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Colombia

“Surprise” election result poses new challenges for the left in Colombia

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The clashes over the next 20 days on the streets, in workplaces and on social media in Colombia will determine not only the name of the country’s new president – between a neo-fascist and a progressive – but also, to a large extent, the balance of power in South America. The Colombian presidential elections, with a second round on 21 June, are a precursor to the Brazilian elections in November and are of central importance to the construction of Trump’s “shield” on the continent.

Bogotá – Having rooted for the candidate to succeed Gustavo Petro, most left-wing and democratic Latin Americans were unlikely to have been exactly surprised by the meteoric rise, in the final weeks of the presidential campaign, of a Milei-style candidate in Colombia. The libertarian lawyer Abelardo de Espriella rose rapidly and reached the second round ahead of Ivan Cepeda, the reserved and meticulous university philosophy lecturer and human rights defender, chosen by Petro’s Pacto Histórico [1] for a second term of local progressivism. Abelardo, nicknamed El Tigre, secured 43.72% of the vote against Cepeda’s 40.92% (a difference of 600,000 votes). [2] Paloma Valencia, an aristocrat and granddaughter of a former president and a follower of Álvaro Uribe, secured 6.9%, compared to the 15% indicated by the initial polls; in other words, the CD was run over by El Tigre’s tank.

After all, neither Colombia nor any other country among the 35 in Latin America and the Caribbean is immune to the wave of the international neo-fascist far right. Although the country’s history attests to a real political space for the right, until yesterday occupied by the Democratic Centre of former President Álvaro Uribe (which was never centre-right to begin with), Abelardo’s achievement can be explained by the current regional and global climate. It was built on a foundation of widespread support from bourgeois-oligarchic factions (agribusiness, the financial market, big business and platforms) which swiftly replaced the CD’s candidate, Paloma Valencia, with Espriella as their darling. The Colombian Milei was aided by the support of Trump and the entire far-right in power across the region; the deluge of fake news – largely originating from the US and the Spanish state [3] – blatant lies about Petro and Cepeda and their links to the guerrillas and organized crime, in a country where regulation of social media is virtually non-existent. Rounding off Abelardo’s perfect storm is the hiring of a political marketing firm – the very same one that worked for Pablo Marçal, the extremist coach who almost won the São Paulo’s mayoral election in 2024 – and the planned manipulation of Colombia’s (at the very least) fragile electoral system.

To understand the gravity of the war of narratives and lies in Colombia, one must remember that the country endured six decades of civil war [4], with 450,000 dead, 121,000 missing and 7.7 million internally displaced persons, countless bomb attacks in cities, against authorities and civilians, as well as the kidnappings and murders of politicians. In 2016, an agreement was signed between the government and the FARC for the disarmament and reintegration of guerrilla fighters into civilian life. Petro’s government and the Historic Pact advocate the policy of ‘Total Peace’, through which they seek dialogue with the remaining guerrilla group, the ENL, and even criminal armed groups willing to lay down their arms. This policy is vehemently opposed by the traditional right-wing CD, the agricultural sector and the urban middle class. Espriella skilfully manipulated these sectors, accusing Petro and Cepeda of being bloodthirsty guerrillas and friends of drug traffickers.

A semi-private electoral system

The Colombian electoral system rests on a three-pronged foundation. There is no Electoral Court, but rather a National Electoral Council (CNE) composed of nine members appointed by parliament, with quotas filled through complex mathematical calculations that give the CNE a majority to whoever holds a majority in the legislature. The

CNE is linked to a ‘Registrar’s Office’, which functions as a large civil and electoral registry office – only those who are registered can vote. The method of vote counting constitutes the third and most questionable leg of the tripod: the counting of the approximately 120,000 ballot boxes is done manually, box by box, with party observers present. However, once the ballot box results have to be processed by district, department (state) and nationally, the tally is carried out by a private Colombian security firm, Thomas Greg & Sons, which does not disclose the source code for the count and therefore does not allow for verification.

It is therefore not surprising that Gustavo Petro questioned the results on 31 May itself and is set to press ahead with his allegations of irregularities on the evening of Tuesday 2 June. This comes amid reports that Espriella had co-opted company employees and staff from the Electoral Registry (as well as members of the police and the Armed Forces). According to the president’s posts, there were 800,000 votes for the neo-fascist candidate that could not be verified. Cepeda and the campaign coordination team, however, decided on Monday 1 June to endorse the result, so as not to bring the process to a standstill, as explained by leaders of the Historical Pact. This contradiction between Petro and Cepeda’s campaign, which may reflect a rift between the two camps or a deliberate division of tasks, keeps the outlook for the second round in limbo.

A young progressive movement, with a grassroots base

Despite the surprise (given that Cepeda’s campaign had spoken of winning in the first round), the Historic Pact and its allies in the Alliance for Life (see composition below) achieved the best electoral result for the left in Colombia’s history, a higher percentage than that of Gustavo Petro in 2022 (Figure 1). The strength of this coalition of left-wing and centre-left groups and figures, alongside social movements, can be explained by the fact that they gained momentum and moved towards unity as a result of the pressure from the social uprisings of 2019 and 2021 – when the country, in parallel with the Chilean uprising, rebelled against the fiscal austerity policies of Ivan Duque’s (CD) government, his mishandling of the peace agreements with the FARC and ELN guerrillas, the murders of social leaders, and the repression of protesters. The movement weathered the pandemic and continued after lockdown, strengthening political figures and organizations identified with the protesters.

Gustavo Petro, leader of Colombia Humana, one of the constituent forces of the Historic Pact (Figure 2), won the presidential elections on that wave and characterized his government, like all progressive movements, by strictly constitutional action – that is, within the framework of the bourgeois-democratic regime – whilst at the same time distinguishing itself, compared to the governments of Lula, Boric, and Uruguay’s Frente Amplio, of calling for popular mobilization to approve policies considered central. This was the case with the 23% increase in the minimum wage by the end of 2025.

Despite advances in the social sphere, Petro governed with a parliamentary minority, which he largely circumvented by channelling significant portions of the national budget through projects submitted by Neighbourhood Councils (Juntas Vecinales) and their regional federations (for more on Colombian associativism, see the articles by the Brazilian historian Tamis Parron). Cepeda’s campaign, for its part, decided to capitalize on this tradition of associative organization, on a proactive policy-based campaign (without focusing on attacking opponents), on grassroots mobilization, and on the idea of a first-round victory (a debatable choice).

The impression remains, shared by international observers from left-wing parties of all stripes, that the campaign gave less importance than necessary to social media and to the very high likelihood of aggressive and widespread use of fake news and disinformation, most of it generated outside the country within a continental context of the Monroe Doctrine and the ‘Trump shield’. The campaign lacked a media defence hub for the candidate and the alliance’s program against Espriella’s falsehoods – something that would have been perfectly feasible, even with the

support of scientists and digital activists from across the region. Within the pact, there are many complaints, including from leaders, about the absence of lawyers and observers at all 120,000 polling stations.

Historic Pact becomes a party

In December 2024, the Pact decided to register as a political party and obtained legal recognition in mid-2025, with the unification of the legal entities of the Alternative Democratic Pole, the Patriotic Union-Communist Party and Human Colombia (led by Petro, Cepeda and Senator Gloria Flores). Also part of the Pact are the faction that emerged from the National Organisation of Indigenous Peoples of Colombia (ONIC), formerly known as the Alternative Indigenous and Social Movement (MAIS), the Democratic Unity (eco-socialist), the Colombian Labour Party (Maoist) and Todos Somos Colombia (a member of the Progressive International), as well as forces from feminism, environmentalism – which enjoys broad consensus on the local left – and the significant Palanquero Black movement (the Colombian name for rural communities made up of former unslaved [fugitive] Africans and Afrocolombian people).

Colombian progressivism is, therefore, a new force in the country, with just one presidential term under its belt and amid consolidating a unified political party that can provide a structure for the political project. Given this ‘youth’ – with even less experience than that of Mexico’s Morena, its counterpart in ‘late progressivism’, not to mention Lula’s PT, the Uruguayan Frente Amplio and Argentine Peronism, stems a certain reluctance towards direct confrontation – which Cepeda promises to overcome by challenging Espriella to a debate the day after the first round – and what appears to be an overconfidence in the institutions of the 1993 Constitution, as evidenced by the lack of questioning, prior to the results, of the extremely fragile electoral system.

The picture for the second round

Cepeda’s alliance was made up of forces beyond the Historic Pact: the indigenous movement, represented by the vice-presidential candidate, Aída Cilcuyé (of the Nasca people); the Green Alliance, a kind of Green Party; by Em Marcha, a party formed in 2018 by dissident liberals, by Claudia López (former mayor of Bogotá), by independent dissident liberals, and even, according to the unsuspecting (because very reactionary) local press, by sectors of the CD conservatives who were unhappy with Paloma Valencia. They all share a commitment to the country’s pacification following decades of armed conflict.

The battle for a left-wing victory in the second round will be no bed of roses, although the most experienced members of the Pact’s grassroots and leadership know that it is possible to get Cepeda into first place, provided that (1) the problems with vote monitoring are rectified and communication and legal work on social media and platforms is strengthened; (2) as Cepeda said on the very night of the first-round vote, it is necessary to remobilize young people so that they do not fail to vote, thereby reducing abstention – this is a genuine mobilization; and (3) if new key endorsements are secured. Cepeda will have to secure new votes from the traditional supporters of the centrist Sergio Fajardo (former mayor of Cali, who received 1 million votes in the 2025 candidacy poll), negotiate officially with the Liberal Party and even develop a strategy for sectors of the CD. Indeed, Paloma Valencia’s running mate, Juan Daniel Oviedo, has already declared that he neither supports nor will vote for Espriella.

The game is still on. The whole second and exciting half of the match is yet to come. Instead of making doomsday predictions, which portray the workers and the Colombian people who form the Pact’s base as defeated before the battle has even begun, the left across the continent and around the world would do well to offer some form of assistance, whether through physical presence or online work, to ensure the tide turns. Young people in Bogotá have

already begun to take to the streets.

2 June 2026

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[1] Colombian law prohibits re-election.

[2] The figures are from the Truth Commission and refer to the armed conflict that began in 1964 with the FARC guerrilla group. There have been numerous other civil wars in Colombia's history: nineteen conflicts between liberals and conservatives between 1812 and 1886; and the famous 'La Violencia', immortalised in the pages of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, between 1948 and 1958.

[3] According to research by the Pacto Histórico campaign.

[4] See all the reports on the heart of Colombia by Tamis Perron in Rosa Magazine: www.revistarosa.com.