

# Colombia's President Petro warns of "soft coup" attempt

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At a march in Bogotá on June 7, the pseudo-left Colombian President Gustavo Petro warned about a "soft coup" attempt against him, as his administration faces a corruption scandal, a breakdown of the ruling coalition, a drop in popularity and open coup threats by retired military officials and opposition groups.

Petro said in his speech that he could face a similar fate as Peruvian President Pedro Castillo, who was overthrown last December in a US-backed parliamentary coup. But he added: "Pedro Castillo was alone, and Petro is not alone: if they dare to destroy democracy, the people will come out of every corner, street and district, out of every rock, to defend with its hands the popular mandate." He concluded demagogically that his "government is at your service until death" and that he has "introduced the reforms the people want," and it's up to Congress to approve them.

After a demonstration by retired troops against Petro last month, the former chairman of the Association of Retired Military Officials (Acore), John Marulanda, declared that reservists would do their best to repeat what took place in Peru and "defenestrate" Petro.

Then, on June 8, several right-wing opposition groups demanded Petro's resignation in a demonstration convoked by a fascist businessman, who called for stopping Colombia "from falling in the hands of the Communists."

On June 7, thousands demonstrated across Colombia against these threats and to demand the reforms Petro promised. However, the president's approval rate has dropped dramatically less than a year into his term, from over 50 percent last November to 26 percent just before the latest scandal.

Moreover, while a slight majority of Colombians views his labor bill positively, over 60 percent oppose his overall reform proposals, according to a May poll by Invamer.

With the support of the trade unions and pseudo-left, Petro was able to channel a series of mass social explosions and general strikes in 2019, 2020 and 2021 against social inequality, the homicidal "let it rip" response to COVID-19, and the brutal repression which left close to 100 protesters dead, hundreds "disappeared" and many more injured.

But it has not taken long before most of his supporters have concluded that he is not going to significantly impinge on the wealth and properties of the financial, corporate and landowning elites. Simultaneously, a section of the ruling elite has decided that his "left" populism, which rests heavily on identity politics, and

his inadequate reform proposals are failing to suppress social opposition and the class struggle, as shown by the collapse in his popularity.

The demonstration on June 7 was convoked by the trade union bureaucracy to protest that legislators are using the corruption scandal to discard Petro's reform proposals. These consist of: 1) a healthcare bill that promises to expand the network healthcare primary services but will only serve to provide new subsidies for the mostly privatized healthcare providers; 2) a pension bill that would cover the massive deficit of the privatized pension funds with public money while transferring most pensioners to the state pensions and expanding coverage (the campaign promises of handing a meager US\$120 per month to all elderly Colombians without a pension and to guarantee a living pension were abandoned), and 3) a labor bill that would enshrine in law the 8-hour day, a night shift differential and wage parity between men and women.

Revelations emerged in the last two weeks that Petro's chief of staff Laura Sarabia had wiretapped her nanny and that his ambassador to Venezuela, Armando Benedetti, threatened to disclose illegal campaign financing to Petro's campaign. Both officials belonged to Petro's closest circle and have been fired.

The right-wing weekly *Semana*, which has led the exposures, published a series of audios and text messages between Petro, Sarabia and Benedetti. The former ambassador threatened to disclose the presumably illegal source of \$3.5 million in campaign money. "We are going to jail... With all the shit that I know, we'll all be fucked. If you fuck me, I'll fuck you," he said to Sarabia.

In text messages to Petro, Benedetti accused Sarabia of leaking information and slandering Benedetti to the press. After being terminated, Benedetti kept bitterly attacking Sarabia while claiming he has drug problems and acted out of "rage and drinking." He then decided to cool off by traveling to Istanbul to see the football final of Europe Champions League.

This was a Petro's official in charge of organizing with the Biden administration a diplomatic rapprochement with the Venezuelan government. In one of the audios to Sarabia, published by *Semana*, Benedetti boasted of his "excellent relations with the US Department of State, but I can't tell you about that, but it's not like I'm becoming a spy..."

In response to the scandal, the US State Department reaffirmed the Biden administration's "excellent partnership with Colombia under the Petro administration."

While the illegal wiretapping so casually employed by the 29-year-old Sarabia has raised suspicions of whether the government is employing such measures more widely, the far-right opposition is using the scandal in the most hypocritical fashion. Their political leader, former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), was found to regularly spy on politicians, activists, journalists, and judges, and the military was exposed for wiretapping politicians, judges and journalists under the Uribista administration of Iván Duque (2018-2022).

Regarding illegal campaign financing, indictments were filed on Monday against former Uribista presidential candidate Óscar Iván Zuluaga and a minister under the Liberal-led administration of Juan Manuel Santos as part of millions of dollars in campaign money and kickbacks from the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht, in a corruption scandal that has implicated the entire political establishment in Colombia and across Latin America.

The longstanding ties between Uribe and drug cartels were repeatedly reported in US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks. These also acknowledged widespread extrajudicial executions by the military, and the collaboration of the armed forces and Uribe directly with fascist paramilitary militias that massacred peasants for land grabs, but Washington continued to send billions in military aid, ostensibly to fight drug trafficking and defend democracy.

The Sarabia-Benedetti scandal, nonetheless, has offered an excuse for the main forces in Congress, including within Petro's "Historic Pact" coalition, to put a hold on the reform proposals and describe his government as "illegitimate."

Meanwhile, Petro is seeking to exploit the rescue of four indigenous children who survived 40 days alone in the Colombian Amazon after a plane crash to try to boost his image and provide a progressive varnish to the armed forces, whose search teams worked with the indigenous communities. "The joining of forces for a common good: the indigenous guard and the Armed Forces of Colombia... that is the true path to peace," Petro tweeted after visiting the children at a military hospital.

This followed a trip to Cuba, where he signed a ceasefire with the ELN (National Liberation Army) Colombian guerrilla group as part of Petro's plan for a "total peace," even as the military and paramilitary fascist groups keep massacring peasants and disarmed, former guerrilla leaders.

Petro was a member of the M-19 guerrilla movement, which laid down its weapons in 1990 and became a bourgeois party along with sections of Stalinist guerrillas that formed the Patriotic Union (UP). The Colombian state, working closely with US forces, collaborated with paramilitary forces to kidnap and kill thousands of M-19 and UP rank-and-file and leaders. Just last month, from his prison cell in the US, the paramilitary leader at the time, Salvatore Mancuso, acknowledged that the state intelligence office had given him the order to murder Petro himself, who was elected to Congress in 1991.

One of his main campaign promises last year was a "police reform" to eliminate the Anti-Riot Squadron (ESMAD) implicated in many killings and transfer the police from the Defense Ministry to the Interior Ministry. But even such window-dressing has been de-prioritized by the administration due to "difficulties" in even

presenting it to Congress.

Instead, the ESMAD was simply renamed to the "Unit for Dialogue and Policing," and it has kept repressing protests. So far this year, according to official records, it has intervened 2,731 times in demonstrations or gatherings and used force 211 times. As recently as June 8, in response to the injury of an officer during clashes with students protesting at the National University, Bogota Mayor Claudia Lopez demanded that the unit "enter and detain these criminals," which would have been the first police invasion of a campus since 1984. While the request was denied, the incident shows the repressive frenzy building up in the ruling class.

Petro has also tried to regain popularity by criticizing the economic and anti-immigrant policies of US imperialism, even as he vows to "consolidate" Colombia's strategic partnership with NATO.

Along with Lula in Brazil and other so-called "Pink Tide" governments, Petro has promoted the renewal of regional commercial deals like UNASUR that circumvent the dollar, but even during the commodity boom in the early 2000s, the ruling elites failed to establish any real "integration." Such initiatives are undermined at every turn by competition, nationalist chauvinism, and efforts to attack wages and working conditions locally and offer the most profitable conditions to foreign capital.

Meanwhile, the union bureaucracy and pseudo-left are working to channel opposition behind the government by falsifying its capitalist class character. A particularly criminal role is being played by the Socialist Workers Party (PST), which has claimed to represent "Trotskyism" in Colombia since the 1970s, when it was founded by the renegade Nahuel Moreno.

The Colombian Morenoites have endorsed Petro repeatedly and concluded from the recent social explosions that workers must pressure Petro to "expropriate the expropriators," suggesting that he could be pressured into leading a socialist revolution. The PST opposed participating in the pro-Petro demonstration last week due to the corruption scandals. Instead, on June 7 it called on Petro to kick out Benedetti and other particularly discredited politicians, while writing: "We demand the government to break with the bourgeoisie and transfer power to the workers to advance toward the fundamental changes required."

As Trotsky wrote, "No devil ever yet voluntarily cut off his own claws." The union apparatus, the PST and the other pseudo-left allies of Petro are working consciously to betray the working class to protect their own positions in the upper middle class and ties with the capitalist class, which is only preparing to escalate its assault against workers' living standards and democratic rights.



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