**[Lift for the left](https://www.dawn.com/news/1696118/lift-for-the-left)**

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THE narrow victory of Gustavo Petro in last Sunday’s run-off election constitutes a landmark event for Latin America’s third most populous nation. Whether it will also qualify as a Colombian watershed remains to be seen.

Colombia for the past 200 years has veered between the right and the far right, which might help to explain why left-wing elements sought to redress the imbalance via guerrilla movements and insurrections.

It didn’t work out, and the response of the state — America’s closest ally in the region — frequently tended towards overkill involving death squads. There is an extended history of extrajudicial killings — known locally as the ‘false positives scandal’, similar to the subcontinent’s litany of ‘fake encounters’ — that continues to be illuminated by court hearings and a special tribunal.

It took until 2016 for the largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, to enter a peace process. But M-19, the mainly urban group that Petro joined as a teenager, abandoned violence as far back as 1990. Petro subsequently served as a senator and as the mayor of Bogota, Colombia’s capital.

Colombia’s election result may be a watershed.

His presidential aspirations were nonetheless knocked back twice, and it wasn’t implausible to assume when he entered this year’s race that Petro would be unlucky a third time. But the popular mood in Colombia has changed since he was defeated in 2018 by the incumbent, Ivan Duque.

Dozens of deaths in the security state’s response to protests that broke out a year ago no doubt helped to shift that mood. Beyond that, there’s a dynamic pretty much across the western hemisphere where younger generations — not unanimously by any means, but in large numbers — are looking left for answers to the sordid inadequacy of the status quo.

They are regularly being thwarted in ‘developed’ democracies, such as Britain and the US, where the likes of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders have been sidelined by vested interests. Latin America has been a different story for the past couple of decades, though.

The first ‘pink tide’ presaged by the emergence of Hugo Chávez as Venezuela’s president at the turn of the millennium seemed a few years later to have been a false start in some ways. It was swept back to some extent by a right-wing resurgence — on a continent where the US had long informally decreed that only political conservatism could replace neo-fascist military rule.

Latin American populations had different ideas, though, as they have demonstrated time and again — not least in Bolivia, where a 2019 coup against Evo Morales succeeded in displacing him, but led to yet another victory for his Movement for Socialism in the following year’s elections.

The disastrous Summit of the Americas hosted earlier this month in Los Angeles by Joe Biden exemplified the weakening grasp of the regional hegemon. The exclusion of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua prompted Mexico’s president Andrés Manuel López Obrador to politely bow out. The presidents of Honduras, Guatemala and even El Salvador followed suit. And even some of those who turned up in LA asked awkward questions that the hosts struggled to coherently answer.

Needless to say, the likes of Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro were not excluded. The Trumpian president of Latin America’s largest country faces his comeuppance in elections scheduled for October. Every opinion poll shows a massive gap between him and the leading candidate, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who bowed out in 2011, after two terms, with a popularity rating of 80pc.

He was subsequently imprisoned on seemingly trumped-up corruption charges, and eventually vindicated by the courts. But Bolsonaro has lately raised the spectre of electoral fraud, and been backed up by his friends in Brazil’s formidable military, so who knows what lies ahead. (Like Imran Khan, Bolsonaro was once a captain, albeit in a different field.) We’ll have to wait and see whether his power-retention strategy turns out to be as absurd as Donald Trump’s.

In Colombia, meanwhile, much will depend on how Petro implements his progressive agenda after August, when he is sworn in. It ranges from wealth redistribution — 40 per cent of Colombians live in poverty — to universal healthcare, free higher education, and a minimum wage for single mothers.

Hopefully his potentially formidable vice-president, Francia Márquez — the first Afro-Colombian elected to such a high position — will help to keep him honest. Concerns have been raised about his plan to halt digging for oil, when climate action is a key component of his agenda.

On Sunday, Petro did not defeat a representative of Colombia’s traditional right — he achieved that with a 40pc score in last month’s first round — but a TikTok candidate, Rodolfo Hernández, who avoided all debates and described Adolf Hitler as “a great German thinker”.

Despite his rival’s absurdity, Petro won barely more than 50pc of the vote. One can only wish him success, and assure him he’ll be closely watched.

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