

Gustavo Petro tested in power in Colombia

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The presidential election in Colombia of 19 June 2022, which saw left-wing candidate Gustavo Petro and his running mate Francia Marquez emerge victorious with 50.44% of the vote, marks a major turning point for the country, but also for Latin America.

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Colombia is considered a US forward base because of its strategic location, wedged between Central and South America, with the US military presence on the ground allowing monitoring of the Caribbean sea while keeping an eye on the rest of Latin America. Colombian right-wing parties have always ensured that the Colombian political left and social movements remain outside political power. Hence the victory of the Petro/Marquez ticket constitutes a break with the contemporary history of the country.

The Colombian exception

It could easily be believed that since Colombia has always been governed by the right, its people would have remained outside the upheavals of the Latin American world. The right has been in power continuously and the country was not affected by the “progressive wave” of the early 2000s. But then how can we understand that two of the most powerful guerrilla movements on the continent, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (National Liberation Army) are found in this country?

The explanation goes back to 1948, the date of the assassination of the liberal Jorge Eliécer Gaitan, when the ultra-conservative bourgeoisie unleashed a wave of mass executions against the opposition, and everything related directly or indirectly to social organizations. This period of Colombian history, *la Violencia*, lasted until the 1960s and caused between 100,000 and 300,000 deaths. It was during these years that the Colombian left made the choice of survival and opted for armed struggle. The FARC was formed from the Colombian Communist Party while the ELN was created around supporters of the Cuban revolution, especially Guevaristas, and Christians committed to liberation theology, followers of Camilo Torres. Even the nationalist left was forced to go underground, totally or partially. This was the case, for example, with the M-19 (April 19 Movement), which laid down its arms in 1990 and from which Gustavo Petro came.

An attempt to return to legal political life was attempted by the FARC from 1984 with the creation of the Popular Union. But its activists were hunted down. A report by the National Centre for Historical Memory listed 4,153 activists murdered between 1984 and 2002. [\[1\]](#) It is not surprising that the armed organizations were able to survive, the population seeing no democratic and legal solution to

its demands, any social demand leading to ferocious repression.

It was because of this internal war that a particular form of state developed in Colombia, with armed forces mainly engaged in the fight against the “internal enemy” and the creation of paramilitary groups, used by the government for “unofficial” tasks, most often in alliance with drug trafficking groups. [2]

Despite this deleterious situation, the US relied on the Colombian government to develop a strong military presence on the pretext of the “war against drugs”, reinforced with the signing in 1999 of Plan Colombia, which came into force in 2001. Behind the announced objective of developing the country and fighting against social inequalities and drug trafficking lay a completely different motive: disarming the guerrilla organizations, primarily the FARC, and keeping Colombia under US domination. [3] Since then, governments have succeeded one another with programs limited to more or less one-upmanship in their commitment to fight against “terrorism”, the prize for cynicism going to President Alvaro Uribe, former mayor of Medellin, intimately linked to drug trafficking, elected in 2002 to eradicate the guerrillas. During his two terms, he promoted the development of paramilitary groups that multiplied abuses, particularly in the countryside, punctuated by summary executions, destruction of crops by chemical spraying and displacement of populations.

But this war against the FARC was a failure: guerrilla warfare still existed, and the Colombian people increasingly openly demanded that peace talks begin. This is one of the explanations for the victory in 2010 of Uribe’s successor, Juan Manuel Santos, architect of the peace agreement signed between the Colombian government and the FARC in 2016. The “Uribist” right has tried to sabotage this agreement and hijack it to disarm the FARC while preserving most of the right-wing armed groups sowing terror in the countryside. This situation was used to conduct a campaign to denounce the peace agreement, all the more effective as peace seemed out of reach. [4]

Since then, Iván Duque, the ultraconservative candidate in the 2018 presidential elections and Uribe’s nominee, has repeatedly taken up this demand, widely shared by the Colombian media. As soon as he was elected, he took over his mentor’s policy of repression, and in 2021 international organizations noted that only 30% of the provisions of this agreement were implemented.

New forms of domination and resistance

To understand this triptych signature/denunciation/revival of the peace agreement, we must return to the profound changes in the Colombian economy. As in the rest of the continent, neoliberal reforms were implemented in Colombia, and during the last decade of the twentieth century labour market reforms, tax relief, and the disengagement of the state from social spending began. In addition to copying and pasting neoliberal recipes, the Colombian state has decided to transfer a large part of its social policies to local or regional administrative entities, reinforcing the prevailing clientelism.

But behind these reforms there was also a profound change in Colombian capitalism. The main vector of growth and export is no longer agriculture (especially coffee), but the mining sector, which quickly became dominant and attracts foreign investors. Colombia entered the cycle of a rentier economy subject to the world market. However, mining requires prospecting and especially securing extraction sites, made difficult by the presence of armed groups on a significant part of the territory. There were two very different solutions to secure this primary development model. The first was to wage a life-and-death struggle against these groups - a priority issue of Plan Colombia. It is this strategy that was chosen by the Colombian bourgeoisie in supporting the candidacy of Alvaro Uribe for the presidential election of 2002. The second solution emerged as a result of the failure of this

method: to negotiate a peace agreement opening the door to free movement in areas of future exploitation. This was implemented by the new President Santos, elected in 2010 and re-elected in 2014, a strategy that was denounced again by his successor Iván Duque, elected in 2018.

The effects of this extractivism quickly became a cause for mobilizations of Indigenous peoples who demanded to remain on their ancestral territories and denounced the social, health and environmental consequences of this new productive model. Connections thus began to emerge between these rural movements and those of urban youth, sensitive to struggles for the defence of the environment and the trade union movement fighting increased flexibilization of labour and the social ravages caused by neoliberalism. There were student strikes in 2011 and 2018 in particular, but the big mobilization of April/May 2019 was a global struggle against Iván Duque's anti-social measures, in particular against his tax reform, but also against the privatization of pension funds and the new reform of the labour code. This popular revolt tended to unify all social sectors against the government's policy. It was followed by that of 2021, which took the form of a massively followed general strike, in continuity with that of 2019. Although the government abandoned its new tax reform project after a few days of demonstrations and strikes that paralyzed the country, the mobilization continued because the demonstrators also demanded an end to social inequalities and corruption and obtained the abandonment of the neoliberal reform of the health system. [5] The tax reform is all the more contested as it involves generalising income tax while reducing corporation tax and increasing the VAT rate on essential services (water, electricity and so on) and on several food products. By refusing to raise taxes on the richest and extending taxes to the poorest, Iván Duque's government has tried to have the debts accumulated with the Covid-19 pandemic paid off by the poor and middle classes, although the poverty rate increased by a third between 2020 and 2021.

Quickly this de facto conjunction of social struggles pointed the finger at a common adversary: neoliberal policies. By bursting into the political field, these social movements precipitated the reorganization of the political left, which was carried out by successive trial and error. First there was the creation of the Alternative Democratic Pole, a coalition of left-wing forces that stood for the first time in the presidential elections in 2006. But above all, there was the creation of the Historic Pact in 2021, a coalition of seven organizations, which led to the victory of Petro.

The Historic Pact, by bringing together national and local organisers of these struggles and presenting their candidacies at the general elections of 2022, has managed to become hegemonic within the social sectors in struggle. Through this interweaving, the Historic Pact represents a successful fusion between the social movements that mobilized widely in 2019 and 2021 with left-wing activists and political currents.

From mobilizations to electoral victory

Despite the opposition of the bourgeoisie and the unleashing of the media against social mobilizations and left-wing candidacies in the 2022 elections, the Petro/Marquez ticket won the presidential elections despite the right's demonization of Francia Marquez in particular. [6] The Historic Pact achieved this feat by articulating the strong popular aspiration for peace and a promise to revive the 2016 agreement with a catalogue of anti-neoliberal measures. The strategy of starting from the aspirations expressed by the mobilizations "from below" to build a new political tool conceived as an outlet for the demands of social struggles has paid off.

This first victory of the left in the history of Colombia has accentuated the crisis of the right, a right shaken by the mobilizations of 2019 and 2021, divided on the issue of the peace agreement, and

which led a hysterical campaign with the media against Petro's candidacy. So much so that it was the outsider Rodolfo Hernández who came out ahead on the right in the first round, beating the traditional parties. [7] But after Petro's victory, the bourgeoisie understood that it was necessary to avoid falling into a Brazilian-style situation with a Bolsonaro who managed to antagonize most of the Brazilian employers. For this reason, the Consejo Gremial Nacional (CGN), Colombia's main employers' organization, invited Petro on June 19 to "integrate a common program that aims at the unity of our country and the social and economic development of Colombia", thus taking the place of the political right, defeated, divided and in full reconstruction. [8] In response, on 23 August 2022, President Petro invited the GNC to discuss the tax reform project, which is expected to bring in \$11 billion and will finance social spending. He also asked the GNC to reach an agreement with the unions on labour reform in 2023.

Back to the Future

The country's economic situation is uncertain - although the OECD predicts GDP growth of more than 6% as inequality has continued to deepen with an unemployment rate of over 13% and a formal employment rate of just over 50%. Uncertainties about the future prompted employers to quickly seek guarantees from Petro. This requires a revival of peace agreements, thus paving the way for the exploitation of the subsoil in sectors hitherto outside the control of the state. To achieve this, Petro has accelerated the process and is seeking to generalize it for all armed groups. He has proposed its enlargement to the ELN and has already called for the opening of negotiations with the drug cartels, promising appropriate penalties and the refusal of any extradition to the USA in exchange for an end to the violence. [9] One of the objectives is also to revive the agrarian reform project, part of which is provided for in the peace agreement but has never been implemented.

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Without a majority in Parliament, to achieve its ends, the Petro government is counting on a part of the right, especially that which supported Santos. Petro has appointed members of right-wing opposition parties and even former ministers of previous governments to key positions in his government, and thus affirmed his desire to associate himself with an anti-Uribe right. [10] From a more global point of view, this action is based on his conviction of a vision of Colombia not as a dependent capitalist society but as a feudal society. For him, before arriving at an egalitarian society it is first necessary to create a capitalist Colombia with a developed national bourgeoisie. It isn't certain that this old antiphon will resist the popular demands that allowed him to accede to power. [11] As for the US, although the country's foreign policy is primarily oriented towards Asia because of the conflict with China, it is not certain that Biden will be satisfied with the new neutrality displayed by President Petro, especially since the new Colombian president wants to review the free trade agreement that binds him to the US and has decided to resume diplomatic

relations with Venezuela.

Petro's Colombia is part of a relatively long sequence in Latin America where in many countries, the coming to power of new left-wing parties is driven by the waves of social struggles that preceded these electoral victories. Beginning in 1998 with the election of Hugo Chávez, it seemed to close with the return of the right in Ecuador, the coup d'état against Morales in Bolivia, Bolsonaro's victory in Brazil or the defeat of the Frente Amplio in Uruguay.

Yet, very recently, the victories of Boric in Chile, Castillo in Peru and Petro in Colombia have shown that we are still in the same sequence... but with strong nuances. The anti-imperialist discourse of the first wave has largely faded and these three new presidents are much more inclined to expand their majority towards a part of the right. These three newly elected representatives are entangled in their choice to respect institutions, whereas Chávez, Correa or Morales had made the political choice, in order to change the situation, to immediately convene a constituent assembly by relying directly on the social mobilizations that followed their victories. Petro decided not to take advantage of the window opened by the defeat of the right to advance his advantage by relying on the euphoria caused by his victory among the people.

From the point of view of political power, the hopes of social transformation of the Colombian people are now suspended on the laws that will or will not be adopted by the government coalition. It isn't certain that the faction of the right that supports the government and the employers goes in the same direction as the population that fought massively in 2019 and 2021. Given the scale of past mobilizations, it is also not certain that the Colombian people will be satisfied with this in-between for long.

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P.S.

Translated by *International Viewpoint* from *l'Anticapitaliste*:

<https://lanticapitaliste.org/actualite/international/colombie-gustavo-petro-lepreuve-du-pouvoir>

Footnotes

[1] his figure was increased in 2022 to 5,733 including the years after 2002.

[2] Former President Uribe is one of the most illustrious representatives of the accession to power of the political class allied with these groups.

[3] A 2001 report prepared for the Colombian government states, however, that while armed struggle organizations were responsible for 2.5% of drug trafficking, paramilitary organizations accounted for 40%. Yet they were totally spared. In order to fight against the guerrillas, as part of the counter-insurgency struggle, campaigns were organized to spread chemicals, including glyphosate, both on coca crops and on other crops, thus seeking to cut off the sources of supply of guerrilla groups, even if this resulted in an explosion of diseases, especially among children.

[4] See for example the case of the "false positives," peasants executed by the army or

paramilitaries, presented as murdered by the guerrillas.

[5] Colombia is according to the World Bank the second most unequal country in Latin America and seventh in the world.

[6] At a very young age, she campaigned against mining in her region and threatened with death, she was forced to take refuge in Cali. Her commitment to human rights, women's rights and the defence of rural communities provoked a rampage on the right. A survivor of an attack in 2019, she is the first Afro-Colombian elected to the position of vice-president.

[7] It should be noted that this candidate was supported by Ingrid Betancourt and her party, the Partido Verde Oxígeno.

[8] A Gallup poll showed that Petro had 62% favourable views among businesspeople in mid-July.

[9] These extraditions to the United States have been facilitated since the signing of Plan Colombia and under successor agreements.

[10] In addition to the coalition that supported him, he obtained the support of the Green Alliance Party, the Liberal Party, Citizen Force, the Independent Social Alliance, Communes, the Union for the People Party and the Conservative Party enabling him to win a majority in Parliament. It should be noted that the Party for the Union of People was part of the coalition that supported Uribe in 2006 and Duque in 2018.

[11] In an interview with *El Pais* on 19 September 2019, he stated that "my government programme is the Constitution, and my reforms would not be described as left-wing in Europe. The needs of Colombian society are not to build socialism, but to build democracy and peace, period."