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‘All eyes on Colombia!’

Kurt Beck, Chairman of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, asks the international community to pay attention to the peace process

Read this interview in German.

You’ve just returned from Colombia. What is the situation in the country ahead of the presidential elections on 27 May?

Unfortunately, the situation isn’t as hopeful as I would have liked after the peace deal was officially concluded. But it’s no good dwelling on that: You have to engage with the realities on the ground. This is a country with a very wide social divide and major differences among the population. Thus, there are still some massive steps to be taken in the peace process, which is designed as a long-term process, because at some point people have to feel that it also means something for them as far as their future, their social situation is concerned.

Turnout at the parliamentary elections in March was less than 50 per cent. Why doesn’t the peace process, and with it the fundamental question of war and peace, galvanise more voters?

I think for many people, especially in Bogotá, the war was a long way off. We had a much greater sense of people having been affected by the war when we were travelling along the Caribbean coast. The conflict was an everyday experience for people there. There is hardly any family there that wasn’t affected in some terrible way by kidnappings or killings. When you’re travelling around Bogotá, on the other hand, which is home to around nine million people, and not just in the north of the city, where the better-off live, but also in the south, where very poor people live, people who quite literally sleep in the gutter, the peace process is far removed from the situation. I don’t believe it’s not important for people. It's just that getting through each day takes up so much space, everything else takes a back seat.

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international attention means the process can't simply be abandoned.

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On top of all that, trust in politicians is obviously not very developed. We visited cities where there have been eleven mayors in the last ten years. Some of the them are sitting in prison today. A lot of people, even Father Fransisco de Roux for example, who heads the Truth Commission that's just been created, described to us that the Colombian population has developed into one in which a great many people have lost trust and don't have a sense of solidarity any more. They've always experienced exploitation. They've always experienced that the powerful have had things their way and haven't shown any concern for other people.

If things are looking bad for the cohesion of society, are there also signs that give hope?

The only matter that really gives any hope are civil society organisations who are committed and campaigning strongly for a fairer society and for safeguarding the peace. This is where we, as a foundation with boots on the ground, are trying to provide vigorous support. We got to know several mayors where you definitely get the impression they want to change things for the better. It's just that there's a kink in the system: You can only be elected mayor for one term, and that's for four years. If you look at the size of the task, from infrastructure, and the necessary land reform, to the construction of a future-oriented economy that isn't solely dependent on coal and commodities, but that uses its ecological advantages and that gives tourism a chance, then of course four years is a frustratingly short time.

It's stipulated in the peace process that the former FARC fighters are to get land to cultivate. What's the state of play with this plan?

It's estimated there are around 13,000 former FARC fighters that would be affected by this. But it's a process that people don't really believe in. There are no land registers in vast parts of the country. Even today, there are still situations where groups are illegally driving people off their land and the people don't have any legal defence, because nothing is registered. And anyone who doesn't leave ends up murdered at some point. Then, other people make up their own minds to leave. And where do they go? Into the poverty of the slums in the big cities. This is probably the most difficult process, because

this division of the land – actually creating order as far as land distribution is concerned – comes up against the strongest opposition from the large landowning families.

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You met both with representatives of political parties and with civil society actors outside the major cities. What did the different persons you talked to say was the No. 1 priority for implementing the peace agreement? Are they actually on the same page?

Officially, everyone is on the same page – at least everyone who doesn't belong to the very conservative parties. The presidential elections are taking place at the moment, and there are some candidates who didn't want this peace process. That's a danger. The hope among the forces that are focused on peace is that international attention means the process can't simply be abandoned. International attention is where these forces see the current priority. But there is for example the worry that opponents could use budget cuts to derail the next steps in the peace process, which involves 500 milestones by 2025. Because there are obviously many forces that currently hold sway and also call the shots in this country who have no interest in lifting up broader swatches of the population and allowing them to compete with them politically or, indeed, economically.

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What aspects do you see that could still scupper the process?

Peace negotiations are still under way with the National Liberation Army (ELN). In contrast to FARC, this group has a much more intensive connection with the rural population. FARC obviously weren't very close to the people, because it didn't even get three per cent of the vote in the parliamentary elections. But the ELN, which is still in rebellion, is drawn more strongly from the population. So there's still a degree of uncertainty about how this process will play out, although a lot of people are confident that at least the guns will fall silent here as well.

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But the crucial factor will be whether people feel that progress is being made when it come to their own lives. This means building infrastructure in rural regions. And in the cities it certainly means bringing an end to this basically insufferable poverty. There are official statements, we also spoke with the High

Commissioner for Peace Rodrigo Rivera, that say that 90 per cent of crimes go unpunished. That is of course a statement about the government and its ability to assert itself or its interest in asserting itself. And of course people draw their own conclusions, some by forming criminal gangs, others by exploiting the poor in the most awful ways. All of that is now exacerbated by the roughly 700,000 refugees arriving from Venezuela. And it all harbours the risk for this society that it won't lift itself up through its own efforts.

Who would be able to help in this situation?

I believe the Catholic Church has a very large role to play. The churches are full, three services a day. Progressive, responsible people have placed a certain hope in Pope Francis here. You have to wonder whether the Catholic Church shouldn't be doing more when it comes to the struggle for fairness. As I said, there are people like Father de Roux who are putting their whole life into improving people's situation. But whether the church as a whole institution is also doing that? I have my doubts.

What can Germany do to make the peace process a success?

Germany enjoys a high regard, and a lot of hope has been placed in getting Germany's support. The German ambassador also gave us a picture of the programmes that Germany is involved in, some of which are very small-scale. But it is precisely these programmes that reach the people and don't have to go through every conceivable channel and filter, where everything gets held up. That is one thing: providing support especially where projects are implemented through civic participation and people actually get something from them. What's more, there is certainly also a need for the international community to continue to pay attention to this process. The Nobel Peace Prize meant there was very wide coverage, worldwide, for all of this. But the danger here is that, at some point, this will be increasingly subsumed in the blur of international conflicts that is unfortunately so widespread. That is why I assured the High Commission for Peace Rodrigo Rivera and also the judge of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace Rodolfo Arango and the Truth Commission under Father de Roux that we will call attention to the problems that stand in the way of the many more steps that are supposed to be taken by 2025 and that are designed to play their part in establishing genuine peace in the country.

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Kurt Beck serves as Chairman of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation since 2013.From May 2006 to September 2008 he was chairman of the SPD and from October 1994 to January 2013 Prime Minister of Rhineland-Palatinate.

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