**A radical win**

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On June 19, Colombian voters ended the 213 year-long winning streak of rightwing presidents as they elected their first ever socialist president, with 62-year-old former guerilla commander Gustavo Petro elected president and Francia Marquez vice president. Colombia was the only major country in Latin America in which left never succeeded to win presidency in its 213 years of existence.

Gustavo Petro/Francia Marquez bagged 11.28 million (50.44 per cent) votes and defeated rightwing populist billionaire construction tycoon Rodolfo Hernandez who secured 10.5 million (47.31 per cent) votes. The turnout in the runoff was 58 per cent. The turnout in the first round was 55 per cent.

The higher turnout in the runoff hugely benefited socialist Petro who increased his vote from 8.5 million in the first round to 11.28 million in the runoff. Petro successfully mobilized his voters on the basis of his radical economic programme. The people have expressed their anger and discontent against the ruling elite.

June 19 will be remembered as an historic day in Colombia. The third largest Latin American nation of 50 million people has chosen a radical path to solve its economic, social and political problems. This victory means a clear break from neoliberal economic policies and for a pro-people progressive economic agenda to end poverty, extreme exploitation and unemployment.

The people of Colombia have been waiting for this day for more than two centuries. This victory is a big triumph for the left, and for progressives, the working class, young people and the poor, and a big setback for the reactionary rightwing Colombian ruling elite and US imperialism. The reactionary ruling elite of Columbia had a strong grip over the country for decades. In the name of crushing the leftist insurgency and to end drug trafficking, American imperialism fully backed the reactionary ruling elite of Colombia.

Colombia remained the closest ally of the US in Latin America, being used by the Americans against leftwing governments in the region. It is also a bitterly divided country due to a prolonged civil war. The left-wing Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) waged an armed struggle against the Colombian state. The brutal civil war between FARC, ELN and other groups, pro-government militias and the American-backed government killed hundreds of thousands of people.

This brutal civil war was used by the Colombian ruling elite to contain the left movement in the country. The armed conflict had killed 2, 60,000 (0.26 million) people half a million were injured and 7, 00,000 (0.7 million) was displaced. FARC and other guerilla groups signed a peace deal in 2016 to end the decades-long insurgency. FARC and other groups laid down arms and joined the political process. Petro had been a member of the rebel group called the M-19, which abandoned armed struggle in 1990 and became a political party that helped rewrite the country’s constitution.

The people of Colombia have rejected neoliberal economic policies and want to see different kinds of economic policies to end poverty and unemployment. Many people were sick and tired of free market economic policies. Last year, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets against the rising cost of living, inequality and falling living standards. The mass protest movement and big strikes last year laid the basis for this victory, having radicalized big sections of society.

There is a panic in the Colombian ruling class because they believe that this victory will give more confidence to the workers, youth and poor communities to organize more struggles for their economic and democratic rights. They are afraid that this new wave of struggle, mass protests and strikes will further radicalize society. There is much enthusiasm in the working class, the poor and the most downtrodden in Colombian society.

There is a lot of hope that the radical reformist programme of Gustavo Petro will deliver. The victory of Francia Marquez, the first black woman in this office, is also widely celebrated by the people. She belongs to one of the most oppressed sections of Colombian society.

Her victory is also important for the left movement. Gustavo Petro has built a broad coalition which includes both left parties and liberal forces. The struggle within the coalition will inevitably take place on an ideological basis between the radical leftwing and liberal rightwing forces. She represents the radical left wing of the party.

It has been a hard-fought victory against the rightwing ruling classes. All the centre-right pro-capitalist parties, the ruling class and landowners supported the reactionary populist rightwing Hernandez to defeat the socialists. The reactionary ruling class will try to do everything to stop the implementation of radical economic policies to defend their economic and political struggles.

Gustavo has promised “real change”. His radical programme includes a wealth tax on the richest 400,000, an increase in the minimum wage, the introduction of unemployment payments, a public health system, radical land reform, and a shift away from “the old extractive economy”, based on oil and coal, to focus on other industries and other reformist measures. He wants to take new approach towards neighbouring countries including Venezuela. This poses new challenges to US imperialism in Latin America.

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