

Far-right candidate elected as Colombia becomes NATO “global partner”

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Colombia’s far-right Democratic Center candidate, Iván Duque, won the presidency with 54 percent of the vote against the 42 percent for Gustavo Petro of the Progressive Movement in a second-round election on June 17.

The political vacuum generated by the alignment of the official “left,” led by Petro, with the militaristic and austerity-driven policies of the outgoing Juan Manuel Santos administration has been exploited by the extreme right.

The largest parties in the Senate are now the Democratic Center and Radical Change, both closely tied with far-right paramilitary groups used by the landed and financial aristocracies to terrorize the peasantry. The coming to power of Duque parallels the rise of far-right forces in Europe and the United States, posing a stark warning for workers in Colombia and internationally about the continued shift of bourgeois rule toward increasingly dictatorial and militaristic governments.

Despite speculation by sections of the national and international corporate press that Duque will moderate his stance once in office, the ruling class as a whole will continue to shift to the right. Its only response to growing social opposition and a deepening economic downturn has been to escalate social austerity, corporate tax cuts, attacks on democratic rights, and domestic and regional militarization.

Colombia is the closest military ally of the United States in the region, and it was announced last month that it will not only become a “global partner” of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but will also join the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has continued to demand further corporate tax cuts and austerity from Bogotá.

Popular opposition to the ruling establishment characterized the elections. It was the first time since 1853 that neither the traditional Conservative nor Liberal parties and their respective coalitions have come to power or even made it to the second round. After leading two “National Unity” administrations under incumbent President Juan Manuel Santos, the Liberal Party received just 2 percent of the vote, while the coalition favored by the Conservative Party won just 7 percent. Popular anger toward Santos grew after he pushed through the 2016 peace accord with the now-demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla movement after it was rejected in a popular referendum.

Duque graduated from American University in Washington, D.C., where he worked until 2014 at the Inter-American Development Bank. He was then summoned by the right-wing ex-president Álvaro Uribe to become a Senator, which allowed him to quickly come into the political spotlight with a fascistic, law-and-order rhetoric comparable to the Duterte regime in the Philippines. His campaign proposed the death penalty for rape and child murder, along with pro-business tax measures, the elimination of financial and other regulations, and a military and police build-up.

In his victory speech, Duque promised “corrections” to the “peace” accord with the FARC, insisting that “it must be a peace that above all allows the guerrilla combatants their demobilization, disarmament and effective reinsertion.” The leader of the FARC, Rodrigo Londoño, tweeted on June 17: “It’s a moment of greatness and reconciliation, we respect the decision of the majorities and congratulate the new president.”

Petro, a former leader of the M-19 Castroite guerrilla movement that turned itself into a bourgeois political party in the late 1980s, requested the backing of the

Liberal candidate, Humberto de la Calle, in the second round. As the mayor of the capital, Bogotá, and then as a legislator, Petro had closely backed the Santos administration since 2010 and supported his second-round bid in 2014, joining ranks at the time with the Conservatives' endorsement of Santos.

Previously, Santos was Uribe's defense minister and oversaw a policy that encouraged thousands of extrajudicial executions and detentions of impoverished peasants and workers as part of an escalation of the US-sponsored war on "drugs" and "terrorism" under Plan Colombia. And more recently, Santos's "Peace Colombia" with the FARC guerrillas, which has been energetically backed by the Obama and Trump administrations, paved the way for Colombia to join NATO, integrating it ever more closely with the bloody maelstrom of the US and European imperialism's neocolonial repartition of the planet.

Petro's "critical" support for Santos, represented an embrace of the latter's attacks against living standards and hypocritical and empty promises of peace. Now, claiming the title of leader of the opposition in Congress, Petro will seek to unite the official "left," including the Green Alliance, the Democratic Pole, the Patriotic Union, and the Indigenous and Social Alternative Movement (MAIS), while containing its criticisms within an increasingly right-wing framework.

Santos's policies were also closely associated with clearing the path—firstly through the escalation of state violence and then through "peace"—for the intensified mining and oil extractionist model promoted by Santos's Conservative finance minister, Mauricio Cárdenas, a darling of Wall Street.

This bet on what Wall Street speculators call "vulnerable" markets was formalized in a pro-business program that cuts taxes for corporations and gives tax refunds for fossil fuel and mining investments. The Colombian economy already suffered a sharp deceleration as oil and other commodity prices fell when the Chinese economy slowed down in 2014, and now the increase in interest rates in the capitalist centers and a trade war between the US, China and the European Union are on their way to upset previous forecasts with inflation and an economic downturn.

The 2017 tax "reform" cut corporate taxes from 40 percent to 33 percent. Meanwhile, a jump in the regressive value-added tax from 16 to 19 percent is

already hurting retail consumption—i.e., has measurably impoverished the masses.

Official figures indicate that 67.2 percent of the population are either under the poverty line or "vulnerable" to falling beneath it. Moreover, worries are rising about "worsening of structural and long-term poverty," as Louvain University professor Jorge Iván González wrote earlier this year for *La Razón*. He explains that growing land and income inequality, devaluation and an addiction to profits from mineral and oil extraction are "destroying industrial and agricultural production."

His column notes that 71 percent of agricultural workers and peasants own 3 percent of registered land, while 0.2 percent of landowners, whose predatory interests *Uribismo* and Duque most directly represent, control 60 percent of the land. Colombia is the second most unequal country in Latin America, a region where the top 10 percent own 68 percent of wealth, while the bottom 50 percent control just 3.5 percent, according to a recent Oxfam study.

The entire official political spectrum in Colombia and the region, from the far right to the Morenoite pseudo-left—which called for a "critical" vote for Petro—reflects the interests of different sectors within the richest 10 percent of society. The "left" layers of the upper-middle class are already fearfully denouncing Duque's political "insensitivity" toward growing social tensions; however, their "opposition" will be limited to the extent that their padded stock portfolios and bank accounts continue to grow from escalated social attacks against the working and impoverished masses.

The policies pursued by the political establishment to carve out a larger share of wealth for the ruling elites meant that 95 percent of all new wealth generated during 2017 in the region—that is, excluding the profits siphoned off by the imperialist financiers in New York and London—was hoarded by the top 10 percent. The more than 300 million Latin Americans of the bottom half, according to the same Oxfam report, lost more than \$22 billion in assets.



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