Colombia’s ultra-right president moves to put the army on the streets

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Colombia’s new government of President Abelardo de la Espriella is moving rapidly to place the armed forces at the center of urban policing. This campaign is being promoted as a response to crime, but it is in reality aimed at the working class and the social opposition that his austerity program will provoke.

The immediate vehicle is a request by Representative José Jaime Uscátegui of the far-right Democratic Center party, joined by members of the Bogotá City Council, that President De la Espriella authorize the deployment of military forces to support the police in the southern Bogotá districts of Ciudad Bolívar, Kennedy and Bosa. Uscátegui cited 2026 homicide figures of 57 killings in Ciudad Bolívar, 39 in Kennedy and 26 in Bosa to justify the measure, which he has pressed through a public town hall petition that has already gathered 37,056 certified signatures.

The legal pretext is Article 170 of Law 1801 of 2016, which contemplates military assistance to the police, as a “temporary and exceptional measure.” The demand to militarize three of Bogotá’s most populous working-class districts is neither temporary nor exceptional. It is the urban expression of a program that De la Espriella has made the centerpiece of his presidency: the Urban Security Defense Bloc. He announced he would create this force by decree on his first day in office, summoning the mayors of Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla and Bucaramanga to enact “the largest urban security operation” in Colombia’s history.

A continental turn toward dictatorship

The militarization of public security in Colombia is not an isolated development. It is part of a region-wide process, documented in a September 2026 analysis by the Chilean investigative outlet CIPER, of growing “civil militarism” involving the deployment of the armed forces for internal policing by governments of both the right and the nominal “left,” in countries ranging from Brazil and Mexico to El Salvador, Colombia and Venezuela.

The template is modeled on El Salvador’s security measures, characterized by mass arrests, a permanent state of emergency in force since March 2022 and mega-prisons in which more than 90,000 people are held under conditions human rights groups have described as torture. Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele’s methods have been explicitly endorsed by the Trump administration, which has lent them political legitimacy across the hemisphere.

In Ecuador, President Daniel Noboa declared a “state of internal armed conflict” in early 2024 and directed the military against criminal gangs, inaugurating a maximum-security prison modeled on El Salvador’s CECOT facility. Such measures produced an 18-percent increase in armed clashes between criminal organizations and security forces across Latin America in 2025, with nearly 6,900 people killed in state security interventions, the highest figure since 2018.

In Peru, President Dina Boluarte decreed a state of emergency in Lima and Callao in March 2025, and her successor, Keiko Fujimori, has now announced the deployment of the armed forces across urban areas and public transportation.

In Chile, the fascistic president José Antonio Kast secured passage of the Rules on the Use of Force, authorizing the use of lethal weapons to protect “critical infrastructure,” licensing the military to shoot at protesters. It follows the passage of the Naín-Retamal Law by his “left” predecessor Gabriel Boric, granting police and military a legal presumption of legitimate self-defense when using lethal force as increasing bipartisan demands are made for the deployment of the armed forces onto the streets of Santiago’s working-class neighborhoods.

In Brazil, the pattern is most advanced. The “Guarantee of Law and Order” (GLO) mechanism that authorizes the use of the armed forces for public security has been invoked by governments of both the right and “left” 59 times between 2010 and 2021 alone. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who claims to oppose GLO operations, himself decreed one in November 2023, deploying troops to the ports and airports of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The October 2025 “Operation Containment” in Rio’s Complexo do Alemão and Penha favelas, the deadliest police operation in Brazilian history, leaving at least 121 dead—with prosecutors confirming killings bearing signs of execution—was carried out by state police, but it has been used by the Lula government to pressure for the approval of a constitutional amendment institutionalizing the militarized public security model.

The common thread is not crime but class. Every section of the political establishment across Latin America has prepared for the current upsurge of workers and youth who have come forward in national strikes and mass marches in recent weeks alone, by adopting the Bukele model: normalizing states of emergency, criminalizing opposition, deploying the military and building up the repressive apparatus. De la Espriella’s decree authorizing police to intervene against protests “without first attempting dialogue,” signed hours before the October 14 national strike against his austerity measures, is the Colombian expression of this continental process.

A military built by US imperialism

The officer corps to which De la Espriella is now handing the streets is 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 relationship dates to 1949, when the United States established

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formal army and air force missions in Colombia. In 1962, US Army Brigadier General William P. Yarborough visited Colombia and drafted the counterinsurgency blueprint that became Plan Lazo, recommending that the Colombian military and police engage in “paramilitary, sabotage, and/or terrorist activities” against the population. The 1964 assault on the peasant community of Marquetalia, carried out under this doctrine, gave birth to the FARC and codified the doctrine of the “internal enemy” that has defined the Colombian armed forces ever since.

The School of the Americas (WHINSEC since 2001) has been the central institution of this relationship. Colombia has accumulated the largest single national cohort of any country: more than 10,000 graduates, with approximately 60 percent of current WHINSEC enrollment coming from Colombia alone. The generals at the top of the Colombian army during the “false positives” scandal—in which soldiers executed thousands of civilians and dressed them as guerrillas to inflate body counts—were WHINSEC graduates. A 2014 study found a direct correlation between US military aid to Colombian army brigades and the incidence of extrajudicial killings.

Plan Colombia, launched in 2000, was the apex of this investment. The United States has provided over $13 billion in security and economic assistance to Colombia, more than to any other country in the Americas, with military aid averaging 85 percent of the total. The consequences for the armed forces were transformative. When President Andrés Pastrana took office in 1998, the armed forces had barely 53,000 regular soldiers and 22,000 professional soldiers.

Plan Colombia converted conscript slots into 55,000 professional soldiers by the end of 2001, a 160 percent increase. Plan Fortaleza aimed to nearly double the number of regulars. The military and police combined grew from 300,000 to 446,000 personnel between 2001 and 2012, with active military personnel jumping from 158,000 to 200,000 in a single year (2003) and reaching 297,000 by 2015-2016.

Colombia now has a ratio of 9.6 soldiers per 1,000 inhabitants, nearly double the regional average of 4.3. Its National Police is some 180,000 strong, a paramilitary gendarmerie under the Ministry of National Defense, with military ranks and pay, a structure imposed by the military dictatorship of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in the 1950s and never reversed. The army’s officer corps, numbering some 10,000, has been trained in US counterinsurgency doctrine. Its institutional culture is defined by the doctrine of an “internal enemy”: the population itself, specifically those who challenge the oligarchic order.

The officer corps and the new president

De la Espriella’s relationship with this apparatus is the foundation of his political project.

His designated defense minister is retired Maj. Gen. Jorge Eduardo Mora López, a 36-year veteran who commanded the Eighth Division of the Army and directed the Joint Intelligence and Counterintelligence Department of the Military Forces, and who retired in 2022 after changes under De la Espriella’s predecessor, Gustavo Petro, “decapitated” much of the high command. Mora is the second consecutive retired general to hold the defense portfolio, following Petro’s own minister, Gen. Pedro Sánchez, a continuity that underscores the point that the militarization of the Colombian state is a bipartisan project.

De la Espriella’s campaign was built in significant measure on the radicalization of retired military and police personnel, who became one of the most visible sectors of opposition to the Petro government after the 2023 marches in the Plaza de Bolívar. He has campaigned alongside retired Gen. Eduardo Zapateiro and has cultivated the veterans’ organizations that emerged from those marches with the explicit aim of converting the reserve into a political force. His promise to create a “first line of defense” made up of veterans and reservists, and his holding his inauguration inside a military garrison as “an act of gratitude, respect and recognition” to the armed forces, are the clearest expressions of a project to fuse the far right with the officer corps.

Edwin Palma, a union bureaucrat and former minister under Petro, has invoked the specter of the Convivir neighborhood watch cooperatives created in the 1990s, most of which ended up linked to paramilitarism. The Convivir were the civilian auxiliary of the same counterinsurgency doctrine that produced the AUC, the paramilitary confederation whose demobilization was exposed as a fraud that left the Gulf Clan—now present in 392 municipalities—as Colombia’s dominant armed non-state actor.

However, the danger is not that De la Espriella will create a paramilitary force outside the state. It is that he is handing the state’s own armed forces—built, financed and trained by US imperialism, and swollen to nearly 300,000 personnel under Plan Colombia—the task of policing the working class.

The class character of the state

The working class must draw political conclusions. The armed forces are, in Lenin’s formulation, “special bodies of armed men” that enforce the rule of the class that controls them. In Colombia, that class is the oligarchy that has ruled through the Liberal and Conservative parties for two centuries, that settled its differences through the National Front while outsourcing the repression of everyone outside that pact to the security forces, and that has now installed de la Espriella to carry out an assault on jobs, wages and social conditions.

The answer to the militarization of the streets is not to appeal to the “progressive” wing of the bourgeoisie, nor to seek a return to the Petro government, which presided over the same repressive apparatus and ended its term approving a $3.54 billion military modernization program and bombing ELN camps. The answer is the independent mobilization of the working class, in Colombia and across Latin America, against the entire capitalist order that is preparing to meet its resistance with bullets.

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