

Petro's Authoritarianism

by Fernando Mora¹

Since assuming office on August 7, 2022, Gustavo Petro and Francia Márquez have presided over a marked deterioration of Colombia's political and institutional framework, increasingly relying on violence as a tool of governance. Approaching the three-year mark of their four-year term, the prospects for restoring effective governance grow increasingly dim.

Rather than advancing progress, their administration has systematically weakened the state under the guise of peace, social justice, and dialogue. This decline is not accidental but deliberately sustained by a political coalition comprising the ruling Pacto Histórico, the Green Alliance, and allied parties. Backing this alliance is a network of actors—including illegal armed groups and criminal organizations—now linked to Petro and Márquez through the controversial “Total Peace” agreement.

Legitimacy concerns have surfaced regarding Colombia's 2022 presidential election. Petro's eldest son and brother have alleged that his campaign received financing tied to drug trafficking and organized crime. Petro's brother further claims agreements with criminal groups, including the so-called Picota Agreement. If confirmed, these allegations would fundamentally undermine Colombia's democracy and the rule of law. Additional accusations have since emerged.

A 2025 investigation connects Petro to an alleged contraband trafficker known as “Pitufo.” Although the Attorney General's Office initiated this inquiry in 2023, it only became public recently under the leadership of Petro's close ally. Media coverage and a political trial launched in March 2025 have been suppressed by Petro's coalition and government-backed social media networks, effectively removing the

issue from public debate. Unlike Venezuela's dictator Maduro, whose authoritarianism and legitimacy are widely condemned, Petro's emulation of such governance remains ambiguous. His political survival increasingly depends on alliances with organized crime—ties reportedly dating back to his 2018 electoral defeat by Iván Duque and later reinforced under the Total Peace initiative. These connections pose serious threats to Colombia's democratic future.

Under Petro's leadership, cocaine production reached a record 2,664 metric tons in 2023, rising 14% in 2024. Coca cultivation now spans 370,000 hectares across 16 departments. Drug cartels operate in 456 of Colombia's 1,119 municipalities—a presence some analysts say has grown due to peace negotiations intended to disarm armed groups. Some international media question the UN's figures. These criminal groups have formed transnational alliances with organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, further destabilizing the region. Petro has appointed individuals with criminal records as “peace managers,” blurring the line between negotiation and collusion.

Critics rank the Petro-Márquez administration among the least effective in recent Colombian history, citing politicization, mismanagement, and administrative inefficiency. Reports show over 3,000 experienced civil servants dismissed and replaced with loyalists to the ruling coalition. Since 2022, the government has made over 50 ministerial appointments, accompanied by unusually high turnover among vice ministers and senior officials. These disruptions have exacerbated budget execution difficulties, weakening state institutions and public services. In response, the administration issued decrees in 2024 and 2025 mandating advance tax payments from various sectors, reflecting government spending outpacing revenue.

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Petro and Márquez have conducted more than 76 international trips costing over \$50 million USD, excluding per diems for delegations averaging 60 people, often including Petro's close associates. One controversial expense allocated at least \$2 million USD for a single attendee at the World Economic Forum in Davos for only three days. Additionally, some civil servants have made over 900 trips to Cuba and Venezuela, with unclear objectives and budgets.

The government has diverted millions of U.S. dollars in public funds to finance pro-government rallies nationwide. These events are supported through preferential contracts and subsidies benefiting ideologically aligned NGOs, indigenous groups, and labor unions. Participation is often coerced, with public employees and state beneficiaries pressured under threat of penalties. Despite this, public turnout remains low, rarely exceeding 100,000. Recent May 2025 demonstrations involved only 400 masked individuals nationwide committing vandalism at transportation hubs—actions seemingly orchestrated to destabilize public order. Funding for these operations links to the CUT union, whose leadership has openly praised infrastructure disruptions.

On June 11, 2025, President Petro held a rally in Cali, Valle del Cauca, to sign a decree launching a national consultation—an initiative previously rejected by the Colombian Senate and widely criticized as unconstitutional. Reports suggest the administration paid the attendees, continuing a controversial practice allegedly ongoing since August 2022. Among thousands of contracts awarded by the administration, two stand out for scrutiny: Alfredo Saade, a self-proclaimed pastor and close ally, received a contract worth 21 billion Colombian Pesos (\$4.9 million USD) for a failed project in La Guajira, despite lacking qualifications. Saade later propagated unfounded conspiracy theories reportedly treated as credible by President Petro. This contract is under formal investigation.

Secondly, Luis Eduardo Montealegre Lynett—a lawyer and former Attorney General appointed

Minister of Justice in June 2025—owns a company that has received government contracts exceeding 840 million Colombian Pesos (\$325,000 USD). Both Montealegre's appointment and these contracts have sparked widespread controversy. The government has also reportedly established a parallel payroll system covering 1.8 million employees, whose operations remain largely opaque. Simultaneously, the administration has dismantled institutional safeguards and marginalized political dissent. Despite public disapproval surpassing 80%, organized crime controls over three-quarters of the country. Under the “Total Peace” framework, armed groups and criminal networks act as de facto authorities, replacing governance with coercion, intimidation, and impunity.

The consequences are clear: erratic leadership, institutional paralysis, and collapsing public trust. Far from accidental, many analysts view this as a deliberate strategy by Petro and Márquez to centralize power by weakening democratic checks and balances. Their governance neglects institutional resilience and actively erodes it.

This is not a policy failure—it is a deliberate political design. The erosion of democratic norms and the systematic dismantling of accountability mechanisms reflect a calculated effort to entrench power by weakening opposition and circumventing institutional checks. Driving this decline is a network of enabling forces. Since 2019, coordinated digital propaganda campaigns originating from Caracas and aligned with the Maduro regime have actively shaped favorable narratives around Petro—first as an opposition leader, and now as the head of government—largely without international scrutiny.

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