



67/2022

26/10/2022

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Gustavo Petro: a change in Colombian geopolitics[Visit the WEBSITE](#)[Receive the E-NEWSLETTER](#)

Gustavo Petro: a change in Colombian geopolitics

Abstract:

Colombia Humana candidate, Gustavo Petro, was elected as Colombia's new president after a very close race with billionaire Rodolfo Hernández. Colombians elected the Historical Pact candidate to govern the country for the next four years in one of the most hotly contested elections in the country's recent history.

The new president is committed to continue the peace process and a complete change in the development model of this Republic.

He has already begun one of his star projects, the tax reform with which he wants to reduce the fiscal deficit, and he intends to unify the pension system. He proposes to carry out the ecological transition. He has also resumed diplomatic and consular relations with Venezuela.

Although he enjoys a majority in both houses of parliament, his main task will be to maintain the unity of his heterogeneous coalition and retain the backing of the traditional forces that are beginning to support him. But in addition to governability, the other major challenge is to meet the expectations that the Colombian people have placed in him, thereby responding to the widespread desire for change.

Keywords:

Colombia, elections, historic pact, guerrillas, peace, drug trafficking, FARC, ELN

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Gustavo Petro: un cambio en la geopolítica colombiana

Resumen:

El candidato de Colombia Humana, Gustavo Petro, fue elegido como nuevo presidente de Colombia después de una contienda muy reñida con el multimillonario Rodolfo Hernández. Los colombianos eligieron al candidato del Pacto Histórico para gobernar el país en los próximos cuatro años en una de las elecciones más disputadas en la historia reciente de este país.

El nuevo mandatario apuesta por continuar con el proceso de paz y un cambio total en el modelo de desarrollo de esta República.

Ya ha comenzado uno de sus proyectos estrella, la reforma tributaria con la que quiere disminuir el déficit fiscal, y pretende unificar el sistema de pensiones. Propone llevar a cabo la transición ecológica. Asimismo, ha retomado las relaciones diplomáticas y consulares con Venezuela.

Si bien disfruta de la mayoría en ambas cámaras del Parlamento, su principal tarea será mantener la unidad de su heterogénea coalición y retener el respaldo de las fuerzas tradicionales que comienzan a apoyarle. Pero además de la gobernabilidad, el otro gran reto es cumplir las expectativas que el pueblo colombiano ha depositado en él, respondiendo de este modo al deseo generalizado de cambio.

Palabras clave:

Colombia, elecciones, pacto histórico, guerrilla, paz, narcotráfico, FARC, ELN

How to cite this document:

REYES RAMÍREZ, Rocío de los. *Gustavo Petro: a leftist in Bogotá*. IEEE Analysis Paper 67/2022.

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA67_2022_ROCREY_Colombia_ENG.pdf and/or [bie³ link](#) (accessed on day/month/year)

Introduction

The election of Gustavo Petro as Colombia's new president marks the beginning of an alternation in power as the first leftist president¹ in a country that has been ruled for decades by a traditional and rather conservative political class. This factor is significant if we consider that for many years Colombia has been immersed in an internal war between the state and guerrilla groups that politically claim leftist ideas. Moreover, at the regional level, it will strengthen the bloc of governments of this political persuasion, which will have repercussions on its relationship with the US and other global actors.

Claiming his victory in the second round with his transformative promise, this was Petro's third electoral attempt to win the presidency, this time beating businessman Rodolfo Hernández and winning more than 11.2 million votes² to become the most supported candidate in a presidential race in the history of Colombia.

Petro was sworn in in Bogotá on 7 August in front of a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people. The 62-year-old former guerrilla, mayor and senator took the baton from the deeply unpopular Iván Duque, with plans for intense reforms in a country beset by economic inequality and drug violence. His campaign promises for the four-year term included raising taxes on the rich, investing in health care and education, and reforming the police in the aftermath of their brutal and internationally condemned crackdown on anti-inequality protests last year. He has also promised to suspend oil exploration, promote clean energy and reactivate diplomatic and trade relations with the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro, which have been non-existent since 2019.

But Petro's presidency is also historic in another sense because at his side is the country's first Afro-Colombian vice-president, 40-year-old environmental activist, feminist and human rights defender Francia Márquez. The pair must grapple with an economy reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic, a surge in violence and deep-seated anger at the political *status quo* that culminated in last year's protests.

¹ The left is in government for the first time in Colombia with Gustavo Petro. 7- 08-22. La Vanguardia. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20220807/8454941/izquierda-llega-primera-vez-gobierno-colombia-petro.html>

² Summary and results of the 2022 Colombia elections won by Petro: this is how the voting went. 20/6/2022. CNN <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2022/06/19/resultados-elecciones-presidenciales-2022-colombia-petro-rodolfo-segunda-vuelta-boletines-orix/>

With almost 40% of Colombia's 50 million inhabitants living in poverty, 11.7% of the population unemployed³ and inflation in July this year reaching 10.2% year-on-year, the challenges for Gustavo Petro are manifold. And what is more, he is also hoping to regain international visibility. There are social challenges, educational challenges, challenges in innovation, in the environment, in security and in agriculture. Colombians have high expectations of what this left-wing government will deliver and what it means for the Latin American left itself.

The relatively short time that has elapsed since Petro's inauguration makes it difficult to predict with any accuracy how he will navigate the government's many challenges, make trade-offs between competing priorities⁴, have his initiatives undermined by political resistance or be side-tracked by new challenges.

However, his track record as a politician, his stated objectives, his personnel choices and his first initiatives give us an idea of what to expect. Furthermore, Colombia's economic and security challenges, and the international and domestic political landscape, highlight the issues that are likely to shape the agenda⁵.

The road to Nariño Palace

In last June's elections, Gustavo Petro, a former guerrilla of the M19, the urban guerrilla group demobilised in the 1990s, managed to make history: he won the endorsement for an ideological shift thanks to the support of more than 11 million people. To this achievement we must add the high participation and the appointment of Francia Márquez as the country's first Afro-Colombian woman vice-president.

His victory this year and inauguration as the 118th president of the Republic of Colombia was overdue, this being his third attempt, his first and second in 2010 and 2018, respectively.

³ National Administrative Department of Statistics of Colombia (Dane). Available at: <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/pobreza-y-condiciones-de-vida> (All links are active as of the closing date of this document, October 2022).

⁴ Forero, Juan . "Former Colombia Rebel Gustavo Petro Inaugurated as President", Wall Street Journal. 7-08-22. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/former-colombia-rebel-gustavo-petro-inaugurated-as-president-11659917654>

⁵ ELLIS, Robert Evan. "A Preliminary Look from Washington at Colombia's New Direction and Security Challenges". Security and Land Power Magazine. Vol. 1 Issue 2 (2022). <https://revistas.cceep.mil.pe/index.php/seguridad-y-poder-terrestre/article/view/16>

Petro, unlike former president Duque, is a very experienced figure in different scenarios. He not only knows the workings of the state perfectly, but he is also internationally renowned in some political sectors of neighbouring countries and in different sectors worldwide.

His track record in the legislature and his long, rather bittersweet experience in the executive in Bogotá must be acknowledged. While all this has undoubtedly served him as an apprenticeship, legitimising his possible identification as a politician who is much more pragmatic and ideologically much more strategic than his predecessor, we cannot leave aside his past in the guerrilla, which arouses reservations in many sectors.

Petro's arrival in the government of the Republic is a turning point, as it signifies the emergence of the left in Colombia for the first time, with all that this entails and in awareness that this transition will not be easy and many obstacles will have to be overcome to insert itself into the logic of state administration and of decision-making in public policy processes.

The new president holds a very critical view of neoliberalism, an issue that has historically had a certain electoral cost, because Colombia is an exception in Latin America. It has never been led by revolutionaries, as has Mexico and Bolivia, or by popular movements, such as Peronism in Argentina, or by a socialist president like Salvador Allende in Chile.

We must ask ourselves why this absence of left-wing governments in the political history of this country and what circumstances and factors explain the fact.

The first cause concerns the elites that have governed this neo-Granadian nation, ruled by around just 40 families in 200 years of history. While it is true that the two traditional parties, liberal and conservative, have clashed on fundamental issues such as the role of the Church, public education and the role of trade unions, in practice the elites of these two parties were very similar and aligned on other key issues such as the alliance with the US and a capitalist economic model. They were also led by basically similar people, aristocratic Bogotanos and Creoles. For decades, most leaders that did not fit this profile or conform to this type were assassinated, especially when they had a chance of winning the presidency. Some cases in point are Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, assassinated during the

political campaign on 9 April 1948⁶, and Luis Carlos Galán, who was killed during the 1989 campaign⁷. So extreme was the violence in the 1940s and 1950s that both Liberals and Conservatives signed the famous and notoriously undemocratic National Front⁸, a kind of two-party system, which prevented other parties of any colour or political stripe from governing.

It was then that six guerrillas emerged in Colombia. This is another of the fundamental reasons for the previous absence of left wing governments, given that the Colombian people have always identified the left with the guerrillas, and the guerrillas have murdered people. The FARC⁹ were particularly bloodthirsty, so voting for someone linked to violence, to the destruction of rural populations and to the misery and poverty of the people themselves was not a viable option. This left-FARC identification was a disadvantage because being a left-wing politician in a democracy is not the same as being a guerrilla fighter.

What is more, left-wing politicians always had the dilemmas of whether or not to support the guerrillas or whether or not they sounded like the outdated left. The war that left more than 200,000 dead and millions displaced has scarred Colombians to this day, and although the victims include members of the state and paramilitaries, people generally blame the subversive and violent guerrillas.

The recent election campaign was marked by rejection of the political class, dissatisfaction and polarisation. While it was a truly unpleasant campaign from a political and social point of view, it was also one of great hope and a messianism invested in Gustavo Petro.

However, perhaps the greatest peculiarity of this electoral process was that the priorities in terms of public discussion and electoral debate were not set by the candidates or the political parties. It was the citizens that ended up being the primary agenda in the

⁶ El Bogotazo, 9 April 1948: the story of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's death in the press. 9/4/2021. Panorama Cultural.com. Available at: <https://panoramacultural.com.co/historia/6611/el-bogotazo-9-de-abril-de-1948-el-relato-de-la-muerte-de-jorge-eliecer-gaitan-en-la-prensa>

⁷ 30 years without Luis Carlos Galán. EFE 18-08-2019. El Colombiano. Available at: <https://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/historia-de-luis-carlos-galan-30-anos-despues-de-su-asesinato-LH11434429>

⁸ MESA GARCÍA, Esteban. *The National Front and its anti-democratic nature*. In: FACULTY OF LAW AND POLITICAL SCIENCES Journal. Vol. Issue 39 110, p. 157-184. Medellín - Colombia. January-June 2009. <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/1514/151412842007.pdf>

⁹ Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

electoral process. It was the fundamental issues of the social protest of two years ago that set the politicians' agenda: the economic situation, deepened by the pandemic and by the confinement, social measures and the terrible weariness with the traditional political class and its nefarious habits. Petro's campaign was a logical attempt to connect directly with this citizens' movement and an excellent platform at a time when he was already leading in the polls.

Two populist discourses dominated the campaign: one attacking the political class represented by Rodolfo Hernández and the conservative parties, and the other attacking the inability of the state technocracy to understand the needs of the people. Petro, however, has never flatly rejected political parties or the *establishment*; in fact, he grew up in it and surrounds himself with people who know him well, including Roy Barreras¹⁰, very ably appointed president of the Senate of the Republic of Colombia and, consequently, the president of Congress, considered a wizard at understanding how the two chambers work. He knows all the procedures and every good, bad, formal and informal way to be able to mould any process¹¹.

The new president had a landslide victory in the 5 departments¹² that have suffered most from guerrilla and paramilitary violence, a battered area on the Pacific coast where illegal mining and coca cultivation are the only means of survival for many inhabitants.

The left-wing coalition Historical Pact¹³ won in Bogotá, the island of San Andrés and practically took over the peripheral departments, where poverty levels are highest. But undoubtedly, key to his triumph were the victories in the Pacific, Nariño and Cauca departments, with almost all their municipalities voting for change. For example, in Timbiquí, a town of more than 20,000 inhabitants, Gustavo Petro obtained close to 99% of the votes.

¹⁰ He has been a political ally of former presidents Álvaro Uribe and Juan Manuel Santos.

¹¹ Read the story of presidential pre-candidate Roy Barreras. 20/9/2021. TIME. Available at: <https://www.eltiempo.com/politica/partidos-politicos/biografia-de-roy-barreras-y-su-recorrido-politico-621589>

¹² Colombia is administratively divided into 32 departments and 1 capital district.

¹³ The Historic Pact "Colombia Puede" is a Colombian political coalition composed mainly of left and centre-left political parties and movements, of progressive, social democratic and democratic socialist ideology.



President Petro and Vice-President Francia Márquez. Source: Channel 8

In his inauguration speech, the new president peppered his government decalogue with special emphasis on equality, the creation of a dedicated ministry to be headed by Francia Márquez, the fierce fight against corruption and the defence of biodiversity and the environment. However, the search for the so-called "total peace" took precedence in his plea, pledging to follow the recommendations of the Truth Commission for the real and effective implementation of the Peace Accords. In the president's words, "we have to end once and for all with six decades of violence and armed conflict, with two centuries of permanent war, the eternal war, the perpetual war in Colombia. We can, we will comply with the peace agreement"¹⁴.

For the time being, Pacto Histórico has very broad support in Congress, but its leader will have to do some fine-tuning to ensure that this unity does not crack. Part of the process we are going to see during the first year will be one of building levels of governance, and finding out how solid these coalitions and alliances that have managed to be put together are going to be vis-à-vis this new government that is beginning to take shape.

In these democratic games, Petro's capacity for action is a bill he has yet to pay after holding the Bogotá mayoralty, where he was widely criticised for his slow capacity to react. This will be an apt stage for him to demonstrate his negotiating skills, the time to find out whether the positive outcomes until now have been simply a fluke because he was starting the government, or whether he truly is a person capable of building consensus within coalitions.

¹⁴ Full speech by Gustavo Petro on his inauguration as President of Colombia. 7/8/2022. Caracol News. Available at: <https://noticias.caracoltv.com/politica/discurso-completo-de-gustavo-petro-en-su-posesion-como-presidente-de-colombia-rg10>

The Historic Pact - Gustavo Petro's bench - the Comunes Party, La U, Alianza Verde, the representatives of the indigenous seats and the Liberal Party have declared themselves in government. Liberals will be concerned with legislative matters but will probably end up supporting the president-elect wholeheartedly.

The opposition statute, which came into force in 2018, provides that parties with seats in congress can take up to one month after the inauguration of the Colombian president to define their position vis-à-vis the new government.

In this political scenario, the Democratic Centre appears to be the only party that will oppose Gustavo Petro's government. Various members of this group have said that it will be a political exercise with arguments and that it will be very different from the one that Iván Duque had to confront in his government¹⁵.

This distribution of power means that, in the first legislature at least, Gustavo Petro will have a Congress that is even closer than the one that former presidents Álvaro Uribe and Juan Manuel Santos or Duque himself had in their time, with majorities that will allow a left-wing government to make progress on the legislative agenda, and especially on constitutional reforms, which is where the bulk of his political project will be based.

It may be that, as usually happens at the beginning of all governments, it will start out with apparently strong coalitions that are very much anchored in the purely administrative aspects of the distribution of certain ministries or representative posts to the different parties involved, but when the thorniest issues are raised, including pensions, health, the economy, etc., liberalism and conservatism will clearly continue to be on different sides.

It is very difficult as we speak to know for sure what will happen in four years' time, but there is already evidence of a change in the political sense.

Daniel Raisbeck sees Gustavo Petro's victory as the victory of a Colombian *neo-establishment* made up of leftist academics and progressive journalists or "influencers"¹⁶.

The first changes are beginning to be seen, and it seems that we won't have to wait long for the start of the implementation all the reforms, some of which are quite controversial,

¹⁵ Centro Democrático becomes official as the opposition to Gustavo Petro's government. 20/7/2022. Infobae. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2022/07/20/centro-democratico-se-oficializa-como-oposicion-al-gobierno-de-gustavo-petro/>

¹⁶ RAISBECK, Daniel. The Colombian establishment wins again: At what price? 20/6/2022. In: The Cato.org . <https://www.elcato.org/el-establecimiento-colombiano-gana-de-nuevo-pero-que-precio>

and which will require a lot of political dexterity, deliberation and negotiation in different scenarios.

Economic policy: from tax reform to pension and health care systems

Colombia receives this new government with a complex budget deficit, not only with coffers in the red after the pandemic and the government of President Duque, but also with a proposal to abandon dependence on oil and boost new forms of financing, urging Colombians to work and produce.

In a country plagued by violence and one of the most unequal in the world, Petro aspires to achieving peace and equity through profound reforms, with economic and fiscal reform as one of his main challenges. So far, seeking to allay fears about his economic policy, he has chosen José Antonio Ocampo, a key figure and a person of recognised international prestige whose thinking is closer to classical liberalism than to the left, to lead one of his flagship projects, the tax reform. Ocampo was advisor in the campaign of the centrist candidate Sergio Fajardo and in the campaign of the current president of Chile, Gabriel Boric, who is very close to Petro. He was also a professor at Columbia University, Secretary for Economic Affairs at ECLAC, Minister of Finance and Minister of Agriculture in the Gaviria and Samper governments¹⁷.

This choice may be a sign of moderation in the management of the economy, and also of responsible reforms, so much so that he is credited with keeping the dollar market basically within relatively stable ranges.

The first major hurdle in Petro's tax reform bill, and a cornerstone of his campaign, is implementing the promised tax hike on Colombia's wealthy to address the country's fiscal balance and generate revenue from increases in public spending.

This bill¹⁸, which is already in Congress and is making good progress, aims to reduce the "inequitable exemptions"(in the words of the text itself) currently enjoyed by high-income earners and some companies, and to fight tax evasion. This is how the administration will, according to its projections, obtain the funds to finance its ambitious social

¹⁷ José Antonio Ocampo. Minister of Finance. 9/8/2022. The Empty Chair. Available at: <https://www.lasillavacia.com/quien-es-quien/jose-antonio-ocampo>

¹⁸ Colombia: Tax Reform Bill 2022. Garrigues. Tax Department Colombia. Available at: https://www.garrigues.com/sites/default/files/documents/alerta_descargable_reforma_tributaria_colombia_vf10_0822_0.pdf

programme. It aims to raise \$25 trillion, 32.4% of which is held by higher income earners¹⁹, to help the expanded implementation of the 2016 peace plan, including infrastructure construction, land redistribution, and other public sector investments. All of this is aimed at creating economic opportunities in marginalised areas and transferring land and resources to the most disadvantaged.

Another important proposal is agrarian reform, something that many consider a historical debt in Colombia, where the inequitable distribution of land is, in the opinion of some analysts, one of the main sources of rural poverty and inequality, which has its roots in the colonial period. More than half of Colombia's land - 52% - is in the hands of 1.5% of the population, according to the Centro de Memoria Histórica. Some even believe that this, together with the state's abandonment of the countryside, was the breeding ground for the emergence first of the guerrillas, and then of drug trafficking and the illegal buying and selling of land. Petro says that he intends to make the countryside productive and socially just, and to this end he plans to tax large estates, encourage activity on land that is not producing, and redistribute land. In more precise terms, the government is going to hand over the title of almost 300,000 hectares to indigenous communities under the "Great National Agreement for the Agrarian Pact", signed a few days ago.

Perhaps the proposal that is currently generating the most misgivings is the issue of hydrocarbons, given that a key issue in Petro's electoral career was the environment.

His plan is to move away from the extractive economy and boost production as a policy to tackle climate change. Colombia's economy is characterised by macroeconomic stability and sustained growth in the export of non-renewable raw materials, mainly oil. The president wants to turn this around, one of his proposals being to dismantle the oil industry in the medium and long terms, although without doing away with it entirely. What he wants is an end to oil exploration, not oil exploitation, an ambitious proposal that is not without controversy and raises questions about how to make the transition to a green economy.

Colombia will be the fastest growing regional economy in 2022, according to the OECD. National GDP is projected to grow by 6.1% in 2022 and 2.3% in 2023. While the figure is

¹⁹ CEDEÑOS, M^a Fernanda. How Petro's tax reform will affect me: what's new and how it could hurt. 20-09-22. en: AS Colombia. <https://colombia.as.com/actualidad/como-me-afectara-la-reforma-tributaria-de-petro-novedades-y-posibles-perjuicios-n/>

positive, inflation growth is close to 9.2% and the economy is still adjusting after the recession of 2020, when it fell by 7%²⁰.

For their part, health and pensions are two issues that are currently sources of great discontent for some citizens, casting our minds back to the protests of 2019 and 2021 when thousands of people took to the streets in Colombia demanding, among other things, greater equality in these areas.

Regarding pensions, Petro is also pushing for greater state involvement in one of the Latin American countries with the lowest pension coverage for the over-65s. He proposes to extend the right to a pension and has announced a unified system that is mostly managed by the state, unlike what is currently happening with the so-called private "pension fund administrators" (AFP) managing most of the Colombian taxpayers' money, and who Petro accuses of using the money to finance the business of the bankers who own the funds. Critics say Petro's proposal is fiscally unsustainable and that the state has not historically been an example of good stewardship. However, the social agenda is a priority for Petro, who will also grant direct subsidies of half a minimum monthly wage to poor female heads of household and launch an anti-hunger programme. He also plans to present in Congress the so-called "law against hunger", to subsidise the production of basic foodstuffs and sell them at preferential prices to vulnerable families²¹.

Regarding healthcare, the current Colombian system involves both the public and private sectors through the so-called EPS²² (Entidades Promotoras de Salud), with some considering that it works better than when it was totally under the state in the 1980s. By way of example, it is criticised for corruption and bureaucracy, overpriced medicines and because the difference between rural and urban care is too great. Petro is pushing for greater state intervention and says he will establish a single, universal public system that does not depend on patients' ability to pay, financing the system, so he says, with progressive taxation. This will restrict the current role of EPSs, promising a tough hand against corruption.

²⁰ MALAMUD, Carlos and NÚÑEZ CASTELLANO, Rogelio. Elections in Colombia: from polarisation and electoral fragmentation to the challenge of governability for Gustavo Petro. 7-07-22 En: Real Instituto Elcano. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/elecciones-en-colombia-de-la-polarizacion-y-fragmentacion-electoral-al-reto-de-gobernabilidad-para-gustavo-petro/>

²¹ With basic food baskets, Petro would lower the cost of food by 50%.9-08-22. El Colombiano. Available at: <https://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/proyecto-de-gustavo-petro-para-bajar-los-precios-de-los-alimentos-y-acabar-el-hambre-desata-polemica-JO18346087>

²² What is an EPS? 21/7/2022. Possible country. Available at: <https://paisposible.info/que-es-una-eps/>

“Total peace”

In his first speech as president, Petro alluded to his strongest and most resolute commitment: "Peace is the meaning of my life; it is the hope of Colombia. We cannot fail Colombian society".²³

Total peace is one of the most important and ambitious challenges facing this government and will involve several ministries as well as reliance on the willingness of the armed groups to engage in the project.

A few weeks after taking office, he lifted the arrest and extradition zones on the ELN chief negotiators²⁴, announcing that he had authorised "the reinstatement of protocols, allowing negotiators to return and reconnect with their organisation, suspending their arrest warrants, and doing away with extradition orders so that a dialogue with the National Liberation Army can begin, so called to try to build a path, hopefully quickly and expeditiously, along which this organisation ceases to be a guerrilla organisation".²⁵

In 2016, the peace process polarised the Colombian people between supporters and detractors, which is why one of the main challenges for the new president is to fulfil the agreements signed with the FARC, hindered by former president Iván Duque, and to resume talks with the ELN guerrillas.

This dialogue began in 2016 under former president Juan Manuel Santos, who signed a peace treaty with the broader Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebel group, which later laid down its arms and created a political party. However, the party was suspended in 2019 by the conservative president of the time, Iván Duque, after a car bombing at a police academy in Bogotá left 22 dead²⁶.

Since this event, FARC dissident groups, the ELN, one of the most historic guerrilla groups on Colombian territory, and neo-paramilitary groups have continued to multiply, illustrating the vulnerability of these agreements.

²³ Full speech by Gustavo Petro... Opus Cit.

²⁴ National Liberation Army.

²⁵ Presidency of the Republic. Speech. Available at: <https://petro.presidencia.gov.co/prensa/Paginas/He-autorizado-restituir-los-protocolos-permitir-negociadores-reconexion-y-s-220820.aspx>

²⁶ Car bomb attack at police school in Bogotá leaves more than 20 dead. 18/1/2019. Available at: https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/01/17/colombia/1547737781_816877.html

The figure of the new foreign minister, the conservative Álvaro Leiva, a fierce defender of the peace processes, could play a key role in these projects, which may have three management channels. First, the resumption of talks with the ELN²⁷ - a very different guerrilla group in structural terms compared to the former FARC guerrilla group - which have been at a standstill since 2018, is proposed for the purpose of ending the conflict. The ELN peace talks delegation spent four years in Cuba, as the previous government forbade them to return to Colombia.

This move was announced on 4 October by Antonio García, the first commander of this guerrilla group, and Danilo Rueda, Colombia's High Commissioner for Peace. At a meeting in Venezuela, the two delegations set the first week of November to resume the agenda, "given the new political circumstances in Colombia"²⁸, with Venezuela, Cuba and Norway as guarantors of the talks.

Second, is the dismantling of the dissident groups that refused to sign the 2016 peace agreement, which are still active but with a more political imprint, closer to the FARC, and which maintain a relationship of relative camaraderie with the ELN, while counting on Venezuelan sponsorship²⁹. Notably, the largest FARC dissident group did propose a bilateral ceasefire to find a "political solution" to the conflict, according to a letter released to the media in early August. Thousands of dissidents continue to fight the ELN and powerful cartels for control of drug fields, illegal gold mines and lucrative smuggling routes. According to the Institute for Development and Peace Studies (Indepaz), there are 90 armed groups with some 10,000 active members in Colombia, the world's largest cocaine producer³⁰.

²⁷ Talks with the ELN will continue discreetly, according to Peace Commissioner Danilo Rueda. 23-08-2022. INFOBAE. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2022/08/24/las-conversaciones-con-el-eln-seguiran-de-forma-discreta-segun-danilo-rueda-comisionado-de-paz/>

²⁸ Petro's government and the ELN announce the resumption of peace talks from Venezuela. BBC News World. 4-10-22. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-63138827>

²⁹ CAIRO CAROU, Herberto and RÍOS SIERRA, Jerónimo. Spain and Colombia's total peace. 31/8/2022. Esglobal. Available at: <https://www.esglobal.org/espana-y-la-paz-total-de-colombia/>

³⁰ Armed groups. Institute for Development and Peace Studies. <http://indepaz.org.co/category/grupos-armados/>



Source: Institute for Development and Peace Studies (Indepaz).

Ultimately, then, there is the submission to the law of the armed narco-criminal groups, which are largely the heirs of paramilitarism and have no ideology. Among many others, the most dangerous is the so-called Clan del Golfo³¹, which operates in 211 municipalities in the country. In this case, it cannot have the same connotation as the guerrilla groups and will require a different type of negotiation, in which the figure of the defence minister is fundamental.

This marks the opening of a political opportunity for all the different elements to come together in meeting. The ELN has found a government that is receptive to its negotiating intentions, and the other organised armed groups know that they must take advantage of the strategic moment to negotiate their submission under the best possible terms, making the most of the climate of euphoria and enthusiasm of public opinion.

The government also understands this relationship between peace and alternative development, and if it is to pursue the energy transition, this will mean not receiving a large number of resources from oil and mineral extraction. Alternatively, it needs to rely

³¹ Clan del Golfo is the largest illegal armed structure in Colombia: Peace and Reconciliation Foundation. 15/9/2020. The Spectator. Available at: <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia/mas-regiones/clan-del-golfo-es-la-estructura-armada-ilegal-mas-grande-de-colombia-fundacion-paz-y-reconciliacion-articulo/>

on industry, especially tourism, and for this sector to develop there has to be what Petro calls total peace. All actors involved in this game have their own interests and all stand to gain something; and in the end the whole country will benefit.

Petro is not only aware that the fight against drugs has so far failed, but he is also aware of the need to have a fluid dialogue with the US on this issue and with affected neighbouring countries, precisely because these criminal groups have already become transnational, penetrating Ecuador, Costa Rica and Mexico, which are themselves immersed in all these drug trafficking chains. This harks to the principle of co-responsibility, so that not all the negative part of the whole falls to Colombia to deal with, but demanding that consumer countries also take action. The president, since his time as senator of the Republic and in all his statements, has clearly opposed fumigation, opting for the manual and voluntary substitution of illicit crops. This is why dialogue with the US is crucial, and at least in the months since his election until the present it has been much more fluid than it was in the four years under Iván Duque. It would appear that the first steps are much firmer than those previously taken.

The Pacific corridor is one of the most important drug trafficking routes in Colombia, where several criminal organisations operate. This is the route they use to smuggle cocaine to Central America and distribute it to the rest of the world. At the ocean's edge, fishing, illegal mining and coca have become the economic engines. Many grow illicit crops simply because it is the only way to guarantee a living. Twenty years ago, they used to plant rice, cassava and bananas, but the imposition of certified seeds put an end to the subsistence economy.

Ownership of land and what can be grown on it remains a source of conflict and violence. Colombia is the world's largest producer of cocaine. In departments like Cauca and Nariño, large illegal plantations are hidden, displacing traditional crops and putting the subsistence economy at risk.

The signing of the peace accords with the FARC in 2016 included the government's commitment to replace these crops, leading to some farmers abandoning coca but later returning to this cultivation when they realised that the promised investment was not going to arrive.

Historically, governments have paid little attention to the needs of the region. Extreme poverty is common and formal state institutions are absent. Where bodies such as Afro-

Colombian community councils and indigenous “resguardos” once filled the vacuum by providing authority, social welfare and conflict resolution, illegal armed groups now occupy this space. Between 1985 and September 2017, nearly 7.6 million people were internally displaced, the highest total in the world. A "governance gap" exists when legitimate authorities are unable to enforce their rules or provide services to communities to meet their basic needs or demands. When other actors fill these gaps, a "hybrid political order" is created³².

At the moment, Petro's promise to end the cycles of violence seems to be an insurmountable task. According to authorities, on 2 September, an explosion killed seven policemen on their way to a social welfare event in the southern Colombian department of Huila. An eighth officer was hospitalised with injuries³³.

International inclusion

On the issue of international relations, as mentioned earlier, we see a President Petro with a fluid relationship with the US. There is also the need to re-establish dialogue with Caracas, especially because of border activity and the number of Colombians and Venezuelans living on both sides of the border.

Much has been said about regional integration, about the integration of the left, through the predominance of like-minded presidents. However, right now we are seeing very different lefts in Latin America: a dictatorial left like Daniel Ortega's, rigid with the media, persecuting the church; the same Cuba and Venezuela, as if in a limbo whose direction is entirely unknown, those that once promoted the old project dreamed of by Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro to advance in the joint construction of "Cubazuela", or "Venecuba". Together, these three countries now form the authoritarian and pro-Russian core of Latin America.

It will be a very different new left that will oppose this trio; some even call it social democratic, although the Puebla Group prefers to talk about progressivism. This group includes Chile's Gabriel Boric and even Colombia's Gustavo Petro. But there are also

³² Boege, V., Brown, M. A., & Clements, K. P. "Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States", *Peace Review*, Vol. Issue 21 1, 2009, pp. 13-21.

³³ GLATSKY, Genevieve. "Explosion Kills 7 Police Officers in Colombia". 2-09-22 En: *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/world/americas/colombia-police-attack.html>

groups that include, albeit with a high dose of voluntarism, Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador, much more of a socialist than a democrat; Peru's Pedro Castillo, a well-known Marxist, a Leninist Mariateguista; and Argentina's Alberto Fernández, a profoundly militant Peronist.

While Petro's interest in rescuing the sense of regional integration has always been palpable, today he may not be interested in being its standard-bearer while clearly still aware that it is fundamental. Meanwhile, his new left-integrationist leadership clashes with a complex reality,

It is still too early to know what regional direction his administration will take and with whom he will have more fluid contact, or even what he will want to do with the OAS and CELAC.

US-Colombia relations are likely to remain positive under Petro³⁴. The president's approval of the use of eight South Carolina National Guard F-16s to operate in Colombia, despite Venezuela's possible disgruntlement, could be an indication of Petro's interest in maintaining balance in the relationship. However, the focus of the Colombia-US relationship is likely to gradually shift from counter-narcotics and security cooperation to other areas such as the environment, and projects to strengthen communities, justice and development in Colombia's countryside.

Special attention should be paid to diplomatic relations with Venezuela, the now President Petro having already announced in his campaign that he would resume them, as has been the case. While Duque previously accused Maduro of infiltrating Colombia by financing Colombian guerrillas against the government, Petro has now done exactly the opposite, giving Maduro or Venezuela the role of guarantor of the peace process. Confined to the past are the recognition of Juan Guaidó³⁵, the president of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, as the real president of Venezuela, in line with the then

³⁴ Colombia's President-Elect Petro Meets With Biden Delegation, Reuters .U.S. News & World Report. 22 -07-22: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-07-22/colombias-president-elect-petro-meets-with-biden-delegation>

³⁵ The White House 45 Archived (@ Whitehous45) 23-01-19. <https://twitter.com/whitehouse45/status/1088136422320689152?s=46&t=QgSIs288grnI9ZlwaQGJnw>

occupant of the White House, Donald Trump; the withdrawal of the Colombian ambassador; and the total severance of relations with Venezuela on 23 February 2019³⁶.

As soon as he came to power, Petro appointed one of his most trusted collaborators, Armando Benedetti, as ambassador to the neighbouring country. This was the initial gesture, and Maduro personally received Benedetti.

Some analysts see this as an opportunity for Petro to be a possible interlocutor with Washington, who is also quietly trying to rebuild relations with Maduro because of the need for oil as the Russian war in Ukraine drags on. Could this be a point of union between the old left and the new left in terms of democratisation? Naturally, in some way this whole process breaks with the isolation that Venezuela has experienced in the continent in recent years and shows us a stronger Maduro than in recent times.

A first step has been the reestablishment of trade relations between the two countries, with the opening of the border on 26 September³⁷, the trucks carrying different products crossing the Simón Bolívar International Bridge a sign of the reestablishment of relations. However, this total, absolute and free opening of the entire border between Colombia and Venezuela is fraught with sensitive issues, including security, in an area where guerrilla groups and groups linked to drug trafficking operate.

Some Colombians are wary of Petro; if realism becomes appeasement, Petro risks rekindling these fears and losing his audience³⁸. While a revival of trade will be welcome, it is incumbent on the new president to tread carefully across the border. Notably, while his inauguration was underway, the first demonstration against his government was also taking place, with thousands of people marching through the streets of the country's main cities to protest against economic and political reforms.

³⁶ Colombia and Venezuela: the key moments of a tumultuous relationship that is now resuming. 29-08-2022. BBC News World. Available at: <https://www.elimparcial.com/mundo/Colombia-y-Venezuela-los-momentos-clave-de-una-relacion-tumultuosa-que-ahora-se-reanuda-20220829-0096.html>

³⁷ Gustavo Petro (@ petrogustavo) 9-09-22
<https://twitter.com/petrogustavo/status/1568239842470887431?s=46&t=QgSIs288grnI9ZlwaQGJnw>

³⁸ Colombian President Gustavo Petro seems to be increasingly comfortable with Venezuela's controversial leaders. 18/9/2022. The Economist. Available at: <https://tn.com.ar/internacional/2022/09/18/el-presidente-colombiano-gustavo-petro-parece-estar-cada-vez-mas-comodo-con-los-polemicos-lideres-de-venezuela/>

Conclusions

Gustavo Petro has toned down his rhetoric, openly welcomed dialogue with opponents and proposed broad partnerships with multiple sectors, although his pitch will almost certainly change as his administration progresses.

The new occupant of Palacio de Nariño has already shown a conciliatory attitude, toning down his discourse on the understanding that 47% of the country has reservations and will likely strongly oppose him. This has been reflected in a number of appointments and in the curious invitation to meet with his greatest political rival, former president Álvaro Uribe, a conservative leader and staunch opponent of some of the new head of state's ideas.

While Petro certainly intends to govern for all, without disappointing those who voted for him, the truth is that he has many challenges ahead of him and there are very high expectations that obviously exceed what a government can do in four years.

Petro is unlikely to succeed on all fronts. A combination of political, economic and social factors will limit the scope of his actions and force him to compromise or significantly reduce his ambitions - uncharted territory considering Petro's political career as a Bogotá mayor and opposition politician.

What he must do, then, is seek fast and early victories to contain the frustrations that will be generated by the impossibility of fulfilling a government programme that is wholeheartedly ambitious and beyond its control. If he does not achieve the tax reform, if he does not improve the conditions of the global economy, there will be a whole host of promises in his programme that he will not be able to deliver and that will generate huge disappointments. Some early victories in these first months will be fundamental for Petro to set a course and a roadmap that will allow him to oxygenate his government for four years, which will be no mean feat for the country and for his politics.

Let us bear in mind that Petro's approval rating has dropped 10 points after just two months as president, according to a poll conducted by pollster Invamer and published by 'El Tiempo'³⁹.

³⁹ Petro's approval rating drops 10 points after two months as Colombian president. NEWS 360. Available at: <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/petro-s-approval-rating-drops-10-points-after-two-months-as-colombian-president/ar-AA13affY>

Nonetheless, it was Colombians themselves who opted for the profound change that Petro represents and although it will not be easy, given that he has all the power of the system against him, the country has begun a new era in which many are waiting to see how he makes the structural transformation he promises come to pass.

Four years lie ahead in which negotiations and policies of subjugation with illegal armed groups, tax reform and the fight against the climate emergency will also be major challenges for the first left-wing president in Colombia's history.

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