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Nobel Peace prize: what might have been, what may yet be

By [YEN MAKABENTA](#) on December 15, 2016 [Opinion on Page One](#)



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First read

Think of the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Juan Manuel Santos of Columbia like you would the person who in another time could have been your spouse, lover or soul mate.

There's the taste here of both the pleasant and the sad. What-might-have been is achingly bittersweet.

This year's peace prize was envisioned by some yellow loyalists as the capstone of the presidency of Benigno Aquino III. They saw it as the logical terminus of Aquino's peace overtures to both the Muslim secessionists and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), had the peace effort been crowned with success. Had he extracted even just the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) from the bowels of Congress, he might have bagged the prize.

BBL was the reason billions of public funds were funneled to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). This was why we almost succumbed to Malaysia and its Trojan Horse.

Instead of the Nobel in our arms, the country got nothing. Instead, Columbia, the mother of drug cartels and the first narco-state, home of numerous Miss Universe beauties, and host to a half-century of insurgency and civil war, took home the prize.

I can hear some yellows sighing, "There but for the naysayers could have gone his excellency Benigno Aquino III."

Columbia won with complications

Remarkably, Columbia and president Santos followed the same playbook that had been laid out by the Aquino brain trust.

Santos negotiated and forged peace with Colombian rebels (FARC) to bring the country's 50-year-long civil war to an end.

Mr. Santos and Farc leader Timochenko signed the original agreement in June.

The Colombian government's peace deal with Farc was struck after many years of negotiations.

The agreement hit a surprise hurdle in October this year when 50.2 percent of voters rejected the agreement in a referendum.

Four days after the unexpected referendum result, the Nobel prize committee announced that President Santos would receive the Nobel Peace prize for 2016.

Working alongside the "no" campaigners, the Santos government wrote a new deal, which was then approved by the Colombian Congress last month.

Many armed groups have been involved in decades of conflict in Colombia, including left-wing rebel groups and right-wing paramilitaries. In October the government announced it would start peace talks with the second-largest rebel group, the ELN.

In its announcement, the Nobel committee said it was awarding the Peace Prize to Santos "for his resolute efforts to bring his country's more than 50-year-long civil war to an end".

Honoring the victims of conflict

At the conferment of the peace award, president Santos used his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech to honor the families of the victims of the Colombian conflict and to call on the nations of the world to "rethink" the war on drugs.

The conflict with the Farc rebels in Colombia has killed more than 260,000 people and left millions internally displaced.

In accepting the prize for his efforts in the peace process, Mr Santos paid tribute to the families of the victims of the conflict.

He said the "great paradox" of peacemaking was that "the victims are the ones who are most willing to forgive, to reconcile and to face the future with a heart free of hate".

In a deviation from his prepared remarks, he asked the representatives of the victims present to stand and be recognised for their own efforts in the peace process during the award ceremony.

He previously pledged to donate the prize money—eight million Swedish krona (\$925,000)—to help the conflict’s victims.

He said: “I have served as a leader in times of war – to defend the freedom and the rights of the Colombian people – and I have served as a leader in times of making peace... Allow me to tell you, from my own experience, that it is much harder to make peace than to wage war.”

Rethinking the war on drugs

Then he unveiled his second major message: he called on the nations of the world to rethink “ war on drugs.”

He said the zero-tolerance policy against drugs might be “even more harmful” than all the other wars being fought worldwide.

Mr. Santos said it was “time to change our strategy” on drugs, and that Colombia had “paid the highest cost in deaths and sacrifices” in the so-called war on drugs.

The term “ war on drugs” was coined by US President Richard Nixon more than four decades ago, and it fundamentally refers to US-led efforts to stop drug production at its source. In Latin America this has included on-the-ground policing, and fumigation of coca fields from the air.

Santos said: “We have moral authority to state that, after decades of fighting against drug trafficking, the world has still been unable to control this scourge that fuels violence and corruption throughout our global community,” he said.

“It makes no sense to imprison a peasant who grows marijuana, when nowadays, for example, its cultivation and use are legal in eight states of the United States.

“The manner in which this war against drugs is being waged is equally or perhaps even more harmful than all the wars the world is fighting today, combined.”

Closer to prize now than before

The door is not closed for the Philippines and a Filipino winning the Nobel Peace prize sometime in the future.

Paradoxically, our country could be closer now to the peace prize, with a president in Rodrigo Duterte who is waging a bloody drug war, than with a president in Benigno Aquino who devoted a ton of words to peacetalking.

DU30 raises this tantalizing possibility with his resolute efforts to forge peace on two major fronts of conflict:

1. The 48-year insurgency being waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), and the New People’s Army (NPA).

2. The Muslim secessionist struggle being waged by the Moro Islamic liberation Front (MILF) and various armed groups in Mindanao.

Hopes for a peace deal on the communist insurgency were raised recently when the National Democratic Front, the negotiating arm of the CPP-NPA, announced that it is willing to sign a formal ceasefire agreement with the government, despite President Duterte's obstinate refusal to release political prisoners.

Talks with Muslim rebel groups are also moving forward with the policy of the government to negotiate with all muslim rebel groups, including the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). DU30 is seeking a constitutional amendment that would pave the way for a structural shift to federalism and the grant of broader autonomy to Filipino Muslim communities.

President Duterte's grand vision clearly is to forge an effective peace agreement with both groups within the near future or at least, during his term.

This is no wild dream; it is within the realm of possibility. The Muslim secessionists and communist rebels have never had a more determined president to negotiate with. And the Philippine presidency has never had the ears of the rebellions as Duterte has now.

If DU30 makes peace happen, he will make history. And the Nobel Peace prize will fall into his arms.

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