

# Colombian elections go to second round amid coup threats and false promises of change

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On Sunday, the first round of the presidential elections in Colombia took place, defining a second round that will occur on June 19. It will be a contest between the official left candidate, Gustavo Petro, and the fascistic Rodolfo Hernandez, who has been dubbed the “Colombian Trump.”

In a country that in the last three years has seen an explosive series of mass protests and strikes against brutal levels of social inequality and state violence, both candidates, who present themselves as a break with the traditional political system, take on the challenge of re-establishing the stability of the crisis-ridden bourgeois regime in Colombia.

This is the second time that Petro, representing the Pacto Histórico (Historical Pact) pseudo-left coalition, has reached the second round of presidential elections. In 2018, he contested it against the current far-right president, Iván Duque. Throughout this year’s campaign, he consistently appeared in the intention polls as the favored candidate and received 40.3 percent of the vote on Sunday. Hernández, on the other hand, who got 28 percent of the vote, was a surprise victor and will advance to the run-off.

Until a few weeks ago, the millionaire and former mayor of the city Bucaramanga was considered a little-known politician nationally. Now, Hernández already appears slightly ahead of Petro in the polls.

The comparisons between Hernández and Trump, as well as his Latin American ally, Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, have a point. He combines buffoonish traits with ultra-reactionary rhetoric—in 2016, he claimed in an interview, “I am a follower of a great German thinker. His name is Adolf Hitler”—mostly based on fighting corruption. Running for the newly created League of Anti-Corruption Rulers, Hernández himself is being investigated for corruption in contracts signed during his administration of Bucaramanga.

The fact that this grotesque figure has suddenly been thrust forward as one of the main contenders in the presidential race is a testimony to the degeneration of the Colombian political regime. The candidate of the traditional right, Federico Gutiérrez, who was until the last moment referred to in the press as the “only one capable of contending for victory with Petro,” was rejected (he got 23 percent of the vote) for carrying the rotten nomination of former president Alvaro Uribe and his detested disciple, current President Duque.

The current elections are at the same time being marked by growing coup threats and unprecedented interference by the

military in Colombian politics.

The Public Ministry announced at the end of April that it will open an investigation against Army Commander Eduardo Zapateiro for intervening in the presidential campaign with a series of threatening tweets against Petro for criticizing the military. Zapateiro wrote: “I have never seen a general on television receiving ill-gotten money. Colombians have seen you receiving money in garbage bags,” referring to a corruption scandal from which Petro was acquitted. He ended the tweets by “demanding respect” for the candidate for the Army. Zapateiro’s demonstration was openly supported by Duque.

Other military personnel spoke out against Petro, raising the fact that the candidate belonged to the Castroite M-19 guerrilla movement. AFP reported that retired colonel Jose Marulanda, president of the Colombian Association of Retired Officers (ACORE), said that a section of the military views Petro with “a certain fear and trepidation.” “We feel that he has a very clear resentment against the military and police, who were the ones who were killed by his M-19 comrades in combat,” he said.

Alongside these local actors, a decisive role in the assaults against democracy in the country is played by Washington, which has in Colombia its main political and military base in Latin America. In February, US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, after participating in high-level security talks in Bogota, announced that “foreign actors” were trying to subvert Colombia’s elections. Nuland announced that, in response, American military and intelligence agents would work together with their Colombian colleagues to guarantee “free and fair” elections.

These episodes are an expression of a universal process of corrosion of bourgeois democratic forms of rule and an advance of fascist dictatorial threats. Similar crises, involving threats of electoral coups and military intervention, have marked the most recent presidential elections in Latin American countries like Peru and Bolivia, and already dominate the future Brazilian presidential elections that will take place in October.

The crisis of capitalist rule in Colombia is a case in point. With a long-lasting two-party political system established since 1853, the country was considered bearer of an exceptional political stability in Latin America, having experienced neither military regimes during the 20th century nor bourgeois nationalist “Pink Tide” governments in recent decades. Uribismo, having presented itself as a political alternative to the crisis of the Conservative and

Liberal parties, gave birth to the Duque government, which will leave power after a single term as one of the most unpopular presidential administrations in history.

The two fundamental factors behind this political crisis are, on the one hand, the crisis of the world capitalist system, which is having a devastating impact on Latin American commodity-based economies, and on the other, the sharpening of the class struggle to a new historic level.

Colombia was defined by the World Bank as “one of the most unequal countries in the world.” It is the second most unequal country in Latin America and the Caribbean, behind only Brazil, and the most unequal among OECD members. The Duque administration’s disastrous pro-capitalist response to the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened already extreme social conditions, driving another 3.6 million Colombians into poverty.

This severe social crisis has spurred repeated national strikes since 2019, which have brought hundreds of thousands of angry Colombian workers and youth into the streets, and were precariously kept under control by trade union federations and farmer associations in collaboration with the right-wing government. The employment of murderous state violence against protesters and the population in general, which Duque promoted in continuity with the policies of his mentor, Uribe, intensified the popular anger and burst into another series of massive protests.

While Petro’s electoral growth is directly linked to the growing social opposition and rejection of the capitalist political regime, a possible government of Pacto Histórico would prove itself unable to answer the burning questions for the Colombian working class. Petro’s defeat in the 2018 elections was largely due to his identification with the unpopular austerity policies of the National Unity government of Juan Manuel Santos, supported by Petro.

Summarizing the reasons for his current political projection, Petro stated in an interview with *The Economist*, “Now, if I manage to win a majority, as the polls suggest ... [it is] because the economic and political model on which Uribe sustained itself has fallen apart. On the economic side, that was oil, gas and cocaine. And on the political side, the destruction of the FARC provided a unifying narrative, but now they do not exist anymore.”

Despite acknowledging the exhaustion of these economic and political bases, Petro has no alternatives to offer beyond tackling the state’s fiscal deficit—which will necessarily entail more austerity policies - and barely tangible promises of reactivating the country’s industrial sector as opposed to today’s essentially extractive based economy. Seeking to present himself as a loyal representative of the nationalist interests of the Colombian bourgeoisie, he strives to dispel any association with a program of confrontation to capitalist profit interests.

In the same interview with the *Economist*, he stated that “the caricature about my programme has been that we will expropriate businesses, as if we wanted to create a Soviet economy. I have never suggested that, not even in my days as a guerrilla.” He clarifies that his movement, the M-19, was an advocate of the idea that based the 1991 constitution of “a social democratic market economy—as the Germans call it. With universal rights and respect for private property as well as free enterprise.” In other words, he assumes his umbilical relationship to the capitalist political regime

that is being massively rejected by the Colombian working class.

Being unable to appeal with this reactionary program to the generalized dissatisfaction of the youth and workers, the task of giving airs of radicalism to the Pacto Histórico’s campaign was fully given to its vice-presidential candidate, Francia Márquez. A black woman, coming from the most impoverished sections of Colombian society, and an activist for environmental and identity politics, Márquez promises to represent a renewal of Colombian politics. At one point, she publicly confronted Petro during the campaign in the face of his reactionary opposition to the legalization of abortion.

Yet, despite pseudo-leftist catchphrases in opposition to structural racism and patriarchy, Márquez does not advocate a break with the capitalist system, nor does she have any remote connection to the socialist movement. She has been aptly compared by a Colombian political expert at Hampshire College, Roosbelinda Cárdenas, to US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the Democratic Party’s pseudo-left caucus, the Squad. “Like the radical women of color who have dared to show up in the US Congress ‘as equals,’ Francia Márquez’s very presence in Colombia’s presidential elections rattles the status quo,” Cárdenas told *The Nation*. But, instead of “rattling the status quo,” once in power, Ocasio-Cortez has devoted herself to denouncing any left opposition to Biden’s administration as “bad faith,” and defending American imperialism’s massive arming of Ukraine in its proxy war against Russia.

Should it take power, the fate of a Pacto Histórico government will be the same as that of its pseudo-leftist counterparts in Latin America: implementing anti-social policies and repressing the working class struggles in the name of maintaining a national unity of the bourgeoisie, while paving the way for the rise of fascism, which will permanently haunt its unstable political administration.



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