



Latin America Policy Journal

SHIFTING WINDS IN LATIN AMERICA

Seventh Edition
2018

A Harvard Kennedy School Student Publication

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“Always Do What You Feel is Right, No Matter How Unpopular it May Turn Out to Be”

An interview with Juan Manuel Santos, President of Colombia (2010-2018)

President Santos responded to the questions formulated by LAPJ Managing Editor Valentín Sierra, with the assistance of Editor-in-Chief Manuel González, on 23 February 2018. What follows is a lightly edited transcript.

LAPJ Staff: You graduated from the Harvard Kennedy School as an MC/MPA in 1981. Ten years later you served in several cabinet positions, and in 2010 you were elected President of Colombia. Looking back, what did you take away from your time at Harvard?

President Juan Manuel Santos: I have great memories of the time I spent studying at the Harvard Kennedy School, where I had great teachers. There, I completed the consolidation of a concept that I have put into practice in my public service life, the concept of “Good Governance,” which I would summarize in four basic principles: efficacy, efficiency, transparency, and accountability.

LAPJ: Dr. Roger Fisher, Samuel Williston Professor of Law emeritus at Harvard Law School, “was a master at the art of perspective-taking.”¹ How did Dr. Fisher, and your experience on campus in general, influence your approach to the negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)?

JMS: Professor Fisher was a true master, and on top of that, for me, a friend. His teachings about adopting the other party’s perspective in negotiations was crucial, and I have used them not only to solve the armed conflict in Colombia but also to exercise the ever-complex art of government. Undoubtedly, nobody does

something without having an internal motivation. For that reason, in every situation I try to understand what is it that motivates, inspires, and concerns my counterparts, what makes their hearts grieve, even if their actions are terrible and may seem inexcusable. There’s a human being behind every action, and behind every human being there’s a motivation. If we manage to understand it, we are halfway to a solution.

LAPJ: What are the main development challenges that Colombia will face in the near future?

JMS: The main challenge into the future will be, undoubtedly, to finalize the implementation of the peace agreement in all its aspects, bringing the State and its institutions to be present in the most remote corners of the country, which were also the most affected by the war. We should also keep on working to achieve a true reconciliation among the Colombian people, so that we can leave past hatreds and fears behind and focus on the opportunities the future offers. We must keep fighting poverty and corruption.

LAPJ: Colombia has been affected by the fall in oil prices, but the economy is growing and the country has increased its annual exports by more than 20 percent. What is the key to ensure Colombia’s long-term economic growth?

JMS: Colombia has always been characterized, not only in my administration, for having a serious, prudent, and responsible economic management, and that is a fact that is recognized by multilateral banks and international investors. During my government, we went a few steps further to ensure such responsible management and incorporated the principle of fiscal sustainability in our Constitution, which obligates the State to consider the fiscal effect of its decisions. We also promoted the Fiscal Rule Law, which is a sort of straitjacket that prevents public spending to exaggeratedly overflow revenues. All of this was very useful when we had to face difficult situations such as the slump of oil prices, our main export.

LAPJ: . . . How did you tackle that situation?

JMS: With an austerity policy in public spending, an intelligent austerity that did not cut resources from social and job generation programs. And also, with a tax reform that partly offset the downfall in revenues. It was not a popular measure, but it was the responsible measure. As a result, Colombia navigated through the troubled waters with a slowed-down economy, but we didn't fall into a recession or stopped growing, like other countries in the region. On the contrary, we kept on growing above the region's average.

LAPJ: What are your views on the current state of affairs of regional integration processes in the Americas?

JMS: I'm a believer in the advantages of regional integration. In a globalized world, success may only be achieved if you boost your strengths and offset your weaknesses through fair and well-conceived alliances. I am proud to be a co-founder of the Pacific Alliance, since it is considered the most important and successful regional

integration experience in Latin America. The four Country Members (Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Colombia) share their faith in democracy and free market, and their vocation to attract foreign investment. That is why we have managed to move forward in an integration effort that goes beyond free trade and also encompasses the free movement of capitals and people. The Pacific Alliance has spurred the interest of the whole world. We have 52 observer States and negotiations are under way with four of them (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Singapore) to become Associate Members.

LAPJ: You have dedicated over 30 years of your life to public service and have served as President of Colombia for almost eight. What advice would you offer to future government leaders in Latin America?

JMS: Throughout my life in public service, I have promoted and practiced the Third Way doctrine of British sociologist and former director of the London School of Economics, Anthony Giddens. This doctrine promotes a middle way between classic liberalism, which leaves everything in the hands of the market forces, and economic interventionism, which considers that the State should be the economy's regulator. It has been summarized in a simple but compelling sentence: "As much market as possible; as much State as necessary." It is a pragmatic doctrine, successfully put to work by Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, Bill Clinton in the United States, Felipe González in Spain, and Ricardo Lagos in Chile, among other government leaders. I have also put it in place in Colombia. One of the essential features of the Third Way is that it doesn't consider the State and the private sector as antagonists, but rather sees them as allies who may help each other to achieve social prosperity.

That is why my recommendation to Latin America's and the world's future leaders is that they should overcome the inflexibility of the ideologies and adopt a pragmatic approach, which may lead to achieve inclusive economic growth, that is, a strong economy whose profits shall mainly benefit the poorest population.

LAPJ: The Colombian presidential election will be held in May 2018. Do you have any message for your successor?

JMS: My main promise to my successor is that I will not interfere in his or her work. I had the privilege of governing for eight years, and I gave my best, with significant achievements as well as mistakes. I built on what my predecessors had built before and managed to ensure progress on many of the goals that Colombia has as a nation.

We lowered unemployment, but there are still many unemployed. We reduced poverty, but the poor are still too many. We signed peace with the FARC, but total peace has not been achieved yet in the country. To govern is to progress, to take steps forward, even if only a few times do leaders actually see the final result of their actions during their government. I hope the next president will build on what we have built, and will continue moving forward on peace, security, and social development.

LAPJ: What is your legacy for future generations?

JMS: My main legacy is that I found a country amid an armed conflict that had been going on for over half a century with the FARC guerrillas, a conflict that seemed impossible to end, and I am handing over a country without that absurd and cruel war. I am also satisfied to deliver a country with five million less poor people, with a strengthened middle class, with an additional 3.5 million

people with jobs, and with a more modern economy in full recovery.

LAPJ: You were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016, and the Harvard Law School's Great Negotiator Award in 2017. You became a model of leadership for many in our community. What lessons did you learn during your presidency that can be helpful for current students?

JMS: Ever since I was a cadet at the Naval Academy in my country, I learned that the most important thing in life is having a clear port of destination. When the port you are heading to is clear, even unfavorable winds help you get there. Hence, that is my first and most important lesson: you must have a clear goal and then persevere, always persevere, and never falter when difficulties arise. That is the only way to achieve major objectives.

Looking back, after 20 years working for peace in my country, I see there were more failures than successes. But precisely those failures were the ones that showed me the way and led me to the end result, which was none other than ending the longest and most painful internal armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere.

And I would like to say something else to the students: always do whatever is appropriate, what you feel is right, no matter how unpopular it may turn out to be. If you do, you will certainly have to suffer some consequences. But you will win something that is very important: peace of mind.

NOTES

¹ Robert C. Bordone '97, Thaddeus R. Beal Clinical Professor of Law and Director of the Harvard Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program. Taken from Harvard Law School Communication, "HLS Professor Roger Fisher dies," Harvard Gazette, 28 August 2012, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/08/hls-professor-roger-fisher-dies/>.



President Juan Manuel Santos

Juan Manuel Santos was elected President of Colombia on June 2010, then re-elected in 2014 for another four-year term. During his time in office, he worked to achieve the most prominent accomplishment of his presidency: the signature of the peace accords with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which put an end to more than 50 years of armed conflict in the country. The Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded him the 2016 Nobel Peace Laureate, Time Magazine included him in the 2017 list of the 100 most influential public figures in the world, and the World Economic Forum earned him the Global Statesman Award for his efforts for peace and his distinguished career as a world leader. President Santos started his professional life as a cadet at the Naval Academy in Cartagena. As a journalist, he was a columnist and Deputy Director of Colombian newspaper El Tiempo. Throughout his political career, he has served as Chief of the Colombian Delegation to the International Coffee Organization in London, Foreign Trade Minister (1991-1994), Finance Minister (2000-2002), and National Defense Minister (2006-2009). President Santos studied Economics and Business Administration at the University of Kansas (1973). He holds a Master of Science in Economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science (1975), and a Master in Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government (1981).