



# If at first you don't succeed...

## INTERVIEW WITH H.E. JUAN MANUEL SANTOS

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF COLOMBIA

**A week is a long time in politics, but few world leaders have lost a referendum and won a Nobel Prize within days of each other. How would you describe your feelings on hearing of the Committee's decision, and how significant do you think it will prove in moving the peace process forward?**

I was thrilled, of course, and as I said when I got the call from the Nobel Committee, this Prize is for all Colombians – and especially for the victims who have suffered most from this war. It is for their sake that now, more than ever, we must unite and achieve peace for Colombia.

The prize is a mandate and a great stimulus to us all to overcome our present difficulties and strive to reach our common goal. As I said when the outcome of the referendum became clear, I will persevere.

**Referendum results rarely turn out to be about their purported subject. Could the question have been put in a 'better' way? Might it even have been possible to reach an accord without a plebiscite?**

I promised Colombians that they would have the final say on the accord, and I am convinced that it was the right thing to do. I am certain that out of this present juncture we will emerge with a peace accord that will have both stronger and wider support. The massive demonstrations that we are now seeing all across the country demonstrate that Colombians want peace and they want it now.

**The result of the plebiscite notwithstanding, you managed to achieve what your predecessors did not, namely an end to the armed conflict and a negotiated settlement with the FARC. What made this peace process different from those before it?**

Firstly, this was a very well planned process. We did a lot of planning before we started, and I had many expert people advising me on how to proceed.

Secondly, the entire region supported the process. This is extremely important in any armed conflict.

Thirdly, I involved the military from the outset, and kept them very well informed. As any soldier anywhere in the world will tell you, he doesn't go to war simply to fight. He goes to war for a purpose, and the ultimate purpose is peace. With that in mind, the military also came on board.

A fourth aspect was that we had managed to change the correlation of military forces in our favour, so we were able to negotiate from a position of strength.

**What do you see as the greatest potential risks in the agreement, as it currently stands, to Colombia's security, and how are you seeking to minimise these?**

We have been very careful not to repeat the mistakes of other peace processes. For example, we didn't even discuss the capability of our military or our police. On the contrary, we are strengthening them in order to guarantee security for the post-conflict.

**Which is a concern that many people have expressed: that dissident members will simply migrate to other groups. What is your strategy for dealing with this phenomenon and preventing the fragmentation of the chain of command?**

The FARC is a group that throughout its history has showed a lot of discipline, and they have demonstrated that they have command and control over their forces. They have assured us that the vast majority of their people have already said that they will lay down their arms. There are very few examples of dissidents. When I say very few, it's a very small percentage, which would be subject to the full strength of our Armed Forces, which will now be multiplied because the thousands of soldiers and police that were previously focused on the war against the FARC will now be used against these dissidents or other expressions of violence.

**Just a few weeks before the signing of the accord, you announced a full-frontal assault on the ELN, which had become increasingly active in recent months. Was this a tacit acknowledgement that their numbers had been bolstered by the defection of former FARC members?**

If you look at the results of the army's operations against the ELN over the past couple of years, they have been very significant. The ELN is a smaller guerrilla group than the FARC. Of course, even one guerrilla member can do a lot of damage, but they are now asking us to begin negotiations. I've told them that if they release the kidnapped people that they have, and renounce kidnapping, we will start negotiations with them. [Since this interview was conducted, the Colombian government has announced the start of formal peace negotiations with the ELN, scheduled to begin in the Ecuadorian capital, Quito on 27 October].

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Opposite:  
H.E. Juan Manuel Santos, President of the Republic of Colombia

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**For someone who grew up with the threat of IRA violence and has seen how things have changed for the better in the UK and Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement, it was surprising to see how divided Colombians were on the peace accord. Why do you feel there is still such a divide?**

Well, there was a lot of misinformation spread about the peace process and the accord [in the run-up to the plebiscite]. Some people with the deliberate intention of misinforming, others were simply victims of this misinformation. What you have seen in the last couple of weeks is that now people have the facts about what we really negotiated, and they realise it is not what they were led to believe.

**You are presiding over what is arguably the most significant moment in Colombia's history since the founding of the Republic. How do you intend to seize the momentum offered by the peace process to remake the country from the ground up – to take on vested interests, root out corruption and address some of the historic grievances that persist in terms of land ownership?**

That's exactly what I'm trying to achieve. Once we reach a consensus on a revised peace agreement, we have the opportunity to pass legislation, and we will have procedures in place to advance very important reforms that have been in the pipeline for years – decades, even.

I am trying to tell the Colombian people: this is a tipping point in our history – let's take advantage of it. Let's work together. Let's join forces and build a new country. We have lived with war for too many years. As a professor of psychology said to me recently, we have lost even our compassion, which is the ability to feel the pain of other people. We need to recover that, and the basic principles of a normal society. This is going to take time, of course, but we must start now.

**You reportedly said you were going to 'betray your class' in advancing the reforms contained in the peace accord. Do you feel that this is an overdue righting of historic wrongs?**

I didn't quite say that. What I actually said was that they might do to me what they did to President Roosevelt, when they accused him of being a traitor to his class, simply because he wanted more social equality. I have said all along that I want more social equality, and that's what I've been fighting for.

We have achieved some good results but we have a long way to go, and I think through the peace process we can step on the accelerator and make this country more equal. As I have said all along, I want a country that is at peace, with more equality and better education. That is my vision.

**I would have thought that education is the key to the whole thing. After all, you can't have peace without a change of mentality.**

And without learning how to forgive; how to respect somebody who doesn't agree with you. You don't have to shoot him – you can simply disagree with him and respect his point of view. Education plays a very important role in this respect.

My government has been the first in Colombia to put education above security, in budgetary terms. Education is the key to making the country more equal, more just. And having a more just and equal country is a precondition for a durable peace. So, it's all interlinked.

We are trying to improve our education in many ways. I made education free in the public schools from kindergarten to the 11th grade. We are building more schools and more classes in the next three years than were expected to be built in the next 60 years. Why? Because many of our children only go to school for five hours a day, due to a lack of infrastructure. We need to break this bottleneck if we want to have a better education system.

This is why we are giving scholarships to the best students from poorer backgrounds to go to our best universities. Some 40 per cent of the new students attending the Universidad de los Andes, one of the top universities in Colombia, now come from the lower classes, and this has increased the level of academic achievement because lower-class students always wanted to go to these universities but never had the chance. So, it's a virtuous circle.

**You spent a decade of your life studying and working in London. How has your experience of living in the UK influenced your approach to the peace process in Colombia?**

The influence of the UK on my life has been tremendous, and not only in terms of education. The ten years that I lived there taught me many things, and the IRA negotiations were one of the lessons that I wanted to use.

I have had advice from the UK since the very beginning, from individuals with hands-on experience like Jonathan Powell, who has been a tremendous adviser, particularly on the details of the process. British Intelligence and the security services have also helped me a lot, ever since I was Minister of Defence, and have been extremely effective. Added to which, the UK was the pen-holder of the UN Security Council resolution that approved the mandate for the verification of the FARC's disarmament. So, the UK has played a very important role, and I am sure it will continue to do so. My personal bond with Britain is very strong, but you also have many things to offer that we need, and vice versa. So, I only see an increasing strengthening of our bilateral relations in the future.

Opposite: President Santos in conversation with Alastair Harris, Executive Publisher and Editor of *FIRST*, at Casa de Nariño, the presidential palace in Bogotá

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**What are your hopes and objectives for your 'homecoming' trip in November?**

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Personally, I have always encouraged UK-Colombia relations, for many reasons. My great-great-great uncle fought side-by-side with the British in Colombia's War of Independence, and my great uncle, who was also President of Colombia, was appointed by President Roosevelt to work on the Marshall Plan in the aftermath of World War II, so he worked very closely with the British as well.

I think there is a lot more that Colombia and the UK can achieve together, because we complement each other in so many ways. I'm not just talking about big business; the UK has a lot of small and medium sized enterprises that can find tremendous opportunities in Colombia. At the same time, Colombia has barely scratched the surface of the market in the UK. The trade and investment figures could be much bigger, in both directions.

I hope that this visit will open a lot more doors. Not only in trade, but also in areas like education, healthcare, and research. We are a tremendously rich country in biodiversity, and the UK has a very advanced biotechnology industry. So there are many possible synergies that our two countries can identify and make use of.

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**Where do you see Colombia in ten years' time?**

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I think Colombia has managed to put itself at the forefront of many things in Latin America, despite effectively being at war for fifty-two years. We have been able to become leaders in economic growth and poverty reduction, for example. Without the war, I think we can take off much faster, and we are planting the seeds of that now, through better infrastructure and better education. So, I see Colombia as a country with an increasing relevance in world affairs. The change in the last few years has been extraordinary in that respect. Six years ago we were the black sheep of the region; now we are one of its rising stars.

We want to be a leader in important discussions on issues such as climate change, and we have been very proactive in this regard. We were the ones who proposed the sustainable development goals that were adopted by the United Nations. Again, we worked closely with the UK in this, as we have in the discussions on climate change. We also co-chaired the first global anti-corruption summit in London earlier this year, and we want to continue that initiative. It is extremely important for the whole world – and for Latin America in particular.

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**Colombia's greatest living artist, Fernando Botero, created a new sculpture, *La Paloma de la Paz*, to mark the signing of the peace accord. What role do you see for culture and the arts in the projection of Colombia's image internationally?**

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As Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican President said, Latin America's strength is its diversity, and that is

particularly true of Colombia – partly due to our geography. Because of our mountainous terrain, each region has its own very distinct identity


We are increasingly seeing Colombian performers achieving great acclaim on the London stage, such as Joan Sebastián Zamora at the English National Ballet as well as successful exhibitions by leading Colombian artists such as Doris Salcedo, Oswaldo Maciá and Santiago Montoya. If there is a cultural capital of the world, it's London, so if we can contribute to the cultural life of the UK, which is a world leader in the projection of soft power, we can also learn from the British how to use our art and culture to improve our image around the world.

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**How do you see perceptions of Colombia changing in the post-conflict era?**

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Image and prestige takes a long time to build up, and you can lose it in no time at all. We are building up our prestige again, and I think that the peace process will allow us to build it more rapidly and more powerfully, because a country with a war like the one we had in Colombia will always have this negative aspect. We're starting to change that, and I think the direct correlation between more security, less violence, and progress is very clear. We have already started to benefit from that, and Colombia is becoming an example to the world of how to achieve it.

The agreement that we managed to achieve is already being seen as a template for the resolution of other conflicts and this will, I think, create a very positive impression in terms of the image of Colombia. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said: the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. 

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