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Total Peace in Colombia?

President Petro's Agenda between Aspiration and Reality

Stefan Reith

Since taking office in August 2022, Colombian President Gustavo Petro has pursued the vision of *paz total* – total or complete peace – and the reform agenda this involves as the linchpin of his government’s agenda. Negotiations with remaining guerrilla organisations and criminal groups create opportunities but involve major challenges, too.

Historical Context – The Long Road to Peace

Taking stock of the decades-long internal conflict in Colombia, the record is devastating: the state registry lists more than eight million conflict victims – some 16 per cent of the current Colombian population. According to research by the Truth Commission, more than 450,000 people were killed in the conflict between guerrilla organisations, paramilitaries, state security forces and drug gangs between 1985 and 2018. Over 7.5 million people were victims of displacement. The Truth Commission also counted nearly 70,000 missing persons and thousands of cases of forced recruitment of minors.¹

The history of the conflict is marked by military confrontations between the state and non-state armed groups, and there have been various attempts at negotiation. In the run-up to the 1991 Constituent Assembly, the guerrilla group M-19, to which current President Petro belonged, the indigenous guerrilla movement Quintin Lame and most of the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL) laid down their arms and joined the political process. After years of negotiations, the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the largest remaining guerrilla organisation, concluded a peace agreement in 2016 that allowed for the successful reintegration of 13,000 fighters into civilian life.

After initially seeing a significant decline in violence and casualties, the conflict has gained momentum again in recent years, as the Colombian state has failed to establish a presence of its own to fill the power vacuum left by the FARC

and to assert the state monopoly on the use of force nationwide. The last still active historical guerrilla organisation, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), the FARC dissidents, the Clan del Golfo and other illegal armed groups control entire regions, fighting bitterly for the income from coca cultivation, drug smuggling and illegal mining. Experts say there are 35 to 50 illegal armed groups operating in the country.² The International Committee of the Red Cross registered seven non-state armed conflicts in Colombia in its 2023 Humanitarian Challenges report, three of which relate to the Colombian state’s disputes with the ELN, the FARC dissidents and the Clan del Golfo. The remaining four are conflicts among non-state armed groups themselves.³

The previous government under President Iván Duque (2018 to 2022) pursued a policy known as *paz con legalidad* (“peace with legality”), which primarily relied on intelligence-gathering combined with military and police operations to fight the illegal groups and kill their leaders. Despite some successful operations, the Duque government failed to significantly improve the security situation in the country, since the strategy led to further fragmentation of the conflict landscape with numerous succession battles and territorial struggles that particularly affected the rural population. Petro’s *paz total* is diametrically opposed to the policy of his predecessor in office. Rather than focusing on the deployment of state security forces, government policy is now centred on dialogue and offers of negotiations to all armed groups. The underlying assumption by Petro and the representatives of his left-wing government alliance is that the

causes of the conflict lie primarily in the persistent poverty, inequality and social injustice.

This policy change initially met with a positive response from Colombia's international partners. The German government signalled full support for the policy of *paz total*,⁴ confirmed its commitment to the Colombian peace process – when the German Foreign Minister visited Cali in June 2023, for example – and declared its willingness to act as a supporting state in the negotiation process with the ELN. This includes sending diplomatic representatives to the negotiation rounds and financing the logistics of the negotiation process. Germany already hosted negotiations with the ELN 25 years ago under

the auspices of the German Bishops' Conference, but these later failed. In 2015, the Federal Government appointed a special representative to coordinate Germany's contributions to the Colombian peace process with the FARC. This mandate has since expired and has not been renewed. Despite all the setbacks and sluggish implementation, the peace agreement with the FARC can be said to be successful if only because of the effective demobilisation and reintegration of 13,000 guerrilla fighters, yet the prospects of *paz total* are still unclear a year after the change of government. Given the strength and historical significance of the movement, successful peace negotiations with the ELN would be a milestone.



A terrible record: According to investigations by a truth commission, more than 450,000 people were killed in the conflict in Colombia between 1985 and 2018, with thousands more missing. The photo shows people whose fate is unknown. Photo: © Fernando Vergara, AP, picture alliance.

Negotiations with the ELN – Challenges and Perspectives

The legal basis for the negotiation processes is Act 2272, the law on *paz total* passed by Congress at the end of 2022, which defines two categories. The first includes groups that are granted political status based on their underlying motivation: political negotiations can be conducted with such groups on matters such as participation in the political process and reforms of the economic, social and state system – similar to the peace negotiations with the FARC. The second category covers organisations of a purely criminal nature without a political element: the only option available for these groups is submission to the judiciary. However, representatives of this second category can expect significant reductions in sentences if they cooperate fully in solving crimes and provide information to help dismantle the organisation and reveal drug-smuggling routes. A law defining the framework conditions in more detail is currently still passing through the parliamentary process.

In late March, the ELN killed ten soldiers in an attack in the border region with Venezuela.

The ELN is recognised by the Petro government as a political negotiating partner. According to current estimates, the guerrilla movement founded in 1964 has around 6,000 members⁵ and is present in 16 per cent⁶ of all urban and rural districts. At least seven governments have conducted peace negotiations with the ELN since 1985 without managing to arrive at a successful conclusion. The last negotiations were broken off by the Duque government in January 2019 after the ELN used a car bomb to carry out an attack on the police academy in Bogotá, killing 23 people.

Negotiations with the ELN involve major challenges. Firstly, unlike the FARC, this guerrilla group is strongly decentralised, and secondly, all national leadership members are in Cuba or

Venezuela, so it is not clear whether any agreements reached can be implemented on a binding basis in the Colombian regions. In addition, the ELN has announced that it will not surrender its weapons until all agreements with the government – including far-reaching state and social reforms – have been implemented. Critics believe that the ELN is not genuinely willing to negotiate: they describe the organisation as being largely a drug mafia that has long since lost its political character and is only using the talks with the government to expand its territorial influence.

A bilateral six-month ceasefire with the five main armed groups, announced by President Petro on Twitter prematurely at the end of 2022, was instantly denied by the ELN. Attacks on state security forces and forced recruitment continued. At the end of March, the ELN killed ten soldiers in an attack carried out in the border region with Venezuela. Nevertheless, the government decided to continue the negotiation process. After initial rounds of negotiations in Venezuela and Mexico, a breakthrough was finally achieved at the third round of negotiations in Cuba. On 9 June, President Petro and ELN leader Antonio García signed an agreement in Havana on a six-month nationwide bilateral ceasefire starting on 3 August 2023. The aim here is to create a basis for further negotiations involving the civilian population and to improve the humanitarian situation of the population in those conflict regions particularly affected. The Catholic Church and the UN are involved in verifying implementation of the agreements reached. It remains to be seen in the coming months whether the ceasefire is respected by all ELN units in the regions. Doubts appear to be justified. For example, the ELN leadership ordered the cessation of all offensive actions against the police and military as of 6 July, yet almost simultaneously – in connection with the anniversary of the founding of the guerrilla movement on 4 July 1964 – ELN units launched a nationwide wave of terror involving more than 30 attacks on members of the police and on infrastructure. Three police officers were killed and several injured.⁷ Protocols have since been agreed on to verify and, if necessary, extend the six-month ceasefire in rural areas. Additionally,



a dialogue process was initiated with the aim of involving civil society in the negotiations. Even though key issues such as extortion of protection money, kidnapping and forced recruitment by the ELN remain unresolved, the Petro government has secured an initial interim victory by agreeing the ceasefire to give the *paz total* project greater legitimacy.

FARC Dissidents and Other Armed Groups

Dialogue with the dissidents of the FARC guerrilla is likewise difficult. Those dissidents fall into two groups. The first, under the name Estado Central (EMC), comprises a number of FARC units that refused to sign the 2016 peace agreement and continue to operate in various regions of Colombia. The second group, Segunda Marquetalia, was founded by FARC commanders who originally joined the peace process but went underground in 2019 and took up arms again. Both these organisations compete with the ELN and other illegal groups – as well as with each other – over the control of territory, illegal mining, and drug cultivation and trafficking. According to estimates by the think tank Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP), the two groups together have a total of more than 5,000 members. While the government has granted EMC political status for negotiations, this has not yet been conclusively clarified for the Segunda Marquetalia.

In May 2023, it was revealed that the EMC had tracked down and executed four underage members of an indigenous community who had fled after being forcibly recruited. President Petro then declared the end of the ceasefire with the EMC in four regions and ordered the military to resume operations against the group, albeit without suspending the ongoing dialogue process. The EMC responded immediately and, with an eye on the important regional and local elections at the end of October 2023, declared that representatives of “traditional parties” were not welcome in the regions under its “political and military control”. Recently, a new ceasefire and the beginning of official negotiations, to start in October, were agreed. Informal talks are also being held with the

Segunda Marquetalia – with which a bilateral ceasefire continues to apply – under the leadership of Colombia’s High Commissioner for Peace, Danilo Rueda, but these talks have not yet resulted in an official negotiation process.

Unlike the two factions of FARC dissidents, it is clear that the Clan del Golfo is not recognised as a political guerrilla movement. According to estimates by experts, this criminal organisation has over 4,000 members, does not pursue a political agenda and is particularly active in illegal mining, cocaine trafficking and the extortion of protection money. A ceasefire between the Clan del Golfo and the Colombian military established at the beginning of the year was declared to be over by President Petro at the end of March after the organisation continued its attacks on state security forces and the civilian population. In their public statements, spokespersons for the Clan del Golfo have repeatedly declared their willingness to negotiate, but even the Petro government is now doubtful that any dialogue process with this group can be successful. Little is known about the status of ongoing talks with other illegal armed groups such as the Autodefensas Conquistadores de la Sierra Nevada and criminal structures in Medellín, Buenaventura and Quibdó, which are of a more regional or local nature.

The sense of security among people representing the interests of local communities has deteriorated.

Peace without Security?

A year after the change of government, the *paz total* project has seen mixed results. An analysis by the FIP⁸ of the general security situation illustrates the extent of violence and lack of security in the country: while fewer members of the state security forces were injured (84) or killed (21) in the first quarter of 2023 than in the same period of 2022 (206/27), the trend

has been on the rise again with the ending of ceasefires. Murders of social leaders were 30 per cent lower in the first four months of 2023 compared to the previous year. Nevertheless, there have been 51 murders in this period – the third highest figure since 2016, when the peace agreement was entered into with the FARC. Curfews imposed by illegal groups increased by 32 per cent, while forcible evictions decreased slightly by nine per cent over the same period. Violent clashes between armed groups (24) increased in the first trimester of 2023, reaching a three-year high. Kidnappings increased by 103 per cent in the first quarter of 2023, and the extortion of protection money by 27 per cent.⁹

Security experts interpret these figures as evidence of the fact that although confrontations between state security forces and illegal armed groups have decreased in the wake of the government’s offers to negotiate, the criminal organisations are taking advantage of the decreasing pressure of prosecution and the freedom this gives them to consolidate their control over territory and the population. A survey conducted in April 2023 among people representing the interests of local communities – known as *líderes sociales* – found that the sense of security among this particularly vulnerable group of people had deteriorated significantly. 85 per cent of respondents said they felt unsafe in their own environment, while 50 per cent said that the security situation was unchanged compared to the previous year. 30 per cent saw a deterioration, and only 14 per cent said they felt there had been an improvement in the security situation. Only 7 per cent of respondents were aware of how the government’s ongoing negotiations with the armed groups were progressing.¹⁰ Representative opinion polls now show increasing scepticism towards the policy of *paz total*. According to a recent survey by the renowned polling institute Invamer, 63 per cent of respondents think the government project is on the wrong track, while 29 per cent think it is pursuing the right course. 24 per cent say they feel safer because of the policy of *paz total*, while 67 per cent of respondents feel less safe.

These figures clearly show that the radical change in policy and the generous offers of dialogue to illegal armed groups under the Petro government have not brought about any significant improvement in the security situation to date – some indicators even show a negative development. Moreover, the negative perception of the security situation and of the *paz total* project – among both the particularly vulnerable *líderes sociales* and the population as a whole – indicates that the Petro government is increasingly under time pressure to deliver tangible results.

In spring 2023, there was a wave of resignations among senior officers in the armed forces.

Given the fact that regional and local elections are due to be held at the end of October 2023, observers expect the security situation to deteriorate further: experience shows that political violence increases in the run-up to elections, as criminal actors seek to convert their territorial and social control into local political power and co-opt state decision-making structures within their sphere of influence. Threats and attacks against political actors and candidates who oppose or do not cooperate with the illegal groups are commonplace. In its third pre-election report, the local election monitoring initiative Misión Observación Electoral points out that violent actions against political and social leaders increased by 88 per cent from the end of October 2022 to the end of April 2023 compared to the same period before the last local elections in 2019. Such high levels of pre-election violence have not been seen since the organisation was founded in 2006, the report said.¹¹

Improvisation as a Strategy

The magazine *The Economist* was critical in its interim assessment of President Petro in April 2023, saying that the “total peace” project was

more a slogan than an achievable objective.¹² It criticised the bilateral ceasefire with the main illegal armed groups announced by Petro at the end of the year as having been premature and lacking in coordination. The progress in the negotiations reported by the government contrasts with an increasingly precarious security situation. For this reason, critics accuse the government of being naive and gullible. They say that the ceasefires with various violent actors were de facto not bilateral but a unilateral concession on the part of the Colombian state that the groups have taken advantage of to expand their territorial and social control. While this has led to a reduction in violent clashes between state security forces and armed groups, say the critics, it has also meant that confrontations between these groups have increased – with sometimes dramatic consequences for the population in the regions affected. Experts also point out that bilateral ceasefires between the state and individual groups do not necessarily improve the security situation. An illegal organisation that agrees a ceasefire with the military remains subject to attacks by other groups, so the threat to civilians as a result of territorial struggles persists. Multilateral ceasefires in a complex conflict region require individual perpetrators of violence to be systematically registered and localised in order to guarantee a stable ceasefire, however.

Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez, brother of the former commander of the M-19 guerrilla movement and presidential candidate Carlos Pizarro, who was assassinated in 1990, is considered to be one of the most renowned experts on Colombia's long history of conflict. In an interview, he accuses the government of not having a structured plan for the *paz total* project but instead pursuing an improvised course of action that is doomed to failure unless improvements are made soon.¹³ Among other things, Leongómez criticises the restraint and lack of motivation in military leadership circles. The replacement of more than 50 generals in the military and police after the change of government has led to a massive loss of experience and to uncertainty among the state security forces, he says.

The parallel negotiation processes also pose a dilemma for the military in the conflict regions, says Leongómez: when state armed forces come into contact with armed groups, they may not know whether the latter are subject to an agreed ceasefire or not. Any confrontation with a group sitting at the negotiating table could jeopardise the military career of those in command. As a result, the military hardly ever leaves its bases, says Leongómez, which in turn creates new freedom for the armed groups. In spring 2023, there was a wave of resignations among senior officers in the armed forces, apparently due to a lack of prospects combined with frustration at security policy developments and the declining social status of military personnel. A former M-19 guerrillero himself, President Petro had repeatedly expressed his deep mistrust and disrespect for the military leadership. He made Iván Velásquez his Minister of Defence – a renowned anti-corruption campaigner but someone who lacked experience in security and defence policy. Security experts call for state security forces to take on a stronger role within the *paz total* project so as to ensure public security, enforce the state monopoly on the use of force in the regions and conduct negotiations with illegal groups from a position of strength.¹⁴

The Petro government's flagship project is more a political vision than an achievable government objective.

In May, a group of experts consisting of former ministers, chief negotiators and academics published a “Manifesto for Total Peace”,¹⁵ in which they set out twelve proposals to improve the effectiveness of the government's *paz total* project. The paper warns of the risks of new paramilitary groups claiming to be self-defence forces that protect the rights of indigenous, Afro-Colombian or smallholder communities. These *guardias indígenas*, *cimarronas* and



“Respect for the armed forces, respect for our police officers”: Critics in Colombia complain about the government’s treatment of the state security forces. In spring 2023, there was even a wave of resignations by senior officers due to a lack of prospects and frustration over security policy developments and the declining social status of military personnel. [Photo: © Juancho Torres, AA, picture alliance.](#)

campesinas have a long tradition in Colombia, given the lack of state presence in large parts of the national territory. There are also clear indications that these organisations are infiltrated by criminal forces to some extent, however. At the beginning of March, for example, protests by the local population against environmental damage caused by an oil company in the Caquetá region resulted in violent clashes between local *guardias indígenas*, *campesinas* and police forces, in the course of which a police officer and a protester were killed. 79 police officers were detained for a day by the local groups and threatened. While the government downplayed the incident as a “humanitarian

encirclement”, critics called it a “kidnapping” and accused the government of abandoning the police officers. Security sources suspected that the FARC dissidents of the EMC were behind the attacks on the company premises and the kidnapping. This suspicion appeared to be confirmed when, in the same region a few weeks later, EMC commander Iván Mordisco held a public meeting in which he announced the start of the negotiation process with the government. Among the approximately 7,000 participants were numerous representatives of the *guardia campesina* who had been involved in the abduction of the police officers. The aforementioned group of experts warns that these self-defence

groups may become stronger, emphasising that protecting the rights of all Colombians should be the task of the state security forces and the judiciary alone.

Analysts researching Colombia's history of conflict and organised crime structures also point out that the enormous economic incentives associated with illegal mining and cocaine trafficking are key drivers of conflict. They say that the law on "submission to the judiciary" currently passing through parliament should not lead to a situation in which the leaders of illegal groups, after serving greatly reduced sentences, are able to retire legally with their illegally acquired assets, only to be replaced by a new generation of criminals. According to the analysts, the current strategy of seeking negotiated solutions has to be supplemented by instruments to combat the business models of these illegal economies effectively.

Perspectives – Between Utopia and Reality

The Petro government's flagship project – the establishment of "total peace" – is more a political vision than a concrete government objective that can be achieved within a period of four years. The paradigm shift away from a policy that relied one-sidedly on police and military measures to a strategy that prioritises dialogue and negotiated solutions was welcomed by the international community, German and European government representatives included. A year after the Petro government took office, however, the limits and challenges of the *paz total* policy are becoming increasingly clear. The agreement on a six-month ceasefire with the ELN was an important milestone, but concrete implementation in the regions has still failed to materialise. Even though the most visible indicators of conflict – attempts to assassinate the *líderes sociales* and deaths in combat – are declining, the local population remains at the mercy of illegal groups exercising territorial and social control. Extortion of protection money, curfews, threats and forced recruitment are important phenomena that must be observed and incorporated into the assessment of how the *paz total*

policy is progressing. Another important indicator is the development of the security situation in the context of the local and regional elections at the end of October 2023.

German and European foreign and development policy should continue to provide critical and constructive support for the peace process in Colombia. The focus should remain on implementing the peace agreement with the FARC, something that has increasingly been upstaged by the political narrative of *paz total*. The funding of 170 special development zones (Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial) that are defined in this agreement must not be neglected – they account for no less than 36 per cent of the national territory and 24 per cent of Colombia's rural population – nor should the programmes for phasing out coca cultivation and for land distribution. When President Petro came to power, he announced that he would purchase three million hectares to distribute to small farmers without land. In actual fact, the government bought only 12,000 hectares in its first ten months in office.¹⁶

Even if *paz total* is to be understood more as a vision than as a concrete objective, there is still currently a wide gap between aspiration and reality. Beyond political narratives, decision-makers in German foreign and development policy should therefore increasingly gear future support towards realities and measurable results. As a global NATO partner and OECD member, as well as being one of the most important countries in Latin America in terms of population, economic power, surface area and wealth of resources, Colombia is a key partner with regard to values and future development whose security, stability and development are in the interests of German foreign policy.

– translated from German –

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