



OCTOBER 2016

## “It is a cheap shot on the part of Uribe to turn a personal vendetta into a national catastrophe”

Questions and answers with I. William Zartman on the outcome of the Colombian referendum

- 1) Now that a small majority of the Colombian voters have rejected the agreement – largely it seems on granting pardons not the FARC and no punishment – the question becomes whether the Colombian administration lost touch with their constituency and overstepped their mandate. Do you agree with that assessment?**

The voter rejection (with a small turnout) of the Colombian peace plan is a catastrophe in the annals of peace processes. The agreement was the outcome of a serious, prolonged series of engagements, the sustained result of lessons learned from 30 years of previous failures, pursued with patience and determination down to the endgame earlier this year, and it was rejected by a nation split down the middle between hope and fear.

As always it was rolled into a prickly bumble of national politics: inspired by an implacable hatred of his former ally, former president Uribe gave a voice and an organization to the voters who had their qualms about the lightened penalties for former FARC guerrillas (similar to those accorded by Uribe to the rightwing militias who fought them). President Santos worked hard to get the best deal possible. As any shopper knows, it is easy to say as one emerges from bargain hunting, “on second thought I bet I could have gotten a better deal”. This is a common ailment of the negotiation process. It is a cheap shot on the part

of Uribe to turn a personal vendetta into a national catastrophe.

Santos tried to crystalize and lead his public into support. He made one mistake (which I and doubtless others signaled in Bogotá two years ago) – he didn’t reach out early to convince the people. Such negotiations need to be secret (which Uribe criticized), but they need to be sold to the public at the same time. The “anti” campaign, irresponsibly, did a better job, playing in fears with untruths.

- 2) What are the consequences of the rejection of the agreement by the Colombian people? Is the result to go back to the negotiation table and what can be done?**

Now the game has changed. Before, there was no standard for judgment of an attainable outcome, just guesses. Now, the defeated agreement becomes the stalking horse for future negotiations. Can it be bettered, and how hard can the government push against how much greater punishment the FARC will accept in exchange for peace. Both sides say they will keep on searching, but Santos has to guess how much of an “improvement” it will take to pass the public the next time. Uribe will try to dictate the conditions. As the spoiler, he will try to appear as the savior of peace and push Santos’ face into it, and Santos will have to negotiate with Uribe over what it will take to call off opposition, then negotiate with the FARC to get that new package accepted.

**3) How to proceed from here in Colombia?**

Future, as past, negotiations, will be a race of hope against fear. Now that hope has been dashed, it's always easier to continue riding fear. Success will depend on the governments' ability to overcome the public's fear while keeping FARC's hopes alive. However, the rejection might also strengthen the government's hand in re-negotiating with the FARC, testing the rebels' real desire for peace and participation, and showing them what they sacrifices they have to make to make a publicly acceptable agreement. Without any doubt the coming months will take careful bargaining from the Colombian government and a skilful public relations campaign to build public support.

The Nobel Peace Prize may help President Santos overcome the personal disappointment at the rejection of the peace agreement by his people and it may also help him in negotiating a more acceptable replacement. A peacemaker is not without honor except in his own country, as the Bible says.

*I. William Zartman is one of the foremost international experts on negotiations. He wrote earlier on the [Colombian peace negotiations for the Clingendael website](#). His analysis then spotted the issues which led to NO on Sunday 2 October 2016.*