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## Colombia. Historian La Bella: 'The new President's ambition is not simply to govern, but to change the country'

However one feels about it, "it is in fact an historical watershed", an epoch-making change for Colombia and its peace process, and partly for Latin America as a whole. Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia **Gianni La Bella**, a 'long-standing' contact person for the Community of Sant'Egidio on the Continent, especially for the peace talks in Colombia, is sure that Gustavo Petro's victory in the presidential election runoff is of great consequences. The presidential candidate for 'Pacto Histórico', running for the third time as official leftist candidate, has indeed rewritten history, as he has become the first 'Izquierda' President in over two centuries of Colombian history. He won 50.44% of the vote in the runoff presidential election, versus 47.31% won by his opponent, independent candidate Rodolfo Hernández, also referred to as the 'Colombian Trump.' The remaining votes were blank ballots - a legitimate option in Colombian elections. He wins a narrow victory, close to 700,000 votes, in contrast to the 'tie' projected by several polls. Petro led the first round of voting with 40% three weeks ago. However, it was widely assumed that his opponent, supported by the formal endorsement of most of those defeated in the first round, would make a comeback from his earlier 28% score, capitalizing on the 'fears' of the electorate. Conversely, Hernández's inadequate level of preparation, his uncertain political agenda and his refusal to confront his opponent, even though it had been 'imposed' on him, meant that numerous centre-right voters abstained or voted for Petro, who increased the result of the first round by almost three million votes, an unexpected result also made possible by a high voter turnout of 58% (compared to Colombia's average turnout). After the controversies surrounding the arrest of several of Petro's supporters over the past few days, the day went by fairly peacefully. Hernández acknowledged Petro's victory in a phone call to his opponent. The newly elected President received a phone call also from outgoing President Iván Duque, who promised to meet soon to ensure a peaceful transfer of power. **Focus on the suburbs and minority groups.** Commenting on Petro's victory, La Bella told SIR:

"The new President's ambition is not simply to govern, but to change Colombia,

to reverse its history via a 'maximalist mystical narrative', the result of a clearly strong temperament, which I would describe as 'volitional'. This impetus may well include some facets that are more complex than otherwise perceived, such as the radical policy proposals on replacing oil with alternative energy sources, or decriminalising the personal use of cocaine." For the scholar, Pacto Histórico (The Historic Pact for Colombia), "brought together largely differing sectors and worlds. There might be some governance challenges, but this thrust has been one of Petro's biggest assets. Just consider the role of the African community, the groundbreaking appointment of the first black female vice-president Francia Márquez, in a country where hitherto two-thirds of the population would have deemed her fit to be no more than a domestic helper." Not surprisingly, the winner won a sweeping consensus in the peripheral districts, especially in the south-west. The leftist candidate's victory is possibly due to the absence of actual opponents: "Like him or not, Petro is capable of 'steering the ship', arguably because voters considered Hernández unfit for the role, and that he would ultimately jeopardise Colombia causing it to slide backwards. On top of this, we must consider the end of *Uribeism* (i.e. the political outlook of former president Álvaro Uribe, represented today by outgoing and not re-elected president Iván Duque, *Ed.'s note*) and of traditional parties, starting with the long-standing rotation of conservatives and liberals. His victory has also a Continental relevance, as it follows Boric's victory in Chile and precedes Lula's likely comeback in Brazil. These three factors might offer an opportunity for new leftism throughout the Continent." The new president's alleged ties with Maduro's Venezuela caused widespread criticism over the past few weeks, but La Bella is certain that "Petro has a clear understanding of his position and that he does not pose a threat -

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especially to the United States -. This became evident during the election campaign. **The path to peace and the Church's "primary role."** The scholar emphasises one aspect in particular: "This presidency offers an opportunity to implement the peace agreement, to continue along that path, to free Colombian society from an absurd polarisation that has been played out in the name of peace. New paths must be found, a future must be given to the former guerrillas, and the redistribution of land enshrined in the agreement - hitherto unsuccessful - must be implemented. In short, it is necessary to resume the agreements and move forward." The Colombian Church strongly advocates peace and reconciliation, along with a focus on the country's peripheries: "The Church remained within her inherent boundaries," La Bella remarks, "it did not take sides. Let us not forget, however, that Petro was received in the Vatican a few months ago, and this was outside the protocols. And undoubtedly the episcopate has been more proactive in the social sphere, somewhat attuned with society's present circumstances." In a [video](#) released after the election result, the Archbishop of Bogota, President of the Episcopal Conference of Colombia, Msgr. **Luis José Rueda Aparicio**, said: "We made an important effort for democracy, showing responsibility, maturity and love for Colombia. Admittedly, there is much to be restored. In this election campaign has taught us some lessons, some things that should not happen again. Yet now we must look to the future, to the present and to the future of Colombia. Let us persist in our efforts and continue working for life, peace and integral human development." He added: "We wish the President-elect of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, and his Vice-President, Francia Márquez, every success in leading this Country, as do all Colombians and our Church, that God may give them the wisdom" to govern Colombia. "As Church," concluded the archbishop, primate of the country, "we remain steadfast in our efforts for peace, reconciliation and for the brotherhood of all Colombians." \*journalist at "La vita del popolo"

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