

TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH ISABEL RINCÓN FLORES



FERNANDO: Welcome Isabel! Thank you for accepting the invitation. In an almost impossible intellectual exercise, how would you describe in a few words the Colombia of the last 10 years?

(Laughs)

ISABEL: *Well... it must be brief, yes, but nevertheless, we must provide a bit of context. The first thing to understand about Colombia in recent years has to do with the peace talks in Colombia with FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia); for the signing of the peace agreement for which former President Juan Manuel Santos received the Nobel Peace Prize. That agreement was finally signed on November 26, 2016.*

With Juan Manuel Santos, what happened was that a process was initiated... (I would like to explain it briefly, but the agreement itself is quite profound). It's 2023; we were going to start in 2012, and the agreement was finally signed four years later, in 2016. With one of the oldest guerrillas in Latin America, a guerrilla that had been operating in the country for more than 50 years. Because to talk about the last 10 years, it is necessary to understand that in Colombia there are organized belligerent groups outside the law, which have, let's say, control over parts of the Colombian State, and precisely, the FARC as a guerrilla has been an organization that has had a significant impact on the structural violence that the country has experienced. An organization that at the same time was recognized in that period as an "armed actor."

This last point is important to note because before the term of Juan Manuel Santos and the start of the peace talks in 2012, in Colombia, especially between 2002 and 2010, a period marked by former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, there was no such thing as the concept of an “armed conflict”. There were only terrorist groups. Let's say that labelling them as terrorist groups and the lack of recognition of the armed conflict positioned the guerrillas internationally as a terrorist group and not as an armed actor, which has consequences in international humanitarian law, which carries a lot of weight. Not recognizing the armed conflict and only labelling it as terrorism prevents the achievement of peace agreements, and the laws of a state cannot be structured or organized to achieve a peace agreement. Because a peace agreement in armed conflict necessarily involves discussing a framework of justice that we called transitional justice here in Colombia. To reach these agreements, which implied modifying laws, implied modifying the penal code, in summary, not treating it through ordinary justice but through a political vision of the law, reaching agreements so that the parties in an armed conflict can establish the foundations for a healthy coexistence within the same territory, which was what was expected from a peace agreement.

F: In that new legal framework you mentioned, that finally opens the doors to dialogue and the solution of the armed conflict, how does the Colombian State treat or recognize the victims of the conflict, which are, the millions of Colombian citizens (4.8 million – IDMC-2022) forcibly displaced from their homes, cities, and workplaces for decades?

I: *Colombia has a public policy for the attention of the displaced population, which is Law 1448 of 2011. This is very important because this law outlines how the State will act regarding the victims of the armed*

conflict and forced displacement in Colombia. Which is a type of victimizing event that allows identifying a subject who has suffered certain characteristics of victimizing events; in this case, forced displacement. So, Colombia has been acting within the framework of the armed conflict, trying to tidy up the house and organize its jurisprudence to be able to assist the population victimized by the armed conflict, and this happens after two government periods of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who insisted on not recognizing this conflict. This prevented the advancement of social constructions and did not recognize or make visible the political movements that arose around the armed conflict.

F: Isabel, despite the historical violence, suffering, and pain that Colombians have experienced, it is striking that a majority ended up voting “No”, in a referendum called by the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos that sought to ratify and legitimize the peace agreements. How can this be explained?

I: *In 2010, Álvaro Uribe Vélez left the presidency, leaving signed a law called "Justice and Peace," which was the law in which supposedly paramilitary groups in the country were demobilized. The government of Santos started with a binational crisis situation with Venezuela, in which the border was closed at that time. Although, the population expected a certain continuity (confrontation with FARC and Hugo Chavez and diplomatic struggle) as did the previous administration from the new Santos government. But President Santos surprised the country and the international community and began his term by calling and asking for help from President Hugo Chávez to mediate with the guerrilla and to establish peace talks, in which Venezuela played an important role. So, the Santos government facilitated the structuring of a path to peace and allowed the*

creation of the "victims unit" for the attention of victims that did not exist before and the "land restitution unit," which is related to the process of returning land to people who lost their land due to armed conflict, displaced by violence.

All of this within the framework of a country that is still in conflict, where guerrillas still exist, and where paramilitary groups have morphed into what we now call "emerging criminal gangs." Where the violence that traditionally occurred in rural areas in the country is also manifesting in large cities. As a result, the entire history of violence that comes from Pablo Escobar in the cities and terrorist acts. With the existence of guerrilla groups but also with the existence of an entire apparatus of drug trafficking and corruption, which shows that it is a cross-cutting problem where the political sphere is also integrated. Then, in 2012, peace talks began, in which and unfortunately, a few fronts of FARC did not adhere to the peace agreements signed in 2016, groups which are now known as FARC dissidents.

For the signing of those peace agreements, President Juan Manuel Santos held a referendum so that people could say whether they agreed or disagreed with the peace agreement, and most of the country decided that they did not agree. One thing, if we are going to talk about magical realism, that is the real magical realism!

In a country of 50 million inhabitants, a country with Andean geography, a country with a coast on the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, a gateway to the Atlantic Ocean. In a country where 46% of the territory is the Amazon. In such a diverse and picturesque country with reliefs and landscapes, in a country that was given the opportunity to consciously find

a transition to a richer society, Colombians went out to vote to say no. Because there is a fairly significant ideological weight around the issue of guerrillas, and that leads us to have to say that the same country that said no to agreements with the FARC guerrilla is the same country that ultimately ended up electing a former guerrilla M-19 Group member as president! (Gustavo Petro).

F: Since you mention the current president of Colombia, how can the rise to power of a former guerrilla fighter like Gustavo Petro be interpreted? Could it be said that Colombian youth played an important role by expressing themselves in the streets despite attempts of censorship, or perhaps the use of digital platforms was another way to express an underlying crisis that might end up worsening due to the economic situation of recent years?

I: *Let's say, there was a situation in the country known as the "social outburst" that arose around the COVID pandemic, where people in conditions of poverty, especially young people from the poorest areas of the country, found themselves in a difficult situation due to pandemic confinement. A situation characterized by a lack of social protection, employment, or education. It is important to note that in Colombia, education is neither public, nor free, nor of quality. Recently, with Petro's administration, a process has started to address this need.*

But the main thing is that the situation of young people in Colombia is very precarious, even young people who have jobs earn a minimum wage that is not enough (1,160,000 million Colombian pesos or \$286.81 USD per month). Besides, they work in terrible labour conditions. So, to worsen the situation, the pandemic ended up making life even more expensive. This

led to the "social outburst," pushing people who were already in very high vulnerability conditions; some without access to clean water or health care. People who could not go out to the street to do their jobs like street vendors, for example. So, this new reality exploded in the faces of these people and forced them to talk to each other, to get out of their individual problems and think collectively. All this to find a solution to the social problem. And this social outburst occurred in areas of the country where the armed conflict is much more pronounced and where the structures of drug trafficking are much more organized. Areas that have been affected by new consumption patterns in the international drug market, leaning towards synthetic products or drugs like fentanyl.

Petro may not be the best administrator, but at least he has a political project for peace, and that makes the entire administrative system aim towards that goal, and that is very good. Petro was very lucky, and he had no political rival who measured up to him. So, the post-pandemic situation converged, the youth movement converged, a movement that was very important and also a movement that was very manipulated and distorted.

For example, the discourse of the extreme right, is that the left used the youth to join the "frontline" of the organized protests and also accused the left of financing the protests. At the end of the day, these are discourses, but the essential thing is that many things converged in favour of Petro for people to start thinking differently. It has been an opportunity for important, historical debates in the country, and unfortunately, the media in the country, with an ultra-right bias, combats them. Polarizing the discourse between left and right, where the left also puts itself on a pedestal and where they leave much to be desired to be done in a better way, in terms of administrative and practical levels.

However, this does not prevent us from recognizing that the effort being made at the state level to change many things is considerable because Gustavo Petro says, if the primary economic model of Colombia is the exploitation of non-renewable natural resources, with a very high environmental cost, he proposes to change the economic model from exploitation to a transition model towards a green economy. And that obviously has significant and powerful opponents in the country who say that this project makes no sense and argue that it is unfeasible.

With this discourse, the current president is concerned about a future without carbon emissions, advocates for policies that alleviate current global warming, and intervenes in the UN, insisting that the rest of the world needs a change in environmental policies.

In addition to this discourse to the international community, Petro has gone in the opposite direction of the international discourse of the State of Israel and the barbarism that has been occurring against the Palestinian people.

F: Gustavo Petro has had the courage to go against the framing of hegemonic media that follows the State of Israel's line with its systematic violation of Human Rights, the destruction of hospitals, and the "evacuation" of civilians to areas that, as the Spanish journalist Teresa Arangurén says, is nothing more than a euphemism, as they end up relocating them to equally insecure zones. Petro was the first president in the Americas who openly and publicly, through Twitter, rejects Israel's actions, categorizing them as genocide in statements where he directly

confronted the Israeli ambassador in Colombia. What is your opinion on these statements, and how have Colombian media reacted?

I: This may have a significant political cost for Petro, as the way the media is handling it is not based on Petro's statements or even a reference to what is happening. Instead, the media adopts a narrative of fear. In the sense that they wonder, what will be the consequences that Colombia will have to pay in terms of international politics and international relations with President Gustavo Petro's position regarding the Palestinian genocide, as we are facing a global genocide. Things need to be called by their name. Well, the issue of fear and the Colombian people being quite fearful, one must remember that Álvaro Uribe spoke to us about democratic security and the issue of terrorism around fear. And all the illegal armed groups have solidified their policy of dominance in territories through fear, and that's also what the media is doing with Colombians. So, in Colombia, there is a level of illiteracy that is not limited only to the ability to read and write but is the way we interpret and observe reality. The media sells us a reality that, well, could blur it, and with information saturation, this ends up convincing or making many Colombians believe the discourse they present.

Gustavo Petro has a clear policy, and that is that Colombia's national plan is called "Colombia, a world power of life," and life is at the center. And one thing that must be clear, for national and international media, even if they don't want to express it to the public in this way is that, whether you are from the left or the right, paramilitaries and guerrillas are human beings. And recognizing life at the center allows us to look at things around life that can lead us to agreements; that is the basis of a peace agreement, that is the basis of healthy coexistence. When Gustavo Petro takes on the

role of Colombia, a world power of life, yes, he cannot see what is happening in Palestine, to be more precise in Gaza and the West Bank, in any other way than in how life must be defended. The government of Gustavo Petro has been very clear in rejecting what Hamas did emphatically because it was an attack against life. But it also emphatically rejects the reaction of the State of Israel to these events and that it be the excuse for the start of an additional war. Because, in addition, Colombia has been suffering the consequences of the war in Ukraine with Russia. A war that has directly affected agricultural production in the country and left Colombia in a disadvantaged economic situation regarding the free trade agreements signed during the governments of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, agreements that now affect the economy of the common Colombian.

F: Since we are talking about the civilian population victims of the conflict in the Middle East, could you tell us a little about the practical policies that the Colombian State is implementing regarding those forcibly displaced by the armed conflict in Colombia?

I: Regarding the displacement situation, it is important to note that the whole issue of the victim's law is done and put into operation to address the population victim of the conflict. The thing is, we are still in conflict, and the displaced figures are also connected to a number of people who are displaced again on countless occasions.

We have systematic monitoring at the Land Restitution Unit of people who have been re-victimized several times. That is, they are forcibly displaced from one place, go to another, and where they arrive, they are victims again of the armed conflict and are displaced again. And this is the result of the cycle of violence in the country. So, for this reason, we are trying to

build peace in the midst of an armed conflict. The comprehensive public policy of the Colombian State focuses on land restitution for these victims based on an approach in three axes: the subject, identity, and territory. That is the best way to build peace. At the same time, we are exploring various alternatives so that the social base being built in pursuit of total peace is real. That is, it results from deep social conversations. And focused on the territory because we cannot talk about a peasant without their land. A peasant as a subject of special protection, taking into account the identities that claim it. So, restitution aims to restore people's right to access land under the same or better conditions than they had before displacement. This is a very nice political project and a project that laid the foundations for the protection of the territory of displaced people.

And looking beyond the national level. We have experienced impressive historical violence, but the level of violence and cruelty with which the State of Israel is acting with Palestine is overwhelming. Here the cruelty of war was very high, there are stories of paramilitary groups arriving in urban centers of rural towns and killing all the men in a sports field. Here the war has been cruel, but what is happening in Palestinian territory in the eyes of the international press, in the eyes of the world, is extremely cruel. And the abandonment and dispossession to which the Palestinian people have been subjected; I don't know if it can be equated in terms of dimensions. It must have similarities or particularities similar to the abandonment and dispossession that the civilian population in Colombia has suffered due to the armed conflict. Because, let's say, in the human condition, in the defence of life, there are very clear things about survival, which can come together. Experience teaches us that the historical cost of generations subjected to violence is paid over a very long time. The

infant population in Palestine being a victim of this cruelty is a population that, to recover historically from the violence that has been happening, at least, I calculate, in social cost, at least 40 more years to overcome this genocide. We must look at international cases like what happened in Uganda.

Also, in Colombia, to connect even more with what is happening in the Middle East, paramilitary groups were trained by the Israeli mercenary Yair Klein. And the paramilitaries had a textbook approach. War is cruel wherever it happens, and war leaves civilian victims.

F: Isabel, thank you very much for sharing your experience and knowledge in this vital area dealing with the consequences of armed conflict on civilian populations. Thank you for giving us your time. Finally, I want to ask you one last question. Does Colombia have a future?

I: It does, we have it. And we need to think that we have it. But you got an interview with a very positive person. I want to think we have it. However, there is everything to be done. For me, as a defender of life, it is incredible that the media insists so much on condemning Gustavo Petro for taking a peaceful position regarding the conflict in the Middle East. Because a country that has suffered the vicissitudes of armed conflict is a country that must prepare to talk about peace and not to talk about war. And not to support genocides, no matter where they come from, from whichever people.

In Colombia, we have a future, we are building it, even though the media lends itself to a different future than a future with peace. But the foundations are being built from the territories. The recognition of

peasants as a subject of special protection is very positive. The agrarian reform that is looming, the way it is being given rigorously to the legalization of previous state wastelands for people who are producing the land will be a very important change.

And it will generate very deep political discussions and debates in which the international community must focus its eyes. Because if, in the end, we are left with an inventory benefit of a manual on how to achieve peace understanding the differences of different states and all processes, Colombia has a lot to show the world in terms of peacebuilding, a lot. And it would be wonderful for the international community to focus its eyes on resilient Colombia, not the Colombia of Pablo Escobar. On the Colombia that, despite being immersed in historical and profound wars for almost half a century, has moved forward. And that is looking at different approaches to nation-building. And that is talking and discussing total peace.