

Fascistic candidate tied to paramilitaries leads first round of Colombian elections

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The fascistic lawyer Abelardo de la Espriella won the first round of Colombia's presidential election on Sunday and will face Senator Iván Cepeda—the candidate backed by outgoing President Gustavo Petro—in a runoff on June 21.

De la Espriella secured 43.7 percent of the vote with just over 10.3 million votes, compared to 40.9 percent and approximately 9.6 million for Cepeda. Paloma Valencia, the candidate for the traditional far-right party led by former President Álvaro Uribe, finished third with a distant 6.9 percent and 1.6 million votes. As expected, immediately after the results were announced, she endorsed De la Espriella.

In elections already marked by violence, the runoff in the third-largest country in Latin America and a long-standing hub for US operations has started off with allegations of fraud and appeals for military interference.

Polls in recent weeks showed De la Espriella trailing Cepeda, who for months appeared to hold a solid lead.

President Petro and Cepeda both issued statements charging that this “surprise” result was due to 800,000 phantom votes introduced by the election's software company, which has longstanding ties to the far right. They insist that they will wait for the final scrutiny directed by judges.

Standing before a crowd at the Malecón in Barranquilla, De la Espriella declared: “Don't dare insist on rejecting the election results, because the people will rise up and punish you. You are a pair of bandits we are going to retire.” He then issued a direct call to the armed forces to “activate the constitutional mechanism” should Petro attempt to deny “the will of the Colombian people,” adding that democracy must be maintained “by reason or by force.”

To grasp the severity of these threats, one must recall the brutality with which the Colombian oligarchy and US imperialism have enforced their interests, not least

through the paramilitary death squads that have been at the center of De la Espriella's own legal career.

The election campaign was already marked by deadly violence: leading Uribista candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay was assassinated by a contract killer, and two weeks before the vote, two members of De la Espriella's own campaign team were shot dead.

The Trump administration's involvement was equally brazen. Republican Senator Bernie Moreno, born in Colombia and sent as Washington's official observer, violated Colombian law by openly meeting with De la Espriella and Valencia.

Moreno had already made his sympathies clear the previous year by bringing an AI-generated image of Petro in a prison jumpsuit to the White House. While Trump has issued no comment, the U.S. State Department indirectly responded to Petro's fraud claims by praising “the strength and resilience of Colombian democracy.” This gives a foretaste of what a De la Espriella–Trump axis would look like: another pillar of far-right regional provocation and military repression, coordinated from Washington.

De la Espriella is a lawyer for the wealthy who has never held public office. He presents himself as an “outsider” while championing deep spending cuts modeled after Javier Milei in Argentina and a sharp expansion of state repression modeled on Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. His program includes a “90-day shock plan”: a US- and Israeli-backed aerial offensive, forced coca eradication and 10 mega-prisons.

The real target of this iron-fist agenda has always been the working class and rural poor, the perennial victims of social attacks and land theft carried out by banks, mining corporations and major landowners long represented by *Uribismo* and its paramilitary apparatus.

De la Espriella's legal office made its name defending politicians tied to fascist paramilitary groups. In a country

whose history of fascist political violence often surpasses even Argentina's—the Colombian Truth Commission estimated that paramilitary groups and state forces killed over 260,000 people between 1985 and 2018—his career is the direct equivalent of Argentine Vice President Victoria Villarruel's rise after founding a legal center to defend military officials accused of crimes against humanity during the 1976–1983 dictatorship.

In 2011, Colombia's Supreme Court ordered the investigation of De la Espriella after drug trafficker and AUC paramilitary member Juan Carlos "El Tuso" Sierra testified that he had paid him millions. The investigation closed without conclusive evidence, and Sierra was later released early by US courts after testifying in cases that also implicated the Uribe family. De la Espriella's leading partner, Daniel Peñarredonda, has been named an "unindicted co-conspirator" by US federal prosecutors for laundering money for international drug traffickers.

U.S. Senator Moreno's own family has not escaped scrutiny, with Petro recalling investigations linking one of Moreno's brothers to a laundering operation run by Bogotá Cartel boss Ángel Gaitán.

This is all in line with the policies of Trump, who justifies his administration's extrajudicial killings of fishermen in the Caribbean and Pacific, the abduction of Venezuela's sitting president, and the overall militarization of the region in the name of fighting "narcoterrorism," while releasing convicted drug kingpin and former Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández to pursue conspiracies across the region, including against Petro, as revealed by the Hondurasgate leaks.

The deep ties between the US-backed Colombian security apparatus and the drug networks were systematically institutionalized under Plan Colombia, the 1999 agreement between right-wing President Andrés Pastrana and Bill Clinton's administration. Between 2000 and 2005, Plan Colombia received \$2.8 billion from the US, later raised by the Pentagon to \$4.5 billion. By 2005, Uribe and Bush had become personal friends, with the administration requesting hundreds of millions more from Congress.

Throughout these years, the Colombian military carried out the "false positive" murders—the cold-blooded killing of at least 6,402 young peasants and unemployed workers, whose corpses were dressed in camouflage and presented as combat fatalities to satisfy superiors' demands for body counts—while the US government continued to issue human rights certifications to Uribe's armed forces.

The rise of this fascist candidate to first place is not an

accident. It is the direct product of four years of the Petro government and the role played by pseudo-left organizations in subordinating the working class to it.

The mass upheavals of 2020 and 2021—Colombia's most powerful social uprising in living memory, in which hundreds of thousands defied curfews and court orders while the state murdered more than 80 people, with the full backing of the Biden administration—shook the bourgeois state to its foundations. Petro, the trade union confederations and their pseudo-left appendages worked systematically to defuse and demobilize the movement and channel it behind Petro's electoral campaign.

Once in office, Petro's record was one of unrelieved capitulation. Structural inequality worsened as the six richest oligarchs saw their fortunes surge from \$28.3 billion to nearly \$50 billion. His signature reforms were either blocked or abandoned, and when Trump threatened military action and branded him a drug trafficker, Petro traveled to the White House and praised Trump as "terrific."

Those same pseudo-left forces are now lining up behind his hand-picked successor, Cepeda, whose campaign has explicitly presented itself as a step to the right of Petro. An adviser told Bloomberg that Cepeda is "looking for people to put the markets at ease."

The experience of the Petro government is the latest confirmation that bourgeois nationalism cannot be pressured or reformed in the interests of the working class. The rise of the fascist De la Espriella demonstrates with brutal clarity what awaits workers if they remain politically subordinated to any faction of Petro's Historic Pact or the trade union bureaucracies.

What is required is a complete break from these forces and 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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