

Review of Robert Karls *Forgotten Peace: Reform, Violence, and the Making of Contemporary Colombia*

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In November 2016, under the recently refurbished ceiling of Bogotá's Teatro Colón, Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos, and the leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Rodrigo Londoño (alias "Timochenko"), signed a peace agreement to formally end the decades-long civil war in the Andean country. The text of the peace agreement, if implemented, would constitute the most significant political reform in the country since the ratification of the country's 1991 constitution. Among other things, the signed pact included substantial changes to the electoral system, land redistribution, significant transformations to anti-drug policies, and a revamping of the judicial system to cope with the demands of transitional justice. After years of complex negotiations, Colombian society now faces the massive challenge of successfully implementing the accord to make peace a reality.

This is not the first time that the country has attempted a peace-making process. In *Forgotten Peace*, historian Robert A. Karl shows that politicians, rebel groups, and civil society faced similar challenges after the civil war in the 1940s and 1950s - a period in Colombian history commonly referred to as *La Violencia* (The Violence). The

inception of a power-sharing agreement between Conservatives and Liberals, known as the *Frente Nacional* (National Front) and the consolidation of local, informal peace agreements were the main mechanisms designed to end the civil war and promised democratic stability.

Finely researched and elegantly written, Karl's book focuses on how the national peace process was built from regional and local initiatives. Based on rich historical sources, including documentation from Colombian governmental archives to the U.S.-based National Security Archive, personal and private archives, films, and periodicals, he reconstructs the evolution of such informal pacts that were negotiated in central Colombia, especially in the southern portion of the department of Tolima, between adversaries from different political parties in the late 1950s. These local peace pacts, the so-called "*paz criolla*" (creole peace), were supported by regional and national authorities, and some of them resulted in successful models of community leadership in remote, underdeveloped rural areas. In their early stages, community-led peace agreements were not only useful in reducing violence but also for delivering social services and infrastructure programs in traditionally forgotten areas of the country.

Karl pays special attention to the effect that informal peace-making processes had on the construction of new forms of citizenship, showing how local peace agreements transformed the role of citizens in rural areas and their relationship with the Colombian state. He also identifies a clear disconnect between national and regional politics and underscores the consequences of that disconnect for the peace-building process in Colombia, more broadly.

The stability of the regional peace agreements in the late 1950s and early 1960s depended greatly on the central government's capacity to effectively deliver public policies. Rural communities in central Colombia demanded poverty alleviation policies, infrastructure projects, and loans, but especially, they needed clear institutional

mechanisms to deal with land and property disputes. To solve the agrarian question - that is, the lack of property rights and the unequal distribution of productive lands - rural communities depended on intervention from the central government. Rural communities also had clear notions about the responsibility and functions of the state: conflict resolution, redistribution, and devolution of political and administrative roles. Unsurprisingly, many who lived in the countryside highly valued government initiatives, like rehabilitation loan programs for both victims and perpetrators, land disputes tribunals, known as *tribunales de conciliación y equidad*, and truth commissions.

The first National Front president, Alberto Lleras Camargo (1958-1962), seemed to understand the importance of fulfilling the mandates of such policies, and he readily implemented a series of initiatives that supported local peace pacts. For example, he created a national commission for rehabilitation (*Comisión Especial de Rehabilitación*) and a land reform agency (*Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria*). However, the evolution of national politics in the early 1960s and problems within the bipartisan power-sharing agreement weakened these policies. Budget allocations for recently created agencies were reduced, and there was a significant rollback of rehabilitation programs due to lack of funding and political conflicts between Conservatives and Liberals in Congress.

As Karl carefully shows, it was during this era that the armed conflict intensified again. The weakening of the state's presence in conflict-affected provinces and the revival of old disputes in the national political arena crippled the *paz criolla* and made peace-making increasingly susceptible to the interests of ex-combatants and regional politicians, who were prepared to resume violent confrontations. These conditions became even more prevalent after the election of the National Front's second president, Guillermo León Valencia (1962-1966), who decimated Colombia's reformist state. The Valencia administration led a conservative assault on rehabilitation and

agrarian reform programs, renewed a technocratic push toward centralization, and allowed anti-communist ideologies to flourish. In other words, Colombia's *país político* (the country of political elites) turned away from the *país nacional* (the country of citizens and the provinces) once again.

The consequences of this anti-reformist movement were not minor. On one hand, political elites in Bogotá reinterpreted the nature of the armed conflict and the rural frontier, coding rebel communities as bandits and creating a new national narrative in which a war was being waged between such bandits and the state. On the other hand, the growing absence of the central government in rural territories fed insurgent narratives in the backcountry about state indifference to provincial needs. Unfulfilled demands for rehabilitation programs and decentralization encouraged new radical political projects, like the establishment of the independent republics of *Marquetalia*, *El Pato*, and *Riochiquito* in central Colombia in the early 1960s, while also preparing the groundwork for insurgent movements like the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

In summary, *Forgotten Peace* is a brilliantly-researched and well-written book on the nature of political and armed conflict in mid-twentieth century Colombia. Karl's book superbly shows that the 1965 military campaign against the country's independent republics ultimately transformed relations between Colombia's urban centers and its provinces, and between the state and the citizenry; it also transformed the national understanding of the conflict. Most importantly, Karl's book offers timely lessons to understand Colombia's current peace process and the challenges that lie ahead for implementation of the 2016 peace agreement. Ultimately, *Forgotten Peace* is a cautionary tale, warning us of the critical role that the state, parties, regional actors, and intellectuals have in creating and maintaining peace in Colombia.