



What's at Stake in Colombia's Presidential Election: Building Peace, Reducing Poverty and Inequality

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Executive Summary

This paper looks at some of the most important issues that could be decided in Colombia's June 19 presidential election runoff. The vote is seen by many observers as potentially historic, in large part because it is the first time that a progressive candidate has a serious chance of winning the presidency.

Progressive candidate Gustavo Petro took a large lead in the first round of the elections with 40.3 percent of the vote, to 28.2 percent for second-place finisher Rodolfo Hernández. Hernández, a former mayor of the city of Bucaramanga, is generally described as a right-wing populist with an anti-establishment appeal to voters fed up with what they see as decades of terribly corrupt and ineffective government. He is currently very often likened to Donald Trump.¹

Hernández's political alliance, the League of Anti-Corruption Leaders (Liga de Gobernantes Anticorrupción) is relatively unknown, and there is much speculation about what he represents. Petro, by contrast, and his coalition — the Historic Pact (Pacto Histórico) — are widely known.

Colombia faces serious long-term socioeconomic problems that could form the basis of this rebellion at the ballot box that brought two “anti-establishment” candidates to the June 19 runoff. The country's GDP per capita, or roughly income per person, was about \$15,424 in 2019, before the pandemic. This is in the middle of the distribution for Latin American countries. But Colombia has much worse poverty and inequality than most of the region — and by some measures of inequality, all of the rest of the region. (See Table 3 below).

These failings were especially pronounced in 2020, when the pandemic and world recession hit. Despite having the same GDP per capita as Brazil, the two countries had vastly different levels of extreme poverty that year. Extreme poverty is defined by the World Bank as an income of less than \$1.90 per day.² As can be seen in Table 1, this difference in extreme poverty rates was so large that Colombia actually had many more people living in extreme

¹ See, e.g., Turkewitz, Julie. “Colombia's Trump May Be Headed for the Presidential Palace,” The New York Times, May 30, 2022.

² This is measured in purchasing power parity international dollars — see below for further explanation of how this is measured.



poverty in 2020 than Brazil did, despite the fact that Brazil has more than four times as many people.

Taking a longer period for this comparison, there is still a very large difference between Colombia and Brazil in extreme poverty rates. The annual average rate of extreme poverty for the years 2008–2020 was 6.4 percent for Colombia, and 4.1 percent in Brazil. This means that 56 percent more people (1.17 million) fell into extreme poverty in Colombia as compared to the number who would have done so if Colombia had the same rate of extreme poverty as Brazil.

Colombia also suffers substantially higher rates of extreme poverty than comparable countries such as Peru and Ecuador, whose income per person is significantly lower than that of Colombia.

Colombia also has very high levels of poverty by another measure of monetary poverty, which is not as severe as extreme poverty as defined above; this is defined as income below \$5.50 per day. In 2020, an alarming 38 percent of Colombians fell below this cutoff. This was nearly three times the rate of Brazil (13.1 percent) and substantially higher than less well-off Peru (32.9 percent) and Ecuador (30.6 percent).

Colombia's very high levels of income inequality contribute to its high poverty rate and other socioeconomic problems. As measured by the Gini coefficient, the country's income inequality is the worst in Latin America. This can be seen in Table 3. For both 2010 and 2020 (the latest data available), Colombia's inequality is the worst, in a region with one of the most unequal distributions of income in the world. It was 54.6 in 2020, virtually unchanged from 54.2 in 2010.

Another serious set of interrelated problems in Colombia is the consolidation of power by armed groups, a rising homicide rate, increased production and trafficking of narcotics, and the persistence of illegal mining and other areas of illicit economic activity. Environmental and political activists are massacred with frequency; there were 96 massacres that killed 338 people in 2021, according to the human rights group Indepaz (Institute of Studies for Development and Peace). The Colombian Ombudsman reported that 145 activists were killed in 2021. The NGO Global Witness has ranked Colombia as the deadliest country in the world for environmental activists.



There are clear signs that some of the military's worst practices have not yet been eradicated. In March, a group of journalists from the outlets *Vorágine*, *El Espectador*, and *Cambio* reported a new case of “false positives” in the department of Putumayo. “False positives” refers to the execution of civilians who are then dressed up as guerrillas and presented as fighters killed in battle to boost body counts. Exact numbers of false positives are unknown, but human rights organizations have reported that more than 3,000 civilians have been executed this way. In 2018, a new study, coauthored by a former police colonel, claimed that around 10,000 false positive executions took place between 2002 and 2008.

The biggest obstacle to the implementation of the 2016 peace accords has been the Duque government's lack of commitment to its application.

What a new government will do, or not do, to advance the peace process is thus crucial. Both of the current candidates, unlike Duque, pledge to support it. Petro supports a plan for the democratization of land ownership and programs for food security, and also the Development Programs with a Territorial Focus (known in Colombia as PDET); and the National Plan for the Substitution of Crops and the Integral Community and Municipal Plans for Crop Substitution and Alternative Development, essential to replacing illicit crops and reorienting peasant communities to new agricultural practices and alternative economic activities. Petro has also said that he strongly supports the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), Colombia's transitional justice institution. Finally, Petro has also announced he would relaunch talks with the ELN that were interrupted in 2018–2019.

Hernández has also been a vocal supporter of the peace process during the campaign. However, as in other areas of the campaign, he has gone into significantly less detail on what his peace plan means exactly; his platform only includes one paragraph on the implementation of the process.

But even if both candidates were sincere, there appear to be big differences in their ability to move forward. Hernández has no serious political organization, no substantial congressional base from which to build, and virtually no loyal legislators working on whipping up their colleagues' support for him. It is much more likely that Hernández would align with right-wing forces in Congress in order to form a governing coalition. These allies would not be likely to



help advance the peace process, any more than they have in the past. Petro, by contrast, at least has about a quarter of the legislature on his side that he could start with.

The reality is the same for attacking the problems of poverty, inequality, health care, education, or any of the other economic and social issues where both candidates say they want to make advances. Also Petro has a long track record as a public official and campaigner fighting for these priorities. Perhaps at least as important, Historic Pact, his coalition of 17 left-of-center parties shares the same goals. It can also count on the support of other grassroots political organizations such as the Movimiento Alternativo Indígena y Social (MAIS), the political wing of the historic National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC). This is the largest and oldest Indigenous group in Colombia. Petro's base is thus much more committed to the social reform program than that of Hernández.

Colombia suffers from intolerably high levels of poverty and inequality, by any reasonable comparison. This also greatly hinders progress in resolving the country's political problems, including political and drug-related violence.

It doesn't have to be this way. A stable Colombia free of systemic violence and injustice would enable it to dedicate more resources to develop its economy and invest in education and public health, as well as in environmental protection. A more peaceful, less unequal, and more cohesive Colombia would open up opportunities that could not only improve the country's own living standards and human development, but help South America's second-most populous nation contribute to renewed progress in the region.



Introduction

On May 29, 2022, Colombians went to the polls for the first round of presidential elections. The presidency of incumbent Iván Duque has been marred by political crisis, economic stagnation, the effects of the pandemic, and now renewed violence. Duque's government has seen the largest nationwide protests since the 1970s. In 2019, Colombians took to the streets to protest in favor of free public education, against corruption and against the murder of social activists and former guerrillas. In 2020, the protests were mostly against police violence and human rights violations.³ In 2021, protests were ignited over a tax reform before morphing into the expression of a broader discontent over a number of issues, including poverty rates and the ongoing brutality of security forces.⁴ These historic protests lasted for several months.

The May elections were therefore held in this difficult and polarized context. Analysts have described these elections as a watershed moment in Colombia's history.⁵ This is, in large part, because the clear favorite during most of the campaign has been Gustavo Petro, a former M-19 guerrilla who became a congressman and senator, and mayor of Bogotá between 2012 and 2015.⁶ Petro's clear win in the first round of the presidential elections, with 40.34 percent of the vote, is the first time a progressive candidate has had a real chance of winning the Colombian presidency. Petro's running mate, Francia Márquez Mina, an environmental and feminist activist of humble origins, would become Colombia's first Afro-Colombian vice president.

Until a few days before the May 29 elections, it was expected that Federico Gutiérrez, the candidate of a coalition of right-wing political parties, would take second place.

Unexpectedly, however, Gutiérrez came in third (23.94 percent) and a relatively unknown former mayor of the city of Bucaramanga, Rodolfo Hernández (28.17 percent) managed to qualify for the runoff. The third-place finish of Federico Gutiérrez has been interpreted by Colombian pundits and by the population at large as a historic defeat for right-wing former

³ Pardo (2019) and Cantillo (2020).

⁴ Allen and Long (2021).

⁵ See e.g., Isacson and Sánchez-Garzoli (2022).

⁶ Daniels (2022).



president Álvaro Uribe,⁷ who has been the most powerful politician in Colombian politics since becoming president in 2002.

While Petro and his coalition, the Historic Pact (Pacto Histórico), are widely known, the runner-up, Rodolfo Hernández and his political platform, the League of Anti-Corruption Leaders (Liga de Gobernantes Anticorrupción), are relatively unknown. There has been much speculation as to what Hernández truly represents and whether he should best be described as a right-wing populist standing on an anti-political platform — he has certainly threatened people with violence and used derogatory language against women in the past⁸ — or whether his politics are more complex than simply Trumpian. Hernández has centered his campaign on an anti-corruption platform, primarily promoted on TikTok, while avoiding public debates as much as possible. He is certainly the great outsider and surprise of the election.

The turnout for the first round of the presidential election was 54.98 percent. Turnout is traditionally low in Colombia compared with other Latin American countries where voting is often compulsory.⁹ If there is a significantly greater increase in turnout for one candidate as compared with the other, that could easily determine the result. At present, polls put Petro and Hernández neck and neck in the elections.

⁷ López (2022).

⁸ Semana (2021) and Palomino (2022).

⁹ Most countries in South America have compulsory voting. An exception is Venezuela, where participation was 46 percent in the latest presidential elections, which were boycotted by part of the opposition. Several Central American countries have both voluntary voting and two rounds. Among these, the most recent first-round turnout figures were 52 percent in El Salvador (2019), 62 percent in Guatemala (2019), and 60 percent in Costa Rica (2022).



Economic and Social Indicators

One of the biggest issues facing Colombia — and indeed most countries — is what will happen to the incomes of the majority of the population. While Colombia sits right in the middle of the distribution in Latin America in its GDP (or income) per person, it stands out in its high levels of poverty and inequality relative to comparable countries and to the region as a whole.

Colombia's GDP per capita in 2019 (before the pandemic) was \$15,633.¹⁰ This is about the same as Brazil, at \$15,424. But Colombia has had a much higher level of extreme poverty, as defined internationally as less than \$1.90 per day.¹¹ This can be seen in **Table 1**, which shows the percent of population living in extreme poverty as an annual average for the years 2008–2020. For Colombia, it is 6.4 percent as compared with 4.1 percent in Brazil. This means that 56 percent more people (1.17 million) fell into extreme poverty in Colombia as compared to the number who would have done so if Colombia had the same rate of extreme poverty as Brazil.

This difference expanded exponentially as South America was hit by the pandemic and recession in 2020. So great was the disparity that year between the prevalence of extreme poverty in the two countries that Colombia actually had more people living in extreme poverty (5.2 million) than Brazil (3.6 million). Brazil has more than four times Colombia's population.

¹⁰ These figures are from the International Monetary Fund's most recent (April 2022) estimates of GDP per capita on a purchasing power parity (PPP) basis. IMF (2022). PPP figures are used by economists for international comparisons because they adjust for differences in prices between countries.

¹¹ This is \$1.90 PPP, and therefore it is constructed to be comparable across countries; otherwise, national poverty rates are not generally directly comparable.



Table 1**Extreme Poverty (Less than \$1.90 per day)**

Country ▲	GDP per capita	Extreme Poverty Headcount, 2020 (Percent of population)	Extreme Poverty Headcount, 2020 (Number of people)	Extreme Poverty Headcount, Annual Average, 2008–2020 (Percent of population)
Brazil	\$15,424	1.7%	3,613,510	4.1%
Colombia	\$15,633	10.3%	5,240,937	6.4%
Ecuador	\$11,923	6.5%	1,146,799	4.6%
Peru	\$13,323	4.4%	1,450,761	4.6%

GDP per capita is 2019, current prices; purchasing power parity, international dollars from the IMF. Extreme poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90 a day is 2011 purchasing power parity from the World Bank's World Development Indicators. Extreme poverty headcount is the authors' calculations with population estimates from the World Bank's World Development Indicators.

Source: Authors' analysis, IMF (2022), and World Bank (2020)

The 2020 experience is a tragedy that undoubtedly took many thousands, or tens of thousands of lives in Colombia. The economic as well as human costs are due at least in part to the failed response of the government to the pandemic.¹² (Colombia has also had 139,867 confirmed deaths from COVID; as a proportion of population, this was the seventh in the hemisphere.) But the long-term trends, as seen in the 12-year average level of poverty in **Table 2**, clearly reflect more endemic and prolonged political and economic failures, including the grossly unequal distribution of income (see below).

Table 1 also includes two other South American countries — Peru and Ecuador — that are most comparable to Colombia, with somewhat less GDP per capita. Strikingly, these two countries also have considerably less extreme poverty than Colombia. Peru, with 2019 GDP per capita of \$13,323, has an annual average extreme poverty rate of 4.6 percent, also considerably lower than Colombia; Ecuador, which has an even lower per capita income of \$11,923, was also at 4.6 percent.

If the World Bank's measure of extreme poverty at \$1.90 per day¹³ seems like it is very little to live on, it is. And monetary poverty is not the only measure of poverty; the World Bank has developed a multidimensional measure of poverty that also includes other indicators: educational attainment, educational enrollment, and access to drinking water, sanitation, and

¹² See, e.g., Blofield, Lustig, and Trasberg (2021).

¹³ This is set at 2011 PPP dollars. See World Bank (2022a).

electricity.¹⁴ These are correlated with monetary poverty¹⁵ and thus the households living below the extreme poverty line are often deprived of sufficient drinking water, sanitation, or electricity; and they may have children of school age who are not enrolled in school.¹⁶ In the most recent data, which dates from 2018, Colombia's Multidimensional Poverty Index was higher than that of the most recent published surveys for Brazil and Ecuador, yet lower than Peru's.¹⁷

In addition to the often life-threatening problem of extreme poverty, Colombia has very high levels of the World Bank's poverty measure that is set at an income below \$5.50 per day.¹⁸ Once again the comparison with similar countries is most striking in 2020, where an alarming 38 percent of Colombians fell below this cutoff. This was nearly three times the rate of Brazil (13.1 percent) and substantially higher than the less well-off Peru (32.9 percent) and Ecuador (30.6 percent).

Colombia's extraordinary levels of poverty during the world recession in 2020 are particularly concerning for the immediate future, as the world economy has slowed sharply and the outlook continues to worsen. The World Bank's most recent annual Global Economic Prospects,¹⁹ released last week, downgraded its global economic growth forecast for 2022 by about one-third to 2.9 percent; less than two months ago, the IMF had projected 3.6 percent, already a very sharp decline from 2021 (which the World Bank now estimates at 5.7 percent). For developing countries, the World Bank has cut its growth forecast for this year to about half (3.4 percent) of 2021 (6.6 percent).

¹⁴ See World Bank (2018) and World Bank (2020).

¹⁵ Monetary poverty, as in the \$1.90 extreme poverty measure, is measured by income or consumption.

¹⁶ UNDP (2010); Akire and Foster (2011); and World Bank (2018).

¹⁷ UNDP (2021).

¹⁸ This is also in PPP dollars.

¹⁹ World Bank (2022c).



Table 2**Poverty (Less than \$5.50 per day)**

Country ▲	GDP per capita	Poverty Headcount, 2020 (Percent of population)	Poverty Headcount, 2020 (Number of people)	Poverty Headcount, Annual Average, 2008–2020 (Percent of population)
Brazil	\$15,424	13.1%	27,845,283	21.3%
Colombia	\$15,633	38.3%	19,488,145	33.6%
Ecuador	\$11,923	30.6%	5,398,776	28.6%
Peru	\$13,323	32.9%	10,847,737	27.8%

GDP per capita is 2019, current prices; purchasing power parity, international dollars from the IMF. Poverty headcount ratio at \$5.50 a day is 2011 purchasing power parity from the World Bank's World Development Indicators. Poverty headcount is the authors' calculations with population estimates from the World Bank's World Development Indicators.

Source: Authors' analysis, IMF (2022), and World Bank (2020)

Going forward into 2023 and beyond, the World Bank is not optimistic. And there are many downside risks: central banks — including, most importantly the United States Federal Reserve — tightening monetary policy; and more inflation shocks from the Ukraine war, including food prices, which hit a record high in March.²⁰ And of course the risks of contraction from tighter monetary policy interact with inflation shocks; financial stress; and further pandemic troubles. Given what happened to Colombia in 2020, the idea that the next government must be prepared, and willing, to make better choices if these downside risks materialize would make sense.

Colombia also has very high levels of income inequality, which contribute to its high poverty rate and other socioeconomic problems. As measured by the Gini coefficient, the country's income inequality is the worst in Latin America.²¹ This can be seen in **Table 3**. For both 2010 and 2020 (the latest available), it is the highest in a region with one of the most unequal distributions of income in the world. It was 54.6 in 2020, virtually unchanged from 54.2 in 2010.

²⁰ Trading Economics (2022).

²¹ World Bank (2022b).

Table 3**Gini Index for Select Latin America and Caribbean Countries**

Country	2010	2020
Argentina	43.6	42.3
Bolivia	46.1*	43.6
Brazil	52.9*	48.9
Chile	46.0*	44.9
Colombia	54.6	54.2
Costa Rica	48.0	49.3
Cuba	n.a.	n.a.
Dominican Republic	47.3	39.6
Ecuador	48.8	47.3
El Salvador	43.5	38.8*
Guatemala	48.3*	n.a.
Haiti	41.1*	n.a.
Honduras	53.1	48.2*
Mexico	47.2	45.4
Nicaragua	43.9*	n.a.
Panama	51.6	49.8*
Paraguay	51.0	43.5
Peru	45.5	43.8
Uruguay	44.5	40.2
Venezuela	44.8*	n.a.

An asterisk ("*") signifies that an observation is not available and that the next available observation is used. "n.a." signifies that data is unavailable.

Source: World Bank (2022b)

Both candidates, Petro and Hernández, propose reforms that are aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. Petro's proposals include a universal public health care system, land reform, and strengthening public education — which includes universal, free kindergarten; increasing school enrollment, increased spending on education, and free universal public higher education. Progressive taxation is proposed to pay for most of the reforms. Petro proposes to establish a human right to food, beginning with food assistance, possibly including a food stamp program.

Hernandez's proposals are more vague and less detailed, but include some that could reduce poverty and inequality. For example in health care, he proposes the use of price controls — including on pharmaceuticals — and expanding the public hospital network. He proposes a national rural housing program, along with more infrastructure for rural areas, including solar energy and septic tanks; and more provision of health care and education, as well as investment in order to move toward universal access to drinking water and basic sanitation.

With regard to the comparative probabilities of either candidate succeeding in reducing poverty and inequality, and improving public health or other social progress: as explained below, Hernández would take office with almost no allied legislators in Congress. It is not that building a congressional majority will be easier for Petro than for Hernández, on the contrary. But it is highly likely that Hernández's alliance would be hostile to any proposed redistributive reforms that he has announced during the campaign.

Petro, by comparison, has at least a start with his party and allies holding about a quarter of the Congress. Another difference is that Petro has a long track record as a public official and campaigner fighting for these goals of social justice. His speech on the night of the first round of the presidential election, after the results were announced, reaffirmed that social justice remained his most important overarching objective. Perhaps at least as important, Historic Pact, his coalition of 17 left-of-center parties shares these goals. It can also count on the support of other grassroots political organizations such as the *Movimiento Alternativo Indígena y Social* (MAIS), the political wing of the historic National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC). This is the largest and oldest Indigenous group in Colombia. Petro's base is thus much more committed to the social reform program.



Peace and Security

Under President Duque, Colombia has seen a worrying resurgence of armed groups and conflict. Homicide rates fell sharply from 84 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1991 to 27 per 100,000 in 2021 (the Latin American average is around 17 per 100,000).²² But this steep reduction in violent deaths throughout the 2000s and 2010s, after record levels in the 1990s, has now stalled and has been rising slowly during the last few years.²³ More disturbingly, Colombia is seeing the consolidation of power of armed groups, old and new, an increase in the production and trafficking of narcotics, and a resilience of illegal mining, among other illicit activities and flows. And the massacre of social and environmental activists remains a feature of everyday life.²⁴ Today, Colombia shows all the signs of teetering on the brink of a new spike in lawlessness, violence, and internal conflict.

The Institute of Studies for Development and Peace (Indepaz), a Colombian organization that has been monitoring peace and human rights in Colombia since 1984, calculates that a total of 96 massacres claimed 338 lives in 2021.²⁵ In March 2021, the UN Verification Mission in Colombia reported that 262 former combatants of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) had been killed after signing the 2016 accords,²⁶ despite the fact that one of the peace deal's key government commitments is the duty to provide security protection to former combatants who have disarmed and joined civilian life. The Colombian Ombudsman reported that 145 activists were killed in 2021.²⁷ The NGO Global Witness has ranked Colombia as the most deadly country in the world for environmental activists.²⁸

Politicians, including presidential candidates, are also vulnerable to attack. A presidential candidate was assassinated in 1986, and three presidential candidates were assassinated in 1990, including the front-runner.²⁹ In the 2022 elections, there have been renewed fears for the safety of candidates, particularly for those from the political left.³⁰

²² World Bank (2022d).

²³ Infobae (2022b).

²⁴ Rueda (2021).

²⁵ Indepaz (2022).

²⁶ UNSC (2021).

²⁷ Deutsche Welle (2022).

²⁸ Santaaulalia (2021).

²⁹ El Tiempo (2021).

³⁰ El Tiempo (2022b).



In May, at the height of the presidential campaign, the Clan del Golfo, the most important drug trafficking organization in Colombia, organized an “armed strike” in retaliation for the extradition of its leader to the United States.³¹ The cartel drastically limited economic activity in several departments. Mobility and transport were heavily restricted, with 26 roads effectively blocked; there were shortages of gas; and a top league soccer team didn’t show up at one of its games for fear of violence. The department of Córdoba was virtually closed down: shops, schools and universities remained shut.³² The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) announced that 26 civilians and 2 members of the security forces were killed during the strike.

Colombia is experiencing an all-too-familiar return to the social and economic dynamics of civil conflict. Coca crops and cocaine production have been steadily on the rise, with the US government claiming that Colombian production of cocaine has tripled since 2012.³³ Forced crop eradication is being prioritized and armed groups thrive on protecting coca farmers. FARC dissidents (the small minority of FARC combatants who refused to lay down their arms after the peace deal) have regrouped, even if their numbers remain small. The guerrilla group ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) has also filled some territorial voids where the FARC once used to operate. And new paramilitary groups, which greatly resemble the old ones and are essentially the armed gangs of drug cartels, are on the rise again.

The Clan del Golfo has consolidated its presence in much of Colombia’s geography. It is particularly powerful in Colombia’s northwestern departments.³⁴ The arrest and extradition last May of its leader, Dario Antonio Úsuga David, alias “Otoniel,” seems to have had little impact on the cartel’s capacity to operate and strike. “Chiquito Malo” appears to be the new leader of the organization, with “Siopas” posing as a possible challenger.³⁵ The Clan’s members often prefer to call themselves the “Autodefensas Gaitainistas de Colombia” (Gaitanist Self-Defense Force of Colombia, AGC).³⁶ Ironically, “gaitanista” is a reference to the historic leftist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, whose murder in 1948 was the trigger for decades

³¹ Schmidt and Durán (2022).

³² Serrano (2022).

³³ United States Office of National Drug Control Policy (2022).

³⁴ Álvarez and Contreras (2022).

³⁵ Ávila (2022).

³⁶ Indepaz (2020).



of violence. But the group largely descends from the “Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia” (Unified Self-Defense Force of Colombia), a far-right narco-paramilitary organization.³⁷

As a result of this paramilitary resurgence, human rights violations are once again on the rise.³⁸

One important cause of this resurgence of violence, and contributing to the control of irregular groups over large swathes of territory, is the current administration’s disregard for some of the most important tenets of the 2016 peace accords with the FARC. It is not a secret that President Duque, since campaigning for a “No” vote in the 2016 referendum on the peace deal, has been no friend to the peace agreement.³⁹

Duque found numerous ways to undermine the agreements contained in the 2016 Peace Accords. One of the most effective was his decision to underfund its most fundamental components, including the institutions responsible for transitional justice, truth, and reconciliation: the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), and the Truth Commission. Duque’s supporters in the Colombian Congress have consistently attempted to abolish the JEP or limit its mandate. Duque’s mentor, former president Uribe, even proposed a 14-question referendum seeking to abolish or significantly reform the JEP.⁴⁰ But the JEP enjoys significant legislative backing in Colombia and diplomatic support abroad. The International Criminal Court has also been very vocal in its support.⁴¹

President Duque’s strategy has also included trying to convince the public that the recent increase in drug production in Colombia is a result of the permissiveness of the peace deal. But if criminal organizations have made renewed inroads into Colombia, it is mainly due to the government’s failure to fill the vacuum left by the guerrillas, both in terms of the absence of state security forces and of government social and economic programs. Duque’s insistence on forced coca eradication, which encourages producers to seek the protection of criminal organizations, and the neglect of the crop substitution program, a major part of the peace

³⁷ The Clan del Golfo goes by many names (including Clan Úsuga, Los Urabeños, etc.) and seems to be an umbrella organization for several groups (including the death squad Águilas Negras). Its rival cartels in Colombia have been “Los Rastrojos”, who were largely defeated in 2013, and “Oficina de Envigado”, which has been weakened in the last few years. Together, these criminal organizations, along with their Mexican cartel business connections, are generally referred to as BACRIM (criminal gangs) in Colombia.

³⁸ Justice for Colombia (2022).

³⁹ Isacson (2019).

⁴⁰ El Tiempo (2020).

⁴¹ Colprensa (2020).



deal, have — at best — made Duque look tough, but utterly failed to reduce illicit coca leaf production.⁴²

Duque also put an end to the 2017–2018 negotiations with the ELN. The Colombian government had already mostly abandoned the negotiations in Cuba when in January 2019 the ELN bombed a police academy, killing 23 people, after which Duque definitively ended the peace talks.⁴³

Duque's policies were well received by US President Donald Trump, who was happy to be seen as putting pressure on Colombia to step up its efforts to eradicate coca growing by whatever means, including aerial spraying of glyphosate, which had been suspended by the World Health Organization (WHO) since 2015 on health and environmental grounds.⁴⁴ Duque had decided to resume aerial spraying but was hampered by a lack of clearance from Colombia's constitutional court. Many political and social actors continue to oppose aerial spraying, which also violates a key part of the 2016 peace accord. In April 2021, despite protests by dozens of organizations, Duque finally issued a decree allowing spraying to resume, while promising to keep it within the limits set by the constitutional court. However, in early 2022 the constitutional court again blocked Duque's decision, requiring him to first consult affected communities before moving forward with fumigation plans.

There is no easy answer to Colombia's violence and crime. But a prerequisite for any lasting solution is for the state to make its presence felt throughout Colombia's territory. The Colombian state — and not just its security forces — must fill the void left by irregular groups when these are weakened or have given up arms, as in the case of the FARC. It is crucial, beyond the issue of law and order, that the state is also present and enact ambitious and effective social programs that have a real impact on people's lives and address the long-term causes of structural violence.

This is exactly what the peace process was all about and why it is paramount for the new government that will be sworn in on August 7 to adhere to the 2016 peace accords in their entirety. The enactment of policies that were agreed upon in the peace deal will lend the state credibility that it currently lacks, including to engage with irregular groups. Similarly, the

⁴² International Crisis Group (2021).

⁴³ Long (2019). See also Allen and Long (2021).

⁴⁴ Moss (2020). A study from the University of Washington found in 2019 that exposure to glyphosate increases the risk of some cancers by more than 40 percent. See Holtz (2019).



social policies designed to alleviate poverty and reduce economic, racial, gender, and regional inequalities, are also fundamental if Colombia is to bring long-term solutions to the prevailing violence and conflict.

Moreover, Colombia's security forces must undergo serious reform to eliminate the killings and human rights abuses that certain sectors of the military and police forces have been involved in; as well as severing any links with paramilitary organizations. Unfortunately, there are clear signs that some of the worst practices of the military have not yet been eradicated. In March, a group of journalists from the outlets *Vorágine*, *El Espectador*, and *Cambio* reported a new case of “false positives” in the department of Putumayo.⁴⁵ “False positives” refers to the execution of civilians who are then dressed up as guerrillas and presented as fighters killed in battle to boost body counts. Exact numbers of false positives are unknown, but human rights organizations have reported that more than 3,000 civilians have been executed this way. In 2018, a new study, coauthored by a former police colonel, claimed that around 10,000 false positive executions took place between 2002 and 2008.⁴⁶

The peace accords announced a new social contract for Colombia: a re-foundational moment that promised to tackle gross injustices and a chance to build a long healing process for victims of violence, displacement, and human rights violations — a prospect that, so far, has been frustrated.

The good news is that the leading candidates in the first round of Colombia's presidential elections promised to give renewed momentum to the implementation of the peace accords. Even Federico Gutiérrez, the right-wing candidate most identified with the Duque administration and who has been supported by the party of anti-peace-deal former president Álvaro Uribe, signaled his support for the peace accords,⁴⁷ even if he assigned much of the blame for their lack of implementation to the former FARC combatants.

More importantly, both the winners of the first round, Gustavo Petro and Rodolfo Hernández, have insisted on the importance of the peace accords. Petro has insisted in relaunching the “integral rural reform” which includes a plan for the democratization of land ownership and programs for food security.⁴⁸ Petro has also insisted on the Development Programs with a

⁴⁵ Abuchaibe (2022).

⁴⁶ Parkin Daniels (2018).

⁴⁷ Semana (2022).

⁴⁸ Gustavopetro.co (2022).



Territorial Focus (known in Colombia as PDET); the current government has been very selective in terms of which PDET it has supported. In the same vein, Petro has also been explicit in his support for the National Plan for the Substitution of Crops and the Integral Community and Municipal Plans for Crop Substitution and Alternative Development, essential to replacing illicit crops and reorienting peasant communities to new agricultural practices and alternative economic activities. Petro has also said that he strongly supports the JEP (Special Jurisdiction for Peace), Colombia's transitional justice. Finally, Petro has also announced he would relaunch talks with the ELN that were interrupted in 2018–2019.

Hernández has also been a vocal supporter of the peace process during the campaign. However, as in other areas of the campaign, Hernández has gone into significantly less detail on what his peace plan means exactly; his platform only includes one paragraph on the implementation of the process.⁴⁹

One of the things that Hernández has made clear is that he wishes to make peace with the ELN to lay down arms peacefully. His strategy to achieve this is what he has called an “otrosí” (“another yes”) extension to the 2016 peace accords, which would include the ELN.

There are, however, problems with his approach. His plan seems to imply that he wants the ELN to merely adhere to what has been agreed with the FARC. However, the official talks with the ELN in 2017–2018 (and the unofficial talks that took place between 2014 and 2017) clearly demonstrated that the ELN is unwilling to merely ratify what was negotiated in Havana between the Juan Manuel Santos government and the FARC. Hernández's statement that he does not wish to have “never-ending conversations” with the ELN, and that the organization should just adhere to the existing deal, is — at best — unrealistic. Any peace accord with the ELN will require a specific space for negotiation with that group, even if clear limits on scope and a time frame are established.

Another important question with regard to Hernández's commitment to pursuing peace concerns his previous position on the Colombian peace process. It is noteworthy that Hernández voted against the peace accords with the FARC in the 2016 referendum.⁵⁰ The most important proponent of a “No” vote was former president Álvaro Uribe and opposition to the deal was overwhelmingly an uribista political position. Hernández has been close to

⁴⁹ Ingrodolfohernandez.com (2022) and Álvarez (2022).

⁵⁰ Caracol Radio (2016).



Uribe in the past, although in this campaign he has been vocal in claiming that he stands for something very different from uribismo.⁵¹

In practice, Hernández now wants the ELN to accept a peace deal that he in fact opposed in a national referendum.

Notwithstanding this, Hernández's adherence to the peace process, and his statements that violence cannot merely be tackled through law enforcement methods and that it requires long-term social policies, are positive developments. To have two candidates arguing the case for peace in Colombia's 2022 presidential runoff is a net improvement from the 2018 presidential election, in which there was a clear divide between Petro's support for the peace program and Duque's overt opposition.

A point of agreement for both candidates concerns the issue of Venezuela. Petro has said that "diplomatic relations are established with a nation, not a person," and accused the Duque administration of embracing double standards, as Colombia maintains relations with many dictatorships. He has argued that reestablishing relations would allow the Colombian government to wrest control of the border region from the criminal groups that currently control it.⁵² Hernández has criticized the decision to recognize opposition leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's president in unequivocal terms, stating: "I don't know who came up with the idea of recognizing Guaidó, when the one that exercises the power of the executive branch is Maduro."⁵³

The Duque administration's support for the strategy of economically isolating its neighbor has come at a cost to the Colombian economy. Maintaining the current policy of nonengagement with the government of Nicolás Maduro, as was advocated by third-place candidate Federico Gutiérrez, would imply very significant lost trade opportunities for Colombia.

Historically, the bilateral trade relationship between Colombia and Venezuela has been paramount for both countries. In an increasingly probable scenario of the easing of some US

⁵¹ El Tiempo (2022a)

⁵² El Tiempo (2022c).

⁵³ Pinto (2020)



economic sanctions on Venezuela, Colombia could see exports rise by as much as 1.9 percent of GDP if it reestablished economic relations with Venezuela.⁵⁴

Crucially, a less hostile relationship between both neighbors would also open the door to a degree of cooperation on a number of fronts, including the complex issues of migration and security. As in 2010, when former president Santos opted for *détente* with Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez after two years of extremely tense relations, a renewed thaw in bilateral relations would play a crucial role in Colombia's security and in a relaunched peace process.⁵⁵

In general, there has been little discussion in this campaign of the candidates' respective visions of foreign policy. It is understood that Petro will strive for a diversification of Colombia's relations with other countries, greater commitment to multilateralism, and an emphasis on the Latin American region and its integration mechanisms — policies that will have another influential proponent if former president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva is elected to the Brazilian presidency in November. Hernández has said very little, but did cause an uproar in diplomatic circles when he promised to close down 27 embassies as soon as he was sworn in.⁵⁶

Pundits in Colombia have struggled to decide how seriously they should take Hernández's bombastic style and whether his declarations are merely campaign ploys, or truly signal some disturbing positions and intentions. There has been much talk of his claim that he is an admirer of Hitler (although he later claimed that he misspoke),⁵⁷ of his foulmouthed insults thrown at an array of politicians, of his misogynistic comments, and more recently of his declaration to the Washington Post that his "messianic" leadership had an impact on his followers comparable to the "brainwashed" hijackers of September 11, 2001.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ The estimate is based on an empirical analysis of the effect of sanctions on oil production, which finds that sanctioned oil producers recover the pre-sanctions level of oil output in a 12–24 month period after sanctions are lifted (Rodríguez, 2022). This means that Venezuela could see production increase by approximately 1.5 million barrels per day if sanctions were lifted, generating an additional USD \$55 billion in export revenue for the country. We estimate that this could generate export growth of \$2.6–\$6.5bn for Colombia, or between 1.0 and 1.9 percent of GDP. The lower end of this range is obtained by assuming that Colombia captures the same share of incremental Venezuelan trade as given by the 2012–21 share. The higher end assumes that it goes back to the share of trade that it had during the first Uribe administration (2002–06) and would correspond to a scenario in which both countries seek to improve economic relations. See Rodríguez (2022).

⁵⁵ See e.g., Weisbrot and Johnston (2010).

⁵⁶ Infobae (2022a).

⁵⁷ The New York Times (May 30, 2020) reports: "Years after saying he was a follower of Adolf Hitler, Mr. Hernández clarified that he meant to say he was a follower of Albert Einstein."

⁵⁸ Schmidt (2022).

While his supporters argue that Hernández represents a good natured, spontaneous, and iconoclastic challenge to the system, his opponents argue that he is unpredictable, unprepared, and bigoted.



Congress and the Balance of Power

The March 13 congressional elections held at the same time as the presidential primaries delivered a highly divided Colombian legislature. The Historic Pact, Petro's coalition, was the most voted ticket at the national level in the senatorial election, but still garnered only 18 percent of valid votes. The picture is similar in the House of Representatives. Jointly, the Historic Pact and potentially sympathetic legislators from other groupings from the left of center (including some — but not all — representatives from the Transitory Special Peace Districts, or CITREP, and from the Special Indigenous and Afro-Colombian Districts, as well as the seats of the Comunes, former FARC) obtained roughly a quarter of House seats. Petro can therefore count on the immediate support of roughly a quarter of Congress if he includes his party and his most immediate allies. This is clearly not enough, but it is a first step toward building a broader legislative alliance.

The Liberal Party, which has 17 percent of seats in the Senate and 13 percent in the House, would be an important actor in any coalition-building effort. Its members are currently split over their support for Petro, or Hernández, or neither. Another important political force is the Green Party, which supported Fajardo in the first round; it obtained 12 percent of seats in the Senate and 9 percent in the House. For the Petro camp, approaching Green Party legislators would be a priority.

Hernández's political platform, by contrast, only has two elected members in the House of Representatives and none in the Senate. He has certainly received an array of endorsements, particularly from legislators whose parties supported Gutiérrez in the first round. But with no serious political organization, no substantial congressional base from which to build, and virtually no loyal legislators working on whipping up their colleagues' support for him, it is much more likely that Hernández would align with conservative forces in Congress than would Petro, who has more legislative muscle to muster.

In many regards, building a congressional majority may be easier for Hernández than for Petro. The problem is that Hernández's political coalition would be overwhelmingly dominated by right-wing parties, with policies for the issues discussed here — the peace



process, violence and harm reduction, and poverty and inequality — ending up similar to those of the current status quo.

Throughout a political career spanning over several decades, Hernández has displayed a great deal of ideological and programmatic flexibility. The congressional balance of political power would therefore suggest it is more likely that Hernández aligns to a makeshift conservative majority than the other way round.

Finally, it is important to mention that despite running on an anti-corruption political platform, Hernández has been indicted on corruption charges and a judge has set July 21 for the final phase of his trial. The accusation is that Hernández sought a bribe in exchange for adjudicating a contract for the modernization of waste management when he was mayor of Bucaramanga.⁵⁹

Hernández's legal situation has been a source of heated debate among Colombian jurists. In the event Hernández wins the elections, there are two conflicting visions of what should happen. The first is that, given the fact that presidents have immunity from prosecution which can only be overturned by the legislative branch, Congress should examine the case against Hernández, after he is sworn in on August 7, in order to decide whether to authorize the Supreme Court to continue with the trial against the president. The second position argues that since Hernández's trial will have already started by the time a new president is inaugurated on August 7, Congress would have no role to play.⁶⁰

Either way, Hernández's judicial travails do not bode well for his relationship with Congress. Being sworn in under those circumstances would almost certainly result in standoffs between different branches of government and weaken Hernández's political hand from the outset. He could even be removed from power within a short time of his election.

⁵⁹ Infobae (2022).

⁶⁰ Riveros (2022).



Conclusion: The Colombian Paradox

Colombia is a country of gaping contradictions. On the one hand, it has institutions that are among the most developed in Latin America, with a sophisticated system of government, including a relatively independent judiciary, particularly in its higher echelons (the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court, the State Council, and the Judicial Council). Colombia is also one of the few Latin American countries that did not have military regimes in the heyday of military rule in Latin America (1960s–1980s).⁶¹ Unlike its Andean neighbors, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela, Colombia has not been marred by dramatic standoffs between the executive and legislative branch, impeachment proceedings, coups d'état, or rampant political instability since the 1958 National Front put an end to the instability of the 1950s.

As compared with the often chaotic politics of the rest of the region, Colombia is often perceived as, at least nominally in terms of its governmental institutions, relatively legalist, and politically stable.

Yet, in marked contrast to this institutionalist tradition, Colombia has been first and foremost a country ridden by widespread and horrific violence and lawlessness, particularly in the country's urban and rural peripheries, and a state pervaded by crime and corruption. Coups d'état may not be the norm, but the assassination of activists is widespread.

The Colombian state still struggles to impose the very basics of law and order. It struggles to maintain its monopoly on the use of force and often fails to effectively control large chunks of its territory. The peace process and 2016 peace agreement with the FARC were supposed to bring an end to the predominance of armed internal conflict, as well as to the reach and power of armed non-state actors, and bring the state into rural enclaves where it had historically been absent. Yet, today, we see a return of conflict, irregular armed groups, violent cartels, and various forms of armed actions in the country.

Colombians often highlight that their patrician democracy is a result of the nineteenth century clash between the Caesarism of Bolivar and the legalism of Santander, and the imposition, over time, of the latter. This historical legacy may appear somewhat abstract in

⁶¹ Out of the 20 Latin American republics, only Colombia, Venezuela, Costa Rica, and Mexico did not undergo military rule during this period.



the current circumstances, but there is no doubt that the combination of Colombia's sophisticated constitutionalism and checks and balances, and the reality of decades of war and terrible human rights abuses, particularly against the more vulnerable sectors of the population, have created an enduring paradox in urgent need of being corrected.

The country's economic trajectory has also been tragically paradoxical. Colombia has a history of macroeconomic stability that is atypical in the region. It is the only major economy in the region not to face a debt crisis during the 1980s. The country has been spared the currency crises that are so common in the region, and it has avoided the high inflation that has been commonplace in Latin America, as well as hyperinflation. At least until recently, its fiscal accounts have been in relatively good shape.

Yet, as is clear from the data reviewed above, Colombia suffers from intolerably high levels of poverty and inequality, by any reasonable comparisons. This also greatly hinders progress in resolving its political problems, including political and drug-related violence.

It doesn't have to be this way. A stable Colombia free of systemic violence and injustice would enable it to dedicate more resources to develop its economy and invest in education and public health, as well as in environmental protection. A more peaceful, less unequal, and more cohesive Colombia would open up opportunities that could not only improve the country's own living standards and human development, but help South America's second-most populous nation⁶² contribute to renewed progress in the region.

⁶² Colombia is also the second-most populous country where Spanish is the official language.



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