

Why this year's elections won't promote peace in Colombia

By Theresa Bachmann¹

On November 24, 2016, the Colombian government and the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army) guerrilla signed "The Final Agreement to Build a Stable and Lasting Peace" in Colombia. The then-president Santos was awarded the Nobel Prize of Peace and the world applauded. The peace agreement is not only remarkable because of the length and the devastating impact of more than five decades of internal armed conflict. Its significance is particularly grounded in its great innovative power, which observers have widely hailed as new milestone in terms of inclusive peacebuilding: Apart from being the first peace agreement with a consistent gender approach, it also includes an entire chapter dedicated to political participation and a separate Ethnic Chapter with numerous affirmative measures to address the differential impact of the armed conflict on historically marginalised actors. The comprehensive rural reform spelled out in Chapter I of the agreement, is key to addressing the root causes of the armed conflict. It gives citizens in Colombia's most affected territories real decision-making power in shaping the transformation of their territories through special "Development Programmes with a Territorial Emphasis" (PDET) (Colombia, 2016).

Five years later, the prospects for peace – both nationally and in the regions that were most affected by the armed conflict – look dire: The implementation progress is slow and has decelerated since the Conservative and opponent of the peace agreement Iván Duque became president in 2018. The Kroc Institute of International Peace Studies, in charge of monitoring the implementation, points out that implementation lags particularly behind in areas with gender and ethnic-related commitments (Barometer Initiative et al., 2019, p. 71; Iniciativa Barómetro et al., 2021, p. 8). A weak state presence in rural regions has enabled other armed actors to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the FARC and negotiations with the still-fighting ELN guerrilla have been halted. Although the peace agreement had been praised as revolutionary attempt to break historically rooted cycles of distrust between the Colombian state and its citizens (Burnyeat, 2020), millions of victims of the armed conflict are still waiting for any kind of recompensation. Meanwhile, the ongoing and exacerbated physical

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violence most openly exposes the fragility of “peace” in Colombia. At present, Colombia is the deadliest country on earth for social leaders and human rights activists (Global Witness, 2020, p. 6). Forced displacement is likewise increasing and annually affects roughly 150,000 citizens, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2021). Fear and intimidation is also sparked by targeted threats against those engaged in the peace process. In December 2020, Colombia's truth commissions' gender advisory body published a press release in which it highlighted its inability to fulfill its tasks as most of its members had been obliged to suspend or reduce their work due to personal threats or displacement (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, 2020).

This is how Colombia has entered a decisive electoral year 2022 with both legislative and presidential elections. Although it is too early to make predictions, two features characterise the national panorama: First, the extreme polarisation between the far-left (emblematically led by their presidential candidate and former guerrilla fighter Gustavo Petro) and the far-right (where omnipresent former president and hardliner Álvaro Uribe still retains his influence). Second, the elections' crucial importance for the further trajectory of the Colombian peace process. As such, not few suspect that another victory of the far-right – which won the 2018 elections i. a. by advocating against the peace agreement – could bring the peace process de facto to an end and leave victims and their communities alone yet again. However, even a win of the left, which is currently leading the polls, can provoke further violence (Infobae, 2021): Armed groups – frequently with links to conservative politicians – are currently consolidating their control in many rural areas, pressuring communities to vote for right-wing candidates. Should for the first time in Colombian history a leftist politician conquer the presidency, rising numbers of combats and a further escalation of violence could follow suit. While these fears will hopefully be proven wrong, the communities of Colombia's rural, historically abandoned territories expect to pay a high prize for the elections – no matter their outcome. Five years after the signing of the peace agreement, peace in Colombia thus remains illusional for many.

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