

Illicit Power Structures in Colombia

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During Colombia's 2022 presidential race, Gustavo Petro and the Pacto Histórico were linked to imprisoned criminals and organized crime figures through the so-called "Pacto de la Picota." Critics alleged that these ties exchanged electoral support for favors. Rather than dismantling these connections, Petro consolidated them in office, allowing his movement to benefit again in the 2026 elections—highlighting a structural vulnerability in Colombia's democracy.

Upon taking office, President Petro advanced the Total Peace deal, granting negotiating status to illicit power structures. By recognizing former targets of security operations as interlocutors, the policy reshaped Colombia's national and international security environment. Analysts argue that Total Peace weakened deterrence, fractured security hierarchies, and empowered non-state armed actors to consolidate territorial and operational control instead of disarming.

While ordinary Colombians saw little benefit, the government and Pacto Histórico gained political, strategic, and allegedly financial leverage, exposing a dangerous entanglement between negotiation, security, and public trust.

Crime and Regional Fallout

Total Peace has strengthened both the Maduro and Petro regimes, enabling Venezuelan military-linked networks to exert de facto control along the Colombia-Venezuela border in coordination with criminal actors. These structures operate alongside transnational extremist networks—including Hezbollah and Hamas—and Colombian armed groups such as the ELN, Segunda Marquetalia, and FARC dissidents.

Instead of constraining criminal threats, Colombia's security posture has deliberately reduced sustained operational pressure on organized networks, creating conditions for illicit expansion and enhanced cross-border coordination. Credible investigations suggest that, under Total Peace, the Petro administration engaged in intelligence-sharing with individuals linked to these groups.

Collectively, these policies have eroded deterrence, weakened institutional leverage, and accelerated the deterioration of Colombia's security environment, reinforcing criminal governance models across the border and complicating international counter-crime efforts.

Territory Lost, Democracy Undermined

Colombia has experienced a notable decline in effective territorial control. Current assessments indicate that actors aligned with the Pacto Histórico and the Total Peace framework exert decisive influence over roughly 70% of the country. In many regions, the armed forces have been reduced to limited or observational roles, undermining their constitutional mandate to provide security and protect civilians.

This power vacuum has facilitated the political instrumentalization of insecurity, with governing coalition actors operating amid escalating political violence, intimidation, and threats against opposition figures, independent journalists, and civil society.

Politics Under Fire

The assassination of Senator and presidential candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay signals a dramatic escalation in politically motivated violence. Investigations link the plot to the Iván Márquez Second Marquetalia faction, with Simeón Pérez Marroquín, alias "El Viejo," acting as a key intermediary. Notably, El Viejo remained incarcerated at La Picota while envoys connected to Petro negotiated the Picota Pact, revealing persistent links between political actors and criminal networks.

This episode illustrates the risks of blurring negotiation, impunity, and state responsibility in criminal-dominated territories. Far from containing political violence, the convergence of government actors, armed networks, and criminal intermediaries has entrenched insecurity and amplified threats against opposition figures, journalists, and civil society, undermining Colombia's democratic and institutional resilience.

Crime Economies

Illegal armed groups and transnational networks have long operated across Colombia and Venezuela, trafficking cocaine, arms, and humans,

and extracting illicit gold and other minerals. Weak state control has enabled these groups to consolidate supply chains with regional and global reach.

The 2,500-kilometer Colombia-Venezuela border has effectively become a permissive zone. Enforcement gaps and official tolerance allow Colombian armed groups—including the ELN, FARC dissidents, and Clan del Golfo—as well as Hezbollah and Hamas, to manage cocaine supply chains and expand into illegal mining, extortion, and other illicit revenue streams.

Venezuela's strategic resources, particularly its oil sector, are embedded in a geopolitical-criminal network leveraged by Iran, Russia, and China, functioning as revenue streams rather than instruments of state development. Senior elements of the Venezuelan state and military maintain direct links to criminal syndicates such as the Cartel of the Suns and Tren de Aragua, coordinating with transnational partners to manage oil revenues, drug corridors, and money-laundering operations.

In this context, the proposed Maduro-Petro “special binational zone” would have formalized illicit economies, diluted sovereignty, and granted legal cover for criminal and hostile state actors along the Colombia-Venezuela border. Rather than fostering integration, it would have entrenched parallel power structures and accelerated the erosion of state authority.

International policy toward Colombia and Venezuela has been inconsistent. While the UN, EU, and partners scrutinize Maduro's allies for corruption and foreign exploitation, comparable standards are not applied to Colombia's Total Peace framework. This asymmetry allows criminal networks to operate under domestic sanction, while international responses prioritize nominal sovereignty and resource access over rule of law and civilian protection.

International Normalization and Political Legitimacy

Diplomatic rapprochement between Colombia and Venezuela, combined with reduced scrutiny of electoral integrity, has weakened regional

accountability. Allegations of organized crime financing linked to Petro's campaign, despite sanctions from Colombia's National Electoral Council, highlight the penetration of criminal economies into democratic processes.

Both the Petro and Maduro regimes have invested more in political messaging and international legitimacy than in delivering tangible benefits to citizens. This imbalance—often overlooked internationally—permits governance failures, corruption, and criminal influence to persist beneath a veneer of diplomatic progress, further eroding public trust and institutional resilience.

The Role of Left-Wing Political Alignment

President Petro frequently frames domestic unrest and criticism as “right-wing” conspiracies, strategy mirroring Maduro's tactics to discredit oversight and silence dissent. This approach positions independent media, political opposition, and international scrutiny as adversaries, shielding government actions from accountability.

Petro's foreign policy favors rapprochement with regimes viewed skeptically by Western capitals, recognizing Maduro's presidency and bypassing Venezuela's interim opposition. Leftist political solidarity—supported by Iran, Russia, China, Sweden, and Portugal—often eclipses scrutiny of corruption, institutional weakening, and democratic backsliding.

Across several regions, left-leaning parties, think tanks, and NGOs have prioritized ideological alignment over governance performance, enabling narrative control and regime solidarity to outweigh accountability.

With Colombia's 2026 legislative and presidential elections approaching, the stakes are high. Without a recalibration toward consistent standards for electoral integrity, rule of law, and transparency, criminal networks and political actors operating outside democratic norms risk further consolidating influence, deepening insecurity, and eroding public trust throughout the region.

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