

## Accord under strain — on Colombia peace pact

Colombia's presidential election, due in May 2018, will have a bearing on the fragile peace accord of 2016 that ended one of the longest civil wars in history. The result of the parliamentary election held this month has framed the stiff challenge the pro-peace parties face. The accord between the Colombian security forces and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) had won President Juan Manuel Santos the Nobel Peace Prize; it is to his credit that the government managed to implement the accord in bits and pieces despite unremitting hostility from the right-wing opposition led by former President Álvaro Uribe. Now, in the March 11 parliamentary vote, Mr. Uribe's Democratic Centre Party has emerged as the largest bloc in the Senate with 19 seats. Two other right-wing parties, Radical Change and Conservative Party, finished second and third with 16 and 15 seats, respectively. In all, the anti-accord parties have 50 seats in a House of 102. They may not have a clear majority, but the popular support they have mustered is undeniable. The ruling Social Party of National Unity won just 14 seats. FARC, contesting polls for the first time, finished with less than 1% of the vote, but is assured representation in parliament thanks to the accord.

Over the last year, the record of implementation of the steps in the peace accord has been patchy, though major strides were made in the form of demilitarisation and disbanding of the FARC and its conversion into a legitimate political force. The other key aspects of the accord required Bogota to protect mainstreamed FARC leaders and to prevent right-wing militias from targeting left-wing leaders sympathetic towards the FARC. Yet, in the past year, several left-wing activists — such as leaders of teachers' unions and mining workers' unions — have been assassinated by right-wing militia groups. This has prevented the possibility of a similar peace accord with the other remaining insurgent group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), whose leadership fears reprisal by militias if they lay down their weapons. Moreover, while the FARC leadership is committed to the accord, some elements of the group are holding out in the jungles, refusing to demilitarise and instead keep fighting. The next couple of months will be crucial for the pro-accord forces, with the parliamentary vote showing how much work they have ahead of them if they want to convince a sceptical electorate — for which memories of the civil war are still quite raw — that peace deserves a chance. For this, they will have to take dedicated steps to overcome the urban-rural disconnect in Colombia. If this not done, the chances of the accord coming undone are dispiritingly high.

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