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The significance of the killing of Alfonso Cano

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After more than 30 years of guerrilla struggle, the principal leader of the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – Army of the People) has been murdered. He died fighting, as just another regular guerrilla fighter, in contrast to those who gave the order to kill him, the ‘golden elite’, none of whom have ever climbed up a mountain or have countenanced their own children joining the battle. The killing of Cano was always on the cards given that from 2008 onwards sustained and intense military pressure was directed towards the end of killing him: 6000 counter-insurgency elite troops hunted him, while the Colombian military encircled and carried out indiscriminate shelling throughout the southern Tolima and Cauca regions. Finally they caught and killed him, not in Tolima as they expected, but in Cauca. The procedure was typical: the operation was led by military intelligence (with support from the CIA), initiated with heavy aerial bombardment and followed by landings from helicopters with troops ordered to kill, not capture.

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This procedure, in flagrant violation of international law, is in full accordance with that component of the dirty war of the Colombian State known as “Plan Bubble”, according to which, attacks on the guerrilla leadership are designed with a dual process in mind: on the one hand these attacks are designed to encourage defections, on the other they are carried out in the hope of producing a phenomenon of “banditisation” through the loss of political-military commanders and a rupturing of the chain of command.

The death of Cano is an undoubted military blow to the insurgency, which has for the time first suffered the death in action of its principal leader. It is a blow due not merely to the enormous esteem within which he was held by fellow guerrilla fighters, it is a blow also owing to the political and military genius that Cano demonstrated during the period of his command of the FARC-EP. In 2008 the media, displaying their usual ignorance of the real nature of issues pertaining to the conflict, speculated on the supposed tension in the FARC-EP between the “military” wing, allegedly led by Mono Jojoy, and the “political” wing, supposedly led by Cano, who was depicted as a dogmatic ideologue without significant military experience. However, reality proved the assumptions that supposedly supported this thesis to be spurious. Cano demonstrated military vision and capacity far superior to that which the media commentariat believed he was capable of, achieving a strategic re-orientation of the FARC-EP that led to the organisation recovering much of the political and military ground it had lost since the implementation of Plan Colombia, adopting as it did a position of strategic offensive in vast areas of the country that can be seen in the strong blows inflicted by guerrilla forces in the period 2009–2011. Also in organizational terms, Cano was able to decentralize the guerrilla struggle, on the one hand, to facilitate the political work of the mass organisations and on the other, to better absorb the shocks of Plan Bubble and defend against the prospect of the break-up of the organisation.

The FARC-EP, with its Cano-inspired, more decentralised and flexible structures will in all likelihood absorb this latest blow by restructuring its command structures to fill the void that Cano's death has left. It is very likely that the mechanism of succession that was previously established by the FARC-EP command has already been activated (Cano was well aware that his murder was imminent) – it is already being mooted that Cano's successor is Iván Márquez.

What is clear is that the ability of the FARC-EP to resist the onslaught that the Colombian state appears to be intent on unleashing will depend not only on the military, but fundamentally, on the political, and in this respect it is owing to the ability of Cano that the preparedness of the FARC-EP seems assured. He managed to bring to an end the very divisive clashes that occurred periodically between the FARC-EP and ELN (National Liberation Army) in various parts of the country. Not only that – he also achieved a strategic agreement with the ELN which has resulted in a strengthening of both insurgent groupings. He also understood the context within which the current popular mobilisations in Colombia are occurring, defying as he did a process of political negotiation to conflict that would facilitate the articulation of the demands of the various sectors of the popular movement. By one means or another, he sought ways by which to reintroduce the perspectives and proposals of the insurgency into a political debate that would go beyond themes such as agreement on humanitarian issues and the 'peace process'. In this sense, Cano displayed political and military leadership that enabled a strategic leap of the guerrilla organization.

Will all of this work done recently die with Cano? Even though the murder of Cano will doubtless impact upon insurgent ranks, it is difficult to see how such a thing will happen. The latest report of the Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris ("The new reality of the FARC"), published in August, recognised this when it said that even though it believed the death of Cano to be imminent, it believed that this

would hardly mean the end of the insurgency or even that it would represent an event that would precipitate in any way the collapse of the FARC-EP. This assessment is factually correct for several reasons: first of all, that the death of Cano would not deal a fatal blow against the FARC-EP is because the decisions Cano took were decisions made not by him alone but rather by the collective ruling-body of the FARC-EP, the Secretariat of the Central Command. The Colombian establishment is wrong when it states that the FARC-EP is an organisation based principally on charismatic leadership. The murder of Mono Jojoy (a commander who was seen as being a much more charismatic than figure than Cano) in 2010 demonstrated this – there were no mass defections and the Eastern Block maintains a level of military activity equivalent to that which characterized it when Mono Jojoy was its commander. The same was said about the founder of the FARC-EP, Manuel Marulanda, whose death it was also speculated at the time would result in the demoralisation and fragmentation of the organisation – when what in fact what actually happened subsequent to his death was the restructuring and organisational strengthening of guerrilla structures. And so it is the case also that the death of Cano will not result in the defeat of the FARC-EP – this scenario will not materialise because the political orientation that the FARC-EP adopted to counteract the Colombian state’s objective of politically isolating the insurgency, as well as its adoption of structures that have facilitated the FARC-EP’s ability to adapt to the reality of a new theatre of war, (dominated as it is by the increased use of operations defined by a reliance on military intelligence used in combination with aerial power,) are already installed and functioning. And they have proven to be effective¹.

¹ A balance sheet of the conflict with an emphasis on Santos’ ‘dirty war’ (a previous article by the author of this piece) – “Santos: A green light for the dirty war in Colombia” anarkismo.net

creases the immiseration of the Colombian masses and puts them in an even more desperate situation than they were previously. The establishment's "locomotives of development" overwhelm, destroy and leave communities in their wake. Santos' Government responds to protests by the people in a military way, with an unusual level of suppression, because they don't know how to answer otherwise, and thus they close all doors to a solution to the social conflict that is not the revolutionary path (as opposed to 'militarist').

Santos should not be deceived by his pyrrhic military victories: his anachronistic world of neo-liberal dogma, pro-imperialist betrayal, exaggerated conservatism, is a retrogressive world. These modern times are times made of struggle, revolutions, where the masses will return to acquire prominence. Santos' radicalising of the social and armed conflict is not only about bombing missions against the insurgency, but rather it is based upon a military-repressive strategy against the whole of the people — that is the significance of Cano's murder. But, in the fact of radicalising the conflict, the Colombian masses have been given the opportunity to take on the Colombian oligarchy, at precisely the very time that same oligarchy, with the death of Cano, believes itself to be invincible.

We can say that with the death of Cano the insurgency has lost a valuable leader, but it neither loses its *raison d'être* nor its focus as an organization. The orientation of Cano has been part of a collective approach that demonstrates both the dynamism of the insurgency as well as the organic nature of the Colombian guerrilla movement in the face of an unprecedented military offensive by the State. Cano is the murdered leader, and several other leaders have been killed in the past as a result of Plan Bubble but the effect hoped for by the State (of demoralisation, mass desertions and organizational fracturing) has not materialised. It won't happen either because the forces that fuel conflict are still there and the insurgency maintains strong roots in rural Colombia despite the campaign of extermination and mass displacement undertaken by the Colombian state. It much sought after demise of the FARC-EP will not materialise because the insurgency in Colombia is an insurgency of organic and popular nature, not one based on charismatic warlords. Insurgent movements of organic nature such as the FARC-EP have managed to survive and have even been strengthened after the death or loss of their leaders, as was the case with the PKK following the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, or with the FSLN after the assassination of Carlos Fonseca, or with the PAIGC or Frelimo, as was the case with the African guerrillas after the murder of their respective leaders Eduardo Mondlane and Amílcar Cabral. And the martyrdom of the leader occasionally manages to strengthen the collective sense of purpose and morality, and increase the resolution to struggle by the rebels.

Over the corpse of his dead adversary, Colombian president Santos shouts hooray for Colombia, without leaving in doubt for one moment his conception of country where power is reaffirmed with offerings of blood. On announcing the death of Cano he stated that "crime" did not pay (intentionally confusing as he did rebellion with crime), and this in a country that is choking on levels of corruption promoted by friends of Santos' whose fortunes have been amassed through murder, displacement, the theft of land and

natural resources through fraudulent pacts. The media reproduced triumphalist parts of Santos' announcement stating how we are now at the 'end of the end', not an immediate end, but in the final stages of the death of the FARC-EP. While only a few weeks ago they complained of an emboldened guerrilla movement and the increasing demoralisation of the Colombia army, today they assert that it is the guerrilla movement that now is demoralised. In reality, this 'victory', for the reasons outlined above, will come to be recognised for the Pyrrhic victory it is, and will hardly alter the course of the conflict as it has already been delineated so far this year. Neither will it substantially improve the low morale of the troops of Colombian army, which, as we have stated before on another occasion, is always degraded owing to the very nature of the dirty war.

But it would not be correct to say that nothing will change in the new post-Cano setting; there is no doubt that this strike will have effects. Journalist Alfredo Molano warned that this military strike might in fact turn out to be viewed in the longer-term as a political defeat for the Colombian establishment. Such a claim does not seem to be that far-fetched when one considers that Santos has presented himself as a President open to "dialogue, negotiation peace", and in favour of "human rights". It will be much harder for Social Democrats such as Medófilo Medina, Pacho Galán, Leon Valencia and others to sustain such a notion when Santos is killing the very partner he needs to dialogue with to make peace. Let us use the Irish case as an example: the British State was willing to engage in dialogue with the (IRA) insurgency and for this reason, although they had full knowledge of whom the political leaders of the movement were, in the spirit of creating a space of negotiation, they were not killed. Such a thing does not occur in Colombia, precisely because there is the no real desire of peace and dialogue. In line with Plan Bubble, what the state is in fact looking for is the extermination of possible negotiators, something that they believe will lead to the fracturing and eventual demobilisation of the guerrilla

movement; in other words, the objective is the peace of cemeteries, or peace without any political transformation whatsoever in the country. The result of this type of policy is well known to the people of Guatemala and El Salvador for instance, and that's not what the majority of most people want for Colombia.

With the assassination of Cano, the Colombian government has closed the doors to dialogue. How will the insurgency react? It is difficult to predict, but whatever the exact form its response assumes, in all likelihood it will involve a period of deepening and intensification of conflict — standing idly by or reiterating calls for dialogue and peace that fall on deaf ears doesn't seem to be an option now for the FARC-EP. If the Colombian government demonstrates its willingness and intent to pursue the military option, then this is what will happen, and we know what it is that this route has to offer Colombia.

The Government does not understand the organic nature of the insurgency, but it understands the **social** character of the conflict, which is far more important than its military component. Why is it that at the very moment that the tempo of the popular struggle has intensified, with students' and petroleum and transport workers' demonstrations, with an increasingly mobilised peasantry, that the Government is poised to deepen the dirty war, seeking to expand the jurisdiction of the military, stigmatising and criminalising social protest, and reinforcing the right-wing paramilitary apparatus? They know that the stage where combat is defined is not on the battlefield, but in the fields and streets of Colombia, where the masses return to challenge the system, and the popular struggle to articulate its emancipatory project. Notwithstanding the results of the last local elections, the product of a rate of abstention of more than 50%, the state persists with its illusory notion of "national unity", and Santos sweeps away all institutional opposition. That institutionalisation is increasingly isolated however — it is increasingly vulnerable to a people who have no other option left to them other than to fight. Santos approves Free Trade Agreements in-