

PEACE AND POLITICAL REFORM

By Eduardo Posada

“Political reform must take place if there is to be serious negotiation” says Marco Palacios in a recent interview (*Semana*, 1 April 2001). This comment by a well-known historian is doubly opportune. Opportune because it is published at a time when there is a debate on a proposal for political reform in Congress, where it has taken its course to the general indifference of public opinion. And opportune, because Palacios links the need for reform to the prospects of peace, a connection which so far has been little appreciated.

We should perhaps remember that the first proposal for political reform presented by the Pastrana administration to Congress in 1998 incorporated the subject of peace. In effect, the national agreement signed between political forces and government in October of that year expressed the “need to give the head of State the instruments required to manage the peace process and to facilitate agreement on reconciliation which come as a result”. The first four articles of the proposal presented to congress were dedicated to those “instruments for peace”. Some then considered that the articles gave the President too much power.

It was precisely those articles which served as reasons for Commission I of the Senate to vote the project down on 7 June 1999. History will have to examine in detail how and why a prospect which had generated much expectation was finally frustrated. Historians engaged in that study will perhaps point to the fact that the Government never clearly tied the chapters of instruments for peace to the central body of the reforms, nor in the articles, nor in the explanation of motives, and that the chapter seemed to be rather isolated from the rest of the project. And it could be concluded that the powers proposed were clearly exorbitant. But at least there was an attempt to tie the issues together. From that time, discussions on the peace process have almost entirely forgotten the fate of the political reform.

Further, we should also remember how influential opinion-formers and political leaders have with their comments belittled the importance of the debate on political reform. According to former ministers of finance Rudolf Hommes and Guillermo Perry, this reform would not be a priority above other needs such as the economy. With such appreciation, they share the background thinking of political leaders such as Noemi Sanin or Fabio Valencia, who in some statements have to some extent deprecated the issue, and suggesting that other problems are more interesting: unemployment, the wholesale reform of the State, and the fiscal deficit. Even constitutional lawyer Luis Carlos Sachica has said that the discussion of reforms in Congress is “adjective, and only of interest to the politicians”, and has “neglected the country as a whole” which is concerned for other things: how to come out of the war and out of recession.

All these underestimation of the importance of political reform in general reflects a worrying underestimation of the functions of democracy -and therefore of the priority nature of its institutions and procedures - in the solution of social problems. It is important to insist on the point: how can we say in a democracy, that we will search for a solution to the serious problems of the country, without a congress with sufficient authority, and

without reliable mechanisms of representation which also guarantee governance? And in many of the comments which have belittled the political reforms, we find the same implicit notion of “integrated peace” which has guided government policy, and which serves as a basis for that ambitious common agenda where themes of substance would seem to define the direction of the process. This model needs to be reshaped.

We should have to go back to the central objective of peace, which as Marco Palacios observed, has today been diluted “that the armed formations become legal political movements” (El proceso o la paz?, *La Revista El Espectador*, 01/04/01). Another historian Jorge Orlando Melo, had already observed how in the previous administration, the goal of the peace process which was “the reincorporation of the guerrilla into a political system, which despite its limitations was considered legitimate” had been abandoned, and that instead, the purpose of negotiations had been a new model of society” (“La paz, ¿una realidad utópica?”, *Semana*, 13/12/99). When we come to redefine true peace in its strictest sense again -as the end of armed conflict, or the silencing of the guns - the discussion on political reform will thus be central to the peace process. Disarmament will be linked to those aspects of the reform which as Palacio suggests will have to guarantee the guerrillas their existence, as a political group, once and for all abandoning their arms and violence. Naturally, the issue is complex. But it is a debate which is not being held.

Regardless of whether the negotiation model is reshaped or not, we must at all events appreciate the fundamental character of the political reform. Beyond the discussion of conditions of possible disarmament, and reinsertion of the guerrillas, the political reform is also essential to the peace process, to the extent that the strengthening of the state and of the institutions which represent society will depend on it, and therefore, so will the negotiating position. It is here that the observations of Marco Palacios seem more novel, and more directly relevant to this project. There is always a possibility, specially in the face of a new electoral campaign, that the guerrillas will broaden their room for maneuver, and strengthen themselves. Their purposes and strategies will benefit from the weakness of the state. Therefore, in another recent essay, Palacios emphasizes “the importance which the strengthening of the state in areas where it is strong has for the state: in the representative electoral system, through a reform which seeks to broaden participation, and above all eliminate factors of patronage and fragmentation”. And he concludes “the political and electoral system must be strengthened, by reform”.

In these terms, the political reform is even more of a priority, if we take account of the short electoral cycle which conditions the timing of democracy. And we also appreciate the limitations which every president has in managing the peace process in a fragmented political system. Here Palacios again offers acute observations, by “stressing the magnitude of the problem that the country lacks modern political parties with discipline, with established leadership, and recognized by all. As a consequence, this makes “the presidential management of peace more hazardous, since it must constantly be adjusted to a complicated and uncertain set of factions”.

It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that the future of peace depends to some extent on the future of political reform. Not any reform, of course. The cure, as is known, is sometimes worse than the disease. It is Another reason for insisting again that the debate on

the proposal before congress should be taken seriously. Above all, it is important that the formulas which re-group political parties should come out of it, giving coherence to a system which is today atomized, resolving crisis of representativeness, and thus strengthening democratic institutions. Without greater pressure by public opinion, perhaps the proposal will sink, and the majority of congressmen, whether independent or traditional -will naturally prefer to concern themselves with the problems and possibilities which the present system offers to their own reelection. Instead of parties, we will have more candidates and more electoral mini-businesses, little national scale representation. The State will continue to expose itself to accusations of illegitimacy which make it seem hollow, at home and abroad. And more ammunition will be given to the armed minority which has the country against the wall, at gunpoint.