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Colombian Presidential Election

KEY POINTS

- Presidential elections are scheduled to be held in two rounds, on 27 May and 17 June 2018.
- President Santos, the incumbent, is ineligible to run due to term limitations.
- Six candidates are contesting the vote, with the front-runners being the leaders of the List of Decency and Grand Alliance for Colombia coalitions; Gustavo Petro and Ivan Duque Marquez.



Ivan Duque, Election Front Runner

SITUATIONAL SUMMARY

Political: The Colombian presidential election is due to be held on 27 May 2018, with a possible second round scheduled for 17 June 2018. The winner of the election is required to gather over 50 per cent of the vote, if a candidate achieves this in the first round, the second round will not take place. The leading two candidates from the first round will stand head to head in the second round, thus ensuring that the elected President has a mandate of over 50 per cent of the vote.

The candidates presently leading the polls are Gustavo Petro, and Ivan Duque, leaders of left- and right-wing coalitions respectively. Petro is a former leader from the M-19 guerrilla group's political wing, and was detained on weapon smuggling charges in 1985, although he states the weapons were planted, and that he never participated in the group's armed operations. The group disarmed and entered conventional politics in 1990, and Petro has held a series of elected offices since; entering Congress in 2002, and acting as a vocal opponent of former president Uribe from 2002-2010. He also served as the Mayor of Bogota until 2013, when a corruption case resulted in his dismissal and a ban on holding political office, which was overturned in



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the face of significant unrest.

Duque, the candidate of the right-wing Grand Alliance for Colombia coalition, is the godson of former President Uribe and has gained a significant following from those unhappy with the recent peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) insurgents. Compared to Petro, Duque, 41, remains relatively inexperienced. He is a one-term senator and former Treasury advisor, with technocratic, rather than legislative or local government, credentials.

SOLACE GLOBAL COMMENT

Dissatisfaction with the FARC peace agreement is likely to be a key driver behind voting in this election. Despite successfully bringing an end to the longest-running insurgency in the Americas, 51 per cent of Colombians report dissatisfaction with the treaty, believing the government made concessions disproportionate to the FARC's influence or support. Duque has received much of his recent spike in support due to vocal criticism of the accords. He did, however, oppose talks since their inception, and supported continued military action. It remains unclear whether he would support a total withdrawal and recommencement of military action should he win.

Petro has, conversely, vocally supported the peace deal, and supports the ongoing efforts to reach a further peace deal with the ELN group (National Liberation Army), which remains active in rural border regions. His statements further suggest that the peace deal should be supported by a series of sweeping reforms aimed at breaking down the urban-rural tensions widely seen as the origins of both insurgencies. These reforms have led to uncertainty among business leaders and foreign investors, who fear his leftist credentials may lead to land expropriations and nationalisation of key industries as carried out in Venezuela. Petro's strong opposition to the oil and gas industry, which funded the Venezuelan expropriations, makes this unlikely; however, significant efforts to redistribute wealth and increase social support measures are highly likely in the case of his victory.

Polling at present suggests that Duque has the greatest public support leading up to the first round, polling at around 35 per cent, with Petro trailing at 28 per cent. The remaining candidates are generally accruing less than 15 per cent each. It is unclear how voters for the less popular candidates will re-align for the second round of polling. However, local pollsters presently suggest that Duque is most likely to attract a majority in any runoff imposed upon him, therefore being the most likely to become president.

The most significant threat to the Duque campaign is the emergence of a pro-peace alliance following the first round, with key supporters of Petro's leftist competitors opting to shift their support in opposition to Duque's confrontational stance regarding the ELN and FARC. It is a realistic probability that such a group's populist program may overcome the general dissatisfaction with peace accords, particularly in rural areas where the benefits of peace and increased social measures are likely to have the most effect. However, an estimated 35-40 per cent of the population remain strongly opposed to such measures due to the fear of a Venezuela-like situation emerging.

The ELN has declared a five-day ceasefire covering the election period, however remaining insurgent and criminal groups across Colombia remain fractured, therefore this ceasefire can not be seen as guaranteeing peace throughout the election period. Many such groups have close ties to organised criminals, and a continuation of criminal activity should be expected.



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SECURITY ADVICE

MODERATE POLITICAL RISK



Travellers are advised of the heightened risk of unrest and a likely increase in security measures in the lead-up to the election. It is strongly recommended that pre- and post-election rallies or protests are avoided; Colombia has a turbulent political history, and violence remains probable.

Solace Global would advise clients to employ enhanced security measures when visiting Colombia – airport meet and greet and a security driver for the length of a visit should be minimum security precaution. Travellers may also wish to employ executive protection, particularly if travelling to isolated, rural areas. Travel tracking and intelligence software is strongly recommended to enhance situational awareness, while supporting implementation of duty of care.



Solace Global remains available to provide the full range of Travel Risk Management services to clients.

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