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FEATURED Q&A

Which Issues Will Drive Colombia's Presidential Race?



Former Colombian Vice President Germán Vargas Lleras last week announced his candidacy for Colombia's presidency. // File Photo: Vargas Lleras Campaign.

Q Former Colombian Vice President Germán Vargas Lleras announced Aug. 29 that he is running as an independent in next year's presidential election. Vargas Lleras will be running against candidates including Gustavo Petro, Sergio Fajardo, and Clara López, all of whom have decided to run without the backing of established political parties. Which issues will drive the country's presidential campaigns? What impact will current President Juan Manuel Santos and the country's peace deal have on the race? What influence will former President Álvaro Uribe have on the race? What are the biggest problems that Colombia's next president will face?

A Adam Isacson, senior associate for the regional security policy program at the Washington Office on Latin America: "There are more than 20 candidates for next May's presidential election, and few are polling in double digits.

Former Vice President Germán Vargas Lleras, who leans right, is probably the frontrunner because of name recognition, but he hardly cracks 20 percent. Concerns about corruption in Vargas Lleras's Cambio Radical party—a likely reason he's running as an independent—may hurt his candidacy. Center-left and left politicians together add up to more than 50 percent in most polls, but there are many of them, and it's not clear whether they're prepared to back a single candidate, even if it means preventing a right-versus-right runoff. The right isn't unified either: Álvaro Uribe has a poor relationship with Vargas Lleras. Uribe, too, has less 'coattails' than before: three recent polls have given him higher negative favorability than positive. The outcome will depend on what issue is most

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

At Least 15 Killed as Powerful Earthquake Strikes Mexico

The 8.2-magnitude quake was the strongest earthquake to hit Mexico in more than a century, said President Enrique Peña Nieto. It was centered in the Pacific Ocean, off Chiapas.

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ECONOMIC

Chile, Argentina Eye Energy Swap Deal

Chile's government is expecting to close on the deal within days. The agreement would allow the countries to send natural gas or electricity over their shared border in exchange for other supplies.

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POLITICAL

Pope Urges Colombians to Seek Lasting Peace

Pope Francis celebrated Mass in Bogotá and urged Colombians to seek reconciliation after the country's five-decade armed conflict.

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Pope Francis. // Photo: Colombian Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

At Least 15 Killed as Powerful Earthquake Rocks Mexico

At least 15 people have been killed in Mexico after a powerful 8.2-magnitude earthquake jolted the country overnight. The earthquake, which struck at 11:49 p.m. Mexico City time, was centered in the Pacific Ocean, off the southern state of Chiapas, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. The quake had a depth of 43 miles and was centered 54 miles southwest of the town of Pijijapan, according to



It had a bigger magnitude than the one Mexicans knew in 1985."

— Enrique Peña Nieto

the USGS. The quake shook buildings for more than a minute and sent frightened residents in locations including Mexico City running into the streets, some fleeing their homes in their pajamas, Business Insider reported. Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto said in televised remarks that the earthquake was the strongest to hit Mexico in more than a century. "It was a large-scale earthquake," said Peña Nieto, Business Insider reported. "It had a bigger magnitude than the one Mexicans knew in 1985." The country's 1985 earthquake struck closer to Mexico City and left thousands dead. Peña Nieto told Mexico's Televisa television network that Thursday night's quake killed 15 people, including 10 deaths in Oaxaca State. The governors of Chiapas and Tabasco confirmed five deaths in their states. The two people killed in Tabasco State were children—one who was crushed by a falling wall, and the other was a hospitalized baby who died when the earthquake cut the power to the ventilator that was keeping him alive. Some 50 million people

in Mexico would have felt the quake's force, the president said. Video posted to social media showed buildings and highways shaking. Video showed Mexico City's Angel of Independence monument swaying as the earthquake struck. Tsunami waves were recorded as a result of the quake and could reach a height of 10 feet, according to the U.S. Pacific Tsunami Warning Center. The waves are unlikely to have enough power to cause major destruction, the center said.

Irma Takes Aim at Cuba After Pounding Turks and Caicos

Hurricane Irma continued churning through the Caribbean on Thursday, pummeling the Turks and Caicos Islands and causing at least 14 deaths in the region, BBC News reported. Irma was downgraded to a Category 4 hurricane, with sustained winds of up to 155 miles an hour, but remained dangerous as it headed toward the Bahamas and along Cuba's northern coast, according to the U.S. National Hurricane Center. Approximately 1.2 million people have been affected by the hurricane, and that number may rise to 26 million, according to the Red Cross. Officials have warned that the death toll could rise, citing concerns that disease could quickly spread in areas where sanitation services have been destroyed and clean drinking water becomes harder to find. Approximately 50,000 tourists have fled Cuba, and resorts along the country's northern coast have emptied out, Reuters reported. Officials in the Bahamas have ordered evacuations in low-lying areas in the southeastern part of the islands, BBC News reported. The Bahamas' tourism ministry said thousands of tourists have left the country before the storm was projected to hit. Over the weekend, Irma is expected to make landfall on the U.S. mainland, in Florida. Parts of south Florida "may be uninhabitable for weeks or months," said the U.S. National Weather Service. As of 8 a.m. Eastern Time today, the storm was located about 80 miles northeast of Cabo Lucretia, Cuba, and moving west-northwest.

NEWS BRIEFS

Mexico's Annual Inflation Reaches Highest Level in More Than 16 Years

Mexico's annual inflation reached its highest level in more than 16 years in August to 6.66 percent, up from 6.44 percent in July, mostly due to increases in the price of gasoline, as well as some agricultural and food prices, The Wall Street Journal reported Thursday. The inflation level is at its highest since May 2001, and it is well above the central bank's 3 percent target, though it was in line with the bank's expectations for August inflation. The consumer-price index rose by 0.49 percent in August from July, in line with expectations.

Chile's Arauco Agrees to Buy Wood Panel Plants in Brazil for \$102 Million

Chile-based forestry company Arauco has agreed to buy two wood panel production plants in Brazil from Masisa, a competitor, for \$102.8 million, Reuters reported today. Arauco is acquiring one plant in Paraná State and another in Rio Grande do Sul.

Chile, Argentina Eye Energy Swap Deal

The Chilean government expects to close on an energy swap deal with Argentina in the next few days, Chilean Energy Minister Andrés Rebolledo said Thursday, Reuters reported. "I think we can have an agreement in the next couple of days or if not, over the next few weeks," he said. The two countries are also negotiating the locations of five additional transmission line interconnection points, and they expect to reach an agreement as early as January, Rebolledo added. The two countries share a 3,300 mile-long border along the Andes Mountains. The deal would allow the South American neighbors to send natural gas or electricity over the border in exchange for other supplies.

Pope Francis Urges Colombians to Seek Lasting Peace

Pope Francis on Thursday sent a message of reconciliation to Colombians in the aftermath of the armed conflict between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, rebel group, Agence France-Presse reported. After greeting hundreds of thousands of people in Bogotá for Mass, he made his way to the altar, and declared the service in the name of “reconciliation.” In a morning address at the presidential palace, the pope acknowledged the “obstacles, differences and varying perspectives,” that would make moving past the half-century conflict difficult, but urged Colombia’s political and civic leaders to press on in the effort. “The more demanding the path, the greater must be our efforts to acknowledge each other, to heal wounds, to build bridges, to strengthen relationships and support one another,” Francis said. The day before, the pope prayed for the country to heal the wounds of war. Standing alongside President Juan Manuel Santos, who oversaw the controversial peace deal with the FARC, Francis urged Colombians to move past resentments in order to achieve lasting peace. Last year, the pontiff tried unsuccessfully to mediate a dispute between Santos and the top critic of the accord, former President and current Senator Álvaro Uribe. Uribe wrote a message on Twitter welcoming the pontiff to the country, though he did not comment on the peace process.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Peru Eyes Higher Investment Amid Reconstruction

Reconstruction efforts to repair the damage from the flooding caused by the “coastal El Niño” weather phenomenon will lead to

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important to voters next May. If the issue is peace: Colombians are feeling better about the FARC peace accords now that the group has disarmed, but still not generous about funding implementation or giving reduced penalties to rights abusers. They may pick a candidate who doesn’t want to tear up the accords, but also wouldn’t be very energetic about implementing them, like Vargas Lleras. If it’s Venezuela: A right-winger like Uribe’s candidate could win votes by trying to link center-left opponents to Caracas. If it’s corruption (Colombia is consumed by scandals, and now there are no big guerrilla attacks to divert attention): The advantage goes to candidates who made names for themselves either as anti-graft crusaders or as people who governed cities without scandal. Among them are ex-mayors Gustavo Petro and Sergio Fajardo, or Senator Claudia López.”

A Daniel E. Velandia O., director and chief economist for research at Credicorp Capital in Bogotá: “The political debate and public sentiment will be mainly driven by the implementation of the peace agreements with the FARC and the continuation of peace talks with the ELN. Hence, the political pulse is expected to be disrupted by two main forces. On the one hand, we have pro-government forces under National Unity—supporting peace processes—while center-right parties such as the U party, Liberal and Cambio Radical may selectively join and share support with center-left (Green Party)

and left parties (Polo Democrático), as we saw in the peace deal’s plebiscite. On the other hand, we have right-wing parties like Centro Democrático (the main opposition party led by former President Álvaro Uribe) and a wide sector of conservatives who

“The left wing’s electoral base in Colombia remains narrow.”

— Daniel E. Velandia O.

oppose the peace processes. In any case, recent corruption scandals could generate new political forces, so developments around them will be a key factor to monitor. While it is too early to predict the potential outcome of the presidential election next May, our current base case assumes continuity in the economic model, as we think that the left wing’s electoral base in Colombia remains narrow. Overall, we believe that the selection of the candidate of the Centro Democrático Party will be a key factor for the election; some recent polls suggest that more than 20 percent of voters would elect the candidate of this party, regardless of who it is. We expect official candidates to be known in the upcoming months, allowing polls to give a clearer picture about the current political backdrop.”

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an increase in investment activity across Peru, President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski said Thursday, state news outlet Andina reported. Peru was affected by coastal El Niño during the period from January to March, with heavy rains, landslides and floods damaging much of the infrastructure and agriculture, and leaving many Peruvians homeless. The government’s two-and-a-half-year reconstruction plan includes upgrading and repairing some 4,700

miles of highways, 46,000 social dwellings, drains and sewage pipes, roads along the cities of Piura, Catacaos, Chiclayo and Trujillo and towns in Huancavelica province. Kuczynski also expressed optimism that the large-scale projects would help the country’s economy recover, and reiterated the government’s pledge to also start work on major projects including an international airport and an irrigation project in Arequipa Province.

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A **Maria Velez de Berliner, president of Latin Intelligence Corporation:** “How the presidential candidates meet the public’s demands for believable and dependable solutions to criminality, insecurity, corruption, drugs and narco-mining, economic downturn and the self-inflicted implosion of the judiciary will define and shape the 2018 campaign. The majority of Colombians do not want ‘another Santos’ and more feel-good promises. They want real solutions to serious structural problems that affect everybody’s daily life. FARC’s newly created political party, Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común, which is also known as FARC, is cunningly skipping the presidential race to elect representatives in Congress, state assemblies and municipal councils, where they have guaranteed seats. By giving his ‘dedazo’ to a unifier candidate, it is possible Uribe can lead an upset similar to the plebiscite that temporarily sank the peace agreement. Uribe will do best by winning a majority in Congress, where amendments to the peace agreement (which Uribe adamantly opposes) and the legislation it spawned can become law. Whoever becomes president will have to collaborate with Congress to rebuild the judiciary from top to bottom and reduce criminality. It will be very difficult to revive the economy and re-establish

trust in government without an impartial, corruption-free judiciary, and the safety and security employees and employers must operate profitably and attract domestic and foreign investment. Venezuela’s expected

“**The majority of Colombians do not want ‘another Santos’ and more feel-good promises.”**

— Maria Velez de Berliner

collapse is an exogenous factor that must enter into any analysis of Colombia’s presidential politics. Colombia’s president will have to give first priority to how Venezuela’s demise will aggravate the instability along the Colombian-Venezuelan border, and complicate the precarious conditions of about two million Venezuelans who now live illegally in Colombia. Despite statements to the contrary, no current candidate is up to the responsibilities and tasks that lie ahead.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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Advisor Video

A Conversation with Andrés Manuel López Obrador

The Mexican presidential candidate discusses his policy proposals and his view on the domestic and foreign challenges facing Mexico in a Sept. 5 event sponsored by the Inter-American Dialogue and the Wilson Center.



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