

## **Colombia's Political Crisis: Corruption Scandal, Failed Reforms, and Mounting Tensions Ahead of the 2026 Presidential Election**

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On May 7, 2025, Colombia's Supreme Court issued arrest warrants for Iván Name, former President of the Senate, and Andrés Calle, former President of the House of Representatives, as part of a widening corruption scandal involving the National Unit for Disaster Risk Management (UNGRD).

Name, of the Green Alliance, served as Senate President during the 2023-2024 term, while Calle, a member of the Liberal Party, led the House of Representatives during the same period. Both are accused of accepting multimillion-peso bribes in exchange for influencing key appointments and backing legislative reforms supported by President Gustavo Petro. Prosecutors allege that Name received 3 billion pesos (approximately USD 770,000), and Calle 1 billion pesos (around USD 260,000).

A portion of the bribe allegedly aimed to ensure Name's absence from key Senate sessions, allowing Vice President of the Senate María José Pizarro—a close ally of Petro from the Colombia Humana party—to temporarily assume control of the chamber. The scheme is believed to have been orchestrated by former UNGRD officials Olmedo López and Sneyder Pinilla, who are both in custody and cooperating with authorities. According to their testimony, the cash was delivered to Name's residence by former presidential adviser Sandra Ortiz, who claims the directive came from Carlos Ramón González, a senior Green Alliance figure and Petro's former chief adviser. González is reportedly now a fugitive.

Senator Pizarro has denied any involvement, but her close ties to President Petro and her elevated role in the Senate have drawn public and media scrutiny. The scandal has triggered an institutional crisis, raising serious concerns about transparency and the integrity of the relationship between Colombia's executive and legislative branches. The investigation is ongoing under the oversight of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General's Office.

Despite accusations that the executive sought to buy political loyalty, the Petro administration has struggled to pass key reforms since taking office in August 2022—particularly in labor legislation. With the 2026 presidential election on the horizon, Petro and his allies have pushed for a National Popular Consultation to gauge public support for these reforms. Critics argue this initiative is a political maneuver designed to use public resources to mobilize Petro's electoral base.

Established under Colombia's 1991 Constitution and regulated by Law 1757 of 2015, the National Popular Consultation must be approved by the Senate, reviewed by the Constitutional Court, and achieve a minimum 30% voter turnout to be binding. A simple majority of participating voters is required for its outcome to take effect.

On May 14, the Senate voted on the consultation. Of 108 senators, 95 were present. The proposal failed, receiving 49 votes in favor, 47 against, and nine absentees. Notably, several abstaining senators—many aligned with the government—remained outside the chamber during the vote. Among them was Angélica Lozano, whose spouse, former Bogotá Mayor Claudia López, is politically aligned with Petro. While Petro's supporters and the Interior Minister denounced the outcome as fraudulent, they remained silent on the abstentions by their own allies.

Reacting from China, President Petro called for mass mobilizations and hinted at a possible national strike. His party and government officials echoed these calls, invoking the memory of past social uprisings. These developments evoke parallels with the turbulent period from 2019 to 2023, when public protests frequently escalated into violence under Petro's leadership and that of his current "Total Peace" policy allies.

The most intense wave of unrest occurred between April and June 2021, one year before the 2022 presidential election. It was sparked by then-President Iván Duque's tax reform proposal, which raised taxes on essential goods and services amid a COVID-19-driven economic crisis. Petro and his allies capitalized on public anger, presenting themselves as defenders of the people—despite later enacting even more aggressive fiscal reforms after taking office.

The failed popular consultation now presents a potential political opportunity for Petro and all his allies. While they technically had enough support to pass the measure, key allies chose to abstain—possibly to avoid full accountability while still fostering unrest.

Critics argue that Petro—who has deep admiration for his friend Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro—is adopting similar tactics: escalating political tensions and encouraging mass mobilization to divert attention from corruption allegations and legislative setbacks. With the 2026 presidential race approaching, Colombia finds itself in an increasingly polarized environment, where democratic institutions appear increasingly vulnerable to political manipulation. The country's democratic integrity is under serious threat.