

Colombian elections: how pseudo-leftist President Gustavo Petro paved way for ultra-right

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Colombia's presidential elections will take place Sunday under the shadow of a political debacle for the administration of Gustavo Petro, whose election was hailed by the pseudo-left internationally as a historic breakthrough for Latin America's workers.

That claim has been definitively shattered. What remains is the wreckage of a government that preserved every fundamental pillar of capitalist exploitation, prostrated itself before US imperialism and left the working class politically disoriented.

Now, the very same pseudo-left forces that channeled the mass social explosions of 2020 and 2021 into votes for Petro are preparing to repeat the operation—this time behind Petro's hand-picked successor, Senator Iván Cepeda, endorsed by formations including the Morenoite Socialist Workers Party (PST).

The absence of a genuine socialist alternative has fueled the rise of ultra-right candidate Abelardo de la Espriella, who is running second in the polls ahead of the traditional far-right candidate, Senator Paloma Valencia, backed by former President Álvaro Uribe.

Given that no candidate is likely to secure 50 percent in the first round, Cepeda and De la Espriella are expected to advance to a runoff where polls show them neck and neck.

The Trump administration is expected to intervene aggressively in the election to consolidate its network of fascistic regimes bound to Wall Street interests and US geopolitical imperatives. The *Wall Street Journal* has already warned against a "Marxist takeover of conservative Colombia," while *Bloomberg* ran the headline: "Son of Slain Communist Rattles Investors Ahead of Colombian Vote."

Cepeda seeks "to put the markets at ease"

To understand what a Cepeda administration would look like, one must begin with the political background of Petro and that of his hand-picked successor, Cepeda. Petro joined the M-19 left nationalist urban guerrilla movement in 1977. Captured and tortured by the Colombian Army in October 1985, he was not released until February 1987. These experiences of state violence did not produce a revolutionary socialist shift. Instead, they led to a turn to bourgeois nationalist politics. The M-19 would sign a peace deal in 1990 and transform itself into a conventional bourgeois party.

By 1994, Petro had already met Venezuelan Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez, who came to define the first wave of Latin American "Pink Tide" governments that used commodity-boom revenues to fund limited social reforms, while leaving capitalist property relations entirely intact. Petro never broke from

capitalism. He sought to reform it while reassuring the ruling class at every turn that its property and its state apparatus were safe in his hands.

Cepeda, 64, is the son of Communist Party leaders who were forced into exile in the USSR and Cuba in the 1960s. His father Manuel Cepeda would become General Secretary of the Colombian Communist party and Senator for the Patriotic Union (UP) coalition. In 1994 he was one of its many politicians killed by fascist paramilitaries.

Ivan Cepeda abandoned the Communist Party and joined Petro's M-19 once it had become a bourgeois party in 1990. Since then, both followed parallel political careers and affiliations.

The Cepeda campaign has presented itself as a step to the right with respect to Petro. As a campaign adviser told *Bloomberg*, Cepeda is "looking for people to put the markets at ease... something Petro has refused to do." He has repeatedly reassured investors that he does not intend to nationalize any sector of the economy.

On security, he has maintained Petro's rhetoric about a more socially conscious buildup of the armed forces. And, without discontinuing military campaigns against the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla, Cepeda has proposed negotiations.

Lacking a genuinely left alternative, the field has been left wide open for the growth of the extreme right.

Abelardo de la Espriella presents himself as an "outsider" while championing law-and-order authoritarianism, deep spending cuts, and sharp expansion of state repression. He wraps Colombian nationalism in pro-US rhetoric while promising to intensify militarization, strengthen the security apparatus and implement the social cuts and deregulation strategy of Argentina's Javier Milei.

His program includes a "90-day shock plan": a US- and Israeli-backed aerial offensive, forced coca eradication and ten mega-prisons modeled on those of Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele. His politics are further marked by hard-right cultural appeals—"family values," rejection of feminism and aggressive anti-left rhetoric—that underscore the fascistic character of his campaign. That such a figure is running second in the polls is the direct product of four years of Petro's government.

Four years of capitulation

Petro's actual record in office is one of unrelieved capitulation to capitalist interests and imperialism, combined with populist rhetoric.

Under his administration, one of the highest levels of social inequality in the world has remained essentially intact. While monetary poverty dropped from 39.7 percent to 31.8 percent between 2022 and 2024, the

structural conditions that produce mass poverty have only been exacerbated.

According to *The Economist's* Inequality Ratio, in 2015 the wealthiest 10 percent in Colombia spent 13.7 times more than the poorest 50 percent; by 2025, that figure had risen to 15.6 times—the largest increase in inequality in Latin America, already the world's most unequal region.

Petro himself acknowledged that 71 percent of Colombia's wealth is concentrated in the top 10 percent. The persistence of poverty is compounded by massive labor informality—affecting approximately 54 percent of workers—and unemployment stands at 8.8 percent as of April 2026.

The six wealthiest Colombian oligarchs, meanwhile, saw their combined fortunes surge from \$28.3 billion when Petro took office to nearly \$50 billion, according to *Forbes*. The three richest—Jaime Gilinski, David Vélez and Carlos Sarmiento—each increased their wealth by more than a third in the past year alone.

On public finances, more than one in every three pesos collected by the state now goes to servicing debt. Total tax revenue stands at approximately COP\$300 trillion (US\$82.7 billion), while domestic debt service for 2026 alone will reach COP\$130 trillion (US\$35.8 billion). Public debt has risen to over 60 percent of GDP, its highest level in decades.

In response to the right-wing Congress blocking his tax measures and triggering a runaway deficit, Petro declared an economic emergency in early 2026 and raised the wealth tax from 1.5 percent to 5 percent by decree. He also implemented a minimum wage increase of 23 percent to COP\$1.7 million, or barely US\$481—while the basic household consumption basket for a typical Colombian family exceeds COP\$3 million.

Petro's reformist agenda—healthcare, pension, labor and tax bills—consisted of marginal adjustments that left the structural foundations of capitalist exploitation and mass poverty untouched. The healthcare system, delegated since the 1990s to private corporations that distribute state funds to hospitals and clinics, has accumulated debts of 25.7 trillion pesos (\$7 billion), resulting in shortages of treatments and wait times stretching months. His healthcare reform was blocked by Congress.

His signature promise of a living pension for all elderly Colombians without one was quietly abandoned. The ESMAD anti-riot unit—directly implicated in the killings of protesters in 2021—was not abolished, as he promised, but merely renamed the “Unit for Dialogue and Policing” and continued repressing protests across the country.

His administration was wracked by corruption scandals—for a president who came to power denouncing the corruption of the traditional right. Two of his former ministers ended up in prison, accused of leading a criminal organization that diverted more than 612 billion pesos (US\$168 million) in bribes to legislators in exchange for political support.

On militarization, Petro unveiled a 10-year defense plan worth US\$12.7 billion, and officials boasted that his administration has invested more in defense than his predecessors. Following a military plane crash in March 2026 that killed 69 people, the government approved additional disbursements, bringing total planned investment in defense modernization to COP\$39.7 billion—compared to COP\$7.2 billion under Juan Manuel Santos and COP\$9.3 billion under Iván Duque.

In the first five months of 2026, Colombia recorded 54 massacres and 233 deaths, with the ranks of narco-trafficking, guerrilla and paramilitary groups swelling, in many cases by recruiting from children and adolescents.

The final and most revealing legacy came in early 2026. After the Trump administration branded Petro a drug trafficker and money launderer, imposed Treasury sanctions and threatened Colombia with military action, Petro traveled to the White House and pledged full collaboration. He declared “I like honest *gringos*,” praised Trump as

“terrific” and handed him a list of alleged cartel leaders worldwide.

Having offered Colombia's state oil company Ecopetrol as an “axis” for the economic looting of Venezuela's oil sector, Petro's criticisms of US foreign policy have been silenced, and he has done nothing to oppose the asphyxiation of Cuba.

The Colombian bourgeoisie's aspiration has been to remain a reliable junior partner of US imperialism—and Petro delivered precisely that.

How the 2020–2021 upsurge was betrayed

To grasp the class dynamics behind Petro's election and the catastrophe that followed, one must return to the mass upheavals that preceded it. By 2020, Colombia was convulsed by enormous social tensions, registering one of the world's highest per capita COVID-19 death rates, with 3.5 million ultimately infected. The national strike of September 2020 was violently repressed. Then, on April 28, 2021, a national strike erupted—triggered by the Duque government's announcement of a deeply regressive COVID tax overhaul.

What followed was Colombia's most powerful social uprising in living memory. Hundreds of thousands filled the streets of Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla and dozens of smaller cities, day after day, defying curfews and court orders. Spontaneous roadblocks spread beyond the control of the official National Strike Committee. The state's response was murderous, detaining hundreds and killing more than 80 people. Reports suggest that hundreds were forcibly disappeared in a crackdown that enjoyed the full support of the Biden administration in Washington.

It was in this context that the working class's most urgent political need—a revolutionary socialist leadership—was nowhere to be found. Instead, Petro, then acting as senator and presidential candidate, demanded demonstrators oppose only specific “reforms” and called on each soldier and police officer to “fraternize” with the workers in the streets. The trade union confederations that formally led the National Strike Committee worked throughout to defuse and “de-escalate” the movement.

While noting that “the masses, which are outside of their bureaucratic control, have remained on the streets,” the Morenoite PST directed their appeals to the same trade union officials.

These forces then channeled the social unrest that had shaken the bourgeois state to its foundations into the electoral vehicle of the Historic Pact and the candidacy of Gustavo Petro. They are now lining up behind Senator Iván Cepeda.

The PST has called for a “critical vote” for Cepeda as the means to “defeat the right, Uribeismo and imperialism.” Meanwhile *Jacobin* magazine—the publication of the Democratic Socialists of America—is already performing the same function it performed in 2022. It published a glowing interview with Cepeda and, despite conceding that Petro failed to “break entrenched elite rule,” it notes that Cepeda will continue his “progressive” project. At no point do these forces explain the rise of the far-right and threat of fascism, let alone their own sordid role in it.

The alternative to fight fascism

The experience of the Petro government is not a cautionary tale about the limitations of reformism or the need to “push harder” on a so-called “progressive” government. It is a confirmation of the Marxist analysis upheld by the International Committee of the Fourth International, that the

capitalist state cannot be reformed in the interests of the working class; that nationalism is the political instrument of the bourgeoisie against the international unity of workers; and that pseudo-left organizations serve as the mechanism through which the ruling class neutralizes working class opposition in periods of acute social crisis.

In order to confront fascism and Trump's neo-colonial offensive, the Colombian working class requires a complete break from every faction of the Historic Pact and the trade union bureaucracies that police it, and from the pseudo-left organizations that serve as their auxiliaries. A new political leadership can be built only through the construction of a Colombian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, fighting to unite the struggles of Colombian, Latin American and North American workers under the program of world socialist revolution.



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