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Colombia's Quiet Revolution

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"It was the straw that broke the camel's back," Guillermo Ramirez told me. He was explaining how Colombia's affordability crisis led to the election in June of the first leftist government in the country's 200-year history. Ramirez is Colombian–Canadian and a member of Colombia Action Solidarity Alliance (CASA), a Toronto-based activist group. He has been following Colombian politics for 27 years and visited Colombia in January.

In April 2021, the right-wing government of **President Iván Duque** announced its intention to increase taxes on food items. This would have affected the poorest Colombians the most—people who were already suffering enormously from the drastic effects of COVID-19 on the economy.

A shocking 40 per cent of Colombians live in poverty, a result of "decades of neoliberal policies which have pushed Colombia into an economic crisis, with unprecedented levels of poverty and inequity," as Raul Burbano told me. Burbano, also Colombian–Canadian, is program director at Common Frontiers, a Canadian working group composed of labour, faith-based and social justice organizations focused on the Americas. Burbano went to Colombia in June to observe the elections.

According to Colombian researcher Veronica Uribe-Kessler, 20 per cent of the richest Colombians get 55 per cent of the country's income, while 80 per cent of the people "scramble over the remainder," as Kessler puts it. This makes Colombia Latin America's second most unequal nation (after Brazil).

> "Colombians barely have enough money to pay for food and cannot afford to spend more, and so the regressive tax proposal sparked a major rebellion against the Duque regime," says Ramirez.

On April 28, 2021, Colombia exploded into a national strike that enveloped 600 cities and went on for several months, a stunning level of protest not seen in 50 years. The uprising was led by unemployed youth and forced Duque to retract the tax increase—but only after Colombian security forces had killed 45 protestors and "disappeared" 405 others. The

violence only increased public anger at the government.

“Many young people in Colombia do not have opportunities to study in universities because they cannot afford the expensive privatized education system,” says Ramirez. He adds that there are no jobs for them. “They don’t even have access to the Internet because they are too poor to pay for this.”

Unemployment in Colombia stands at 15 per cent, according to official figures, but for youth it is close to 24 per cent. More than 63 per cent of the workforce is consigned to the informal sector and only 15 per cent of those earn even the minimum wage.

Ramirez emphasizes that the 2021 national strike led directly to the victory of leftist politician **Gustavo Petro** and his Afro-Colombian running mate, environmentalist, lawyer and social activist, **Francia Márquez**, in the June 2022 national elections. This sea change in Colombian politics reflected public determination to address poverty, inequality, unemployment, official corruption and state repression.

Transparency International ranked Colombia at number 87 out of 180 countries on its Corruption Perception Index for 2021. U.S. News declared Colombia the world’s second most corrupt country for 2021. The Borgen Project, a U.S.-based anti-poverty NGO, points out that “corruption exists at every level of government” in the country. And there isn’t much recourse to deal with it because the judiciary, police and military are also corrupt and, as a result, crime in Colombia has become “normalized.”

In terms of official repression, Colombia has long had the worst human rights record in Latin America, with state-linked paramilitary death squads murdering thousands of people a year. This figure has recently come down to about 400 per year, which still makes Colombia the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists and human rights and environmental activists.

A lot of the violence stems from efforts to maintain the skewed distribution of income in favour of the rich. But, in contrast to Duque, the new leftist government intends to tax the wealthy, Colombia’s 4,000 richest families. As Burbano explains, “Through a progressive tax reform, Petro expects to raise $10.9 billion annually with which he plans to pay for pension, health care and education reforms.”

Petro also proposes free higher education, agricultural reforms and giving women heads of families a salary.

“Land reform is another key priority,” says Burbano. “Decades of conflict and government corruption have resulted in Colombia having one of the most unequal land distribution[s] in Latin America. Land redistribu- tion also means recognition of land rights of Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants.”

Three per cent of Colombians own over 70 per cent of arable land and this concentration has long been a major source of poverty.

Although Petro and Márquez’s economic reforms appear modest, one policy stands out as fairly radical: the pair’s determination to wean Colombia off dependence on oil and other mineral exports and put it on the path to a green transition. To this end, Petro has instituted a ban on unconventional oil fields, offshore drilling and fracking, and has stopped new

licences for oil exploration.

The new government is also hostile to mining, with Márquez being well-known for her anti-mining activism. Oil and mining are the main official export revenue earners for Colombia (joined by cocaine as the unofficial one), but both have brought massive violence and displacement to many communities all over the country and little benefit to most Colombians.

As Burbano explains, "Vice president-elect Francia Márquez is a human-rights and environmental activist. The new government's platform is centred on protecting the environment and climate justice. They have promised to gradually reduce Colombia's dependency on the extractive industry, and oil and coal in particular, replacing these with agriculture, tourism and clean energy.

"Canada is a global leader in mining and I think this will not sit well with Ottawa as it will affect Canadian mining profits. In 2019, according to Natural Resources Canada, 23 Canadian mining companies held assets totaling $1.38 billion in Colombia. In the past, Canada was a staunch ally of Colombia, turning a blind eye to the egregious human rights violations committed by the state. I suspect, going forward, Canadian foreign policy towards Colombia will become much more hostile."

Francia Márquez has been key to the leftist victory in Colombia, making possible the building of an amazingly diverse coalition called "Historical Pact" that includes the liberal, conservative and communist parties along with Afro-Colombians, Indigenous nations, the environ- mental movement, youth, students, parts of the urban middle class, farmers and 2SLGBTQ+ communities.

It was not Petro who joined the unemployed youth when they led the national strike against Duque, but Márquez who marched with them. Burbano points out that "Márquez has an incredible history of grass- roots struggle to protect the environment and for Afro-Colombian and Indigenous rights. Her position as Vice-President signals to the most marginalized in Colombia that things are finally changing. Her role will be key to ensuring the new government sticks to its promises as it negotiates priorities within the bureaucratic structures. The fear by many is that the government may cede too much space and power to liberal and conserva- tive elements."

Ramirez agrees on the significance of Márquez's role: "She was able to bring into politics a lot of groups that had long been isolated and they proved to be a powerhouse. These groups included not only Afro-Colombians and the Indigenous but also women in general who were greatly encouraged to vote due to Francia and that made a big difference in the election."

As Márquez herself put it in a 2021 interview,

> "People want change, in terms of justice, equity and to root out the logics and structures of coloniality, racism, patriarchy. Protests are not just a response to recent events but to the country's systemic inequality. And that social upheaval led by the youth in 2021—and in which I also took part—is also an example of that historical burnout."

The left's unprecedented triumph in Colombia comes as part of a second wave of

progressive governments that are gaining power all over Latin America. The first wave took place from 2000 to 2015. There are now nine leftist governments in Latin America, including Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela, Honduras, Nicaragua and Cuba. Brazil is expected to elect a leftist government in October.

As Kyla Sankey, who teaches in the School of Business and Management at Queen Mary University of London, points out in a recent article, "By the end of the year, for the first time in its history, Latin America's six largest economies—Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru—should all be under left-wing rule of one kind or another."

Sankey believes that "Latin America's second wave of left-wing governments could be more powerful than the first" (the title of her article in Jacobin magazine), especially given the greater opportunities this time for leftist governments to build alliances with environmental and social movements.

Ramirez agrees, adding that the United States, traditionally the major imperialist power in Latin America and the violent remover of leftist governments, is in a much weaker position today than it was 15 years ago. Now China holds more sway in South America.

"So many leftist governments will make possible the advance of regional integration in Latin America," Ramirez says, "which will make the implementation of a green agenda easier across borders. Closer co-operation between Latin America, China and other countries internationally will help displace the U.S.-dominated world order that has impoverished and killed millions of people."

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