

Colombia's Narco-Democratic Turn

Elections, Cocaine, and the Capture of the State
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In less than four months, Colombia will hold legislative (March) and presidential (May) elections amid a profoundly *deteriorated* political environment. Under President Gustavo Petro, the country exhibits a paradoxical form of “success” across six pillars of his administration—each reflecting institutional *degradation* rather than democratic consolidation.

1. Cocaine and State Power. Colombia has *consolidated* its position as the world's leading producer and exporter of cocaine. Rather than reversing decades of narcotrafficking, the Petro administration has *overseen* its expansion, embedding it as a structural component of political power—particularly through the framework of *Total Peace*.

2. Political Violence and Impunity. Petro's *handling* of political violence has fractured the country. Opposition leaders, journalists, minorities, the judicial system, and civil society operate under persistent threat. This climate was tragically confirmed by the assassination of Senator and presidential pre-candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay—a stark illustration of the dangers inherent in Colombia's current trajectory.

Another key element of political violence has been the systematic and organized attacks to women, races, religions, children, countries, and everybody who does not share Petro's standpoints.

3. Corruption as Governance. Corruption has become *emblematic* of the government. Scandals are routine, not exceptional, while arrests and investigations of close allies rarely lead to accountability. The administration governs with visible confidence that consequences no longer apply.

4. Administrative Instability and Symbolism. Administrative *disorder* has become doctrine. Cabinet ministers rotate roughly every six months; mid-level officials every three. Institutional memory, continuity, and accountability have been eroded. Governance is driven not by expertise or planning but by *perpetual* improvisation.

This instability is compounded by appointments prioritizing political *symbolism* over competence. Academic credentials are selectively invoked, while women and minority representatives are instrumentalized rather than empowered. In a country of highly trained professionals—this strategy undermines state capacity, fuels polarization, and weakens public trust.

5. Petro, Cepeda, and International Alignment. President Petro and Senator Iván Cepeda have acted as *de facto* advocates for Maduro's regime. Both treat Maduro as

Venezuela's legitimate president, maintain close political ties, and spend extensive time in Caracas. The administration and Pacto Histórico have conducted over 900 visits to Venezuela. Cepeda has failed to disclose the full scope or funding of these trips.

Following the U.S. seizure of Maduro on 3 January 2026, both regimes mobilized internationally in defense of the dictatorship. Cepeda traveled to Spain, where Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez reportedly received the delegation, *facilitating* elements of its agenda—without public transparency regarding funding.

Meanwhile, claims in certain Spanish media that Venezuela controlled its oil industry are demonstrably false: for nearly two decades, effective control has rested with foreign powers, primarily Iran, China, and Russia, while Venezuelans have derived minimal benefit.

6. Historical revisionism in Colombia. International donors and multilateral partners have funded cultural and memory initiatives under Petro's administration that, while framed as reconciliation, often recast perpetrators of serious crimes—including kidnapping and armed violence—in a sympathetic light.

Fictionalized accounts of real events risk shifting responsibility from perpetrators to victims, underscoring the need for stronger oversight to ensure support for historical memory upholds factual accuracy, victim-centered approaches, and accountability.

Under Petro, illicit power entered the state and remained. *Total Peace* did not demobilize violence; it institutionalized it, converting armed and criminal leverage into political authority. Political violence is now *systemic*. The executive employs stigmatization, intimidation, and threats against opponents, journalists, women, minorities and civil society. Coercion is not incidental—it is *method*.

The assassination of Senator Uribe Turbay is the clearest proof. After sustained public targeting by the president, Uribe Turbay was shot at a Bogotá rally on 7 June 2025 and later died. Investigators traced the perpetrators to organized criminal networks, including Iván Márquez Second Marquetalia operating from Venezuela. The crime emerged from an environment of official incitement and impunity.

This architecture predates Petro's presidency. During the 2022 campaign, his brother and a future peace commissioner negotiated inside La Picota prison with leaders of organized crime groups, granting legitimacy to violent actors.

Narcotrafficking no longer merely penetrates the state—it organizes it. Eradication efforts collapsed, criminal economies expanded, and illegal armed groups consolidated territorial control. *Total Peace* formalized this order by reducing military pressure and conferring

political recognition. Colombia's alignment with Maduro's Venezuela completes the system: Venezuela operates as sanctuary, logistics hub, and shield for transnational criminal networks integrated with Colombian criminal groups.

The result is narco-democracy: elections shaped by illicit bargaining, impunity for allies, criminal sovereignty across border regions, and armed groups aligned with the governing coalition exercising power. Dissent is not debated—it is neutralized.

Petro's administration has invested millions of dollars in altering the metrics used to monitor the economy and the cultivation, production, and trafficking of cocaine. Indicators that were previously accepted when Petro was in opposition are now questioned, as their results contradict the administration's narrative.

Petro's wrecks Colombia. Alternatives? As Colombia nears the 2026 elections, the country teeters under a shadow of coercion and impunity. Criminal groups increasingly shape local power dynamics through intimidation, while opposition figures face assassination, exile, or enforced silence. Journalists operate under constant threat. The parallels with Venezuela's collapse are no longer hypothetical—they are unfolding before the nation's eyes.

Within the ruling coalition, Senator Iván Cepeda is widely regarded as the frontrunner. However, he must first, gain Petro's trust. Observers note that he is supported by the government and by Total Peace associates, as well as by funds whose origins raise serious legal questions, according to campaign financing reports. Despite these concerns, the process is proceeding, highlighting a political system where rules are often applied selectively, and influence shields those who wield it.

Other presidential contenders—both within Petro's broader political milieu and across the left—remain fluid and contested. Figures such as Camilo Romero, Claudia López, Juan Fernando Cristo, Luis Gilberto Murillo, and Roy Barreras [from Petro's milieu] are actively positioning themselves and engaging in internal negotiations to capture space within the Petro's band.

This uncertainty reflects the absence of a single, clearly defined successor *designated* by Petro and underscores the contested and fragmented nature of political leadership ahead of the election.

From the center, Sergio Fajardo continues to hold steady support in recent polls. Observers and his own statements to the media suggest that, despite evolving campaign dynamics, he retains the ability to recalibrate his strategy and redirect his candidacy—keeping his options open in an increasingly volatile electoral landscape.

On the right and center-right, multiple contenders are vying for position ahead of the March 8 inter-party consultations (*Gran Consulta por Colombia*), which will formally select the official candidates for the presidential contest. These consultations will narrow the field to one candidate per bloc, but the outcome remains uncertain, reflecting broader fragmentation and strategic realignment across the political spectrum.

At this stage, the likely roster of contenders for the May 2026 presidential election includes Petro's choice, Sergio Fajardo, the winner of the right-center consultation, and one or two additional figures from Petro's broader circle of the left, depending on how internal negotiations and electoral alliances evolve in the coming months.

As the campaign unfolds, new dynamics are reshaping the electoral terrain. Recent polls show that Iván Cepeda continues to emerge as one of the leading figures in voter intention, often competing closely with right-wing contenders such as Abelardo De la Espriella in hypothetical head-to-head matchups, with Sergio Fajardo typically polling in third place.

These trends underscore a highly polarized contest, where the left and right extremes mobilize strong base support while the center struggles to break through. The fragmentation of political blocs – intensified by ongoing divisions within the traditional right and fluctuating alliances – suggests that no candidate can yet claim a decisive mandate as the first-round approaches.

In this volatile context, the 8 March “Gran Consulta por Colombia” and related nomination processes will be critical junctures. They will not only determine the formal candidates for the May 2026 presidential contest but also signal how deep the fractures run across Colombia's political spectrum.

Whether the center can coalesce around a viable alternative, or whether polarization will hand the lead to the extremes, remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that Colombia's political future – and the possibility of a peaceful, democratic transition – hinges on how these consultations, alliances, and voter mobilization efforts play out in the coming months.

True democracy requires a level playing field, yet the current legislative and presidential race is defined by a massive imbalance of power. By combining the fiscal machinery of the state with the expansive reach of the 'Total Peace' agenda and questionable private funding, the Pacto Histórico has secured an advantage that is as definitive as it is undemocratic. Without rigorous oversight, these forces will inevitably skew the electoral outcome, silencing the genuine will of the Colombian people.

Bogotá, Colombia – 30 January 2026.