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The long road to peace in Colombia

Former Farc paramilitary turned politician Victoria Sandino talks about the difficulties of implementing the Colombian peace process

Read this interview in German.

You've complained that it's taking a long time to implement the Colombian peace process. Would you say it's failed?

No, I don't think it has failed, but the process has run up against all sorts of problems from outside. Importantly though, we've fulfilled our obligations to disarm and we're absolutely committed to driving peace forward. There are a few dissidents, of course, but most of our members are prepared to go along with the peace process.

I'd call it a failure if measures promised on issues such as reintegrating former Farc guerrillas into civilian life aren't followed through. So if, for instance, if our members aren't given land to work, or the violence against them continues – if there are more murders of guerrilla fighters – then I'd call it a failure.

How is the reintegration of former paramilitaries progressing? And what about land reform?

Neither of these promises has been fulfilled yet. It means our members can't work and make a living. Farc people living in the reintegration internment camps are pretty sceptical, but they haven't given up hope that the government and the state will act in good faith.

In concrete terms, they want the current government to use its remaining weeks in power to give clear guarantees about implementation. But if that doesn't happen, and the next administration isn't committed to peace, I see serious problems ahead.

In terms of land reform, there are two important issues: firstly, Congress needs to pass a law that will return land to farmers who were driven away by the conflict; and secondly, there needs to be legislation granting land to our former paramilitaries. We're talking about

roughly 8,000 people, not millions. The government can buy land and then sign it over to groups of 200 to 300 for agricultural use; these groups will then form cooperatives. There's no reason this can't be done.

But there are only a few days left till presidential elections on 27 May. Isn't your timetable pretty unrealistic?

If President Santos keeps his promises, then it can all be done – and, at this point in time, it would save the peace process. But recent events, especially the arrest of Farc politician Jesús Santrich [on charges relating to drug dealing] have put a strain on the process. [Santrich denies the charges and is currently on hunger strike].

What I want to emphasise is that there's a mood of disquiet in the reintegration camps. People are thinking about leaving. That doesn't mean that they'd go straight back into armed conflict, but they don't want to be arrested. If they're given land to work, they'll stay.

Since the ceasefire, which has held for two years now, many of our members have started families. They want peace now, not war, and so certainly won't be joining gangs! I'm talking about the majority here.

What about the minority who do turn to crime, though? Can the Farc still reach them?

The party exerts influence on people who are in the camps and on those who are with their families and working. We don't have any contact with – or influence over – the dissidents, however.

The right-wing candidate Iván Duque – a staunch opponent of the peace process – is the current favourite in the presidential elections. If he wins, what impact will that have on how the agreement is implemented?

We hope his election wouldn't lead to a U-turn in the process, and if President Santos takes the steps we are asking him to – if he makes the guarantees required, initiates the peace programme, and leaves it structured and functional, then Duque be unable to reverse it.

The Farc has always seen itself as representing the poor, yet it received hardly any support from poor families in elections in March, winning just 0.5 per cent of the vote. Why is that?

That's one way of looking at it, but I see the situation as being far more complex than it first appears. Our election result was certainly bad, but one of the reasons is that there haven't been the requisite electoral and systematic reforms. The existing system is strongly

clientelist and marked by pork-barrelling and widespread corruption. And it's important to remember that there are over 155,000 polling stations in the country and that the parties have to send counting agents to each and every one if they want to observe the count. Some parties manage that, but we were unable to field even 1,000.

Another issue is the expense of election campaigns. Political parties are often partially funded by the private sector, but the state, too, offers financial resources; our funding was only transferred two days before the end of campaigning on 9 March – the election happened two days later. And the bank still hasn't released the funds, meaning we're currently in a huge amount of debt.

What are your personal goals for the immediate future?

I feel an unconditional duty towards the party, towards the people, towards peace and to fight for women's rights. I meet a wide range of people in my daily life of all political persuasions. I've been working to increase bipartisanship in Colombian politics and people acknowledge that. I think that means I'll continue to play an important role in the party.



Victoria Sandino
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Victoria Sandino represents the Farc Party in Colombia's Senate. As a member of Colombia's negotiation committee, she participated in the peace process that took place in Havana. Sandino was a commander in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia until the guerilla organisations was dissolved in 2017.