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Latin American repercussion of the triumph of Petro-Francia Márquez: towards an environmental progressivism? Colombia and the political renewal of the left

Petro and France appear as the powerful embodiment of a new disruptive and plurinational binomial that this time integrates the socio-environmental question transversally in its policies and narratives.



Gustavo Petro, committed to a decarbonized economy

The [arrival of Gustavo Petro and Francia Márquez to the leadership of the Colombian state](#) may mark a turning point in the region. There has never been a president-elect in

Latin America who openly bet on environmental progressivism. The challenges of the *ecosocial* transition.

Peace, Social Justice, Environmental Justice and leading the Dialogue with the progressives of Latin America, without exclusions, to leave the fossils, change the course to save humanity..."

"I speak to the world we want Colombia to be at the forefront of the fight against climate change from diplomacy."

"We need to move from the old extractivist economy, which kills water and life, to a collaborative economy in harmony with the environment..."

"It is the government that wants to build Colombia as a world power of life. And if we want to synthesize in three sentences what a government of life consists of, I would say: first, in peace; second, in social justice; third, in environmental justice" (...) "Producing respecting nature, that's environmental justice."



These are some of the numerous mentions of extractivism and socio-environmental problems by the newly elected president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, in his victory

speech, delivered before an exultant crowd last Sunday. Petro is not a newcomer to either Colombian politics or environmentalism. Former mayor of Bogotá, several times candidate for president, his arrival seemed impossible in a country crossed by political violence and characterized by recurrently alternating conservative governments with ultraliberal governments, or both.

Despite the existence of powerful organizations and social movements (peasants, anti-extractivists, youth, anti-racists, urban and feminists, peace and human rights movements) that have been demonstrating in a very visible and massive way in the streets in recent years, Colombia never before had the historic opportunity to live its "progressive moment". But make no mistake. Petro does not propose to be just another progressive government, as is happening with Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, marked by a progressivism that believes itself to be inaugural, that never refers to the recent history of the region, or as is the case with the current weak progressivisms of Argentina and Bolivia, which persist in their extractivist blindness and do not debate even in terms of the development model. Quite the opposite: "To Latin American progressivism I propose to stop thinking about social justice, the redistribution of wealth and the sustainable future on the basis of oil, coal and gas," he also said in his speech as president-elect.

Por the rights of Mother Earth

Nor is it the first time that Petro has challenged and challenged fossil progressivism. In 2018, at the Clacso Critical Thinking Forum, held in Buenos Aires, he was the only critical voice that the political class urged to think about the environmental challenge and against extractivism, in the face of the noisy and self-congratulatory consignmentism that would mark the meeting, in which Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Dilma Rousseff and Alvaro García Linera participated, among others.

"We are going for the rights of Mother Earth. To take care of our big house and take care of biodiversity," Vice President-elect Francia Márquez, a renowned environmental leader in defense of the territories of deep Colombia, also said that same night. France, which for twenty-five years has been fighting against structural racism and for the defense of land and territory, is originally from Cauca, a region in dispute over the advance of extractivism and armed conflict. In 2015 she won the national prize for the defense of human rights in Colombia, and in 2018, she was distinguished with the prestigious Goldman Prize, known internationally as the environmental Nobel.

France suffered several death threats and an attack, in the deadliest country in the world for nature defenders. Although here in Argentina some defenders of fossil progressivism continue to speak of "silly environmentalism" or "falopa", and are indifferent to the close association between extractivism and violence, between extractivism and the absence of democracy, the data are incontestable. Latin America is the region of the world where more environmental activists are killed. In 2020, the last year of Global Witness' record, 227 land and environmental activists were killed, the worst number on record. Colombia was once again the country with the most recorded attacks, with 65 defenders killed. The horrendous murder in Brazil of Bruno Pereira and Don Phillips, both defenders of the Amazon, one of the borders of death in the region, still resonates.



In 2020, Francia Márquez, who has always been concerned with broadening the horizons of struggle, graduated as a lawyer at the Santiago de Cali University and was president of *the National Council for Peace and Coexistence* in 2020, where she followed up on compliance with the [peace agreements](#).

Gradual transition

Gustavo Petro declared during the presidential campaign that "the transition is from an economy of death to an economy of life... We cannot accept that the wealth and foreign exchange in Colombia come from the export of three poisons for humanity: oil, coal and cocaine." In this line, the government program of the Historical Pact stands out, a transition proposal called "Colombia without fossils" that contemplates:

"A gradual de-escalation of economic dependence on oil and coal."

"The exploration and exploitation of unconventional deposits will be prohibited, fracking pilot projects and the development of offshore deposits will be stopped. No new licenses will be granted for hydrocarbon exploration."

It will be destined "the extraction of the current reserves of fossil fuels (...) to domestic consumption under technical and socioeconomic criteria that allow greater efficiency in its use and a higher rate of energy return".

The proposal for a gradual and just transition contemplates sufficient safeguards for the economic and labor sectors that depend today on the extraction of fossil fuels (35% of Colombia's exports). It implies not only changes in the energy matrix, but also the opportunity to promote Colombia's economic diversification and deconcentration. And it would be a true example for the region and the world in the experimentation of new paths, by proposing to leave fossil fuels in the subsoil.

The debate about the ecosocial transition and more specifically about the energy transition, appears very little in the discourses of existing progressivisms. We continue to be spoken by the North, while energy colonialism advances hand in hand with a corporate transition (as in the so-called Lithium Triangle or in the indiscriminate felling of balsa wood in Ecuador for the wind industry), or while the governments of the south compete with each other to obtain international contracts for the production and export of hydrogen, the new Eldorado on a global scale, without taking into account the question of energy sovereignty (in a world in energy crisis and heading towards deglobalization) nor social license (in the face of the destruction of territories and increasing criminalization of populations that resist megaprojects), nor local impacts (again Latin America is a sacrifice zone, now in the name of the northern energy transition).



In his long victory speech, Petro proposed an American dialogue that contemplates two axes: one, that of the North/South relationship with the United States; another, inward, towards Latin America; in both cases to lay the foundations for an "energy transition" in the face of the ravages caused by climate change. Necessary keys to a sustainable transition, which will have to be thought from the axes of environmental justice, ecological debt and regional integration, in tune with the proposals of the "Ecosocial Pact of the South" of which we are part.

The fact is that the synergy of both speeches, that of Petro and that of France, can mark a turning point in the region. There has never been a president-elect in Latin America who openly bet on environmental progressivism. There was never a vice president who embodied the commitment to intersectionality herself: woman, of popular origin, Afro, anti-racist, ecologist and feminist. That is why the victory of this plurinational binomial that bets on the "economy of life" and "tasty life" generates so many expectations today. A very young militant from Colombia, exiled and threatened with death for defending her territory from the advance of fracking, wrote to us excitedly: "we send you all the love that is invading us, we are children grown up in the midst of fear and violence, but today we see a new dawn and we have to look at the sun"

Second-generation progressivism

The Colombian victory comes to oxygenate a Latin American policy characterized by repetitions and the absence of renewing political visions, visible in refractory progressivisms, which as in Argentina, Bolivia and most likely Brazil – if Lula triumphed in the next elections – are not interested in opening the socio-environmental agenda or discussing a Just Transition, and consequently, significantly reduce the horizons of

democracy and a dignified and sustainable life. It is true that it could be said that Petro will not be alone, because Chile with Boric and the alliance that led him to the government, also shows a political renewal from the left. Both efforts represent the hope of a "second-generation progressivism" in Latin America, where democracy and socio-environmental problems can finally be expressed transversally in the government program and not only as a watertight compartment.



Just last week the Chilean government announced, as part of the "just socio-ecological transition", contained in the electoral promise, the definitive closure of the Ventanas foundry that "will be carried out through a gradual and responsible process together with the population and the workers" and ensuring that "no worker will be helpless as a result of this decision". Ventanas is a smelter, belonging to the state company Codelco, denounced decades ago for its very high levels of pollution, which is why "this decision has been taken considering the recurrent cases of poisoning that have occurred in the area, the constant temporary closures of schools, sick children, and the environmental saturation of the area." Ventanas is located in the most polluted industrial pole of the country, near Valparaíso, where in 1964 the first copper smelter and refinery of the National Mining Company (ENAMI) began to operate. In 2016, when we visited the area, the industrial park was home to more than 17 companies, including seven coal-fired thermoelectric plants, a refinery and a copper smelter, three companies related to the distribution of

hydrocarbons, two chemical storage companies, three gas distribution companies. There was born the group Women of Sacrifice Zones in Resistance of Puchuncaví-Quintero, which has done an enormous job of denaturing pollution, denouncing environmental injustice and health impacts.

In short, hopefully this electoral result in Colombia will open a new stage in that country and for the entire region. No one is saying that it will be easy, because the political and social challenges are enormous and very complex. The framework of the alliances established by Petro at the national level (the presence of traditional political machines and figures), the possibility of opening new regional integration spaces in terms of new generation progressivism (climate crisis and just transition), relations with the North (particularly with the United States), will strain the new government and will define its course in these various platforms. And without a doubt, the ecosocial transition program is the most complicated challenge, both for political and economic-productive reasons, that the new government will have. In addition, given that Petro has a horizon of only four years in power (there is no re-election in Colombia), in the best case it will lay the foundations for the future and manage to extend the discussion on the development model to the whole of Colombian and Latin American society.

But something new is being forged, in the heat of large social mobilizations. Petro and France appear as the powerful embodiment of a new disruptive and plurinational binomial that this time integrates the socio-environmental question transversally in its policies and narratives. Not only do they have "environmental awareness", they are also determined militants with an environmentalist and territorial defense trajectory. They come to challenge the "neo-developmentalism" of the region because they directly question the ideological bases of extractivism (even to redistribute) and thus expose the real crack: continue with the recipes of the past or bet on an egalitarian and inclusive, social and ecological future.

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