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# Colombian reelection fever in Jackson Hts.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2010, 11:22 AM



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Not surprisingly, with congressional elections in Colombia being held on March 14 and the presidential election on May 30, the political environment is heating up in the South American country - and in New York City.

Here in New York, home to more than 1 million immigrants from the South American nation, passionate political campaigns pro and con for Colombia's candidates are gathering steam.

New York Colombians can vote in the elections at their consulate.

Tomorrow, a group of progressive Colombians plans a day-long series of events in Queens to launch the campaign for the Polo Democrático opposition party and its presidential candidate, Sen. Gustavo Petro.

Appropriately, the launching will take place in Jackson Heights, the heart of the Colombian community in New York.

"We call ourselves Amigos del Polo Democrático en Nueva York, and we share Sen. Petro's positions," said Freddy Castiblanco, 38, owner of Terraza 7 Train Cafe in Elmhurst.

The group opposes the policies of the current president, Álvaro Uribe - the strongest Washington ally in Latin America - who, after one reelection and eight years in power, apparently wants to run for a third term.

Uribe's popularity, still strong with voters, lately has suffered a series of setbacks. A recent poll found that the majority of Colombians do not want him to run again. Yet if he does, he will be the undisputed favorite.

"The problem is that the Constitution doesn't allow him to do so," Castiblanco said. "The whole country is waiting for the Constitutional Court verdict on his reelection."

Actively involved with the community in New York, Castiblanco belongs to Make the Road New York and New York Small Business United for Health Care. He says Polo Democrático is filled with young, active professionals who would like to see a change in Colombia's "political habits."

"We support Sen. Petro's struggle to put an end to the close link between the mafias and the state," Castiblanco said. "Thanks to his denunciations, more than 30 corrupt Congress members are in jail today because of their links with drug traffickers, paramilitary groups and the FARC guerrilla."

One of Petro's concerns is to put an end to the violence that has plagued Colombia for decades. But he says that, contrary to Uribe, he doesn't believe this can be accomplished only by force.

"I would have a policy different from President Uribe's," Petro told us in a phone interview. "It would be a policy based on the conviction that social inequality is the mother of violence."

"I would put in place a redistribution of land, make credit available to small-business people and make great emphasis on education. In other words, I would give the people the tools for them to be able to leave poverty behind. Work is the only way to overcome poverty."

Mauricio Trujillo, the Polo Democrático's candidate for elected representative in the Colombian House of Representatives of the more than 4 million of his compatriots who live outside their country, will be in New York for the occasion.

Although Castiblanco is in favor of immigration reform, he says that the Polo Democrático's main concern is eliminating the problems that force people to emigrate.

"To resolve the problem of immigration, we have to fight its primary causes," he said. "We need to fight poverty, social inequality, lack of opportunity, insecurity [and] unemployment so people won't have to leave their country."

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