

# Drawing lessons from the past in Colombia

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When I first met María, she was emphatically denouncing how her party's members had been the object of systematic annihilation during the 1980s and 1990s. María's party, 'Unión Patriótica' (UP) had been created in 1985 in the midst of a peace negotiation between the Government and FARC (Guerrilla group), as a civil platform for promoting peace and social justice. The peace talks stalled. Nonetheless, the UP continued to grow as an independent actor. After achieving good electoral results at the local and national level, the Party began to promote social and economic reforms but was soon targeted by paramilitaries, state armed forces and drug-trafficking cartels interested in preserving their vested interest. This resulted in thousands of its members being massacred or forced into exile.

## Leaving behind a legacy of loss

By 2002, María's party's membership had been decimated so badly that it lost its legal status. It was not until 2013, after years of struggles by the survivors at both the national and international levels, that this status was restored through a judicial providence that recognized the party's 'serious survival crisis, due to the extermination of its leaders, activists and candidates'.

Given this history, since the beginning of the latest peace talks between the Colombian Government and FARC-EP in 2012 (one of the biggest guerrillas in the country), I had been concerned about how the integration of members of these groups into the political system would be conducted. I was convinced that in the absence of appropriate democratic mechanisms to channel their demands, these groups would continue to resort to violence for achieving their goals. For this reason, I began to explore different ways in which, we as NIMD, could contribute towards supporting these new political actors that would represent the demands historically defended by the guerrillas.

At the meeting, organized by NIMD, where I first met

María, she also expressed her party's need for support. So after she had finished speaking I approached her.

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Shortly thereafter, my colleagues and I were invited for a meeting with María and two other members of the Party to discuss possible forms of collaboration. As we entered the Party's facilities, we noticed the precarious conditions in which they had been working: they shared an old house with various other organizations and had very few staff members. We were guided up a shaky stairway to a meeting room where the attendants were already waiting. At the meeting I expressed our interest in helping them to improve the Party's capacities for strategic planning, communication, inclusion of under-represented groups and transparency.

However, the party wanted our support to create a think tank for the organization. At first I was hesitant about this request, since there seemed to be more pressing issues for the survival of the Party. Then María explained that the think tank was vital to reconstructing the organizational memory of the Party and to defend its juridical existence.

## Refreshing collective memories

Such history, María stressed, needed to be reflected on and taught to the party's new members and the rest of society, as a way to avoid repeating history. I remembered that, as a child, I had constantly heard news about the killing of left-wing politicians, including two presidential candidates from the UP, and recalled the generalized perception of impunity and hopelessness that pervaded the atmosphere at the time. By listening to her, a victim in this process, I realized how valuable it would be to help the Party's think tank reconstruct their memories. Not just as a symbolic gesture for the victims, but also to

draw lessons for the upcoming integration of FARC members to the political system.

From that first encounter, we began working together on implementing the memory-building activities the party had outlined. These included conducting an international seminar on experiences of political violence and republishing a book on the extermination of UP members called “Unión Patriótica, expedientes contra el olvido”. However, we faced several challenges because of UP’s low organizational capacity, such as the party’s reliance on volunteers. I realized that these limitations were because the party was a minority party, which affected its electoral results and its access to public funding and institutional capacity. This made NIMD’s assistance more meaningful and necessary.

In light of this, I tried a different approach to improve coordination. We created a joint task force for the development of the proposed activities. With these changes in place we were able to commit to particular responsibilities and deadlines, establish better communication mechanisms and quicken the pace of the process.

Consequently, both the international seminar and the new edition of the book on the UP extermination were completed successfully with enormous gains for the party. Some of the party members told me later that it was an interesting opportunity for them to rediscover the history of their organization and to share it with their supporters as a means to build a stronger sense of belonging. It also helped the party gain more recognition. They were able to connect with a broader audience to generate the awareness needed to mitigate the risks of political violence for left-wing movements trying to integrate into the political system in a context of armed conflict.

### Renewing the call for peace built on democracy

Party members also recognized that the coordination methods and mechanisms that were put in place to develop the activities, allowed them to strengthen their internal organization. On the basis of these results, the party leaders expressed an interest in continuing to work with NIMD to improve their institutional capacity and promote reflection on their history.

This experience allowed me to better understand the challenges that the UP faced, and continues to face. This understanding has been the key towards formulating an integral approach for NIMD to support the expected creation of new political parties after the ratification of the Peace Accord with FARC. Such an approach starts with the recognition of the vulnerabilities that the new organizations face in terms of protecting the very safety of their members. It integrates the newly-created parties’ need for institutional support to comply with legal requirements and effectively organize their internal procedures.

This approach also highlights the need for political and electoral reforms that provide guarantees for the inclusion and participation of minority and opposition parties, in particular those created under extraordinary circumstances like peace negotiations and the demobilization of armed groups. These reforms have to be accompanied by the promotion of democratic values in society, which allow citizens to recognize the value of diversity in the political system and remove the prevalence of violence as a means of dealing with social conflicts and demands. The memory of the extermination of the UP that we attempted to reconstruct, has to serve as a permanent reminder of our shared responsibility to protect and include those who have chosen the democratic path to achieve their political goals, as a pre-condition to build a lasting peace in Colombia.

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*NIMD works with a large number of political parties in all its programme countries, with different organizational structures and historical backgrounds. In FCAS countries, many parties are former armed movements and, as this story shows, the transition to a civilian political party can be challenging. NIMD assists political parties in adapting to the changes that come with the peace process.*