

The Conversation

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Colombia's new president 'El Tigre' promises an iron fist – but that may not solve the violence he has inherited

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Colombia's president-elect, Abelardo De La Espriella, widely known as "El Tigre", will inherit a country deeply affected by insecurity.

The (total peace) strategy of outgoing president, Gustavo Petro, leaves a difficult legacy. Dialogue with armed groups has produced limited results. Meanwhile Colombia has watched armed and criminal organisations consolidate territorial power, expand their violent capabilities and profit from coca cultivation, illegal mining and extortion.

De la Espriella capitalised on these problems in his election campaign, promising an "iron fist" policy. This means no more negotiations with armed groups, stronger military pressure, fumigation and eradication of coca crops, extradition of criminals to the United States and the construction of mega-prisons.

In a country where many communities live under the authority of armed groups rather than the state, these promises have clear political appeal. But is this iron fist programme well-suited to solve the problems that Colombia currently faces? One reason to be sceptical is the difficulty of tackling violent groups that are deeply intertwined with local communities.

The relatively centralised rebel governance, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc), once exercised across rural Colombia, has been largely replaced by a fragmented criminal governance run by professional and internationalised armed groups. These that have significantly expanded since the 2016 peace agreement and Farc's demobilisation.

The Colombian state did not fill the ensuing power vacuum. This was instead filled by the far-left National Liberation Army (ELN), the Gulf Clan (Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia or AGC), Farc splinter groups and a shifting constellation of local gangs. All of these compete and collude over coca production and trafficking, illegal mining, extortion and other criminal activities.

One core problem that arises from this is that these criminal groups do not stand outside the local communities in which they operate – they are intertwined with them.

They recruit local youth, tax local shops, move goods along the roads everyone uses and often offer the only income many households can rely on.

When armed actors and civilians are this entangled, an iron-fist policy cannot reliably tell combatants from civilians. This matters because the approach assumes that the state can identify an enemy, apply overwhelming force and restore order. That may make for a persuasive message in an election campaign. But it's much harder in territories where armed groups are not clearly separate from the social and economic life of local communities.

This does not mean the Colombian government should avoid force. The state has a duty to protect civilians and confront armed organisations that kill, extort, recruit children and control territory. But the question is what kind of force, against whom and with what political strategy behind it.

2016 peace agreement at risk

A security policy focused mainly on military pressure also risks weakening the 2016 peace agreement. That agreement was never only about demobilising Farc. It also recognised that criminal violence in Colombia is sustained by rural inequality, weak state presence, restricted political participation, insecure land rights and the dependence of many communities on illicit economies.

One of its core pillars, the first chapter of the agreement, is the Comprehensive Rural Reform (CRR) programme, which seeks to redistribute land, among other things. This reform matters because land inequality has long been one of the drivers of conflict in Colombia. More equitable access to land, along with other kinds of support for disadvantaged rural citizens, can reduce the dependence of rural communities on armed groups and illicit economies.

Funeral service for victims of a bomb attack in the village of La Pedregosa, Colombia, April 2026, believed to be the work of Farc dissidents. EPA/Ernesto Guzman jnr.

A strategy that replaces rural reform with military security and private sector-led development risks leaving small farmers out of the equation. It's a dangerous approach. If peasants remain without land security, infrastructure and legal income, armed groups will continue to offer coercive forms of protection and illicit employment. In such conditions, the state may win military battles in the short term, but it's unlikely to be able to establish enduring legitimacy or authority.

The same problem applies to the proposed anti-narcotics policy. Fumigation and forced eradication can destroy coca crops. But they do not create alternative legal livelihoods. Without viable alternatives, many farmers replant coca or move deeper into the control of armed groups. A policy that treats coca farmers mainly as criminals also risks

alienating communities whose cooperation is essential for any durable security strategy.

Finally, De la Espriella has threatened to dismantle the transitional justice system. Colombia has a group of institutions responsible for guaranteeing victims of the armed conflict their rights to justice, reparation, truth and non-repetition of violence. The peace agreement and the transitional justice framework are both protected by Legislative Act 02 of 2017 and woven into the wider system of truth, justice and reparation.

Even if eliminating them is difficult because of their protected constitutional status, wide support in the Colombian Congress and international pressure, there is a realistic threat of slow strangulation via budget cuts, delegitimisation and selective compliance with their demands. That would damage trust in the state at a moment when Colombia needs greater civilian cooperation in conflict-affected territories.

The wider danger is that Colombia's next government treats peace and security as opposing projects. They are not. The peace agreement's provisions are not obstacles to security. Properly implemented, they are part of the state-building process required to reduce the power of armed groups.