OPTIMISM DESPITE RISING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

By Jonathan Glennie
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This year, 2014, is one of hope in Colombia. The national team has made it to the football World Cup, and peace talks have begun again with the main guerrilla rebels, both for the first time in about 15 years. While the former is a source of joy in this soccer-mad country, the second is a truly historic opportunity to end an armed conflict that, over the decades, has seen thousands of civilians slaughtered and millions more displaced, and has made any kind of normal politics impossible in a country desperately trying to edge its way into the modern world.

Despite having been defence minister under the hardline former president Alvaro Uribe, the current president, Juan Manuel Santos, has struck a different course, and his representatives are meeting rebel leaders in Cuba.

But even if a deal is struck, the problems that blight Colombia will not evaporate – social inequalities, the root of the violence, will remain, and the armed groups are likely to evolve rather than disappear. Since independence from Spain in the early 19th century, the country has failed to generate a settlement to satisfy the various parts of a geographically, economically and culturally diverse society. Barbaric violence has often been the symptom of deep social malaises.

Unlike in the rest of South America, inequality is worsening in Colombia, already one of the world’s most unequal countries.

While the rich live well, the majority remain impoverished or insecure. Politics remains in the hands of an elite class that manages the economy and the country in its own interests. Attempts by the Left and civil society to overturn this unjust situation have been normally met by violence, leading some to conclude that armed rebellion was the only option.

While human rights and peace may have re-emerged in the rhetoric of the political classes, economic policies remain steadfastly stuck in neoliberal mode, an anomaly in a left-leaning region. In recent months, farmer blockades have ignited across the country in protest against government policies favouring foreign produce and leaving small-scale producers at the mercy of the market.

Poverty and disenfranchisement clearly follow ethnic lines. The remaining indigenous population, under two per cent of the population, is the worst hit, almost always caught in the crossfire. Many indigenous groups are at risk of extinction in the next few years. The Afro-Colombian community is also significantly worse off than the majority mestizo population – the displacements of whole communities in the predominantly black Chocó region are infamous.

Yet Colombia is a country blessed with devastating natural beauty and biodiversity, with the Amazon in the south and the Chocó bio-region in the north, the wide eastern plains towards Venezuela and the Andean mountains dividing in two as they reach the Caribbean Sea. Everything grows – you need only drop a seed in the ground and wait to see your

At a glance

Leader: President Juan Manuel Santos.
Economy: GNI per capita $6,110 (Venezuela $11,920, United States $48,450).
Monetary unit: Colombian peso.
Main exports: crude oil and derivatives, coffee, coal and clothing.
Mining (copper, gold, emeralds), oil and gas are seen by the elite as the motors of Colombia’s future economy, along with mega-plantations of palm and banana.
People: 47.7 million. Annual growth rate 1.3%. People per square kilometre 42 (UK 257).
Health: Infant mortality 15 per 1,000 live births (Venezuela 13, US 6). Lifetime risk of maternal death 1 in 430. Life expectancy 74 years, up from 71 in 2000.
Environment: Coca production has caused environmental damage, not only due to pesticides used to help the plant grow and the defoliants sprayed to destroy it, but also because counter-narcotic operations have pushed the growers further into tropical rainforests, resulting in indiscriminate clear-cutting.
Culture: Colombians are descended from native Americans, Africans and Europeans; most people are of mixed race. Indigenous population 1-2%. Afro-Colombians comprise up to 15% of the population.
Religion: Catholic 93%. Although this is the country’s official religion, there is religious freedom.
Language: Spanish (official); there are dozens of indigenous languages including wayuu, cámás and cuaquere.
Human Development Index: 0.719 (Venezuela 0.748, US 0.937).

Source: The New Internationalist, April 2014
plantation flourish. Under the ground, the riches are immense, from gold, copper and emeralds to oil and coal. Culturally, Colombia is a wild and heady mix: sexy salsa and solid pop (think Shakira). Spanish and rancher traditions combining with black communities descended from slaves and the profound cosmo-vision of the many and diverse indigenous groups.

If the current political bid for peace is complemented by socially egalitarian policies promoting land reform and public services pushed by a vibrant civil society, there is still hope that Colombia may be one of the most successful countries of this century. The ‘failed state’ denomination of the late 1990s, when armed groups ruled, certainly seems to be over for the time being.

But, given the entrenched attitudes that pervade Colombian society, no-one is holding their breath.

The present government would be classified as appalling if it were not significantly more humane than the last one. 2004 ★★

**POLITICS ★★**

The Colombian legislature and executive are highly corrupt – a few years ago, a third of congresspeople were thought to be linked to paramilitary groups. It is very hard for progressive policies to break through the self-interest. Unlike most of the rest of South America, Colombia has maintained rightwing policies in the last few decades, in part because the Left has been decimated by the conflict. The present government would be classified as appalling if it were not significantly more humane than the last one. 2004 ★★

**LITERACY ★★★★★**

Literacy has remained at about 98% of 15-24 year olds for the last decade. 2004 ★★★★★

**LIFE EXPECTANCy ★★★★★**

74 years, up from 71 in 2000. Murder rates are somewhat down compared to 10 years ago. 2004 ★★★★★

**POSITION OF WOMEN ★★★**

While women’s organizations in all classes are gaining power, and there is a fair number of prominent women politicians, the country’s macho culture runs deep, with abuse of women common in both domestic and military situations. 2004 ★★★

**SEXUAL MINORITIES ★★★★★**

The law is fairly progressive, recently revised to allow gay people to marry. The openness of parts of the capital city, Bogotá, compares favourably with provincial towns and the countryside, where it is still dangerous to be known as gay. 2004 ★★★★★

**INCOME DISTRIBUTION ★ ★**

One of the world’s most unequal countries, and becoming even more so. 2004 ★ ★

**MURDERS ★★★★**

Murder rates are more or less the same as in 2000. 2004 ★★★★

**ENVIRONMENT ★★★★★**

It is still dangerous to be known as gay. 2004 ★★★★★

**EDUCATION ★★★★★**

Adult literacy is up from 88% in 2000 to 95%. 2004 ★★★★★

**GENDERED INEQUALITY ★★★**

Women have re-emerged in the rhetoric of the Left, but significant progress is still needed. 2004 ★★★

**CORRUPTION ★★★**

Executive policies promoting land reform and public services pushed by a vibrant civil society, there is still hope that Colombia may be one of the most successful countries of this century. The ‘failed state’ denomination of the late 1990s, when armed groups ruled, certainly seems to be over. 2004 ★★★