

International

Historic leftist win in first round of Colombian presidential vote

Petro's road to presidency complicated by Hernandez's late surge

BOGOTA: Colombians clamoring for "change" gave a leftist ex-guerrilla an historic lead Sunday in a first round of presidential elections that will culminate in a runoff against a maverick outsider in June. With more than 99 percent of votes counted, preliminary results showed 62-year-old Gustavo Petro, a former Bogota mayor, taking 40.3 percent. He now has a shot at becoming Colombia's first-ever leftist president and wresting power from the political and economic elites historically at the helm.

Rodolfo Hernandez, a 77-year-old millionaire and himself an ex-mayor, came out of left field to snatch second place with 28 percent of the vote, denying Petro the 50 percent-plus needed for an outright, first-round win. Hernandez, who ran on an anti-corruption platform, also edged out right-winger Federico Gutierrez - a former mayor of second city Medellin who carried the hopes of establishment parties and who pollsters had predicted would finish in second place.

On Sunday, Petro vowed "real change" if elected, and promised to pursue "social justice and economic stability." "A company cannot grow if society is impoverished. Profits cannot grow

sustainably if the majority of the population (suffers from) hunger," he said.

'Danger for democracy'

Analysts say Petro's road to the presidency has been complicated by Hernandez's late surge. With his anti-establishment, populist reputation, some polls have suggested Hernandez would stand a better chance than Gutierrez at



Petro vows 'real change' if elected

beating Petro in a second round. The gloves came off as soon as the results were out, with Petro pointing out that Hernandez is under investigation for graft and asking: "Is this what we want?"

In his speech, a defeated Gutierrez said he would vote for Hernandez in the second round as Petro represented "a

danger for democracy". "We do not want to lose the country and we will not put at risk the future of Colombia, of our families, our children," he said. In a country marked by a deep-rooted fear of the political left - associated with guerrilla groups that sowed decades of misery - the pushback against Petro has been fierce, with rivals seeking to paint him as a radical, Hugo Chavez-style populist. For his part, Hernandez said the results showed that Colombians were "serious about ending corruption as a system of government."

'We all want change'

Some 12,000 polling stations were open for eight hours Sunday in a tense atmosphere one year after a brutal security crackdown on street protests fueled by deepening socioeconomic woes. More than 8.5 million Colombians voted for Petro, hoping he is the man to address biting poverty, rural violence, urban crime and endemic corruption in a country historically governed by rightist elites. Hernandez, who is not aligned to a political party, garnered 5.9 million votes and Gutierrez 5.0 million.

"We all want change," 34-year-old



BOGOTA: Colombian presidential candidate for the Historic Pact coalition, Gustavo Petro, shows his ballot as he votes during the presidential election on May 29, 2022. —AFP

hotel porter Elison Beltran, one of Hernandez's voters, told AFP of his choice. Hernandez had awaited the results with a beer, poolside, at his home, according to video shared by his campaign team. His politics are often described as inscrutable and not fitting comfortably into any specific political doctrine. "It is very hard to

know what his real policies will be," analyst Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue think tank told AFP. "I don't think it was his policies that got him this strong vote, I think it was more his rhetoric and appealing to a lot of disenfranchised voters who were very nervous about Petro, basically." —AFP

Toll mounts from Brazil downpours

RECIFE, Brazil: Torrential rains in northeastern Brazil have left at least 79 people dead and dozens missing, civil defense officials said Sunday, as rescuers capitalized on a lull in downpours to search for survivors. "As of 6:00 pm (2100 GMT) this Sunday, the number of people killed as a result of the rains has reached 79," the civil defense authority of Pernambuco state, where the affected communities of Recife and Olinda are located, said in a statement.

The disaster is the latest in a recent series of deadly landslides and floods triggered by extreme weather in Brazil. The number of dead has mounted steadily over the weekend, including dozens in landslides, as heavy rains caused rivers to overflow and torrents of mud swept away everything in their path. The latest statement from the civil defense did not offer an update on the number of people missing, though the agency had earlier reported 56 people still unaccounted for and nearly 4,000 who had lost their homes.

"We still don't have an exact number, but there are still reports of victims... who have not been found," Pernambuco Governor Paulo Camara said during a press conference. "The search will continue until we can identify all the missing people," he said. Authorities warned that rain was forecast to continue Monday, but in the meantime while the storm subsided some 1,200 personnel - some in boats or helicopters - resumed search and rescue



RECIFE, Brazil: A man removes debris from a landslide area in the Ibura neighborhood on May 29, 2022. —AFP

work, state officials said.

Minister of Regional Development Daniel Ferreira urged caution in a press conference Sunday in Recife, the capital of hard-hit northeastern Pernambuco state. "Although it has stopped raining now, we are forecasting heavy rains for the next few days," he said. "So the first thing is to maintain self-protection measures." Between Friday night and Saturday morning, rainfall volume reached 70 percent of what was forecast for all of May in some parts of Recife.

'Everyone poaches'

"There's no standard profile of a poacher. Everyone poaches - from the villager who is looking for something to eat to some big guy in the city who has an international network," the brigade's commander, Jerry Ibala Mayombo, told AFP. The unarmed unit sees its role as "educating, awareness-building and, as a last resort, punishing," he said. The heaviest sentences are for ivory smuggling, which can carry a 10-year jail term.

The two-year-old service was created by a partnership between Gabon's ministry for water and forests, a Belgian NGO called Conservation Justice and a Swiss-Gabonese sustainable forestry firm, Precious Woods CEB. "At the start, the overall feeling towards us was mistrust. But that's not the case today, because we have got the message across to people about what we do," said Ibala Mayombo. "We sometimes face violent poachers who threaten us, sometimes with their guns," he said. The team can be given a police escort when necessary. Last year, the unit seized 26 weapons, several dozen items of game and arrested eight individuals for ivory smuggling. "The trend is downward," said Ibala Mayombo. — AFP

same thatched round hut where the two sisters lived. No-one saw or heard anything. The homes, known as rondavels, are far apart from each other in Zingqolweni, a Xhosa-speaking community lying three hours from the nearest large city of East London. Here the sun sets behind the green mountains of the Eastern Cape province by 6pm (1600 GMT) in the winter months.

Never in South Africa

South Africa is one of the world's most violent countries outside a war zone, with a murder committed every 20 minutes on average. But even hardened police have been taken aback by the gruesomeness of this killing spree. All the victims were brutally stabbed. Some also had their throats slit. "They literally bled to death," a senior police investigator told AFP. "A series of murders of elderly people with a psychological motive. No, not seen before in South Africa," said the investigator, who asked not to be named. Six men have been arrested over the killings, and their trial is set to begin in June. Local police believe the murders are simply burglaries that have gone wrong.

But local official Geinikaya Koki, 64, is among those who doubt that thieves are to blame. "After the killings, when people were searching the house

Images circulated on local media showed rescue workers and volunteers clearing heaps of debris in Jardim Monteverde, on the border between Recife and the municipality of Jaboatao dos Guararapes, where 19 died Saturday morning in a landslide that ripped through precariously built homes. Luiz Estevao Aguiar, who lives in a different municipality, lost 11 relatives in the disaster, he told TV Globo. "My sister, my brother-in-law, 11 people from my family died. It was difficult... I did not expect this," he said tearfully. — AFP



LASTOURVILLE, Gabon: A team of tree cutters is seen at work on March 29, 2022 in the forest near the village of Bambidi in the Ogoue province. —AFP



ZINGQOLWENI, South Africa: Nontukunina Mbenyana, 82, whose son was the first victim of a wave of murders that affected the village, poses for a portrait outside of her house on May 16, 2022. —AFP

they found the money in the house," he said, adding that other valuables were also untouched. "Now, you then ask yourself, 'What is it that they want from this person that they killed?'" The only clue ever found has been a piece of clothing. Fears of a serial killer on the loose have swept the village. Some have fled and women have started sleeping together at night. — AFP

Russia advances in east Ukraine as EU meets on oil ban

KYIV: Russian forces edged toward the center of the eastern Ukrainian city of Severodonetsk Monday, while President Volodymyr Zelensky prepared to appeal to EU leaders at an emergency summit where a ban on Russian oil imports is on the agenda. Zelensky is expected to press EU officials at the summit "to kill Russian exports" as he seeks to crank up international pressure on Moscow.

Member states are searching for a compromise on a sixth round of sanctions, which has been delayed by resistance from within the bloc, namely from Hungary. Meanwhile, Russia forces continued their push in the eastern Donbas region, upping the pressure on the twin cities of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. Since failing to capture Kyiv in the war's early stages, Russia's army has narrowed its focus, hammering cities with relentless artillery and missile barrages as it seeks to consolidate its control.

The situation in Severodonetsk, just across the Donets river from Lysychansk, was "very difficult", the local Lugansk regional governor Sergiy Gaiday said in a statement on social media. "The Russians are advancing into the middle of Severodonetsk", while the fighting continued, Gaiday said.

While Russia concentrated its efforts in the east, Ukrainian forces pushed back over the weekend in the southern region of Kherson, the country's military leadership said. At the same time, two people were injured following an explosion in the Moscow-controlled city of Melitopol in south-eastern Ukraine, with local pro-Kremlin authorities said pinning the blame on Kyiv. — AFP

Anti-government protesters clash with police in Armenia

YEREVAN: Armenian opposition supporters clashed briefly with police on Monday during the latest in weeks of protests over Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's handling of a territorial dispute with arch-foe Azerbaijan. Opposition parties have been staging rallies since mid-April to demand Pashinyan's resignation, accusing him of planning to make unacceptable concessions to Baku over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Nagorno-Karabakh, located in Muslim-majority Azerbaijan but largely populated by Christian Armenians, is the focus of a decades-long territorial dispute between the two ex-Soviet Caucasus neighbors. On Monday, hundreds of protesters marched through the center of the Armenian capital, Yerevan, before blocking the entrance to a building housing government offices.

Clashes erupted after demonstrators attempted to break through police cordons and enter the building, an AFP journalist witnessed. During the protest, parliament deputy speaker and opposition leader Ishkhan Saghatlyan urged government employees to distance themselves from Pashinyan, so they do not "share his responsibility for ruining the country".

Pashinyan met Azeri President Ilham Aliyev in Brussels last week for a fresh round of European Union-mediated talks on a future peace treaty. They have agreed to "advance discussions" on normalizing ties and on overcoming differences over border delimitation, as well as unblocking transport communications. Azeri Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov told journalists last Friday there was a "positive atmosphere" in relations with Yerevan. — AFP

Gabon's grassroots against poaching

LASTOURVILLE, Gabon: A whistle blows. The car stops, and the driver is politely asked to turn off the engine and get out. A team from Gabon's anti-poaching brigade then searches the vehicle from top to bottom, looking in every cranny for guns or game. Nothing is found, and the driver is allowed to move on. The unit's task is to help guard Gabon's rich biodiversity.

Forests cover 88 percent of the surface of this small central African nation, providing a haven - and a tourism magnet - for species ranging from tropical hardwoods and plants to panthers, elephants and chimps. The team was on patrol close to a small village called Lastourville, 500 km southeast of the capital Libreville. The area has been badly hit by poaching, and tracks dug into the forest floor by logging vehicles are also used by illegal hunters to enter and shoot game.

Sleepless nights in South Africa's 'Village of Death'

ZINGQOLWENI, South Africa: Sleep is something that the inhabitants of Zingqolweni abandoned many months ago. Tucked in a remote corner of South Africa, this frightened village of 3,000 people has suffered a murder almost every month, occurring with clockwork regularity for a year. The brutal series of killings has earned Zingqolweni a chilling moniker: "The Village of Death."

All 11 victims have been elderly people, most of whom were women and most of whom lived alone. They have been stabbed to death in their homes after nightfall, when pitch darkness falls over a village where the unpaved roads are unlit. Nobongile Fihla, 50, spoke to AFP as she walked back from the cemetery. Her mother was among the first victims, killed in May 2021. "I found my mother there, next to the door, lying in a pool of blood. Her throat was slit," Fihla told AFP.

Her aunt was then found stabbed to death in the