

Gustavo Petro's Big Win

Colombia's First Leftist President Could Transform the Region

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In the lead-up to the country's presidential election, members of Colombia's high society braced for disaster. A habitu  of the gentlemen's clubs of Bogot  noted a tide of "catastrophe-minded hysteria" rolling through the salons. Businesses introduced special clauses permitting contracts to be struck down if the worst came to pass. Bleak mutterings circulated through the military barracks. The source of such widespread dread went by one name: Gustavo Petro, a former urban guerrilla, a socialist, and the leading contender in the race.

Those alarmed at the prospect of a Petro victory have had their fears confirmed. The 62-year-old Petro will be the country's next leader, having defeated his opponent, Rodolfo Hern ndez—a 77-year-old real estate tycoon and relative political novice—in the runoff vote. This follows Hern ndez's extraordinary upset victory in the first round of voting in late May, when he beat out Federico Guti rrez, the center-right hopeful backed by the traditional parties, by espousing one message: "Colombia is captured by thieves." But Hern ndez's gambit finally failed him, and Colombia will soon be governed by its first leftist president.

In the sort of paradox that populist competition seems to invite, each campaign sought to present its candidate in the final weeks before the runoff as the sensible choice and the genuine political outsider. Hern ndez ultimately received the backing of much of Colombia's political elite, which apparently chose to flay itself and run the risk of an authoritarian becoming president rather than let the left take power. But it was Petro, whose calls for change resonated with a public hungry for political, social, and economic transformation, who triumphed in this battle of antiestablishment credentials.

Petro's win will have far-reaching implications in a region where Colombia has long been an anchor of relative political stability, despite the rising populist tide across Latin America. It is also telling regarding the current state of Colombian politics. Petro has promised to enact sweeping social changes, as well as measures such as halting new oil and gas exploration contracts and increasing taxes on the rich to pay for antipoverty programs and improved public services. Many of his proposed policies, including

erecting so-called smart tariffs to protect Colombian agricultural production, could be poorly received in Washington.

To his supporters, Petro is a standard-bearer for Latin American progressivism who will usher in a new era of representation and egalitarianism. His critics, in contrast, accuse him of employing the same elite-baiting rhetoric that propelled to power other populist leaders, such as Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Peruvian President Pedro Castillo. And indeed, Petro's record as a former mayor of Bogotá, his self-portrayal as an agent of historic transformation, and even some of his reported personality traits, such as his aversion to being contradicted, suggest to many that a demagogue may be lurking.

BATTLE OF THE OUTSIDERS

The significance of this electoral shock does not conform to any easily recognizable precedent. Petro's triumph was by no means inevitable: in the weeks leading up to the runoff vote, the polls ranged wildly. Hernández's plainspoken manner, social media following, and explosion onto the national political stage had seemed to give him an edge over his left-wing rival. In style, although perhaps not in substance, the two candidates could not have been more different: speaking before packed city squares across the country in the campaign during the first round, Petro promised an imminent end to Colombia's corruption, violence, and injustice while making darkly sarcastic asides about the privileged lives of those now in power—a combination that electrified his listeners and terrified his critics. Hernández, on the other hand, barely appeared in public until the last few weeks of the campaign. In his scant public comments, he had little to say regarding his vision for Colombian politics beyond condemning political corruption and declaring that he would jail the offenders, ratchet up investigations, and generally drain the swamp.

The conditions that drove Hernández's unexpected rise—and that have both helped and hindered Petro's political career—can be found in the tension between a mounting discontent with the status quo and an enduring fear of the political left. Unlike most other Latin American countries, Colombia has never been led by a socialist, in part because many previous aspirants were killed on the campaign trail: in the run-up to the 1990 elections, for instance, three leftist and liberal presidential candidates were assassinated by shady forces involving paramilitary troops, narcotraffickers, and rogue state officials. In the minds of many throughout the country, the left remains associated with Colombia's jungle-based narcotrafficking guerrillas, the most important of which, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), demobilized a mere five years ago. These guerrilla groups continue to loom large in the country's political imagination: Colombia's far-flung territories, where these groups organized and held the strongest influence, are still seen “as a set of threats,” according one former senior military leader. Colombia's left has also been stained by the legacy of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, whose authoritarian clampdown and fiscal mismanagement have driven his oil-rich country toward economic collapse, prompting millions of migrants to flee, many to Colombia. Political conservatives sought to stall Petro's campaign by suggesting that he could usher in similar economic and political mayhem.

Those concerns cost Petro the 2018 presidential election: he lost to the conservative stalwart Iván Duque, a disciple of the former president and security hard-liner Álvaro Uribe. Duque is leaving office with his favorability ratings mired in the 20s. Although the government's economic and social record accounts for much of his unpopularity, this discontent can also be traced to Duque's failure to move the country away from long-standing conflicts with armed criminal and guerrilla groups. His opposition to the 2016 peace accords forged with the FARC under former President Juan Manuel Santos—a landmark deal that aimed to release Colombia from decades of draining clashes between the state and the country's largest guerrilla force—led to a lukewarm application of the terms of the agreement and resurgent government support for military offensives against residual armed groups, criminal outfits, and coca growers.

The results of the watered-down accords have been a disappointment to all sides. The peace agreement aimed to help former combatants demobilize and transition to civilian life, often as farmers. Former guerrillas, however, say the government has failed to make good on promises of land and aid. Rather than laying down their weapons, armed groups have multiplied and grown more inconspicuous, insidious, and effective in extracting illicit revenues and exerting their power over defenseless rural communities. As a result, Duque's security agenda did not lead to a decline in violence but rather to an increase in instability and insecurity: according to a study by the humanitarian nonprofit Fundación Ideas para La Paz, close to 80,000 civilians were forcibly displaced last year, the largest number in 12 years. Last year's murder rate was also the highest in close to a decade.

Yet in a strange turn of events, the same peace agreement that failed to meet its proponents' pledges to transform rural life brought immense changes to the populous urban zones that once looked askance at talks with the FARC. Left-wing causes rooted in income and power redistribution, formerly portrayed as civilian smokescreens for insurgent forces, have found much freer expression now that the FARC's demobilization has removed some of the stigma attached to socialism. Petro's presidential campaign in 2018, which despite defeat represented a breakthrough showing by a left-wing candidate, was followed a year later by a monumental series of urban protests in which marchers voiced grievances regarding Colombia's social inequities and its government's flaws. The same marches took place last year with more fury and on a greater scale during the COVID-19 pandemic, which laid bare the consequences of the country's enormous inequality: while members of many rich households flew to places such as Miami to receive vaccines, over 600 mostly poor Colombians were dying every day during the pandemic's peak. Protesters were met on occasion with live fire and beatings from riot police; while insisting it respected peaceful demonstrations, the government blamed vandals, armed groups, Venezuela, and Petro himself for provoking violent disturbances. But rather than undermining Petro's political credibility, Colombia's wave of public unrest seems to have heightened the country's willingness to embrace an outsider candidate who is ready to upend the social order.

The vast discrepancy in how the pandemic affected different segments of Colombian society is indicative of the country's underlying hierarchical structure. Although its economy has undergone steady growth and is fast recovering from the pandemic, Colombia is the second most unequal country in Latin America after Brazil. Its rates of

social mobility are the lowest of all 38 member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Whether it is in access to education, health care, land, or formal employment, Colombia operates according to brazenly selective and segregated systems rooted in connections, families, and, above all, money.

Inequality is even more pronounced outside the cities, especially in areas near the Pacific coast, which is home to large indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. The despair created by the prevailing lack of opportunity has long boosted recruitment by criminal and armed groups; now it is finding expression in democratic political mobilization on behalf of left-wing candidates. Petro's vice-presidential running mate, Francia Márquez, an exceptionally brave and outspoken Black environmental and human rights activist, has gained enormous political momentum on the basis of her progressive platform. Petro's victory signals that a majority of Colombians may be yearning to blame leaders they see as avaricious and out of touch—but now they are also willing, as they have not been before, to face the costs of undertaking difficult reforms. “If we hadn't woken up, we would have been submissive forever,” said one young female protester in Cali to the International Crisis Group last year. “People no longer have fear.”

GOVERNING WITH A STEADY HAND

Petro will likely face immediate challenges as president. Colombia's relations with the armed forces and with the U.S. government might deteriorate rapidly, particularly if Petro makes good on his promise to remove the current military high command, presses for a rapid change in security policy, or pushes to abandon the policy of coca eradication in favor of voluntary substitution, in which coca growers uproot the illegal crops and turn to other ventures with the help of state support. Improving ties with Cuba and Venezuela or initiating a fresh peace process with the guerrilla group the National Liberation Army (ELN), both of which could be in the cards, will invite critical scrutiny.

Yet as a matter of policy these steps are feasible, and as a matter of politics they are seemingly backed by some of Petro's opponents. Former president Juan Manuel Santos, for instance, made great efforts to reach a deal with the ELN before leaving office, and coca substitution is an anchor of Colombia's 2016 peace accord. Duque's overt hostility to the Venezuelan government has not succeeded in dislodging Maduro from office, but it has fueled acute instability on the countries' shared border. Petro's plan to begin winding down the oil industry is more problematic and could well cause an economic shock and rapid devaluation. But it is also an expeditious way to make good on the climate change commitments that Colombia, along with other Western countries, has pledged to uphold.

Petro's ascent to power is not a panacea for the country's ills. Regardless of Petro's progressive agenda, the same issues of inequity and insecurity that bedeviled Duque will in all likelihood resurge. Colombia's main political obstacles—providing greater security in the country's rural periphery and expanding economic opportunity in its poor suburbs—will present a challenge to Petro, particularly if he aims to wean the country off its oil exports while bolstering the state. The incoming president will face the unenviable dilemma of extracting more revenue from a limited tax base to fund his ambitious

proposals. This will trigger stiff opposition: Petro may have to contend with paralysis in Congress and the flight of capital from the country. And if Colombian history is any indication, the left's rise to power could lead to a cycle of violence against grassroots social activists by armed groups such as the narco-trafficking Gulf Clan. Whether Petro can handle these challenges and build strong coalitions without abandoning his policy goals or attempting to expand executive rule will be the crucial test over the next four years.

Colombia's most famous son, Gabriel García Márquez, said that the military dictator of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century is the only mythological figure created by Latin America. But what this election has demonstrated is that it is the populist of the left or the right railing against the establishment—crusading for social change, claiming to represent the people, calling for a new era of honest governance—that is now the most compelling fixture of the region's politics. As a state that, despite its bloodstained past, has maintained a remarkably long-lived democracy, Colombia has numerous checks and balances to hem Petro in: a wide spectrum of parties in Congress, interventionist courts, autonomous watchdogs, a largely self-governing military. For anxious Colombians, these bulwarks offer an assurance of stability. But as the dust settles after this battle between populists, only time will tell whether Petro is truly capable of healing the country's deep social cleavages—or if he will instead succumb to the populist demagoguery that has stricken so much of the region.

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