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## **Ecopetrol & its CEO Ricardo Ensnared In Helicopter Contract Scandal**

Posted On May 13, 2025 By : Editorial Staff

Ricardo Roa, current president of Colombian state-controlled oil company [Ecopetrol](#) (NYSE: EC) and former campaign manager for President Gustavo Petro, is now embroiled in a major scandal surrounding a helicopter transport contract. A formal

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embodied in a major scandal surrounding a helicopter transport contract. A formal complaint filed with the Office of the Attorney General of Colombia alleges the existence of a rigged bidding process, tailor-made contract terms, and a corruption scheme within [Ecopetrol](#) that Roa perpetuated.

The alleged corruption model dates back to 2011 when [Ecopetrol](#) centralized its air transport provider selection. Since then, [Helistar S.A.S.](#) has continuously secured five-year contracts, with changing requirements seemingly adjusted to match its aging fleet. For example, while aircraft were originally required to be no older than five years, the 2022 bidding allowed for 20-year-old helicopters—a shift allegedly made to accommodate Helistar. The complaint highlights the company's enduring ties to political figures close to President Petro, including Milton Cabeza Peñaranda, Helistar's legal representative, and the Cabeza family's connection to Danilo Romero, a political ally of Petro.

[Ecopetrol](#) launched a bidding process to select air transport providers for the company and its subsidiaries, including Cenit and Ocesa, on August 16, 2023—four months after Roa assumed [Ecopetrol](#)'s presidency. Although the company led the design and strategy of the process, the subsidiaries retained the authority to finalize contracts. The complaint argues that only six Colombian companies were invited to participate and that submission deadlines were extremely short, sidelining potential competitors.

Bidders had less than a month to prepare, with proposals due on October 9, 2023, and operations expected to start by November 1. Many companies withdrew due to the tight timeline and the impractical requirement to upgrade their fleets within days. As [Ecopetrol announced](#), the contract was officially signed on August 29, 2024, and divided into two parts: The majority of the demand went to Helistar for operations in Cúcuta and Soracá, while a smaller part went to [Helicol](#) for the Paz de Ariporo base.

However, seven months later, [Ecopetrol](#) abruptly canceled Helicol's contract, citing technical and documentation shortcomings, and reassigned its share to Helistar. Helicol, represented by lawyer Julián Quintana, former director of the Technical Investigation Team (CTI, by its acronym in Spanish) of the Office of the Attorney General of Colombia, filed a criminal complaint accusing Roa and Cabeza of collusion, anti-competitive practices, and corruption. They alleged that a former Helistar employee, then working at Cenit, was involved in the decision-making process that led to Helicol's removal. They also challenged the validity of inspection reports and the criteria used to terminate the contract.

The complaint also mentions a private lunch between Roa and Orlando Cabeza—the alleged true owner of Helistar—hosted at Danilo Romero's apartment. Though officially denied, the event underscores alleged ties between Helistar and Colombia's political elite, connections that an inquiry made by local website [La Silla Vacía](#) also suggests. Documents referred in the complaint link Orlando Cabeza to past drug trafficking operations, raising further concerns about his hidden involvement.

"We will denounce the alleged mafia within [Ecopetrol](#) dedicated to directing air transport contracts. Ricardo Roa must explain to the authorities how they decapitate bidders to benefit a well-off contractor," Quintana said on X before sending the 53-page complaint. The document also accuses Helistar of submitting falsified pilot certifications and failing to meet the minimum 300 flight-hour requirement. As of May 8, 2024, Colombia's Superintendency of Industry and Commerce formally charged [Ecopetrol](#), its subsidiaries, and Helistar for allegedly directing contracts unfairly from 2011 to 2023.

This is just one of several investigations involving Ricardo Roa. He is also under scrutiny for his role in financing Gustavo Petro's presidential campaign and for irregularities in the appointment of Jorge Carrillo as president of ISA. While Colombia's National Electoral Council has temporarily frozen its investigation into Petro's campaign financing, the

*This now makes 3 major scandals for Roa, with the ISA presidential appointment, and President Gustavo Petro's campaign finance irregularities.*



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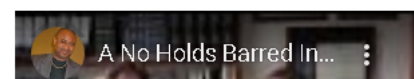


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Headline photo: Colombian President Gustavo Petro with Ricardo Roa (photo: ANH)

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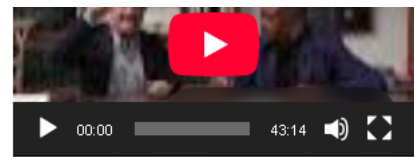
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