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The race for Colombia's next president

In Colombia's presidential election, left-wing candidate Gustavo Petro is currently the frontrunner. But the liberal elite plays with dirty tricks

Is a new progressive wave about to wash over Latin America, following the electoral successes of Xiomara Castro in Honduras and Gabriel Boric in Chile? This year's presidential elections in Colombia and Brazil also garnered a great deal of international attention. For a long time, Colombia was a right-wing stronghold in Latin America. A victory for current frontrunner Gustavo Petro – a left-wing social democrat who consistently fights for broader coalitions – would make quite the statement in the traditionally conservative country. The region is in desperate need of a new progressive direction and a social-ecological awakening.

The results of the Colombian parliamentary election and the presidential primaries on 13 March were an initial test of strength. But it's all still to play for in the presidential election itself. The electoral campaign is like a mountain stage to Alpe d'Huez in the Tour de France. It's long, goes through many twists and turns, focuses on the captains, gives promising newcomers a chance to make their mark on the scene, and there is always an underlying suspicion of foul play. Since the primaries, it's been clear that the diverse left-wing alliance *Pacto Histórico* (Historic Pact) has put forward its candidate with the best prospects for the first round of the presidential election on 29 May. But nothing's certain yet, as similar wildcard candidates have stumbled at the last hurdle in the past.

Mobilising the youth

After decades as a senator, the 61-year-old Petro, who was also mayor of the capital city of Bogotá from 2012 to 2015, is now attempting to seize the reins of the country. He narrowly lost the last presidential election in 2018, but for this year's campaign Petro is deliberately appealing to a broad audience and is emphasising the inclusive nature of his coalition – in a similar approach to the Chilean government's. He's also not shying away from involving established politicians and their unsavoury

clientelist cliques. Even so, he is attempting to achieve something unheard of in Colombia: giving the diverse marginalised sections of society a voice within his political project.

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This voice is embodied in his vice-presidency candidate Francia Márquez, the first Afro-Colombian to take on this role. An activist and lawyer, she caused an upset in the primaries when she received, in total, the third-most votes of all candidates. Her constituents come from all social classes, but she has managed to win over a good portion of the younger generations. She epitomises the desire for rapid and radical change and immediate societal transformation. By nominating her, Gustavo Petro is attempting to mobilise the many young protesters and, especially, the large numbers of those who don't vote. It remains to be seen whether this will pay off.

The peace agreement with FARC, Latin America's oldest guerrilla group, has changed the political landscape of Colombia. Undoubtedly, the new Colombian parliament is benefitting from diversity, as more women, Afro-Colombians, members of the LGBTQI community, and indigenous people will now represent their country. For a start, 16 seats were allocated to victims from the regions that were particularly strongly impacted by armed conflict within the country. But the results turned out somewhat mixed since, besides respected human rights activists, this allowed people with close ties to paramilitaries and the cliques of the traditional parties a way into parliament in March. What effect this will have remains to be seen.

Colombia's power structure

Ultimately, the primaries have been followed by a precarious mix of continuity and change. Gustavo Petro is claiming victory for his coalition – and rightly so, for the most part. The *Pacto Histórico* received the most votes in the congressional election, with Petro personally receiving the most in the primary. However, the political left's campaign is only half the story; the Senate and the House of Representatives do not have a progressive majority. Although Petro is starting the presidential election wearing the yellow jersey, old clientelist power structures continue to have a firm grasp on Colombia's political system. So, even if Petro wins, radical change is unlikely due to Colombia's parliamentary make-up.

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The majorities in parliament will not make it easy to achieve the bold reforms that are so desperately needed to deal with Colombia's development crisis. The causes of the heavy social upheaval of 2021 have so far hardly been addressed. Poverty and social inequality have increased, not least throughout the pandemic, while rising food prices run the risk of malnutrition.

At the same time, the country is in serious debt, and the security situation has deteriorated significantly in many regions in the last few years. Threats, political violence, and murders of activists, human rights campaigners, and former FARC fighters are common in more remote regions. Moreover, there is police brutality, corruption scandals, and a reduced sense of trust among the population in most state institutions. The peace process, which was praised historically and internationally, has been eroded by the incumbent government and is now at a critical juncture.

This is a crucial election for Colombia. There could be a run-off between Gustavo Petro and right-wing conservative Federico 'Fico' Gutiérrez. Gutiérrez has the support of the right-wing *Centro Democrático*, the party of former president Alvaro Uribe and acting president Iván Duque. The two saw the most spectacular losses in the first round. However, it is not even certain that there will be any duel in the first place.

Right-wing populist candidate Rodolfo Hernández, who presents himself as a political outsider and fearless fighter of corruption, is also part of the peloton. The political centre, however, doesn't appear to have a chance. Its candidate, Sergio Fajardo, has been significantly weakened. He would need a miracle to make it into the runoff – in which, paradoxically, he would stand a good chance. Another candidate from the centre is Ingrid Betancourt, who gained a lot of international attention in 2002 when, as a presidential candidate, she was kidnapped by the FARC guerrilla group. She is the only female candidate but stands little to no chance.

Mounting challenges

Meanwhile, Colombia's liberal elite is putting up a fight against the left. Their campaign has been plagued with racism, sexism, and classism against Francia Marquez. Even Petro is constantly berated for his past as a member of a guerrilla organisation, despite not being active for over thirty years. A reluctance towards redistribution and the looming threat of losing some luxurious privileges are seemingly more important to the

established centre than the hope of a fairer and more peaceful future.

Furthermore, the Damocles sword of fraud hangs over the election. In addition to vote-buying and clientelism, the population's faith in state institutions during the most recent parliament election has been further rocked by the 'disappearance' of hundreds of thousands of votes – predominantly for left or centre parties – or votes that were only considered in recounts.

Even in terms of foreign policy, there are enormous challenges to overcome. Although foreign and security politics are, as expected, hardly being discussed in the run-up to the election, the country is going through a violent peace process. The geopolitical environment has become more challenging, too. Colombia is a partner country to NATO. Despite its repeated human rights violations committed by its military, the country has taken on a pioneering role in the military coalition.

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Its next-door neighbour Venezuela, on the other hand, has maintained close political, economic, and military ties with Russia and China for decades. The Colombian government broke its links with Venezuela for ideological reasons. Border conflicts are perpetually threatening to escalate. The fateful link between the two countries will require the next president to explore new avenues – and fast. In the last few years, Colombia has granted asylum to almost two million Venezuelan refugees. At the same time, Colombian guerrilla organisations are active in both countries. The only way to find a solution is through cooperation.

The coming weeks will be decisive in whether Gustavo Petro can convince the centre of his suitability as president. To this end, he is attempting to ride on the back of glory of Egan Bernal, the first Latin American winner of the Tour de France. Petro is keen to point out the fact that it was his local policies – in his younger years, shortly after his demobilisation from M19 – that built the first social programmes in Egan's hometown of Zipaquirá. He claims that these programmes allowed the superstar to begin a professional career in the sport in the first place. At least, Bernal didn't reject this statement. After a nasty accident, he is now on the road to a spectacular comeback. Perhaps soon, both Petro and Bernal will fight their way back into the spotlight and give some tailwind to the country that has experienced so much setback and trauma.



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