

Petro and De la Espriella use Colombia's Independence Day to promote military

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Colombia's July 20 Independence Day, marking 216 years since the break from Spanish colonial rule, became the occasion this week for both outgoing President Gustavo Petro and President-elect Abelardo de la Espriella to place the armed forces at the center of the country's political life.

Beneath their apparently opposed postures—Petro's invocation of a “people's army” and de la Espriella's promise of restored “authority”—both pointed to the same institution as the ultimate guarantor of the existing social order: an armed force built, financed and trained by US imperialism since the 1960s and vastly expanded under Plan Colombia to suppress social opposition and defend the interests of capital.

The fascistic lawyer, De la Espriella arrived in Medellín with his wife and several designated ministers for the military parade, where he addressed the troops directly. “Today I am here to pay tribute to our soldiers and police of the fatherland,” he declared, “but also to thank the people of Antioquia, who do not kneel before tyranny.”

On social media he insisted that his inauguration will be held inside a military garrison as “an act of gratitude, respect and recognition to those who have given their lives to protect Colombians,” warning that this would send “a clear message to those who threaten the tranquility of our people: the state will recover its authority and enforce the law in every corner of the country. Never again will the heroes of the fatherland be sidelined. Never again will decent citizens live in fear.”

This is the language of a government preparing repression against any political opposition, social protest or strikes that disrupt “tranquility.” De la Espriella's promise to restore “authority” through the armed forces is an admission that his program—an assault on jobs, wages and social conditions—will provoke mass resistance he intends to meet with force.

His militarism draws on more than the traditional

Colombian right embodied by former president Álvaro Uribe Vélez. *El País* notes that De la Espriella has campaigned alongside senator-elect Enrique Gómez Martínez, grandson of former president Laureano Gómez—the Conservative president overthrown in 1953 by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, Colombia's only 20th-century military dictator. He has named Gómez Martínez's brother, Miguel Gómez Martínez, as finance minister, and will install the senator's son, Nicolás Gómez Arenas, as chief of staff.

Petro, a former official of the M-19 guerrilla, staged his own inversion of the same militarist tradition. For the first time, Bogotá's July 20 parade did not proceed through the capital's center and north but departed from a shopping mall in Ciudad Bolívar and crossed the working-class district of Bosa. Petro promoted the shift for weeks as a gesture of “popular” identification with the armed forces, whom he has recast, echoing Chilean president Salvador Allende, as “an army of the people and for the people”—Allende's own formulation was “the people in uniform.”

Petro's formula also has a specific lineage in Colombian capitalist politics. Military dictator Rojas Pinilla, who ruled from 1953 to 1957 with the backing of sectors of the Liberal and Conservative parties before those same parties turned on him, tried to sustain his rule by cultivating what he called the “people-armed forces pairing”—as a popular base independent of the traditional party structures. After his overthrow, Rojas founded the Alianza Nacional Popular (Anapo), whose 1970 presidential defeat he denounced as fraud. The M-19 guerrilla was born out of this alleged fraud as factions of Anapo, the Stalinist Communist Youth and other guerillas turned to armed actions under the slogans of “direct democracy” and “Colombian Socialism,” deeply influenced by Allende's own “Chilean road to Socialism.”

Allende appointed Augusto Pinochet as army

commander believing he could rely on the military's loyalty to constitutional government. In September 1973, Pinochet's command, conspiring for months with the CIA, overthrew Allende in a bloody coup and installed a fascist-military dictatorship that killed more than 3,000 people leftists and subjected tens of thousands more to detention and torture.

Petro has reproduced Allende's political framework throughout his presidency, courting the military command, raising soldiers' wages significantly and citing this among his government's central achievements—while leaving the repressive apparatus itself untouched. The gesture found no reciprocity: the military brass conspicuously left the ceremony before Petro's speech began. Petro later claimed he had ordered them to do so.

Lenin, in *The State and Revolution*, characterized the state as “bodies of armed men”—the police, military and other organs of coercion that enforce the rule of the class controlling them.

Petro's speech, whatever its populist coloring, laid bare which class that is. “The desperate owners of wealth in Colombia,” he declared, “should wait until August 7—I still have a few days left—to usher in fascism.”

Yet it was Petro's own government that presided over a rapid expansion of the fortunes of Colombia's billionaires. In accusing the rich of “opening the doors to real fascism,” Petro described a process for which he himself, politically, forged the keys. His government was installed by this same oligarchy, backed by US imperialism, precisely to suppress class struggle while continuing to enrich itself—buying time to disarm the working class and prepare the ascendancy of an openly fascist administration.

Petro continued to fulfill this function like Allende did in his final years, falsifying the class character of the capitalist state's armed bodies. Pointing to the military parade through Bogotá's poor districts, he declared: “The army passed by. The people's weapons passed by, because all those weapons you saw—the vehicles, the planes, the helicopters—belong exclusively to the people of Colombia, no matter whom they voted for.”

The convergence around the military was reinforced by the rest of the political establishment. The Senate-appointed attorney general, Gregorio Eljach, confirmed De la Espriella could be sworn in at a military garrison if Congress approves, while Senate president Lidio García said conditions were favorable for such approval.

De la Espriella's transition team had already convened its own cabinet of designated ministers in Barranquilla,

weeks before taking office. Petro responded to such an affront to his term by insisting his government retains full authority until the transfer of powers on August 7.

Petro, however, has confirmed that he will not attend the inauguration, tying his absence to allegations of an 848,000-vote fraud carried out through the Colombian consulate in Los Angeles, allegedly orchestrated with the Israeli private intelligence firm Black Cube. Colombia's own intelligence services and independent election monitors have found no evidence substantiating these claims.

Petro has also alleged, also contradicted by the intelligence agencies, that a whistleblower was targeted through a hacked electric vehicle. Despite these still unclear claims of fraud, it is a matter of public knowledge that the Trump administration violated Colombian sovereignty by intervening openly and endorsing repeatedly De la Espriella over Petro's candidate, Senator Iván Cepeda.

Facing what he calls attempts to jail him, Petro has called for a “permanent national strike” to defend labor gains, declaring: “I am not waiting for the next election; the opposition is exercised from the streets.” This is not a call to independent working-class action but a sign that Petro intends to use the threat of unrest as leverage within the existing bourgeois order, offering his services to contain and channel opposition into safe channels—a capitulation, in advance, to the reactionary administration set to succeed him.

The events of July 20 expose the class character beneath the apparent hostility between Petro and De la Espriella. Both look to the same armed apparatus, built and financed by US imperialism to defend the propertied classes, as the final arbiter of political life. Workers and youth can place no confidence in either wing of this bourgeois state, nor in illusions in the armed forces that constitute the capitalist state.



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