DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 17.11.2023 | Sara Meyer

A glimmer of hope

Colombian President Petro's 'Total Peace' initiative might be the country's last chance to reach lasting peace anytime soon

Since last November, Colombia's first left-wing President Gustavo Petro has been fighting for his comprehensive peace project. He aims to achieve what no president has managed in the past decades: leading the deeply divided society towards lasting peace.

Under the banner of '*Paz Total*' ('Total Peace'), Petro is making efforts to address the ongoing armed conflicts in Colombia by engaging in dialogue with most of the illegal armed groups and criminal structures that operate in almost all parts of the South American country. At the same time, he tries to implement the peace agreement from 2016, which the state made with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and which was neglected by the previous government. Moreover, Petro is taking unprecedented steps to address the issue at its core by completely revisiting the longstanding drug policy.

Altogether, Total Peace is a ground-breaking and comprehensive initiative, and it seems to be the only chance for peace after so many years of bloody violence and hatred. However, if the project fails, the last glimmer of hope for a country without daily reports of death could be extinguished completely. For it is hard to believe that any other effort would succeed in the foreseeable future.

Drugs, forced displacements and armed conflicts

Columbia currently counts at least seven armed internal conflicts, and a significant number of individuals are involved in the activities of armed political and non-political groups. According to the country's Peace and Reconciliation Foundation, there are 17 600 members linked to such illegal structures. Over the years, the conflicts have resulted in up to eight million internally displaced persons — the second-highest number worldwide after Syria. Last year, 209 people disappeared. And this year,

73 massacres have already killed 234 people. Over the years of conflict, more than 450 000 Colombians lost their lives, 80 per cent of whom were civilians.

The drug cartel *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC), internationally known as the Gulf Clan with connections to the Mexican *Sinaloa* Cartel, is the largest criminal structure in the country and was born out of a right-wing paramilitary movement. With a reported membership of 4 060 individuals, the AGC operates in various zones across the country, controlling waterways and land routes that are crucial for transporting drugs out of Colombia. They control the population through fear, confining the people to towns and villages where the only authorities are criminal groups. Petro's government has begun peace talks with the AGC. However, after several violent public actions in March 2023, the government decided to break the ceasefire agreed between the two parties.

The president has announced that he aims to achieve his ambitious goal of establishing lasting peace in Colombia by May 2025. And there are indeed reasons to hope.

The ⊠⊠*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) is the largest active guerrilla in the country. It currently counts 5 850 insurgents. The group is attributed a political character, which seems to have partially eroded over time though. They started fighting as a Marxist-oriented group in the name of the 'common people' in the 1960s, particularly targeting oil companies. Today, however, experts are convinced that they are also deeply involved in the drug trafficking business, even if the group denies this. Since the autumn of 2022, official negotiations have been taking place with this group, thanks to the 'Total Peace' initiative.

Besides the ELN and the AGC, splinter groups of the FARC guerrilla group are involved in armed actions and drug business in a multitude of regions. The *Estado Mayor Central* ('Central High Command', EMC) and the *Segunda Marquetalia* ('Second Marquetalia') together count more than 5 000 members.

Towards sustainable peace?

The president has announced that he aims to achieve his ambitious goal of establishing lasting peace in Colombia by May 2025. And there are indeed reasons to hope: since the beginning of August, a six-month ceasefire with the ELN has been in effect. Initial humanitarian agreements to protect the civilian population have been signed, and the

UN verification mission recently confirmed a decrease in violence associated with this agreed cessation of offensive action. No president has come this far before; at least seven of the previous heads of state failed in dialogues with the ELN.

Petro – who once was a guerrilla fighter himself – seems to have a good feeling for the dynamics. His approach is oriented towards sustainable peace rather than short-term solutions: he has chosen a diverse delegation team, and selected negotiators from various political parties, even those that do not necessarily agree with his line, such as José Lafaurie, president of the farmers' association. Bringing on board the human rights defender Iván Cepeda, a politician popular especially among the marginalised groups, was also a smart choice.

Alongside this inclusive approach, the new drug policy recently presented by the 63-year-old head of state holds the greatest promise for the long-awaited peace.

Meanwhile, Petro's approach is not tailored to merely talking with the country's elites, leaving a great part of the society out. Instead, he reaches out to involve *all* sectors of the population, especially those that were historically ignored. Currently, discussions are taking place in all regions of the country, engaging the youth, people with disabilities, journalists and university circles, among others, to explore their perspectives on a peaceful future.

Alongside this inclusive approach, the new drug policy recently presented by the 63-year-old head of state holds the greatest promise for the long-awaited peace. With it, Petro aims to stop stigmatising and criminalising farmers that grow illicit crops but to instead facilitate their transition to coffee, cocoa, or other food crops through subsidies. According to the new strategy, social justice measures should be implemented that are in favour of disadvantaged groups affected by the narcotraffic structures, including consumers. Since Petro sees the destination countries of Colombian drugs as crucial components in the peace-building network, he has also advocated for a new international drug diplomacy to change the way countries deal with drug problems.

Despite this comprehensive and well-thought-through approach, its practical implementation is not going so smoothly: talks with the EMC are currently paused because the rebels feel that the government is not adhering to what has been discussed. The peace talks with the ELN are in crisis, too, as kidnappings for ransom have increased recently. The kidnapping of Liverpool football player Luis Manuel Díaz's father, in particular, has fuelled mistrust of the ELN's commitment to peace. A

recent statement from the rebels' Supreme Commander Antonio García that the ELN will not accept pressure and threats from the state has also caused dissatisfaction. The biggest problem appears to be the inconsistent command structures within the ELN, and the reluctance of the lower ranks to align with what was discussed at the negotiation table.

The people of Colombia and its government are expecting results in a very short time, even if the past has shown that such things need time.

The president is trying to make the most of these circumstances, but he cannot overturn the structures that have prevailed for decades overnight. He has to rely on the support of the population — something that is not always easy in a country with the media, conservative elites such as large land- and business owners and traditional parties opposing him. Further obstacles hindering Petro are the strong regional dynamics that are difficult to change. In the latest elections on October 29, predominantly right-wing parties that are rejecting his peace initiative emerged victorious. The people of Colombia and its government are expecting results in a very short time, even if the past has shown that such things need time: negotiations between the FARC and the government took four years until they reached a peace accord in 2016. Hence, at times, it seems as if Petro is forced to act in an overly quick manner, because his political clock is ticking, and he is aware that his successor could tear down everything again.

Yet, the fact that the country, which has been ruled by right-wing and conservative forces for over 200 years, now has a president who wholeheartedly fights for the historically neglected and the pacification of his homeland, despite opposition from the media, broad sectors of society and even his own ranks, should be a reason for hope.



Sara Meyer
Bogotá

Sara Meyer works as a Latin America Correspondent, focussing on Human rights, as well as social and political issues.