

COLOMBIA AT THE CROSSROADS

ON 19 JUNE 2022, Gustavo Petro became the first left candidate ever to win the presidency in Colombia, defeating the right-wing real-estate magnate Rodolfo Hernández by 50.4 to 47.4 per cent in the second round.¹ The turnout, at 58 per cent, was the highest for a quarter-century. Petro's electoral bloc, the Pacto Histórico, had already won 48 out of 268 congressional seats in the March 2022 legislative elections. To set these victories in perspective, it's necessary to grasp the nature of the power bloc that ruled Colombia for over 150 years under an oligarchic Conservative–Liberal duopoly, which then gave way to the hard-right counterinsurgency regime of Álvaro Uribe from 2002. With Washington's backing, Uribe intensified the Colombian Army's long-running war against guerrilla forces in the hinterlands; casualties, according to the country's Truth Commission, include some 450,566 dead and another 121,768 'disappeared', as well as 50,770 kidnapped and 8 million displaced, the vast majority poor peasants. Uribe and his successors—Juan Manuel Santos (2010–18) and, especially, Iván Duque (2018–22)—also backed harsh neoliberal measures against the urban poor.

The electoral victories of Petro and his Vice-President Francia Márquez—daughter of Afro-Colombian miners and a courageous campaigner for their rights—built upon the huge urban protests that have rocked the country in the last few years. Millions of protesters, *los nadies*, 'the nobodies'—many of them young, working-class people from urban peripheries with minimal education and access to public services—took to the streets, paralyzing Colombia's cities again and again in 2018, 2019 and 2021, confronting the riot police with exemplary courage, stamina and discipline, in order to bring the 'horrible night'—a phrase from the national anthem—of *uribismo* to a close. The oligarchic media tried and failed to label the protesters as arsonists and looters. Instead, students

and youth from working class and peripheral neighbourhoods were demanding alternatives to Colombia's lockdown neoliberalism, violent patriarchy, narcotics economy and organized crime.

Petro has pledged to improve public health, education—tuition-free college, forgiveness of student debt—and pensions; to strengthen labour law, offer job prospects to the impoverished youth, fight racial and gender discrimination and mitigate endemic violence, poverty and environmental destruction in the mining, energy and agro-industrial zones, like those of the Pacific southwest where Márquez has been campaigning. As well as backing the green transition, pledging no new contracts for fossil-fuel extraction, Petro has vowed to revive the faltering peace process with former FARC insurgents and to implement the Colombian Truth Commission's recommendations for talks with the still-untamed ELN. His government is normalizing bilateral ties and migration flows with neighbouring Venezuela. The Colombian Ambassador to Venezuela has met with Maduro and said the two presidents will meet before the end of the year.

Given Petro's guerrilla past in the 1980s, his staunch support for the social-democratic articles of the 1991 Constitution, his announcement that he would revise free-trade agreements and his plans to prohibit the aerial spraying of exfoliates, such as glyphosate, over the coca regions—a US-led policy which has driven small farmers off their land and into the hands of organized crime—Washington took the election result relatively well. Biden's Secretary of State called Petro the day after the election and, as the State Department put it, 'discussed how the US–Colombia integrated counternarcotics strategy' aligned with Petro's goal to diminish rural violence.² Juan González, Biden's Cartagena-born National Security Advisor on Latin America, and Samantha Power, now at USAID, were more explicit. In August, González told an audience of 2,000 businesspeople at the annual congress of the National Association of Industrialists (ANDI) in Cartagena: 'Forty years ago, the

¹ The authors wish to thank their former students and colleagues at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia—Sede Medellín. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Campo Elías Galindo, professor and trade unionist at the University of Antioquia, representative of Colombia Humana in the 2018 elections, murdered by the forces of reaction in 2020.

² US Department of State, 'Secretary Blinken's call with Colombian President-Elect Petro', 20 June 2022.

US would have done everything it could to avoid having Petro elected. Once in power, we would have done everything to sabotage his government.' Today, however, in a 'spirit of dialogue', Washington would help the Petro government to 'reconfigure' the key issues—anti-drug policy, security, peace—'according to the interests of both nations'. On the same trip, Power was blunter: 'we need to have a deep discussion in terms of delimiting the programme that we are going to implement together.'³

Petro has been more outspoken than many leaders of the contemporary Latin American left about the character of the ruling bloc in his country. As he told *El País* last year, the Colombian electoral system has been 'co-opted by de facto regional totalitarianisms, where the population lives in fear and candidates are under the control of those who have the weapons and the money—the Colombian mafia operating within the institutions of the state.'⁴ Few have denounced the rule of these narco-merchant-landlords, who control swathes of the country through armed clientelism, more publicly or effectively than Petro. Colombia's violently conservative society and politics have long seemed to mark its history off from neighbouring countries like Ecuador, Brazil, Venezuela or Peru. The temptation now is to see Colombia as having finally caught up with the second wave of Latin America's 'pink tide', or to align its youth-led, anti-neoliberal uprisings with those that in 2018–21 swept cities in Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay and Panama—pushed back by repression and Covid, only to resurface following the pandemic, which took a greater toll in Latin America and the Caribbean than any other world region.

Both perspectives highlight important commonalities. This essay, however, will seek to ground the meaning of Petro's electoral victory in the context of Colombian history, before going on to consider the wider regional landscape. By the late 1990s, a crisis of political representation among traditional parties was widespread in Latin America. Yet only in Colombia had the oligarchic parties of the nineteenth century maintained their grip over the electoral system, excluding new popular forces from independent parliamentary representation of any significant sort

³ Fabián Ramírez, 'Juan González: "Hace 40 años, EE UU hubiera hecho todo lo posible para prevenir elección de Petro"', *Noticias Caracol*, 10 August 2022; Fabián Ramírez, 'Delegación de EE UU se reunió con Petro y halló "diferencias entendibles" sobre lucha antidrogas', *Noticias Caracol*, 8 August 2022.

⁴ Jan Martínez Ahrens and Inés Santaaulalia, 'Entrevista a Gustavo Petro: "Colombia no necesita socialismo, necesita democracia y paz"', *El País*, 19 September 2021.

down to the end of the twentieth—an exclusionary system which was also marked by repeated episodes of civil war and factional slaughter, scarring the country in the 1890s–1900s, the 1940s–50s and the 1980s–90s—when counterinsurgency warfare allowed the narco-linked right to take power as part of a broad coalition in 2002 under Uribe, marginalizing the remnants of the old Liberal-Conservative dyarchy. In what follows, then, while we adopt a hemispheric view of us–Colombia relations—especially of transnational conglomerates, investment flows, narcotics, finance and trade, licit as well as illicit—for the most part we look inward, to endogenous factors, to explain the Petro–Márquez victory and examine what it may portend.

To challenge Colombia’s entrenched social structure will be a tall order. Yet changes are afoot. Will they prove substantive and lasting, in terms of state institutions and the redistribution of wealth, as opposed to symbolic and ephemeral? Will they spur Colombia’s far right to re-organize under new leadership? Will it be possible to alter the structure of the extractive export economy, in order to redress Colombia’s extreme concentrations of wealth? Will Petro reform the US-backed Colombian police and military, or rein in the neo-paramilitary organizations operative through much of the country? Can he protect the rights of citizens to assemble, protest, express opinions and vote without fear of homicidal state and para-state repression? Or will continuities, particularly in the elephantine bureaucracies of repression, but also in finance, education, land and health, outweigh changes in society? At this stage, we can sketch only partial answers to these questions and offer educated guesses to those that will unfold over time, in the context of broader regional developments, especially in Brazil and Venezuela. We are at once hopeful, in light of Petro and Márquez’s road to the Casa de Nariño, traced below, and sceptical, because of the powerful forces they are up against—and the mixed messages already sent by cabinet appointments and congressional alliances.

Wars of the oligarchy

Colombian history is often represented as a paradox: on the one hand, it has been a long-standing model of political and economic stability, ‘a nation in spite of itself’, with regular elections and alternating parties of government both committed to investment-grade policies; on the other, it has been plagued almost from the start by violent political

insurgencies—with no apparent contradiction between the two.⁵ It is true that compared to, say, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru or Ecuador, with their coups, dramatic institutional ruptures and economic turbulence, the continuity of Colombia's parliamentary government is striking. And while its violence is the stuff of legend, it is neither as endemic to the country's history as the 'culture of violence' arguments—themselves endemic (as well as circular)—suggest, nor as unique: one has only to look to Mexico, or Central America, for cases where networks of criminal violence have spiralled beyond the control of state and society, and fused with both.

What sets Colombia apart is, first, the fractious bipartisan political system established in the late 1840s, decades before the borders of the state had assumed their present form. The demographic weight of the country lay, as it still largely does, in the colonial heartlands of the Eastern and Central Cordilleras (the Western Cordillera and the southwest, Greater Cauca, would rise in the twentieth century). Colombia was of course massively rural, with minimal transport infrastructure aside from the Magdalena River, and politically over-determined by its epic geographical differentiation—towering mountain ranges, barricading the cities from each other and walling off the Pacific and Caribbean littorals; hundreds of miles of sparsely inhabited equatorial lowlands forming a vast internal frontier to the southeast. In this deeply fragmented landscape, party rivalries were intensely localized from the start, composed of regional-local networks of clientelism and patronage reaching down the social scale to smallholders, tenants, sharecroppers, squatters, landless workers and wage-earners. Divided originally over clericalism and federalism, both parties, Liberals and Conservatives, could thus mobilize cross-class and multi-ethnic coalitions. This sectarian, bellicose partisanship, combined with the jockeying among regionally fragmented ruling groups for national power, led to innumerable small-scale civil wars, culminating in 1899 in the War of a Thousand Days, which raged across the Santander, Cauca, Tolima and Caribbean regions in a mutual slaughter that left perhaps 100,000 dead, mostly illiterate peasants. Ironically, the victorious Conservatives then adopted the economic programme of their

⁵ David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*, Berkeley 1993; Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society*, New York 2001; Marco Palacios, *Violencia pública en Colombia, 1958–2010*, Bogotá 2012; Daniel Pécaut, *Orden y violencia: Evolución socio-política de Colombia entre 1930 y 1953*, Bogotá 1987.

erstwhile Liberal enemies, using state institutions to obtain loans and credits, and building infrastructure—roads and railroads—to support the coffee export economy.⁶

As elsewhere, the popular classes were largely excluded from political participation by property and literacy qualifications under the Conservative and so-called Independent Liberal oligarchy (1880–1930): ex-slaves, free people of colour, indigenous peoples, artisans and the *mestizo/mulato/zambo* peasant majority, living and working as sharecroppers, tenants, squatters, smallholders and frontier settlers.⁷ In contrast to Bolivia, Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil or Mexico, however, no consolidated national-popular political representation or leadership had arisen to challenge the merchant–landlord oligarchy by the 1930s, when the Liberals returned to power after fifty years in the political wilderness. Instead of resolving their sectarian conflict, ruling groups in both parties had formed new factions, breeding new feuds. By now there were small pockets of organized labour along the Magdalena River and elsewhere, where the Partido Socialista Democrático, a nascent communist grouping, found a base. Initially, Liberal leaders sought to swell their ranks through alliances with these unionized workers and peasant leagues, but the first tepid attempts at labour law and agrarian reform under Alfonso López Pumarejo in the late 1930s were virulently denounced by the pro-Franco Conservatives as the road to red terror—and swiftly reversed. By 1945 the Liberal government itself was waging war on organized labour with the repression of the Magdalena River boatmen's strike.⁸ Once Conservatives returned to power in 1946, the security forces were set against radical-Liberal politicians and supporters, who formed clandestine guerrilla networks of self-defence. The stage was set for sectarian, tit-for-tat killings and massacres, which duly materialized in Boyacá and the Santanders, before metastasizing across the country.

⁶ Charles Bergquist, *Coffee and Conflict in Colombia, 1886–1910*, Durham NC 1978; Helen Delpar, *Red against Blue: The Liberal Party in Colombian Politics, 1863–1899* (2nd edition), Tuscaloosa 2010; Nancy Appelbaum, *Muddied Waters: Race, Region and Local History in Colombia, 1846–1948*, Durham NC 2003.

⁷ James Sanders, *Contentious Republicans: Popular Politics, Race and Class in Nineteenth-Century Colombia*, Durham NC 2004.

⁸ The Colombian Communist Party effectively disarmed itself in this period through its uncritical support of López Pumarejo during the Popular Front and World War II ('Browderismo'); see Medófilo Medina, *Historia del Partido Comunista de Colombia*, Bogotá 1980.

La Violencia lasted over a decade and left some 200,000 dead—again, the vast majority illiterate peasants.⁹

In part the weakness and fragmentation of twentieth-century labour was due to the weight of the coffee sector within the national economy, where patterns of smallholding predominated, alongside squatting, sharecropping and tenancy, and peasant growers sold their crops to wealthy merchant-creditors within the bipartisan system of patronage and clientelism—a zero-sum game that pitted smallholders against one another and allotted a key role to commercial intermediaries.¹⁰ This helped to ensure that independent working-class breakthroughs were limited to regional enclaves, while radicalism was dispersed and divided, contained within certain unions, factories or city districts, or dispersed along distant agrarian frontiers, and blocked by a massive petite bourgeoisie of middlemen. The absence of a national-popular political project was tragically confirmed in the urban uprisings that followed the murder of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the solitary left-populist figure of national standing to emerge from Liberal ranks, on 9 April 1948. That day, Gaitán was supposed to have lunch in Bogotá with a young student leader from Havana: Fidel Castro. As he watched crowds loot and burn in the historic city centre of the capital, Castro concluded that Colombia lacked the political leadership and organization to channel the popular rage Gaitán's murder had unleashed in revolutionary directions. Though juntas, or local organs of self-government, spread throughout the country, there was no coordination or cooperation between them, and the army dismantled them with ease. Castro was right.¹¹

From elite pact to counterinsurgency

During the Cold War period, Colombian capitalism, tethered tightly in the US orbit, remained largely oligarchic. In 1957, the leaders of the

⁹ Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Penaranda and Gonzalo Sanchez, *Violence in Colombia: The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective*, Wilmington 1992; Mary Roldán, *Blood and Fire: La Violencia in Antioquia, Colombia, 1946–53*, Durham NC 2003.

¹⁰ Charles Bergquist, *Labour in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela and Colombia*, Palo Alto 1986; Lesley Gill, *A Century of Violence in a Red City: Popular Struggle, Counterinsurgency and Human Rights*, Durham NC 2016.

¹¹ Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia*, Madison 1986; Ignacio Ramonet, *My Life: A Spoken Biography by Fidel Castro*, London and New York 2008, pp. 98–9; Gonzalo Sánchez Gómez, *Los días de la revolución: Gaitanismo y 9 de Abril en provincia*, Bogotá 1983.

two parties hammered out their differences in a *pacto de caballeros*—gentlemen’s agreement—that would allow them to alternate in office by means of a National Front, dividing power equitably between the Liberals and Conservatives, and once again rigidly excluding competitors from the left. Through the 1960s and 70s, amid a growing agrarian crisis and the collapse of the national-developmental modernization paradigm, political opposition from below was either repressed or driven to take up arms. Inspired in part by the Cuban Revolution, three small rural insurgencies, the FARC, ELN and EPL, sprang up in the mid-1960s, although with its peasant leadership, the FARC felt they had more to teach Castro than learn from him, especially when it came to guerrilla warfare.¹²

The 1970s crisis in the countryside, triggered in part by the subdivision of smallholder plots to the point where they could no longer sustain large families, as well as the reconfiguration of the world coffee market, helped drive the expansion of new informal settlements on the peripheries of the cities, largely unrepresented by the governments of the National Front. They organized their own neighbourhood and civic movements, in districts lacking even basic public services such as sewerage, electricity, roads and water. Although the governing parties began to set up neighbourhood-level clientelist vehicles in the shanty towns, an important percentage of this new proletariat did not vote, with abstention rates over 50 per cent throughout the National Front period. Student militancy in public universities—especially in Cali and Medellín, but also Bogotá and Barranquilla—and the stirring of organized labour, as rank-and-file militants engaged in strikes and direct action, beyond the

¹² The FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) was formed with Communist Party support in 1966, though it backdated its founding to a failed US-backed counterinsurgency campaign in 1964, Operación Marquetalia; its historic strongholds were in Cauca, southern Tolima and on the agrarian frontiers of the Amazonian departments of Meta, Caquetá and Guaviare. The ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) was formed in 1965 by followers of Castro and Guevara in the unions and rural frontiers of Santander, in the northeast. The EPL (Ejército Popular de Liberación), founded in 1967 with the support of the Maoist PCC-ML, was likewise isolated geographically on the northern Antioquia/southern Córdoba borders. All three embodied the experience of guerrilla warfare during *La Violencia*; they represented no threat to bipartisan business as usual in the cities. See James Henderson, *Modernization in Colombia: The Laureano Gómez Years*, Gainesville FL 2001; Darío Villamizar, *Las Guerrillas*, Bogotá 2018; Mauricio Archila *et al.*, eds, *Una historia inconclusa: Izquierdas políticas y sociales en Colombia*, Bogotá 2009; Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez, *Las FARC, 1949–1966: De la autodefensa a la combinación de todas las formas de lucha*, Bogotá 1991.

official party-based confederations, added to the growing sense of urban discontent.¹³ This was the context in which the 19 April Movement, or M-19, declared its existence, an offshoot of the urban left inspired by the Tupamaros in Uruguay or Monteneros in Argentina. They stole one of Bolívar's swords from its museum to signal their intent. The Civic Strike of 1977 represented a confluence of these streams of protest—students, organized labour (led by teachers), and neighbourhood-civic movements—against the rise in the cost of living, with inflation at 35 per cent, and against the Lopez government's State of Siege legislation. It was met by brutal repression by the Liberal government; activists were persecuted, murdered or 'disappeared' in a dirty war that would prevent an urban left from cohering.¹⁴

At this stage, the giant US market to the north threw a new ingredient into the volatile Colombian mix. The dynamic expansion of the cocaine economy from the late 1970s, building on existing marijuana-export networks, brought new players into the political arena.¹⁵ The drug lords' new wealth soon found its way into real estate, ranching, transport and auto, finance, sport, architecture, the arts and entertainment, construction and local politics, supercharging the Liberals in particular, while the death squads the narcos wielded to keep rivals in place formed the kernel of the hard-right paramilitary groups that would soon emerge as a part of a new historic bloc in Colombian politics. But coca also offered the small guerrilla insurgencies a new source of funds—as armed defenders of the growers against manipulation by the merchants—a large new peasant base. The Colombian Army and the narcos' paramilitary squads joined forces to hunt them down, though the small farmers and villagers suffered far more from the counterinsurgency operations than did the guerrilla combatants.¹⁶ Meanwhile the urban left would be tarred by association as 'insurgents' and 'terrorists'.

¹³ Mauricio Archila, *Idas y venidas, vueltas y revueltas: Protestas sociales en Colombia, 1958–1990*, Bogotá 2003.

¹⁴ Medófilo Medina, *La protesta urbana en Colombia en el siglo veinte*, Bogotá 1984; Mauricio Archila, 'El paro cívico nacional del 14 de septiembre de 1977: Un ejercicio de memoria colectiva', *Revista de Economía Institucional*, vol. 18, no. 35, November 2016; Álvaro Delgado Guzmán, 'Ricardo Sánchez Ángel: ¡Huelga! Luchas de la clase trabajadora en Colombia, 1975–1981', *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2009.

¹⁵ Eduardo Sáenz Rovner, *Conexión Colombia*, Bogotá 2021.

¹⁶ Alfredo Molano, *Aguas Arriba: Entre la coca y el oro*, Bogotá 1990; Alfredo Molano, *A lomo de mula: Viajes al corazón de las Farc*, Bogotá 2016.

In the 1980s and 90s, counterinsurgency thus constituted a third politically exclusionary process, after the nineteenth-century oligarchy and the Cold War dyarchy of the National Front. Against this background, countervailing moves to broker the disarmament of the left, such as Belisario Betancur's in the early 1980s, or to launch a constitutional reset, as under César Gaviria in 1991, were bound to be undermined by the paramilitaries and their masters. When FARC leaders attempted to run for election locally under the banner of the Unión Patriótica they were gunned down by death squads—over 5,000 killed. M-19's attempt to restart the peace process by taking the Supreme Court hostage and calling on Betancur to fulfil his promises backfired disastrously when the government handed charge of the situation to the Colombian Army, which retook the Palace of Justice with murderous ferocity, killing nearly a hundred people, including eleven of the country's Supreme Court justices. Torture, arrest, imprisonment without charge, military tribunals, extra-judicial murder: these were the fates of many M-19 and other revolutionary militants, most of them young people from the urban middle class.¹⁷

This was the political context in which Gustavo Petro was formed. Born in 1960, Petro is the son of a schoolteacher from the Caribbean department of Córdoba who moved to the capital to study civil engineering. Petro grew up in Zipaquirá, a small town half an hour from Bogotá, now part of its Greater Metropolitan District. He edited his school newspaper, joining the political wing of M-19 in 1977 at seventeen. In the early 1980s, he ran successfully for the Zipaquirá city council; in 1984, he announced his militancy in M-19 in the town square. Politics was Petro's vocation, though economics was to become his field of study; he took a BA and an MA at two of the country's leading private universities: the Externado and the Javeriana. Arrested by the Colombian Army for weapons possession in the weeks before the 1985 Palace of Justice attack, he was tortured, and held in prison for two years. On his release in 1987, social protest was mounting again. With his M-19 comrades Carlos Pizarro and Antonio Navarro Wolff, Petro negotiated the right to stand in elections, as the FARC (through the UP) and ELN were also doing. Petro was duly elected to the Constituent Assembly in 1991, though the year before Pizarro was assassinated by the death squads, as was the FARC's presidential candidate.

¹⁷ A. Ricardo López-Pedrerros, *Makers of Democracy: A Transnational History of the Middle Classes in Colombia*, Durham NC 2019.

The 1991 Constituent Assembly elections demonstrated a clear hunger for political alternatives. While the Liberal Party, with 25 seats, dominated the Assembly, the left ADM-19—including former guerrillas, not least M-19—was the second largest bloc, with 19 seats, as the Conservatives had split. This allowed the ADM-19 to play a significant role in shaping the 1991 Constitution, which was predictably Janus-faced: if implemented, the provisions on social, economic, cultural, collective and environmental rights (Title II) would have made Colombia among the most advanced countries in the world; but in practice, they were sacrificed to the provisions on economics and public finance (Title XII), reflecting the real balance of class forces.¹⁸ In the 1990s Colombian realities diverged ever more sharply from the social-democratic stipulations of its new charter, becoming a dystopia of soaring homicide rates, rural insurgency and state-led counterinsurgency, under harsh neoliberal policies. In 1994, Petro left Bogotá for Brussels, where he served as Colombia's Attaché for Human Rights and studied development at the Catholic University of Louvain. He returned to Colombia in 1998, and successfully ran for Congress as the candidate of a new urban-left political formation, Via Alterna. At this stage, in the late 1990s, the left managed to obtain a toe-hold in electoral politics in Bogotá and Cali; in 2003 Luis Eduardo Garzón was elected mayor of Bogotá on the Polo Democrático Independiente (PDI) ticket. Running Bogotá would prove to be a path toward broader projection for the new electoral formation.

Rise of uribismo

The Cold War ended in Europe, but in Colombia it accelerated throughout the 1990s, in tandem with coca growing. No one did more to intensify the conflict than Álvaro Uribe Vélez, for whom social democracy was as bad as communism. Born in 1952, Uribe grew up in the middle-class neighbourhood of Laureles in Medellín, and began his career in the 1970s as a student activist in the Liberal Youth at the University of Antioquia. An ambitious young lawyer, he soon went into full-time politics, though was dogged by scandal. His father, Alberto Uribe Sierra, appears to have been an intermediary for land sales, laundering money for cocaine merchants, and became very rich very fast from the late 1970s. When Uribe Sierra was murdered, allegedly by the FARC, on the family's ranch in Córdoba in 1983, Uribe Vélez flew there

¹⁸ Alisha Holland, 'Insurgent Successor Parties', in Steven Levitsky *et al.*, eds, *Challenges of Party Building in Latin America*, Cambridge 2016, p. 302.

in Pablo Escobar's helicopter. Escobar's former lover, Virginia Vallejo, testified that the two knew each other from the early 1980s and that Escobar called him 'Doctor Varito'.¹⁹ There appears to have developed a functional division of labour between Uribe—the educated professional politician—and his narco 'friends' like Escobar and the elite Ochoa family, a linchpin of the Medellín organization; Uribe's mother was a cousin of patriarch Jorge 'El Gordo' Ochoa. Uribe himself can have had no illusions about them, though he affects to have known them as horse breeders and cattle ranchers.²⁰

From 1990 to 1994, Senator Uribe's star rose. As Governor of Antioquia from 1995–97 he brought the Cold War counterinsurgency to a boil, while allowing the cocaine business to thrive. Uribe implemented a policy of 'citizen coordination' with the Colombian police and armed forces, which gave cocaine exporters-cum-paramilitary leaders room to manoeuvre as head of private 'security co-operatives', or *Convivirs*, licensed by the state. Uribe's key security official, Juan Moreno Villa—named by the DEA as the chief importer of potassium permanganate, a key chemical in the manufacture of cocaine—coordinated directly with such 'security co-operatives'-cum-paramilitaries (Moreno later died in a suspicious helicopter accident after falling out publicly with Uribe). Relentless counterinsurgency warfare waged by ACCU paramilitaries in tandem with Colombian Army forces under Gen. Rito Alejo del Rio, Uribe's commander of choice, succeeded in 'pacifying' the banana export zone of Urabá, long dominated by the FARC and the EPL. Uribe considered this to be one of his main achievements as governor. For the Colombian military, as well as the paramilitaries—now grouped under a newly formed national umbrella organization, the AUC—the lesson was clear: Urabá (and neighbouring Córdoba) offered a blueprint for arresting and reversing the advance of the FARC and/or ELN. The AUC next moved into the FARC heartlands in the Amazonian basin and, anchored in zones of expanding territorial control, began to project power nationwide.²¹ Uribe was its political figurehead.

¹⁹ Virginia Vallejo, *Amando a Pablo, odiando a Escobar*, Barcelona 2017; Joseph Contreras and Miguel Garavito, *Biografía no autorizada de Álvaro Uribe Vélez: El señor de las sombras*, Bogotá 2002; Fabio Castillo, *Los jinetes de la cocaína*, Bogotá 1987.

²⁰ Sáenz Rovner, *Conexión Colombia*, 2021.

²¹ Álvaro Camacho Guizado, *A la sombra de la guerra: Ilegalidad y nuevos órdenes regionales en Colombia*, Bogotá 2009; Alejandro Reyes Posada, *Guerreros y campesinos: El despojo de la tierra en Colombia*, Bogotá 2009.

The multilayered, overlapping crises and spirals of violence of the late 1990s stretched Colombia's bipartisan system to breaking point. The old elite's forms of rule were broken through from the right, by Uribe, with support from a wide array of constituencies, not least the Clinton Administration and the US Congress, which in 1999 approved Plan Colombia, a \$1.3 billion counter-narcotics package aimed at fighting the FARC, not least by aerial fumigation. Although he ran as an outsider against 'the system', Uribe's backers included the country's major conglomerates and business organizations, such as the Sociedad de Agricultores Colombianos (SAC), Asociación Nacional de Industriales (ANDI), Grupo Empresarial Antioqueño (GEA), Grupo Aval, Grupo Santo Domingo and the Organización Ardila Lülle. Professional associations, small business people and shopkeepers, taxi, bus, motor-taxi and truck drivers, devout Catholics, retired people, petty landowners and agribusiness, cattle ranchers, military and police officials, salaried civil servants and a significant layer of workers, intellectuals, academics and even students all supported Uribe, as did the dominant media (RCN and Caracol), and many politicians. Of course, the narco-paramilitaries did, too. As AUC paramilitary chieftain Carlos Castaño put it in his autobiography, *Mi confesión*, Uribe's 'philosophy'—Cold War counterinsurgency combined with Opus Dei Catholicism and radical neoliberalism—lined up closely with that of 'the firm', *la empresa*.²²

Running as an independent at the head of the Colombia First coalition, Uribe was elected president in the first round of voting in May 2002 with 53 per cent of the vote, taking all of the wealthiest, most populous and urbanized Andean departments, along with former FARC and ELN heartlands in the Amazon, Orinoco and Pacific. In addition, perhaps a third of the new Congress and Senate had AUC connections. Uribe took the win as a broad counterinsurgent mandate, which would incorporate a deal with the paramilitaries on terms largely dictated by AUC commanders themselves.²³ This time, there would be no reversal. Uribe would finish what the old bipartisan system had barely started. The only way to rid Colombia of the FARC (and the ELN) was the militarization of society.

Even in the US, few exponents of anti-communist national-security doctrine can have believed in it as fervently as Uribe did, or practised it with such devotion. To the extent that Bush's Global War on Terror featured

²² Claudia López, *Y refundaron la patria*, Bogotá 2010.

²³ Mauricio Romero, *Rutas de la parapolítica*, Bogotá 2007.

counterinsurgency as its centrepiece, however, Uribe and Bush were very much in sync, and at home together during visits to Cartagena de las Indias and at Bush's ranch in Crawford, TX. Bush would award Uribe the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his role in the War on Terror. This relationship was one of the keys to Uribe's success. By 2008, Uribe had received more than \$7 billion in aid from the US through Plan Colombia and its successor programme, Plan Patriota, both explicitly designed to crush the FARC. This largesse tripled the budget of the Colombian Armed Forces, which doubled in size. US satellite technology and communications equipment enabled the Army to intercept FARC communications and break the chain of command by attacking its top leadership. In 2008, with the help of US surveillance, Uribe ordered the bombing of a FARC encampment in Ecuadorian territory, killing the FARC's senior diplomat, Raúl Reyes. Three years later, Alfonso Cano, the FARC's top leader, was killed. The rising tide against rural insurgency duly found its counterpart in the cities, where government-led political persecution was unleashed; paramilitaries had free rein for scorched-earth policies in which they murdered and disappeared civilians. Between 2005 and 2009, with the help of Minister of National Defence Juan Manuel Santos, Uribe presided over the disappearance of (at least) 6,400 young men from the urban peripheries, who were dressed up as guerillas and photographed with arms to boost official body counts. The Colombian military is only now confronting this history publicly through the Special Jurisdiction of Peace courts. Yet on its own terms—leaving aside the cost in lives destroyed—Uribe's militarized counterinsurgency succeeded, thanks in the main to robust US support.²⁴

Uribe ran the country as if it was one of his rural estates, barking orders to subordinates, inspecting local problems up close through hands-on 'community councils', and projecting a rustic, austere, patriarchal image in the media day and night. Horse trading with political allies in Congress and the ministries, many of them *paisas* from Antioquia, while persecuting political enemies, often juridically, was his *forte*. He had a 70 per cent approval rating at the end of his first term.²⁵ Clientelist hardball—bribes to the Constitutional Court—allowed Uribe to rewrite the Constitution so that he could run for a second term, and he won elections handily in 2006, with 62 per cent of the vote, and 30 of 32

²⁴ Forrest Hylton, 'Plan Colombia: The Measure of Success', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2010.

²⁵ María Jimena Duzán, *Así gobierna Uribe*, Bogotá 2004.

departments. He had the backing of six right-wing parties, including the Conservative Party, plus his own newly established Union Party for the People (Partido de la U).

The Uribe government accelerated the liberalization of trade and finance, the privatization of the public sector and deregulation of the labour market. Uribe reinforced the extractivist orientation of Colombia's accumulation model by encouraging foreign investment in the mining and energy sectors and subsidizing cash-crop monocultures like African palm, rice, cotton, corn and sugarcane biofuels, bananas and cattle ranching. US multinationals and investment banks were among the main beneficiaries—often taking over land expropriated from the guerrillas. Uribe also took steps to part-privatize the state oil company, Ecopetrol, and to guarantee that future governments could not undo contracts his administration signed with foreign investors. The economy grew at nearly 5 per cent a year between 2004 and 2014, and Colombia's GDP per capita quadrupled over the same period. On the ground, results were uneven: in the countryside, growth was an anemic 1.8 per cent, compared to 7.4 per cent for construction, 6.5 per cent for mining and energy and 5 per cent for services. When Uribe left office in 2010, he was rumoured to be one of the largest landlords in a country with a rural Gini coefficient of 0.85.²⁶ Although he had sustained high levels of popularity through to at least 2008, mounting corruption scandals and 'false positives' (disappeared and murdered civilians made to look like guerrilla insurgents) were beginning to tarnish his aura. A third term wasn't on the cards.

Handshakes in Havana

Uribe's handpicked candidate, Juan Manuel Santos, nevertheless won the 2010 election with a 69 per cent landslide, using the same electoral vehicle, Partido de la U, and taking every department except Putumayo. Once in power, Santos shrewdly continued Uribe's policies of fighting the insurgents and repressing social protest, facing down an agrarian strike against his free-trade agreement with the US, while breaking with his former master in calling for peace negotiations with the FARC. For this, Santos had the backing of the US government and American energy firms, as well as Colombia's leading conglomerates

²⁶ UNDP, 'Informe Nacional de Desarrollo Humano. Colombia rural: razones para la esperanza', PNUD Colombia, Bogotá 2011.

and business organizations; even the ultra-revanchist cattle ranchers' association, FEDEGAN, where Uribe had long enjoyed rock-ribbed support.²⁷ The four-year negotiations began in Havana in November 2012, with Chávez and Castro playing a crucial role in getting FARC leaders to come on board. In view of the minimal social and economic concessions made by the government, the Havana Accords represented a historic defeat for the FARC, and this was how Santos marketed it. The FARC's weak negotiating position allowed Santos to exclude structural reforms from the discussion and seal a 'cheap' peace deal in the interest of the propertied classes.

Havana not only marked the major political-military turning point in Colombia's longstanding civil war, but also, as designed, opened up new opportunities for the investment and accumulation of capital. The FARC's demobilization would pave the way for fossil-fuel and mining megaprojects, cash-crop agribusiness, cocaine, neo-paramilitarism, and tourism to those regions previously under guerilla control. The economic rationale behind the peace policy was to increase foreign direct investment, boost economic growth, and to further integrate Colombia into global value chains; during Santos's first term, FDI surged over 250 per cent. In this sense, the peace process consolidated a period of 'primitive accumulation' going back to Uribe's days as governor of Antioquia: the displacement of millions of small-holding peasants, the seizure of their lands and the military's territorial reconquest under Plan Colombia and its successor. It was aimed, as Santos put it, at turning Colombia into a 'normal' country for capitalist development.²⁸

Though it seemed as though Santos had built a new consensus in favour of peace, understood as an opportunity for new capital investment—in part through generous spreading of *mermelada*, or government pork—Uribe shrilly opposed him from the Senate and ran a 'war' candidate against him in 2014, whom Santos defeated in the second round, seemingly confirming support for the Havana deal. But this was to underestimate the conservative bloc Uribe had created. Regrouping the parties of the far right, Uribe mounted a media assault around the idea

²⁷ Angelika Rettberg, 'Need, Creed and Greed: Understanding Why Business Leaders Focus on Issues of Peace,' *Business Horizons*, May 2016; Nazih Richani, 'Fragmented Hegemony and the Dismantling of the War System in Colombia,' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2020.

²⁸ Maria Jimena Duzán, *Santos: Paradojas de la paz y el poder*, Bogotá 2018.

that Santos was giving the FARC a free pass and the keys to the country. Without basis in fact, it nevertheless played well. Given the FARC's long history of kidnappings, human-rights violations and involvement in the drug trade, coupled with decades of heavily biased media coverage in which the military often had the first and last word, many Colombians rejected the idea of the guerrillas becoming political actors. When Santos unwisely put the issue to popular referendum in early October 2016, without having first conducted a popular-education campaign in the media, 50.2 per cent of voters rejected the accords. This was not fatal for the Havana deal: a slightly amended version of the Accords was later ratified by Congress and passed into law. But it signalled *uribismo's* weight in the country, painting *santismo* as a slippery slope that would turn Colombia into Venezuela.

Despite Uribe's threats, the FARC's transformation into a political party as stipulated in the Havana Accords posed a minimal threat to the established order. Its constituency was confined to specific regions and it lacked the capacity for building one nationally. The final agreement encouraged broader democratic participation and included safety guarantees for FARC commanders, trade unions, human-rights groups and dissident forces, although there was no indication the Colombian government would honour these pledges, much less compel neo-paramilitary forces to do so. Like the better parts of the 1991 Constitution, the 2016 agreement was mostly a dead letter. Indeed, hundreds of FARC militants were murdered after giving up arms in 2016, repeating the story of the 1980s and giving ballast to those who opted to participate in 'dissident' FARC fronts—regional rump groups involved in cocaine trafficking, arms trafficking, illegal logging and mining and extortion—or join the ELN, up to its neck in the same lines of business.

Yet for left parties and social movements, the peace process opened up new opportunities for mobilization in the cities, despite their relative voicelessness at the negotiating table (Francia Márquez was an exception that confirmed the rule: she was present in Havana in order to outline the rights of victims to reparations). Urban social movements demanded the implementation of both the 1991 Constitution and the 2016 Peace Accords, and for the first time, won a significant degree of moral and intellectual leadership. Petro's 2018 presidential campaign was the first sign that change was in the wind. Elected to the Senate in 2006 on the ticket of the Polo Democrático Alternativo, Petro had mounted a

sustained and highly effective parliamentary assault on Uribe's record, exposing his ties to paramilitarism, *latifundismo* and narco-trafficking in Antioquia in the 1990s, with a specific focus on Urabá, as well as neighbouring Córdoba, where Uribe owned *latifundios*. Petro's performance was remarkable, for he knew it would bring credible death threats and require beefed-up security, yet he remained undaunted, presenting mounting documentary evidence to support his claims.²⁹

Though Duque won the 2018 presidential election with 54 per cent of the vote, Petro's achievement was historic: he won 8 million votes, or 42 per cent; never had a left presidential candidate garnered so much support. Petro performed well in Bogotá, the sparsely populated Pacific and—in the first round, at least—Atlantic coasts, which had large numbers of people of African descent, along with the heavily indigenous departments of Putumayo and Vaupés; these lightly populated regions had also voted for Santos in 2014, and in favour of the peace accords in 2016. For observers of Colombian politics, it came as no surprise that Duque's victory was accomplished with the help of drug money and electoral fraud. Nor did allegations to that effect, backed by evidence, trouble his administration, which enjoyed cordial relations with Washington, where Duque had long worked at the Inter-American Development Bank, and where Vice-President Marta Lucía Ramírez played the part of policy intellectual, despite the narco-construction scandals involving her and her husband.³⁰ Many Colombians, not to speak of Americans, had apparently become inured to such corruption, treating it like unpleasant background noise.

Uribismo redux?

Under Duque's presidency, *uribismo* appeared to return with full force, counterinsurgency and neoliberalism advancing hand in hand. The

²⁹ Iván Cepeda and Alirio Uribe Muñoz, *Por las sendas del Ubérrimo*, Bogotá 2017. Along with Petro, Cepeda, of the Polo Democrático, has been a leading anti-Uribe opposition figure in the Colombian Senate and heads the main victims' rights organization. Cepeda's father was a leader of the PCC and Congressperson for the UP who was assassinated by paramilitaries in 1994. In the 2006 elections the presidential candidate of the Polo Democrático Alternativo was Senator Carlos Gaviria, a distinguished constitutional scholar, who took a significant 22 per cent of the vote and won two frontier departments, Guajira and Nariño.

³⁰ After investigative journalist Jeremy McDermott broke the story, Ramírez sued him for defamation and lost. See McDermott. 'Tracking the Ghost: Follow the Money', *InSight Crime*, 29 March 2020.

government boycotted implementation of the Havana Accords and broke off ties with Venezuela. Large landowners, cattle ranchers and agribusiness interests, with intimate ties to paramilitary groups, drug traffickers and organized crime, retained their commanding positions in regional politics. Investigators and prosecutors working on the restitution of stolen lands to coercively displaced peasants were threatened and, in some cases, murdered. The Duque government slashed the budgets for the institutions set up under the Accords—the Truth Commission, the Search Unit for Missing Persons, and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace. Little progress was achieved on the issue of rural development or substitutions for coca crops. According to the US Office of National Drug Control Policy, illegal coca plantations expanded under Duque: by 2020, 245,000 hectares—12 per cent of the cultivatable land surface—was dedicated to the production of coca leaves. The systematic persecution of social and environmental activists, students, neighbourhood leaders, trade-union organizers, feminists, LGBTQ+ activists and leaders of peasant, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities continued unabated. Over 900 activists were murdered, with a sharp rise in massacres, from eleven in 2017 to 96 in 2021. Most of these atrocities took place in Cauca, Antioquia and Nariño; the perpetrators were typically right-wing paramilitaries, the Colombian military or dissident FARC groups, and the main beneficiaries large landowners, agribusinesses, drug traffickers and multinational mining corporations. In almost all cases, crimes remain unsolved.³¹

Yet despite the continuities with *uribismo*, something had shifted. This was apparent in the unprecedented cycle of social protest and popular struggle that rocked Colombia's cities from 2018. Its prologue came earlier, in June 2016, when peasants, rural workers, indigenous groups and social movements called a national agrarian strike, organizing marches and setting up roadblocks throughout the country, while Afro-Colombian fishermen paralyzed the Pacific port of Buenaventura. What united the different protest groups was their rejection of the Santos government's free-trade agreements, pro-agribusiness policies and industrial-mining projects, which increasingly threatened the livelihoods of rural communities that combine agriculture with wage work or small-scale artisanal mining. The mobilization was largely a product of Santos's unwillingness to fulfill promises made during the 2013 rural

³¹ White House, 'ONDCP Releases Data on Coca Cultivation and Potential Cocaine Production in the Andean Region', 16 July 2021; 'Masacres en Colombia durante el 2020, 2021 y 2022', INDEPAZ, 30 September 2022.

strike, which unfolded in protest against the US–Colombia free-trade agreement signed the previous year.³²

In October 2018, following Duque’s victory, Colombia’s students declared an indefinite strike in public universities—the first since 2011—and took to the streets in all major cities in protest against government de-financing and the deepening structural crisis of higher education. Far more students were now attending university than before, but they did so in precarious conditions, with limited prospects for future professional advancement. Although Duque—and, especially, the ubiquitous Uribe—tried to tag them as vandals and dangerous criminals, the students effectively won the debate about the importance of financing public education and respecting the right to protest, and gained support from city centres and urban peripheries where most people do not go to college, or even graduate from high school. In the event, students won an additional \$1.4 billion from the Duque government.³³

The following year Duque’s Finance Minister, Alberto Carrasquilla—another Uribe retread, Panama Papers alumnus and crony of Duque’s from Washington’s international-financial institution circles, notorious for the structured-debt devices (‘Carrasquilla bonds’) by which financial companies in which he had a finger entrapped over a hundred poor Colombian municipalities in double-digit rates of interest—introduced a new raft of neoliberal reforms. A fresh onslaught in upward redistribution, the Carrasquilla package would reduce the minimum wage, introduce hourly contracts and differential pay, turn the public pension fund over to private entities; privatize the state oil company, the airwaves, electric companies and all enterprises in which the state holds fewer than half the shares; lower taxes for multinational corporations and raise them for middle-class and working-class citizens. In late November 2019, a national strike was called by trade unions and student movements. In terms of bodies in the streets, shutting down cities for months on end and dominating the news cycle and public discourse, the students would display an unmatched capacity in the months ahead. The 2019 general strike went far beyond the student movement, however, with an estimated 1.5 million people taking to the streets in all major and nearly all secondary cities in every department: Medellín, Cali,

³² Edwin Cruz, ‘La recomposición del movimiento campesino en Colombia, 2013–16’, *Revista Via Iuris*, no. 26, January 2019.

³³ Sandra Borda, *Parar para avanzar*, Bogotá 2021.

Barranquilla, Cartagena, Santa Marta, Bucaramanga, Pereira, Manizales, Pasto, Popayán, Villavicencio, along with 550 municipalities.³⁴

Students, trade unions, teachers, peace and environmental movements, feminist collectives, truck drivers, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, retirees, LGBTQ+ rights and peasant organizations, middle-class professionals and some small and medium business owners protested and struck day after day against government corruption, police violence, social inequality, rising electricity costs, large-scale extractivist projects and the systematic killing of activists. In particular, the younger generation—not only students but precarious workers and the unemployed—who had not experienced the repression of the 1980s and 1990s, played the leading role in the mobilizations, which shook the country for weeks. More than ever, social media played an essential role in the collective actions, as well as in overcoming the geographical dispersion of the protests. Following international examples, beginning in Bogotá and then spreading across the country, front-line demonstrators—mainly but not only students and young people; mainly but not only male—wore protective helmets, gear, and shields, much of which was homemade. Unlike the neighbourhood gangs, they had no weapons, but nevertheless put their bodies on the line by facing off against riot police night after night—and, in Bogotá, defied curfews imposed by the liberal Green mayor, Claudia López, who emerged from the protests thoroughly discredited, as did the Green Party's perennial presidential candidate, Sergio Fajardo.

The demonstrations, barricades, work stoppages and road blockades expressed opposition to Carrasquilla's class-struggle neoliberalism and, at the same time, signaled the ideological weakening of *uribismo*, which failed to convict protesters in the court of public opinion as quasi-insurgents in league with Venezuela and the ELN. The rejection of the repressive Duque government and of *uribismo* as the country's dominant ideology had a unifying effect. It helped overcome the heterogeneity of the political subjects, and their geographical and sectoral

³⁴ What follows draws upon our reports of the protests as they unfolded. See *inter alia* Hylton, 'In Medellín', LRB Blog, 26 November 2019; Tauss and Joshua Large, 'In Latin America, the Long Shadow of Colombia's Far Right Is Receding', *Jacobin*, 12 December 2021; Tauss, 'Colombia Is in Revolt against Neoliberalism', *Jacobin*, 20 May 2021; Hylton, 'Colombia Rising', LRB Blog, 7 May 2021 and 'La Resistencia', LRB Blog, 31 May 2021. See also Raúl Zibechi *et al.*, *Colombia: Entre la rebeldía y la esperanza: Reflexiones en torno a la Movilización Social 28 abril de 2021*, Medellín 2021.

fragmentation, and strengthened a shared commitment to fight for a socially just, democratic and de-militarized Colombia. The weeks of protests shifted the country's common sense to the left, and reinforced the idea that non-violent direct action could make demands heard. At the same time, movements struggled to put together a coherent agenda for negotiations, and tensions between trade-union veterans and student youth, as well as between official student representatives and rank-and-file activists, simmered on the National Strike Committee, which could not encompass the breadth of movements—or, more importantly, the regions, since different movements came together in the streets of specific departmental capitals and towns, each with distinct dynamics.

Uribismo's loss of hegemony was also manifest in the regional elections of October 2019. Independents won the mayoralties of three major cities (Bogota, Medellín, and Cali). In addition to the socio-economic hardship that affects the lives of many Colombians, and Duque's low popularity in office—under 20 per cent by December 2019—the ebbing support for *uribismo* had to do with Uribe himself, now the single most unpopular politician in the country. With over two hundred open legal proceedings against him—*inter alia*, for bribery and witness tampering, for which he is on trial—in national and international courts, the capacity of the former president to provide an ideological or political lead for the ruling, middle and subaltern classes had waned, even in Antioquia and the coffee axis to its south. The mass strikes and demonstrations against the government, and Duque's inability to respond except with often lethal violence, accelerated Uribe's decline, as they were directed against him as much as Duque. However, with Christmas and New Year looming, Duque had only to wait for the holidays for respite.

The protests were set to resume in March 2020, alongside government negotiations with the National Strike Committee, but the Covid-19 pandemic brought both to a halt. The virus hit the country hard with high infection rates and overcrowded intensive care units; to date, more than 140,000 people have died. The pandemic rapidly worsened an already dire social situation, as unemployment, poverty and hunger rose sharply. Over 40 per cent of the population dropped below the poverty line, while 15 per cent lived in extreme poverty (both figures were surely underestimates). Nearly two-thirds of the labouring population were on the minimum wage, less than \$250 per month. The devaluation of the peso made imported food more expensive, hitting the working poor hardest. It also widened the gap between them and the ruling class, whose wealth

soared. The government's failed crisis management fanned flames of popular anger and discontent, alienating much of the bourgeoisie in the process. Small and medium-sized businesses shuttered and did not reopen. Unemployment reached 16 per cent.

Popular irruption

In April 2021, Carrasquilla proposed a further regressive tax reform, a 19 per cent sales tax on basic foodstuffs like cereals, milk, sugar and coffee, along with utilities (water, electricity, gas), accompanied by subsidies for the rich. In response, students, social movements, trade unions and peasant organizations called for another national strike, and in the following days protests expanded in scope and intensity, turning into the largest popular uprising in Colombia's history. Like the country itself, the 2021 revolt was predominantly urban, although the countryside was mobilized, too, with highways blockaded. More than 10 per cent of the total population took to the streets across the country, calling for Carrasquilla's resignation and the retraction of the sales tax, which Duque quickly had to concede. But the movement was now calling for fundamental social, economic and political reforms, along with the resignation of Minister of National Defence Diego Molano and Duque himself. Many said that after the pandemic and police murder of young people, they had had nothing left to lose, not even fear.

The 'social explosion' of late April through June 2021 marked the continuation, expansion and radicalization of the general strike of November–December 2019. The pandemic further deepened the crisis and exposed a lack of consensus—not least among the country's fragmented bourgeoisie, who rejected Duque's administration by more than a two-thirds majority—around how the state and society should be organized. This fragmentation among the various ruling-class fractions reflected the breakdown of the historic bloc that Uribe had led and created an opening in which popular demands could be expressed. At the same time, the very brittleness of the governing consensus ensured the predominance of overwhelming coercion in the state's response. In the two months of the uprising, government repression left 44 people dead, 47 blinded in one eye and over 4,600 wounded; two thousand were arbitrarily detained.³⁵ People feared cars without plates driven by men

³⁵ 'Comunicado a la opinión pública y a la comunidad internacional por los hechos de violencia coetidos por la Fuerza Pública de Colombia', *Temblores*, 28 June 2021.

in civilian clothes, and police on motorcycles, but did not stay indoors, except at night. Members of UN teams and human-rights organizations documenting the crackdown were themselves victimized by state violence in the act of recording it. Many victims were not even demonstrators, which only spurred further protest and revolt.

Along with medics and doctors providing aid to the injured, journalists came under fire from police. The media blackout of the violence was almost total, but images of lethal police brutality, updated each morning, circulated nationally and internationally on social media. The Uribe camp denounced the protesters as ‘vandals’ and ‘terrorists’, or, combining the two, ‘terrorist vandals’. Via Twitter, Uribe himself called for soldiers in the streets and a State of Exception. When Vice-President Marta Lucía Ramírez went to Washington to engage in damage control and was asked about the missing, disappeared and dead, she replied that there were none. For the most part, the mainstream Colombian media, echoing Duque and right-wing businessmen and politicians, tried to lay the uprising at the feet of Venezuela, *castro-chavismo* and its representative in Colombia, with Petro depicted as an inveterate master conspirator.

In fact Petro and his party, Colombia Humana, played a secondary, not to say inconsequential, role. Few followed the lead of Colombia Humana Congresswoman María José Pizarro, the daughter of Carlos Pizarro, who met with local organizers in the streets; nor would many have been welcome. For tactical and strategic reasons, Petro called on protesters to lift the barricades, but, as he pointed out, they were not listening. Instead, more barricades went up, and new front lines kept appearing: mothers of the front line; professors of the front line; medics of the front line; teachers of the front line; and so on. Indeed Colombia’s urban cultural elite largely gave its support to the uprising, in contrast to its alienation from struggles in the countryside. In May and June 2021, the mass democratic mobilization of young people in the cities attracted all manner of artists, musicians, writers, actors, filmmakers, producers and professionals of all stripes. This movement of movements, which dominated social and other media, had enough moral authority to trigger struggles for control of representation and leadership, and many rank-and-file activists claimed that opportunists were coming out of the woodwork in search of political-electoral advantage.

Unlike the 2019 general strike, however, what emerged in 2021 was a layer of local leadership exercised by those dubbed *los ninis*: young

people without steady work, study or future prospects of either, living in precarious circumstances in Colombia's equivalent of *favelas*, called simply *barrios populares*. 'The nobodies' (*los nadies*), as they were also called, had no confidence in, and minimal familiarity with, institutions in the state or civil society, which made negotiations unlikely. Who, after all, was willing to speak with them on the barricades without first sending in the police? Certainly not the mayor of Cali or the governor of Valle de Cauca. The *muchachos* and *muchachas* came together with others in neighbourhoods like Siloé, on the western hillside of Cali, which has a rich tradition of working-class radicalism and trade unionism, to perform collective labour—*minga*, a Quichua word borrowed from Cauca's indigenous movement: the term itself reflects the circulation of struggles in the southwest—in order to provide food and security during the strike. Barricades had communal kitchens set up nearby, run by women who were family and community members, operating on small donations, where young people ate better than they could at home due to poverty, some of it pandemic-induced.

The communal kitchens also served as places for political discussion and pedagogy, where veterans could talk with young people, not least about neighbourhood history. Similar dynamics were at work in the heavily Afro-Colombian districts in the east. In Cali—as noted, epicentre of the 2021 uprising—different neighbourhoods and groups came together to form *Colectivos Unidos*. Similar things occurred in nodal points of Bogotá's periphery: Soacha in the west and Ciudad Kennedy in the south, for example. In addition to or in lieu of marching in city centres, people sought to make decisions collectively in local assemblies about how to meet basic needs in the communities where they lived.

Images of collective deliberation in urban neighbourhood *cabildos*—a process that was merely incipient in 2019, but by 2021 had spread even to middle-class districts, especially in the southwest of the country, where citizens called for a regional *cabildo abierto*—did not circulate widely on social or other media. This made it difficult to grasp the extent to which a new type of popular sovereignty and solidarity had emerged, on the barricades, in the neighbourhoods, and in marches and protests, and with it, a new historical subject: the marginalized youth of the urban periphery. This intensification of social struggle and popular resistance in city streets from 2018 to 2021, and in the countryside from 2016 to 2021, made Petro's victory possible. And the Havana Accords of 2016 were the condition of possibility for this new cycle of struggle, anchored

in mass direct action. In this sense, after Havana, the repressed figure of a democratic urban Left, with its own agenda for social change, which was disappeared through the dirty war after 1977, returned to undo the long rule of Colombia's counterinsurgent state.³⁶

Comparing the demands that crystallized in 2021 with Petro's programme as presidential candidate in 2022, we see considerable overlap. Demands covered seventeen principal points or areas: the peace accords; the eradication of government corruption; the elimination of the militarized riot police (ESMAD); free higher education and cancellation of student debt; the right to peaceful protest; progressive tax reform; healthcare reform, to turn the wholly privatized, US-based model into something more like Brazil; gender equality; pension reform; regulation of logging and mining and energy corporations; restitution of lands stolen by the FARC and the paramilitaries; reorganization of the police and military. Needless to say, the Duque government refused to negotiate with demonstrators. Duque clearly planned to wait protesters out, just as previous Santos governments had done with agrarian strikes in 2013 and 2016, and as Duque had tried with the student strike in 2018. Labour history teaches that during strikes and uprisings, time tends to be on the side of the state and capital, not the working class and its allies.

Electoral push

Yet the March 2022 parliamentary elections registered the shifts that had taken place. Petro spearheaded a new progressive alliance, the Pacto Histórico, made up of twenty smaller parties and movements.³⁷ With 17 per cent of the popular vote, the Pacto Histórico emerged as the largest political bloc, with 20 (out of 108) seats in the Senate and 28 (out of 166) seats in the Chamber. The traditional Liberal and Conservative parties

³⁶ Charles Bergquist, 'La izquierda colombiana: un pasado paradójico, ¿un futuro promisorio?', *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2017.

³⁷ The Pacto Histórico includes Petro's Colombia Humana, a successor vehicle to the Polo Democrático Alternativo, the FARC's Communes, the Colombian Communist Party, the centre-left Todos somos Colombia group, modelled on Mexico's Morena, as well as other left or social-democratic groupings, indigenous parties, social movements, Afro-Colombian activists, the Unión Patriótica and the People's Congress—a social movement that played a pivotal role in the popular mobilizations of 2013—as well as some opportunist parliamentarians formerly with Santos or Duque.

came second and third, with 14 and 12 per cent respectively, while Uribe–Duque’s so-called Centro Democrático and Santos’s Partido de U barely notched up 10 per cent each, roughly the same as the Greens. This was a crushing blow for the Centro Democrático, in particular, which fell from being the most powerful force in Congress to a minor party, with 13 seats in the Senate and 16 in the Chamber.

In the primaries, held the same day, the Pacto Histórico nominated Francia Márquez for the vice presidency, the first Afro-Colombian woman to be nominated for that post in the country’s history. Running first as an independent-left candidate in the primaries, she had come second to Petro with 783,160 votes. Born in 1981, the daughter of artisanal miners in the Cauca district of La Toma, in the mountainous southwest, Márquez fought as a teenager to defend the Ovejas River as a resource for her community and campaigned to block multinational mining corporations like AngloGold from exploiting the region under Uribe and Santos, in the face of terrifying depredations by paramilitaries. In 2014 she led a 350-mile protest march by Afro-Colombian women from Cauca to the presidential palace in Bogotá, demanding an end to all illegal mining activities in their territories. She contributed as a representative of the victims to the Havana peace process, helping to win reserved seats in Congress. Márquez thus emerges out of Afro-Colombian movements for collective land title, the feminist movement, along with Indigenous, environmental organizations, and the main public university (UniValle) in the southwest, long the most radically democratic region in the country.

Predictably, right-wing political operators from a range of parties launched a racist, misogynist disinformation campaign in the lead-up to the presidential election, based on pithy slogans and manipulated videos and tweets. Mainstream media highlighted Petro’s militant past and the outgoing Duque government denounced the Pacto Histórico as an ally of Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, even though Petro has long distanced himself rhetorically from all three—unsurprising for an ex-guerrilla running for president in Colombia. Nevertheless, Petro and Márquez easily won the first round, held in late May, with just over 40 per cent of the vote. To everyone’s surprise, the second-place finisher was not Uribe’s choice, the former mayor of Medellín, Federico Gutiérrez, from the right-wing coalition Equipo por Colombia. Rather, the 77-year-old independent candidate, Rodolfo Hernández, from the

League of Anti-Corruption Rulers, took 28 per cent. Similar to Trump, Bolsonaro or Uribe himself, the former mayor of Bucaramanga followed a right-wing, populist and authoritarian anti-establishment strategy, presenting himself as a plain-spoken political outsider. Aided by TikTok, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, Hernández pushed an aggressively simplistic and politically incorrect discourse against corruption and traditional politics.

In the run-off, Hernández had the support of large sections of the traditional Colombian right and the Uribe camp, which had proved unable to run its own candidate. Once again, the country's oligarchic media played a crucial role, with the leading newsweekly *Semana* campaigning heavily for Hernández, putting the spectre of *castro-chavismo* at the ideological heart of the campaign. The apocalyptic warning that Petro would turn the country into 'another Venezuela' played on xenophobic fears of the two million Venezuelans who have fled to Colombia in recent years (some of them descendants of Colombian immigrants to Venezuela). Yet not all *uribistas* turned out for Hernández, and the small centrist Green Party vote went to Petro, not his opponent. Petro-Márquez won the run-off with 50.4 to 47.3 per cent of the vote, Petro receiving the highest number of votes ever cast for a presidential candidate. Astonishingly, his campaign mobilized an additional 4 per cent, or 2.7 million votes, for the second round—primarily young first-time voters and poor Colombians from the urban peripheries who had previously stayed away from the ballot box. Voter turnout was the highest since 1998, when Andrés Pastrana won thanks to his promise to make peace (and with tacit support from the FARC).

Petro's visits to Colombia's most abandoned and war-torn regions and his long pedagogical speeches helped create an alternative common sense in political, ethical, and even aesthetic terms, with regional-local music and dance featured prominently at campaign events. Petro and Márquez also won in all major cities, with the exception of Medellín—though even there they took a third of the vote, and increased the number of voters by over 200,000—and received overwhelming support in the country's rural areas. Petro took the Atlantic and Pacific coasts handily, as well as the densely settled southwest. At the municipal level, the results showed a strong correlation between Petro's vote share and the percentage of people living in poverty. Regions along the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, such as Chocó, Cauca, Nariño, Putumayo and La Guajira, with majority

Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations, and particularly affected by the armed conflict and inequality, voted most enthusiastically. The Chocó, with its massive Afro-Colombian majority, voted 81.4 per cent Petro; however, the Chocó has a tiny population compared to Valle, Bogotá or Antioquia. Having Márquez on the ticket helped motivate people in historically neglected rural areas of the country. Her example of living without fear of death threats, and her idea of ‘living with flavour’—*vivir sabroso*: an Afro-Colombian variant of Indigenous Andean perspectives on *buen vivir* or *vivir bien*, codified in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions of 2008 and 2009—resonated with many long-ing for a less dystopian future to call their own.

The historical breakthrough represented by Petro and Márquez’s victory on 19 June 2022 hardly needs to be underlined. After two hundred years of successive exclusionary regimes, the popular classes at last have their own tribunes in office. As we have argued, Uribe’s electoral overthrow of the old Liberal-Conservative duopoly—with the backing of the dominant fractions of transnationalized Colombian capital: finance, real estate, commerce, agribusiness, mining, oil, gas, cocaine—and brutal crushing of the rural insurgencies ironically cleared the way for the rise of the Pacto Histórico, once Santos had achieved at least a partial peace settlement with the Havana Accords. But how far this landmark achievement will also represent a political-economic rupture in favour of the dispossessed is another question.

In his victory speech on election night, Petro announced that his government would ‘develop capitalism. Not because we worship it, but to overcome pre-modern, feudal and enslaved living conditions.’ The stadial theory of history contained in the phrase was common on the Latin American left in the twentieth century, and was revived most recently by Álvaro García Linera in Bolivia; yet of course, like Bolivia, Colombia has been increasingly capitalist for the past 150 years. As announced, Petro’s programme is not radical, much less revolutionary—expropriations are off the table. Instead, he has pledged to pursue a moderate reform agenda that aims to revive and renovate investment flows, while breaking with neoliberal theory and practice, and taking into account movements related to ethnic diversity, the environment, gender and sexuality, and women’s empowerment. For the first time ever, left feminists are prominent in Congress and some of the ministries. Will redistribution accompany representation, and if not, will the latter prove

sufficient? The objective is to cement the progressive foundations of the 1991 Constitution, reduce social inequality, cautiously redistribute wealth through progressive taxation, guarantee fundamental civil rights, and move towards the democratization of the state and the economy. Rather than building 21st-century socialism, *à la* Chávez, Petro envisions, at least rhetorically, a more regulated capitalism. If this sounds utopian, it is in part a sign of how far politics in Colombia, and in our time, have shifted.

Petro is a social democrat and his reading of Colombian history highlights the costs for his people of failing to implement a broad peace with social justice through redistributive reform policies. He has said he intends to carry out modernizing reforms that were consistently shelved by the oligarchy from the 1930s through *La Violencia* of the 1940s and 50s, and into the National Front of the 1960s and 1970s—agrarian reform, for instance—before neoliberalism took hold in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite his guerrilla past, or because of M-19's Bolivarian nationalism, Petro sees himself in the line of Liberal leaders like Alfonso López Pumarejo, Alberto Lleras Camargo and Carlos Lleras Restrepo, all of whom, oligarchs though they may have been, supported agrarian and other social reforms. Except that Petro also intends to rally the capital–state nexus, both domestic and international, to invest in (green) development and peace, and wants to dismantle the counterinsurgent state. Can he achieve a governing consensus to accomplish this?

Petro in office

The main Cabinet appointments to date present a mixed picture. On the one hand, Finance Minister José Antonio Ocampo Gaviria, born in Cali in 1952, is a longstanding member of Colombia's US-educated governing elite, with a PhD in economics from Yale (1976), cabinet appointments advancing breakneck neoliberal measures under Liberal presidents Gaviria and Samper in the 1990s, a foothold at Columbia, where he has co-edited numerous volumes on economic development with Joseph Stiglitz, and various turns through the revolving doors of international think-tanks and well-remunerated UN positions. By contrast, the new ministers of the Interior, Defence, Justice and Foreign Affairs, though from contrasting ideological backgrounds, all have track records in advancing the peace process. Minister of the Interior Alfonso Prada, born in Bogotá in 1963, a political operator with a background

in the Liberal Party, then the Greens, was a Santos promotion who worked hard to popularize the Havana Accords and pivoted to Petro's campaign in April 2022. Defence Minister Ivan Velásquez Gómez, born in Medellín in 1955, is a lawyer by training who played a key role in the *parapolítica* prosecutions, investigating extra-judicial executions and human-rights abuses. Foreign Minister Álvaro Leyva, born in Bogotá in 1942, from a Conservative Party background, played a vital role as peace mediator with the FARC under Betancur in the 1980s. Justice Minister Néstor Osuna, born in Bogotá, is a law professor at Externado, charged with overhauling the justice system.

So far, the left groups and social movements of the Pacto Histórico have just four of eighteen ministries: Labour, Environment, Health and Mines and Energy. Rather than try to press his (narrow) advantage, Petro has formed alliances with mainstream political forces in order to bulletproof himself against de-stabilization. Vice-President Márquez has been promised a new Ministry of Equality to eliminate social inequalities between men and women, and between different ethnic groups and the dominant creole-*mestizo* society. In theory, women will be granted special access to employment, housing, land, healthcare and education, as stipulated in the 1991 Constitution; those who have dedicated their lives to care work in the home will be integrated into the public-pension system. However, Interior Minister Prada has yet to put forward the bill for the creation of the Ministry of Equality, and instead appointed Cielo Rusinque, whom feminists oppose, as head of the Department of Social Protection, thereby antagonizing Márquez. Though rumours of a rift are rife, Petro issued Decree 1874 on equity, which gives Márquez functions, but no budget. Márquez is also tasked with creating a Historic Reparations Community to 'overcome the effects of racism'; but again, no additional money has been allotted.

On the basis of this uneven start we can begin to sketch out the challenges that lie ahead, both for a civil settlement and on the economic front, and to identify potential popular allies the Petro government might mobilize against oligarchic-multinational opposition. As has been evident since the 1980s, Colombia's armed conflict can only be resolved through agreements with the actors involved, including the neo-paramilitary outfits. This is why Petro met with Uribe to discuss peace with the ELN and the Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AGC), the largest neo-paramilitary group. Unlike his predecessor, he

promised to implement rural reforms for the substitution of coca crops. The Petro government aims to achieve what Santos once called ‘total peace’, as opposed to the patchwork of agreements hitherto. The devil will be in the detail, not only with the FARC dissidents and ELN guerrillas, but above all with the AGC, which is the wildcard. Like the Mexican groups with which it works, the AGC is a multinational conglomerate with a base in Urabá, the ground zero of contemporary paramilitarism. The government is seeking to end extradition of drug traffickers to the US, so as to provide incentives for them to confess their crimes and leave the business; nearly three hundred leading traffickers signalled their willingness to do so. It remains to be seen whether the AGC will need special legislation, or if the US—the DEA in particular, but also the CIA, State and Defense departments—will support or sabotage those negotiations. A bill is currently being drafted by Senator Iván Cepeda that would bring the AGC, along with the ELN and FARC dissidents, in from the cold. Its passage through Congress is likely to be fraught.

To get key Congressional players onboard, Petro has pushed the idea of a ‘grand national agreement’. The Liberals, Conservatives and Party of U all wanted in, as did many smaller factions, the better to influence, twist, and distort any eventual agreement for economic gain or political advantage. This suggests that the representatives of Colombia’s leading fractions of capital want to shape and orient the Petro administration, rather than challenge it directly. This leaves Uribe’s Centro Democrático, along with Ingrid Betancourt’s splinter of the Greens, as the opposition (the official Greens, meanwhile, have the Ministry of Education).

While the bear hug of the mainstream parties will guarantee Petro’s measures the necessary parliamentary majorities, they will likely weaken and dilute them. So far, the Liberals have proposed legislation to legalize marijuana, the independent centre-left Dignidad wants to reform higher education (Law 30), while the Pacto Histórico proposes to eliminate fracking and control logging. The most important debates will come in October, leading up to the passage of a budget in which Petro is asking for an additional 14 billion pesos—up from Duque’s 391 billion to 405 billion pesos, or \$90 million.

Achieving peace depends on the support of the military and the police, and in an unprecedented move, Petro’s Minister of Defence, the former prosecutor Iván Velásquez, retired a dozen officers, and ten more resigned. This purge fits with Petro’s proposal to shelve the decades-old

counterinsurgency discourse of the ‘internal enemy’ and to demilitarize social life. This would include the elimination of the military criminal jurisdiction, with the relocation of the police to the Ministry of the Interior or of Justice. It appears that ESMAD will be reformed, not dismantled: the government plans to transform it into a unit for civic protection during demonstrations, and pledged to follow UN guidelines on the use of force.

Colombia’s cities and many rural areas are still affected by the multifold violence of war. In 2022 alone, 99 social activists have been murdered and 72 massacres reported by INDEPAZ. Colombia remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world for trade unionists, human rights defenders, journalists and environmental activists, with 5.2 million displaced persons, or 10 per cent of the population, a figure surpassed only by Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo.³⁸ How much will this change? In the first months of Petro’s presidency a series of massacres, evidently carried out by a Venezuelan group called the Maracuchos, has rocked Bogotá. In other parts of the country, FARC dissidents and Mexican trafficking groups are the alleged authors—the killing of seven police in Huila, for example. The public security situation is critical, as massacres have risen rather than fallen since Petro took office on 7 August.

Economic renewal?

The main economic goal of Petro’s administration is to break Colombia’s dependence on commodity rents, the drug economy and organized crime. Yet Finance Minister Ocampo has said Colombia will need those rents; investors—and Petro’s political rivals—reacted to Ocampo’s nomination with relief. Fossil fuels currently make up half of Colombia’s licit exports, and Petro wants to move away from them gradually, with plans to prohibit future hydrocarbon exploration and large-scale open-pit mining, and halt pilot projects for fracking and offshore drilling, while pocketing the rents from 170 existing contracts in order to fund social programmes. He hopes to promote solar, wind, water and ‘green’ hydrogen energy sources and get international compensation for leaving coal and oil reserves in the ground. Yet green talk is cheap: the 1998–2012 left governments in Latin America started out sounding green notes, but

³⁸ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Country Profile: Colombia*, Geneva 2022.

quickly discovered their dependence on energy rents and commodity exports. Will Petro be forced to do the same?

The support of environmental movements and workers' unions in the coal and oil industries would be crucial for any breakthrough. So far, there are no signs Petro plans to mobilize them. The new Minister of Mines and Energy, Irene Vélez—born in Bogotá in 1982, a feminist geographer and environmentalist at UniValle, with a PhD from the University of Copenhagen—has come under constant attack, clashing with Congress and the press as well as the oil, gas and coal lobbies. The Uribe-led right has gone for her lack of mining-industry credentials, but her Deputy Minister, Belizza Ruíz, a professor at the Universidad Nacional-Manizales, has a PhD in electrical engineering from UNAM, and has long researched renewable energy in Colombia. Her first task is to bring down the cost of energy on the Caribbean coast, which in some regions rose by 40 per cent in August. However, the government also plans to remove fuel subsidies, allowing gas to rise to 18,000 pesos per gallon, or just under \$4. The Deputy Minister of Mines and Energy is Giovanni Franco, a mining engineer at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, with a firm grasp of the technical nuances which industry representatives accuse Vélez of lacking. The Minister for the Environment, Susana Muhamad, has been a bright light on the political left, speaking out for protesters in 2021 as city councillor from Bogotá.

Yet the cost of moving away from the extractive economy on the cusp of a global recession, when inflation and fuel prices are high, hardly needs underlining. Falling export revenues could put more pressure on the Colombian peso, triggering capital flight and a currency crisis, driving inflation even higher. Tourism—especially 'eco-tourism'—is supposed to play a key role in financing the post-extractivist transition to a peace economy. Petro plans to increase the country's airport capacity and attract more international tourists over the next decade, rising from 4.5 million to 12 million annually, effectively turning Colombia into a much larger version of Costa Rica. The growth of tourism, however, is primarily contingent upon the success of the peace agenda, and, leaving aside the pollution generated by increased air travel, it has a dark underside: sex tourism, especially with minors, and trafficking of women, which flourish in the light of day in Cartagena and Medellín. Will the central government finally confront the various regional mafias who run these trades?

A green-capitalist growth model would imply changes in agriculture. In line with the Havana Accords, the government plans a moderate land reform that includes the redistribution of land to poor peasants, as well as the restitution of land to victims of the armed conflict. As with other campaign pledges, the details are sketchy. Since the 1990s subsidized imports, primarily from the US, have crippled Colombia's agricultural sector and forced small farmers to work on coca plantations as pickers (*raspachines*) to make a living. This is why Petro announced he would revise (but not renegotiate) free-trade agreements, which Biden officials have rejected. The fact that drug production and trafficking within Colombia are increasingly controlled by Mexican organizations makes the picture even more complex; so far AMLO's policy of *abrazos* as opposed to *balazos* has not turned out well. Since 7 August, Colombia has also seen an explosive wave of land takeovers sweeping the country. The power of large landowners within the regional state system may limit what can be done to redress the country's land hunger, and Uribe is already warning that if the government does not step in and adjudicate the conflicts, landowners will have no choice but to arm themselves. Minister of Agriculture Cecilia López, a Liberal stalwart who has held the post before, has her work cut out, and has appointed a deputy minister from Palmira, Luis Alberto Villegas, with ties to the sugar industry.

The main government initiative to date is Ocampo's budget proposal, drawing on Piketty's ideas for a wealth tax that would affect some 10,000 Colombians—perhaps expediting the relocation of their assets to Panama, long used by Colombia's oligarchy as a tax haven—while also levying new taxes on ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages which would hit working-class sectors who can least afford it. Taxes would also rise on pensions over 10,000,000 pesos (\$2,300), vacant fertile land, dividends, oil, coal and gold exports, coffee production, second homes and imported products not covered by free-trade agreements, to boost social spending. Some have suggested this represents the resurrection of Carrasquilla's proposals, with a few progressive additions thrown in. Petro also plans to cut the bloated defence budget, and for the first time ever, Defence Minister Velazquez has requested a budget cut of 800 billion pesos, to be allotted to Finance instead.

Pathways

In a regional context, Colombia has long served as a staging ground for US destabilization efforts against neighbouring Venezuela. In line with

Washington, Duque broke off relations in order to recognize pretender Juan Guaidó as president in 2019. Petro has reversed that position, reaching out to Maduro to normalize ties. He delivered a fiery speech at the UN denouncing the international drug regime in relation to oil and coal consumption and deforestation in the Amazon. At the same time, he has confirmed an agreement with US SouthCom, allowing US helicopters to patrol the Amazon Basin, in violation of Article 173 of the 1991 Constitution. Nevertheless, Petro's victory shifts the regional balance of power towards further integration in Latin America. Over half a dozen countries—Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Peru, Honduras, Venezuela, Chile—have elected left coalitions, challenging to greater or lesser extents the role of the US government and transnational corporations. The gap between promises of progressive change and the ability to implement them is something Colombia's new government is beginning to face now the honeymoon is over—Petro's approval rating has dropped ten points since taking office in August, to around 46 per cent. Expectations are running high, and the *muchachos* and *muchachas* of the front line have said that if Petro messes up, protest will return.

As recent experiences in Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil and Argentina have shown, electoral success does not necessarily mean control over the levers of the state; bureaucratic routines within institutions and their close ties with powerful social and economic interests mean that change will move slowly, if it moves at all.³⁹ In light of the current constellation of forces, with a victory margin of just 3 per cent, Petro has made clear that he is not contemplating more radical reforms, not least because that might give the far right a chance to regroup and go on the offensive. Colombia has one of the most violent, mafia-ridden ruling classes in the region, as some factions—*uribistas*, but not only them—have close ties to the military, paramilitary structures and trafficking networks. Petro has sought to include all but the *uribista* far right in his government. In extending a hand to the establishment, however, he may lose an arm.

It remains to be seen whether Petro will be willing or able to create a broad left front that includes initiatives from trade unions, social movements, feminist collectives and neighbourhood organizations, and mobilizes those constituencies on behalf of these demands; this may

³⁹ For an analytical survey, see Juan Carlos Monedero, 'Snipers in the Kitchen: State Theory and Latin America's Left Cycle', NLR 120, Nov–Dec 2019.

depend on how relations with Vice-President Márquez unfold. The Labour Minister, Gloria Ramírez, is a steadfast radical who comes out of the trade union and feminist movements, with significant experience as a Congresswoman—can she implement a progressive labour-law reform, and address the issue of informality? Can she build a constituency for it? In education, the government could, in theory, form an alliance with the teachers' union, Fecode. But with Santos's former Health Minister Alejandro Gaviria as Minister of Education, look for neoliberalism to be introduced through the back door, as it was under Santos. Gaviria has already told the Senate that universal free tuition is off the table and there is no word yet on student debt, even though education is slated to receive the largest budget of any ministry (54.7 billion pesos). Though close to Vice-President Márquez, Deputy Minister of Education Aurora Vergara, a rising young Afro-Colombian academic star, has no professional experience in public education. While former student representative Jennifer Pedraza is now in Congress and has introduced a proposal to reform Law 30, it is hard to see what an alliance between the Ministry of Education and the majority of the student movement might look like.

In health, a likely ally is the *Movimiento por la salud*, which rejects the neoliberalization of healthcare and has long worked for alternative policies. Carolina Corcho, the Minister of Health, is a trained psychiatrist with experience in researching urban violence. She plans to unify the contributory and subsidized systems into a single, universal public system, arguing that private-insurance healthcare outfits have violated the constitutional right to healthcare, and wants to give resources to the municipal and departmental health secretaries to create mobile units, serving multiple communities. Healthcare is slated for debate in 2023, giving Corcho and her team time to prepare to take on the insurance lobby and their political representatives in Congress.

Will Colombia finally move beyond its exclusionary political model, joining its neighbours in opening up to the needs of broader urban and rural social forces? Or will the Petro government prove a short-lived experiment, rolled back by the militarized forces of conservatism that want to confine Colombia to its solitary historic path? Emphasizing the importance of endogenous factors in contemporary Colombian history, we have traced the reproduction of serial models of exclusionary oligarchic rule, from the nineteenth century to the Cold War, and thence to the

era of counterinsurgency. As the bipartisan political system foundered, it was *uribismo* that, ironically, played the role of clean broom, sweeping aside the remnants of the post-1848 system even as it depended upon US firepower and funds to implement its counterinsurgency programme. In doing so, *uribismo* unwittingly laid the foundations for *santismo*, which took over Uribe's political vehicle and used it to broker the surrender of the FARC. Yet—and this is our second, related argument—once the floodgates of peace were opened with the Havana Accords, they could not be closed. The government and dominant media could no longer cast urban-left resistance as 'guerrilla terrorism' or 'vandalism'. Popular protests, strikes and uprisings buried *uribismo*, and ensured that *petrismo* would replace *santismo* as the best chance to forge lasting peace and social change.

While it is too soon to say whether a new agenda will emerge for Colombia's cities, for the first time, it has become a possibility. Perhaps it is now possible to envisage a historic bloc in which capital is forced to make concessions, pay taxes and comply with government laws. It is harder to see how the police and armed forces can be reformed, and their recalcitrance may prove to be a significant obstacle, though much may depend on how successful Foreign Minister Lleyva is at negotiating a new deal with Washington on trade and counter-narcotics.

Colombia's bloody history of prolonged warfare within a constitutional republican framework, fuelled and funded by narcotics exports for the past forty years, marks it as distinct from its neighbours in the region, although parallels with Peru and Mexico, as well as Central America, spring to mind (in fact, Mexico's disastrous Plan Mérida (2006–10) was modelled on Plan Colombia).⁴⁰ In Colombia, the Petro government has set itself the task of re-making the country in line with the social, cultural and environmental rights contained in the 1991 Constitution. In that sense, Colombia may be comparable to Bolivia and Ecuador, both of which have progressive constitutions that resulted from titanic social struggles that brought progressive governments to power, triggering partially successful reactions from the far right. Petro's proposal for a 'national agreement' may be read as an effort to head that outcome off

⁴⁰ Benjamin Smith, *The Dope: The Real History of the Mexican Drug Trade*, New York 2021; Carlo Nasi, *Cuando callan los fusiles: Impacto de la paz negociada en Colombia y en Centroamérica*, Bogotá 2007.

at the pass. The danger is that Petro's government will make concessions without gaining commitments to peace and social programmes, including jobs. Yet for once, Colombia and its neighbours in the hemisphere seem to be in sync in terms of radical democratic politics and cycles of popular struggle, which could result in greater cooperation at the inter-state level throughout the region. Should Colombia help resuscitate a neo-Bolivarian project, in however modified a form, Chávez—not to speak of Fidel Castro—may yet be smiling in his grave at the degree to which at least some things in Latin America have come full circle.