

COLOMBIA

DR. HUBERT GEHRING
MARGARITA CUERVO

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Colombia – At loggerheads over the path to peace

While the Colombian Government's delegation in Cuba negotiates with FARC guerrilla representatives over a possible end to the armed conflict despite reciprocal military attacks, the political situation in the country itself is marked by tensions and scepticism that are not to be underestimated.

Colombia should hence not only concentrate on the negotiations in Havana but also on achieving a consensus within society on the issue of peace negotiations. This is vital for the country since important reforms need to be introduced in order to create a sustainable future for the post-conflict phase following the signing of an agreement.

Colombia in dispute over peace: the legacy of the 2014 elections

The presidential elections of 2014 left behind a highly polarized political atmosphere in Colombia because the election campaign focused on a false distinction between "friends" and "enemies" of peace. In the election campaign, "friends" of peace were regarded as those who supported incumbent President Santos's proposal to continue the peace talks with the FARC guerrillas and be prepared to compromise so as to achieve a quick end to the armed conflict. On the other hand, critics of the president's way of conducting the negotiations were classed as "enemies" of peace. The arguments of the sceptics were here above all directed towards a possible impunity for the violent crimes of the guerrillas.

This tension led to Santos being re-elected as president for a further four years in June 2014, but paradoxically also put him in an awkward situation. Because the election victory with 51% was very narrow and because he had presented his government as being the one that would achieve peace in Colombia, the political evaluation of his work as president hinges on the result of

the peace talks in Havana. Thus he has to achieve a peace agreement not only for the sake of his voters and for sympathizers of the "Unidad Nacional" government coalition but also for the sake of the more oppositional parties from the left wing, such as the "Polo Democrático Alternativo" and the "Partido Verde", which only joined Santos's coalition for the re-election campaign on the second round of voting on the condition that the peace negotiations would be continued and brought to a successful conclusion.

So much for one half of the voters, who supported Santos in the presidential election. The other half, who voted for Óscar Iván Zuluaga, the candidate of so-called "Uribism" (followers of Santos's predecessor as president, Álvaro Uribe), should not be disregarded either in assessing the political situation in Colombia or by Santos himself in the peace negotiations. Firstly, it was not without reason that the candidate of the "Uribism" obtained the majority of votes in the first round of voting, thus winning against Santos in that first round. Secondly, with their vote for "Uribism" this half of the voters very clearly expressed their dissatisfaction and their criticism of Santos's way of conducting the negotiations so far and thus

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COLOMBIA

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also their criticism of the general development of the country.

The main points of criticism by the Uribe wing of Colombians regarding the peace process were, and still are, firstly, that the way negotiations have been conducted has raised the level of insecurity in the country and that there is a high risk that the crimes committed by the guerrillas against the population over the past 50 years could go unpunished. A legal analysis as to the extent to which these fears are actually justified would go beyond the scope of this report. The fact that the presidential candidate Zuluaga also gained a noteworthy 45% of the votes in the second round of voting should thus not be underestimated by Santos in the peace negotiations.

Of course, the FARC also knows that Santos is under great pressure to succeed and they are pushing things to the limit with their actions and demands at the negotiating table, which leaves the government with only a little leeway. As a result, the government ultimately seems to be a "prisoner" itself of the peace process and of all the commitments it has made in order to reach a peace agreement quickly.

Neither a dove of peace nor a firm hand – before attaining a signature in Havana, Colombia needs a broad compromise in society

Thus, almost a year after the elections there continues to be a strong polarization in Colombian society as a result. The most alarming thing about this is the fact that large portions of the population are increasingly sceptical about the peace process. A recent opinion poll¹ shows that almost 70% of Colombians believe that the current negotiations will not lead to a peace agreement.

In the same study, however, the question was asked as to what approach should be pursued in the light of the progress of the talks. Only

27% of those surveyed spoke in favour of aborting the negotiations and solving the conflict by military means. In other words, despite their scepticism, the substantial majority of the population is in favour of continuing to pursue the negotiation route for obtaining peace in the country. At the same time, there is, however, also a general fatigue and attrition due to the lengthy duration of the talks, especially since President Santos himself set a deadline of one year when the negotiations commenced in autumn 2012. And if the Colombians do not see tangible results soon, the legitimacy of the process will continue to decline.

The survey findings also show that neither of the extreme positions can be the solution – neither the rather gentle way in which Santos has conducted the peace process so far, nor the harsh proposals from the opposition on the part of the "Centro Democrático". As an example: although the Colombians truly desire lasting peace by means of negotiation, only a small minority (approx. 8%) agrees with the guerrilla leaders not having to serve prison sentences. Moreover, the sense of insecurity has increased (approx. 83% of the population do not feel safe). Consequently, the criticisms from "Uribism" have genuine backing in public opinion in all of these points.

The discontent of the Colombians is not only related to the peace process, however. There generally exists a very negative evaluation of the governance of the country. According to the above-mentioned survey, 75% of the population have no confidence in the president's administration. Compared with previous surveys, Santos's credibility has reached an all-time low. Furthermore, the president is perceived as not keeping his election promises.

In short, the overall dissatisfaction in Colombia is due to various factors that are related to one another. Above all, those who elected Santos because of the peace issue are noticing how the process is being protracted more and more. There is increasing scepticism as to whether success can really be achieved in this. Secondly, those citizens who did not vote for Santos last year feel shut out of the peace process because their concerns are not being taken into account.

¹ "Revista Semana. Todo está a la baja. May the 2nd, 2015. En: <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/gran-encuesta-santos-esta-la-baja/426263-3>.

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www.kas.de**Beyond the peace process: structural reform processes necessary in Colombian society**

There is, however, a further reason for the overall discontent, namely that Santos's government has focused all its strength almost exclusively on the issue of peace. This restriction to one topic not only harms his reputation and the peace process itself but also affects the chance of widespread development for the country. Development of this kind would also address the structural problems that have caused and intensified the conflict.

In a country of such great diversity and complexity as Colombia, there are a multitude of problems to solve. The armed conflict is one of those problems that must not be put off. Nonetheless, it is not the only urgent task and the signing of a peace agreement will not automatically lead to a cancellation of the remaining problems that the country suffers from.

On the contrary, there is actually a high risk that, without simultaneous structural changes in the country, an agreement between the parties involved in the conflict could lead to a relapse into armed conflict with the same parties or new ones. Why is that? In the opinion of numerous experts, the reason is to be found in the fact that the country's profound problems go far beyond armed conflict and are rooted in institutional structures that hinder the inclusion of broad sections of society while a small few are privileged. In short, structures exist in Colombia that lead to the exclusion of significant portions of society from education, health and participation in social welfare.

The good news is that the necessary approaches to reform concerning the underlying reasons for both the conflict and other problems that Colombia has have not been completely abolished from the government programme and are regarded as a supplement to the peace process. For example, the National Development Plan (PND) for the four-year period of 2014-2018 is based on the objective of closing existing social gaps in Colombia. For this, some particularly affected areas were identified where socio-economic inequality is clearly evident. There the government intends

to intensify its efforts to reduce the social differences.

This is necessary not only for ending the armed conflict. Colombia has other goals, too. In 2011 Santos announced that his country wanted to become a member of the OECD. Most of the changes and reforms that the National Development Plan intends to implement are focused on this goal.

The economic indicators alone – sustained growth in GDP of over 4% in the last 5 years and the country's positioning as an attractive target for foreign investment – are themselves a significant basis for achieving this objective. Nonetheless, the country's development continues to lag behind (inequality with regard to population and regions, the absence of a functioning decentralization of governmental power and the lacking consolidation of the rule of law), which contributes to it still being quite some way away from admission to this "club of nations" with good government practices and sustainable development.

Furthermore, the OECD has issued a series of recommendations on the primary requirements that Colombia is to fulfil if the country wants to join the organization. Incidentally, these recommendations are not "only" important because the OECD has stated them as part of the conditions for accession; they are also inherently good government practices. They concern necessary, fundamental transformations for the country's development and also for the sustainability of a potential peace agreement. Two of the recommendations are to be elaborated on here:

- **Territorial development with a focus on efficient government practices**

In order for Colombia to be able to proceed along the path towards integral development and to guarantee the sustainability of the peace process, first of all steps need to be taken to overcome the regional differences. It is thus a top priority to establish an efficient and functioning administrative system at a local and regional level across the whole of Colombia. In other words, as long as the framework conditions in the various regions remain different, the inequality between the *departamentos* (provinces) will

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persist. One example to illustrate this situation: according to the National Planning Department DNP, in 2013 741 out of 1102 Colombian municipalities were classified in the two lowest grades in an assessment of their financial situation, i.e. they are at high risk of becoming or are de facto bankrupt.²

▪ **Equal opportunities for everyone**

On paper, at least, the foundations have been laid for achieving this goal in the National Development Plan PND 2014-2018. The government programme here rests on three pillars: peace, equality and education. According to this plan, a cycle is to be implemented in which the three pillars reinforce one another. Under the term "equality", equal opportunities for everyone are to be strived for. With this in mind, the priority first needs to be placed on equal educational and professional opportunities. To this end, access to education must be improved, as must the quality of education, so that the "human capital" in the country is simultaneously boosted and productivity and economic development can be increased in the medium term. Regarding employment opportunities, lowering the unemployment rate is not sufficient. Instead, the supply of formal jobs needs to be expanded and education should be aligned with the demands of the labour market.

In short: it is time to achieve a consensus in Colombia regarding the fundamental problems and to find appropriate approaches to solutions

As already explained, it would be too simple to limit oneself to a point of view that divides the country into "good guys" and "bad guys", into "friends" and "enemies". That would hinder a genuine and comprehensive solution to the problems the country is suffering from.

With this in mind, two different approaches are needed. On the one hand, there must be a dia-

logue between the various sectors of society that have differing views on the peace process, i.e. between those who support the peace process as it is currently being conducted and those who criticize the way the negotiations are being handled. It is indisputable that the Colombians favour the negotiation route to solve the armed conflict and that, in this regard, the president's approach attracts support. On the other hand, however, it is also apparent that representatives of some camps oppose impunity for the crimes against humanity that have been committed in the course of the conflict. Here the criticisms – not only on the part of "Uribism" but also from other political camps – certainly have their validity and should be taken into account. Ignoring this perspective of half of society would be a grave mistake that could cost the country the sustainability of a negotiated peace agreement.

On the other hand, it is a great political risk to focus all efforts only on "peace", which must, initially, be seen as a potential outcome of the peace negotiations in Havana, after which the real peace process with the implementation of the negotiated issues begins. If all the eggs are put in this one basket, everything that happens, or does not happen, with the FARC issue will have an effect on the entire governance of the country, as recent opinion polls have shown. Santos should thus also work on reforms for an inclusive and sustainable development of the country, irrespective of the peace negotiations. These reforms are absolutely necessary with or without a peace agreement.

And last but not least: topics such as peace and development should no longer be limited solely to personal and party political debates. They are fundamental points that should go beyond the ideological debate and a polarized perspective. With this in mind, it is time for the elites of Colombian politics, whether they are "Santistas" or "Uribistas", to be ready to make concessions and compromises if their goal really is to develop a peaceful and fair country. The international players would also be well advised to take greater account of this.

² Departamento Nacional de Planeación. Índice de Desempeño Fiscal, 2013. Anexo 1, Municipios. In: <https://colaboracion.dnp.gov.co/CDT/Desarrollo%20Terrorismo/Copia%20de%20Anexo%20Desempeño%20Fiscal%202013-v1.zip>.