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## Colombia Tries a Transformative Left Turn

WILL FREEMAN

In June 2022, Gustavo Petro made his final campaign speech from behind a wall of bullet-proof shields—an unusual precaution for a presidential frontrunner in Latin America, but normal protocol for a leftist candidate in Colombia. The fates of several of Petro’s predecessors show why: liberal reformer Rafael Uribe Uribe, cut down by axe-wielding assassins in 1914; left-populist Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, fatally shot in 1948 after becoming the favorite to win the presidency; and leftists Carlos Pizarro Leongómez and Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, both gunned down while running for president in 1990.

Petro’s bid for Colombia’s highest office ended differently. On June 19, he became the country’s first leftist elected president in decades, after narrowly winning a runoff. His running mate, Afro-Colombian environmental activist Francia Márquez, also made history by becoming Colombia’s first Black vice president. Politicians on the right quickly laid fears of postelection disputes to rest by recognizing Petro’s win, and a peaceful transfer of power ensued.

Nothing about Petro and Márquez’s victory was preordained. While most of South America turned left in the early 2000s, Colombia remained a right-of-center island. Assassinations of thousands of trade unionists and peasant leaders by right-wing paramilitaries throughout the 1980s and 1990s disintegrated networks that might otherwise have undergirded a strong leftist party at the national level. Right-wing populist Álvaro Uribe concentrated power during his 2002–10 presidency and loomed large over national politics afterward, backing successors Juan Manuel Santos, who first won the presidency in 2010, and Iván Duque, who held the office from 2018 to 2022.

There was also a stigma attached to running as a leftist in a country long terrorized by left-wing insurgencies. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which officially demobilized with the signing of the 2016 Peace Accord, had a brutal record of kidnapping and killing civilians and forcibly recruiting child soldiers. A sector of Colombian society saw left-wing parties and candidates as guilty by association, even when they disavowed violence.

Last but not least, family dynasties dominated politics in many rural areas and in small and medium-sized cities. Their vote-buying machines were often decisive in national elections—support that came at the price of government pork-barrel spending, which leftists, almost perpetually in opposition, had limited ability to offer. Colombia had an almost unbroken record of holding democratic elections, but the deck was stacked against the left.

In 2022, several forces combined to weaken Colombia’s historically strong political establishment and create an unprecedented opening for the left. Like the rest of Latin America, Colombia was swept by a wave of anti-incumbent fervor. As the slow growth of the mid- to late 2010s became the new normal and opportunities for upward mobility dwindled, Colombians—like Brazilians, Chileans, and others—blamed their government. A high debt burden constrained the state’s ability to provide adequate social services. Then COVID-19 hit, exacting a staggering human and economic toll. Millions slipped back into poverty, and unemployment and inflation hit multiyear highs.

Incumbent parties have lost the last 15 consecutive presidential elections in Latin America. By electing Petro, Colombians joined the trend. But the left’s win was not attributable only to outrage at incumbents. It was also fueled by three longer-term developments: the downfall of Uribe’s movement, *Uribismo*, as Colombia’s dominant political

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force; Petro's construction of a new coalition uniting leftist outsiders with some of the wildest operators in traditional politics; and the waning influence of regional political machines on national elections. These developments set the 2022 election apart from earlier contests. The orthodoxies that had defined Colombian politics since Uribe's first election in 2002 were gone, opening a new era of uncertainty.

The victory of Petro and Márquez owed just as much to their bold vision of change. They promised to lead the country through a dual transition: from the status quo of simmering violence to a state of "total peace," and from an economy dependent on fossil fuels and the illicit drug trade to one grounded in green energy and sustainable development. In its first hundred days, their new government took ambitious steps toward implementing total peace and passed a major tax reform. But Petro's broader economic agenda faced mounting obstacles. Rising inflation, Colombia's costly foreign debt, and the looming prospect of a global recession threatened to undermine his boldest plans.

Achieving the dual transformation of Colombia's security situation and economy would never have been easy; 2022 turned out to be a particularly difficult year to start. Still, the fact that Colombia inaugurated a leftist president without major disturbances or bloodshed was a remarkable milestone. The country long referred to as Latin America's oldest democracy had at last displayed political inclusion worthy of that name.

## ADIOS, URIBISMO

Not long ago, it was unthinkable that Uribe would find himself on the sidelines of a national election. During his two terms as president, the former governor of Antioquia cut Colombia's homicide rate in half, demobilized most of the right-wing paramilitaries, and oversaw the armed forces' success in reclaiming large swaths of territory from the FARC. His ascendancy rendered Colombia's centuries-old two-party system obsolete and etched a new dividing line into the political landscape: Uribistas versus the anti-Uribista opposition.

The opposition could point to a series of chilling human rights abuses and antidemocratic maneuvers by Uribe. But many Colombians

regarded Uribe as a hero for restoring a semblance of order. His approval rating never dipped below 65 percent during his two terms, and often climbed into the 70s and 80s. Even after a falling-out with his successor, Santos, whom he had originally backed, Uribe remained a political heavyweight. His Democratic Center became one of the largest parties in Congress.

Ironically, the victory of an Uribista candidate in the 2018 presidential election marked the beginning of the end. Iván Duque, a one-term senator backed by Uribe, comfortably beat Petro, a former rebel whose radical past instilled fear in many voters. Once in office, however, Duque quickly proved he was no Uribe 2.0. Founders of personalist movements often struggle to find successors who match their charismatic appeal and political acumen; sometimes they deliberately choose lackluster protégés for fear of being upstaged. Duque, relatively new to politics when he took office, fit this profile exactly.

From Santos, Duque inherited a sound economy, relative political stability, and most importantly, the 2016 Peace Accord—an ambitious set of commitments to reincorporate ex-FARC rebels, implement rural land reform, and extend state services across Colombia's neglected peripheries. These inherited advantages did not last long. Whether by incompetence or design, implementation of the Peace Accord—which Duque and Uribe had fervently opposed—stalled. Paramilitary successor groups, FARC dissidents, and local mafias battled for control of drug trafficking routes left behind by the FARC. Violence surged. On the eve of the 2022 elections, the homicide rate had rebounded to levels not seen since before the accord was signed.

The economy also fared poorly. The national debt climbed from 40 to 60 percent of gross domestic product during Duque's first three years in office as a result of pandemic spending and insufficient tax revenue. The peso lost a third of its value.

It was only a matter of time before political stability slipped away, too. Young people, the middle class, and social movements from Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities took to the streets in unprecedented numbers to denounce inequality, violence, and overburdened public services. Mass protests flared up in successive waves

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from 2019 to 2021. Though many protesters participated peacefully, others attacked police and destroyed property. The Duque government responded by dispatching the feared riot police. Dozens of protesters were killed, tortured, sexually assaulted, or disappeared. Uribismo had built its brand as a force for security and order, but under Duque, Colombians had neither.

By the time the 2022 presidential campaign began, the writing was on the wall: Uribismo, the force that had dominated electoral competition for a generation, was on its way out. Uribe first backed Óscar Iván Zuluaga, his own party's candidate, and then shifted his support to center-right contender Fico Gutiérrez. But Fico's poll numbers dropped after Uribe endorsed him.

The contender who advanced to the runoff with Petro was neither an Uribista nor part of right-wing establishment politics. Instead, Rodolfo Hernández was a right-leaning populist who decried the political class and promised to build a government of politically independent businesspeople. The fact that Hernández, a 77-year-old political outsider, had claimed the mantle of the Colombian right was a sign of just how far Uribismo and the center-right establishment had fallen. A new period of electoral uncertainty had begun.

## PETRO'S REALPOLITIK

Petro took advantage of this moment. When Uribismo ruled the day, his profile as a leftist iconoclast was a liability. But as Colombians grew increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo, it became an asset.

As a young man, Petro had participated in the urban AD-M19 insurgency. After demobilizing with the rebel group in 1990, he built a political career in Congress, exposing the abuses of the Uribe government and its ties with right-wing paramilitaries. He served a polarizing term as mayor of Bogotá from 2012 to 2015. But his rebel past seemed to put an unmovable ceiling on his electoral aspirations; both times Petro ran for president, in 2010 and 2018, he lost badly. His coalition—a motley crew of small center-left and left parties—was not up to the task, and his flirtation with radicalism scared away moderate voters.

As Petro took to the campaign trail in 2021, he made a strategic about-face. First, he swapped out bromides against the political class for a new message: “the politics of love.” Now all were welcome in his coalition, even former rivals. Instead of

upending Colombia's market-based economy, Petro committed to “developing capitalism in Colombia,” although he vowed to do so by replacing fossil fuels with renewables and catalyzing green development. He also called for a national dialogue between the state and Colombia's myriad armed groups to chart a path toward “total peace.” Petro's newfound moderation and mellow tone counteracted his reputation for divisiveness and broadened his base of support.

To match his new inclusive message, Petro built a campaign team of seasoned establishment operators—two of them under investigation by Colombia's Supreme Court for corruption. Roy Barreras, a former Senate president and close ally of Uribe and later Santos, brought years of experience negotiating tough deals, including the 2016 Peace Accord. Armando Benedetti, another senator who had once been close to Uribe and Santos, became Petro's campaign manager. Even some Conservative party politicians with paramilitary ties expressed support for Petro. The resulting coalition made for strange bedfellows as Petro's party-movement, Colombia Humana, continued to attract the support of constituencies long excluded from traditional politics, including rural social leaders, environmentalists, and Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

The pairing of establishment insiders and social movement outsiders behind a leftist presidential candidate was not unusual in the region. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva first won Brazil's presidency in 2002 by peeling off a sector of the center-right establishment and welding it onto his social movement base; he repeated that successful strategy in 2022. After several failed bids for Mexico's presidency, Andrés Manuel López Obrador won the 2018 election with help from conservative politicians and evangelicals. Petro's pragmatic alliances similarly produced a winning coalition. Even flanked by establishment allies, Petro and Márquez still represented the forces of change for many Colombians.

## MACHINES OUT OF GAS

Uribismo's fall from grace and Petro's realpolitik created an opening for the left, but no guarantees. There was still another force that might have acted as a backstop for the center-right and conservative establishment: dozens of regional family dynasties, or clans. Powerful clans have been a constant throughout Colombian history, keeping control over local fiefdoms through such seismic

changes as the collapse of the traditional party system and decentralization. They provided center-right and conservative national politicians with votes in return for public money to fuel their political machines. These relations between local and national power historically limited chances for political outsiders, including leftists, to win office.

Take the example of the Char family: Colombia's most powerful clan, often referred to as the "owners" of the Caribbean coast. The Char have governed Barranquilla, Colombia's fourth-largest city and its major Caribbean port, for nearly two decades. By exploiting Barranquilla's poverty, the family built a vote-buying machine capable of supplying hundreds of thousands of votes to candidates in national elections. Rather than tie themselves down to any one party, they migrated from one power center to another, aligning first with Uribe and later with Santos. In 2014, the support of the Char and other coastal clans was critical to Santos's winning bid for a second term. Meanwhile, the Char's political power and business empire kept growing.

The Char and other family dynasties had little interest in seeing the status quo overturned, but they failed to block Petro's rise. Clans were accustomed to operating under conditions of predictability; the 2022 election season was uncertain and fluid. When no center-right or conservative frontrunner emerged, clans adopted a wait-and-see approach rather than pool their support behind any one candidate. Then it became clear that Petro's second-round challenger would be Hernández, a political outsider who had challenged his region's dominant clan. The Char and other clans halfheartedly announced support for Hernández at the last minute, but it was too late.

National elections, unlike local ones, did not put clans' political survival at stake. In 2022, their vote-buying machines remained on the sidelines. But there were other signs that the clans' grip on local politics might finally be loosening. In 2019, outsider candidates running on anticorruption platforms and shoestring budgets wrested control of city halls from clans in Cartagena and Cúcuta. The spread of smartphones also made it easier to expose vote buying and election day fraud. Colombia's new era of political change extended down to the local level.

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## A DOABLE DUAL TRANSITION?

Petro and Márquez's call for Colombia to undergo a dual transition resonated on the campaign trail, though they were rarely specific about how they planned to navigate from organized crime-fueled violence to "total peace," and from an economy dependent on fossil fuel and illicit drugs to one powered by sustainable development. A conventional approach to fighting organized crime, focused on eliminating kingpins, had failed to arrest rising violence not only in Colombia, but across Latin America. Slowing economic growth in the wake of the 2000s commodity boom revealed the shortcomings of natural resource dependence. Illegal logging and mining boomed in territories vacated by the FARC after 2016, adding to the urgency of addressing the climate crisis.

Petro and Márquez's vision made a contrast with *mano dura* (firm hand) security policies and extractive development models embraced by Latin American governments of the left and right alike in the 2000s and 2010s. Some among the wave of center-left and leftist governments that swept into

power across the region in the early 2020s harkened back to twentieth-century models. Petro and Márquez offered a forward-looking agenda.

Achieving either transition—let alone both—would require unprecedented, sustained political will. At Petro's inauguration on August 8, and for weeks afterward, the outlook was promising. Although Colombia Humana had won just a plurality of seats in the Senate and a smaller share in the House of Representatives, Barreras, the new Congress president, negotiated commanding pro-government majorities in both chambers. By the end of August, 64 percent of Colombians approved of Petro, creating a bandwagon effect.

Meanwhile, the intense right-wing opposition that many believed would emerge in the wake of Petro's win never materialized. Out of hundreds of senators and members of the lower chamber, just over two dozen joined the opposition. Even Uribe seemed uninterested in leading the anti-Petro charge. "The first one who has to cure himself of Uribismo is me," he told interviewers—a stunning rebuke of his own movement.

Petro's cabinet reflected his heterogeneous campaign coalition. For defense minister, he chose human rights lawyer Iván Velásquez, sending

a clear signal to top brass—Velásquez was famous for investigating right-wing paramilitaries' ties to the state. But as finance minister, Petro named a moderate—José Antonio Ocampo, a center-left economist with previous ministerial experience—which reassured foreign investors. The choices gave an early indication of Petro's priorities.

## PEACE MOVES

To chart a path toward total peace, the new government proposed holding simultaneous dialogues with armed groups and criminal organizations. These groups included the National Liberation Army (ELN)—a Cuban-inspired insurgency founded in the 1960s that maintains approximately 4,000 fighters in strongholds on the Pacific coast and the Venezuelan border—and FARC dissidents who rejected the 2016 Peace Accord. The Gulf Clan, Colombia's largest criminal group and successor to its right-wing paramilitaries, was also invited, as were dozens of smaller regional mafias and narco-trafficking groups operating across the country.

At a minimum, the government said, it would require these groups to ask for pardons from society, observe a cease-fire, and cooperate with the justice system. In exchange, it would suspend arrest warrants and extradition orders for those who complied. Representatives of the ELN, who had not met with state officials since the group ordered a deadly Bogotá car bombing in 2019, returned to the negotiating table. The government's peace commissioner, Danilo Rueda, announced in late September that 10 groups, including the Gulf Clan and FARC dissident factions, had ordered a unilateral cease-fire to signal their willingness to join the talks.

The Petro administration also moved aggressively to counteract potential sources of resistance within the state, purging more than half of Colombia's military generals and police commanders—many of whom had criticized the negotiations—in just six weeks. In August, the government asked Venezuela to act as a guarantor to talks with the ELN and restored diplomatic ties with autocratic President Nicolás Maduro, which had been ruptured since 2019. Though ideology may have partly driven this outreach to a fellow leftist, pragmatism played a role, too: the ELN and other armed groups rely on bases and drug trade routes inside Venezuelan territory. The Petro government argued that this made it necessary to have Maduro

at the table, though the move drew criticism from Venezuela's democratic opposition.

In October, Congress passed the Total Peace Law, creating a legal framework for the state to suspend sentences and extraditions if leaders of armed and criminal groups hand over illicit goods and information on criminal activities. In November, an eclectic team of negotiators chosen by the government—including leftists, members of the military, and a right-wing representative of ranchers and landowners—formally opened a dialogue with representatives of the ELN in Caracas. But the ELN is a federated organization, so even if the leaders taking part in the talks strike a peace deal with the government, it is unclear how they would get the group's factions dispersed across Colombia to comply.

By Petro's hundredth day in office, continued violence cast doubt on several of the participating groups' commitment to total peace. Contrary to the government's claims that the Gulf Clan and FARC dissidents had put down their weapons, reporters across the country uncovered grisly tales of new assassinations and disappearances. In September, a bomb planted by FARC dissidents killed six police officers in the southeast. In late October, the Gulf Clan announced a plan to assassinate mayors, social leaders, and military officials in central Colombia.

In 2021, coca cultivation in Colombia hit a record high, and groups including the Gulf Clan and FARC dissidents reaped huge profits. Whether they would dismantle their criminal fiefdoms in return for more lenient treatment by the state—and what would become of Colombia's booming illicit economies if they did—remained open questions.

## ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS

While Petro's security agenda moved forward in his first months in office, the other half of the dual transition—the shift to a green economy—was bogged down by obstacles. Petro introduced a tax reform bill that would increase levies on oil and coal companies, as well as on wealthy individuals. Although the reform drew staunch opposition from business lobbies, a modified version passed both houses of Congress by wide margins in November. Still, it remained uncertain how Petro would finance his most ambitious plans—including a transfer of vast tracts of rural land to small farmers—without ballooning public debt.

Meanwhile, the constraints Petro inherited from his predecessor—a depreciating peso, high debt, and slow growth—only tightened. Investors nervous about increased taxes on gas, oil, and coal dumped government bonds, sending the peso plummeting. From late June to late October, the currency lost 19 percent of its value, posting record-setting lows against the US dollar. Inflation climbed to 11.4 percent, a two-decade high, and was predicted to continue rising through 2023.

The high debt burden also threatened to hamstring Petro's spending plans. Even with the tax reform in place, projected to increase state revenue by 1.2 percent, economists estimate that the budget deficit will grow considerably in 2023, to 7.3 percent of gross domestic product, from 5.8 percent in 2022. Debt service, which already consumed one-third of government revenue, was set to become even more costly as the US Federal Reserve hiked interest rates, since more than 30 percent of Colombia's public debt is denominated in dollars.

The combination of high inflation, slow growth, and unprecedented depreciation of the peso took a toll. In October, inflation became Colombians' top concern, according to public opinion polls. In response to these constraints, Petro and his government sent mixed messages, exposing latent rifts.

Petro criticized rate hikes by Colombia's central bank and proposed a tax on transnational capital flows as an anti-inflationary measure. But Ocampo, the relatively orthodox finance minister, swore such a tax would not happen. When Deputy Minister of Mines and Energy Irene Vélez insisted that the government would not sign new contracts for oil exploration and gas fracking, Ocampo once again pushed back, and official policy in this area remained murky.

By the end of the year, it was uncertain which Petro Colombians had elected: the conciliatory moderate from the 2022 campaign trail, or the anti-establishment firebrand from years past. The stakes were high. The government's vision of total peace was premised on creating alternative livelihoods for those engaged in the illicit drug trade and organized crime. But doing so would require

fiscal stability and growth. Under Duque, both started to slip away, and the situation only seemed to deteriorate in Petro's first hundred days.

## A TEST FOR DEMOCRACY

Colombia is one of Latin America's longest-standing democracies, but it has not been one of its most inclusive. Informal barriers to genuinely free and fair competition at different points in time have limited Colombian democracy's potential. When one set of informal barriers disappeared, another seemed to take its place: collusive power-sharing by traditional parties gave way to paramilitary violence; local party bosses were succeeded by political machines for hire. Over time, these barriers eased, but center-right and conservative parties remained the protagonists while leftists were consigned to minor roles. Colombian politics seemed slow to change.

The 2022 election proved otherwise. In fact, much had changed in a brief period: Uribismo and regional machines had started to fade from the national political scene, while new forces—Petro and Márquez's green leftism and Hernández's outsider right-wing populism—emerged to take their place. A period of electoral fluidity and uncertainty appeared to have begun.

Many had doubted that a leftist candidate could reach the home stretch of a national election without triggering polarizing political instability—or worse, violence. Fortunately, neither occurred, and Colombia's democratic institutions passed the test.

What comes next will be as, or even more, decisive. If Petro's dual transition derails, the country could end up back where it started—only with less macroeconomic stability, less foreign investment, and possibly more severe violence. But a dual transition done right would put Colombian democracy on new and stronger footing, and could position the country as a regional or international model for green development and peacebuilding.

The start of Petro's presidency marked the end of a long period of predictability in Colombian politics. Time will tell if the change was for better or worse. ■