

The Limited Impact of Partial Peace Agreements: What Other Countries Can Learn from Colombia's Historic Quest for Peace

Executive Summary

As of December 2019, nineteen out of thirty-five countries with at least one active armed conflict had more than one active armed group. In the Western Hemisphere, Colombia has been the only country to experience more than one armed conflict for over half a century. Since the 1980s and amid multiple protracted conflicts, numerous negotiation efforts were made with armed groups, producing thirty-six Partial Peace Agreements (PPAs). However, these agreements and their implementation proved insufficient for ending armed conflict and building sustainable peace. Although PPAs are limited in scope and their potential for conflict transformation, they can be a useful tool for building trust among signatories in order to continue the negotiation process and encourage non-signatories to join future negotiations.¹



Keywords:

Colombia
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Introduction

We define Partial Peace Agreements (PPAs) as accords that either exclude some of the main parties in an armed conflict or only partially address the substantive issues underlying the conflict. PPAs also include agreements in which conflicting parties do not deal with substantive issues but agree to continue negotiations in the future. Although PPAs differ from Comprehensive Peace Agreements (CPAs) in their scope and potential to transform conflict, they are more common than CPAs: of the 216 peace agreements in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Peace Agreement Dataset (1975 – 2011), only thirty-two are comprehensive peace agreements.²

The Colombian context offers a case study to test the limits of peacemaking through PPAs. Between 1984 and 2012, the Colombian government negotiated thirty-six partial peace agreements with thirteen different armed groups, including guerrilla organizations and their splinter groups, as well as paramilitary groups. Out of the thirty-six PPAs, eleven (30%) were considered the final agreement among conflicting parties. However, these agreements did not include all armed groups engaged in the armed conflict, fighting for the same underlying grievances. A total of seven PPAs (19%) dealt with multiple conflict-related issues but were not intended to be the final agreement, with the conflicting parties agreeing to further negotiate to resolve the remaining issues.

We tracked the implementation processes of provisions in these agreements over ten years. In our analysis of the thirty-six partial peace agreements and their implementation, we made five observations on these agreements' limited capacity for resolving Colombia's ongoing armed conflicts.

¹ Parts of this brief is based on a working paper, "Power-Sharing in Colombia: Bipartisanship, Leftist Insurgencies, and Beyond."

² Stina Höglblad. "Peace agreements 1975–2011: Updating the UCDP peace agreement dataset," in Therése Pettersson and Lotta Themnér (eds), *States in Armed Conflict 2011* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2012), 39–56. Madhav Joshi, Jason Michael Quinn, and Patrick M. Regan, "Annualized implementation data on comprehensive intrastate peace accords, 1989–2012," *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no.4 (2015): 551–562.

3. Short-term political measures

Partial peace agreements lacked substantive electoral and political reforms for promoting and safeguarding political participation. For instance, peace negotiations in the late 1980s coincided with the election of the National Constituent Assembly in 1991, which proclaimed a new Colombian constitution. M-19, an insurgent group that negotiated agreements with the government in 1989 and 1990, formed the Democratic Alliance M-19 (AD M-19). This alliance successfully elected 27% of the seventy seats in the ANC. Violence and lack of safeguards for political participation beyond the ANC process contributed to the decline of AD M-19. While the PPA provided pathways for the political representation of AD M-19 at the local and national levels, these short-term arrangements did not translate into long-term democratic participation for these groups.

4. No substantive commitments for addressing agrarian reform and development

One of the underlying causes of leftist insurgencies in Colombia was economic inequality and underdevelopment. As such, it is reasonable to expect PPAs to include provisions for economic reform and development. Development issues were acknowledged in eleven of thirty-six PPAs. Nevertheless, only seven of the thirty-six PPAs contained provisions specific to land reform or agrarian reform. PPAs mainly emphasized disarmament and demobilization of combatants and their economic reintegration, with development programs exclusively targeting former combatants. Thus, PPAs did not effectively address the broader societal grievances fueling armed conflict.

5. Protecting political speech and assembly

Partial agreements with armed groups in Colombia lacked measures necessary to address the potential security threats demobilized combatants faced upon returning to civilian life and engaging in democratic politics. For example, following the PPA with the FARC in 1984, the FARC participated in elections, creating the Patriotic Union (UP) in 1985. The UP quickly became the target of an extermination campaign. By 1988, this campaign took the lives of over 1,200 FARC leaders and supporters, leading to the breakdown of the ceasefire agreement in 1987. Security threats to demobilized combatants following the PPAs signed in Colombia during the 1980s and early 1990s contributed to the failure in these agreements' implementation, also preventing other armed groups from entering into agreements with the government.

Conclusion

Although Colombia has been fighting armed insurgencies for over fifty years and negotiated multiple PPAs, armed conflicts have continued in old and new forms. The poor implementation record of past agreements has led to a missed opportunity for building trust between the state and insurgent groups. Implementation of PPAs would have sent a signal to other insurgent groups that the state was willing to negotiate CPAs and pursue meaningful reform.

Policy Recommendations

By definition, PPAs are limited in scope and potential for conflict transformation. The Colombian experience with PPAs shows that these agreements were not utilized as opportunities for opening a space for engagement with other insurgent groups. By avoiding these pitfalls, negotiators in other conflicts can design PPAs that contribute to sustainable peace.

1. Negotiators of PPAs should focus on provisions that build and strengthen mutual trust between signatories that is necessary for continuing the negotiation process. PPAs should clearly outline future negotiations for the parties to address substantive conflict-related issues. Specifically, PPAs must detail security guarantees in anticipation of post-accord security threats to demobilized groups.
2. When implementing PPAs, states should give equal attention to all dimensions of the agreement. Instead of an overemphasis on military provisions (such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration measures), PPAs must effectively advance political and economic reforms to foster trust between the parties and encourage non-signatory groups to take part in the peace process.

Authors:

Madhav Joshi is a Research Professor at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies and the Associate Director of the Peace Accords Matrix (PAM).

Ana Mercedes Sánchez-Ramírez is a Doctoral Candidate in Peace Studies and History at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies and the Department of History at the University of Notre Dame.

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