

Colombia: The Ballot and the Gun

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Heading into the 2026 elections, prominent media and research platforms—such as El Tiempo, El Espectador, Semana, and 360° Geopolítica—warn that Colombia's democratic competition is being overshadowed by armed conflict. Their reporting points to a landscape where illegal armed actors have expanded territorial control across major regions, challenging Colombian sovereignty under the current Petro's Total Peace deal.

According to El Espectador (May 30, 2026), armed organizations and criminal structures exert varying degrees of influence over at least 190 municipalities, with additional risk classifications identifying 69 municipalities requiring immediate intervention, 168 requiring urgent action, and 433 municipalities designated as priority areas due to the presence or influence of criminal actors. These figures are frequently cited as evidence of the scale of territorial fragmentation affecting governance and electoral conditions.

A separate intelligence report referenced by Semana (June 6, 2026) adds further detail to this security landscape, concluding that between 2022 and 2025, illegal armed organizations expanded both their operational capacity and territorial reach. The report estimates an 87% increase in operational capabilities and a 36% expansion in territorial presence, with armed groups now reportedly operating across more than 420,000 square kilometers—approximately 40% of Colombia's national territory but influencing significantly larger portions through informal control and coercive capacity.

It also identifies the Clan del Golfo, the ELN, and dissident FARC factions as the principal actors behind this expansion, with collective membership allegedly growing from roughly 13,000 individuals in 2022 to over 27,000 by 2025.

Within this framework, analysts argue that these territorial dynamics have direct implications for electoral behavior. In regions such as Caquetá, Guaviare, and Putumayo, local reporting and field documentation describe environments where voting may be shaped by intimidation, coercion, or political pressure from armed groups operating in areas with limited state presence. These conditions are frequently cited as central to understanding how electoral outcomes are produced in geographically contested zones.

Political controversy has also surrounded allegations regarding the relationship between criminal actors and electoral processes. Critics and some investigative narratives, including those discussed in 360° Geopolítica, reference the so-called "Pacto de la Picota" as an example of alleged interactions between political campaigns and criminal organizations during the 2022 election cycle.

One of the most widely cited claims in this debate is the assertion—reportedly made by relatives of President Petro—that such arrangements could have influenced approximately one million votes. These claims remain politically explosive and continue to shape polarized interpretations of Colombia's recent electoral history.

The 2026 legislative elections have further intensified these disputes. Some analyses cited in public debate argue that approximately 2.4 million votes for the Pacto Histórico coalition

originated from 126 municipalities under varying degrees of illegal armed-group influence (Semana, April 18, 2026). While these figures are contested, they are frequently used to question the integrity of electoral competition in high-risk territories.

Additional controversy emerged from voting patterns observed in conflict-affected regions during the 2026 electoral cycle. According to data reported by several Colombian media outlets based on CNE election results, Iván Cepeda received 100% of the votes in 218 polling stations, many of them located in municipalities affected by armed conflict in Nariño, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, and Chocó. Analysts noted that some of these areas have a documented presence of illegal armed groups and weak state institutions. Nevertheless, the results have fueled debate regarding the conditions under which electoral participation occurs in territories where coercive actors maintain significant influence over local populations.

The broader security environment has also been marked by high-profile political violence. The assassination of opposition senator and presidential candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay is widely recognized as a pivotal event in the electoral cycle, altering campaign dynamics and intensifying national debate over security and political stability. Interpretations of its political consequences vary, but its impact on the tone and focus of the campaign has been widely acknowledged.

Taken together, these developments point to a structural condition in which electoral politics and territorial control are deeply intertwined. With hundreds of municipalities classified as high-risk, armed groups expanding across an estimated 40% of national territory, and allegations of coercive influence shaping parts of the vote, Colombia's 2026 elections are increasingly analyzed not only as a contest between political projects, but as a test of whether democratic participation can be fully insulated from armed territorial power.

In this context, the central challenge is no longer limited to electoral competition in the formal sense, but whether voting behavior in large parts of Colombia can be meaningfully disentangled from coercive local power structures that continue to shape political, social, and security realities across extensive portions of the territory.

The 2026 electoral landscape has hardened into a zero-sum game. In major urban centers, aggressive street-level mobilization and high-octane messaging have turned the campaign trail into an ideological pressure cooker. The Petro-Cepeda campaign is facing allegations of using state resources to tilt the political balance in its favor, amid accusations of institutional overreach.

In this volatile arena, even a simple street protest is a Rorschach test: to supporters, it's vital democratic expression; to critics, it's a dog whistle for civil disorder.

This total fragmentation of narrative—where every political act is simultaneously framed as a civic duty, a government abuse, or a threat to national stability—sets a combustible stage for the ultimate showdown: a presidential runoff between Abelardo de la Espriella and the Petro-Cepeda coalition.

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