

## Colombia's Elections II

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With legislative elections four weeks away and the first round of the presidential election scheduled for 31 May, Colombia is approaching a decisive political moment. These elections take place amid the most severe humanitarian and human rights *deterioration* in more than two decades and against a backdrop of institutional strain, geopolitical realignment, and unprecedented fragmentation within the political system.

Three underlying dynamics are reshaping Colombia's electoral landscape and altering the balance of power ahead of 2026.

### Context

Colombia is facing its most acute humanitarian and human rights crisis since the mid-2000s. Since 2022, official and independent monitoring bodies report a sharp rise in massacres, forced displacement, and targeted killings, particularly in rural and peripheral regions. Violence has expanded both in scale and geography, affecting territories that had experienced relative stabilization following the 2016 peace agreement.

This deterioration is driven primarily by the expansion and consolidation of illegal armed and criminal organizations, operating in the context of President Gustavo Petro's "Total Peace" policy. While conceived as a strategy to de-escalate conflict through dialogue, the policy has coincided with reduced state coercive pressure in key regions, creating incentives for armed groups to expand territorial control.

The principal victims include women, children, ethnic minorities, judicial officials, opposition political actors, and journalists. Human rights organizations describe a sustained pattern of victimization combining *lethal violence* with political intimidation, harassment, and stigmatization, which has weakened local governance and eroded institutional protection mechanisms.

These trends are extensively documented by the Office of the Colombian Ombudsperson, the United Nations system, the European Union, the Truth Commission, Human Rights Watch, and independent research organizations, including 360° Geopolítica. Despite methodological differences, their findings converge on a shared conclusion: *the state's capacity to guarantee fundamental rights and humanitarian norms has declined sharply since 2022.*

### Critical Developments

#### 1. Geopolitical Realignment and Security Policy Reversal

After months of escalating diplomatic tension between Bogotá and Washington, Colombia's foreign and security posture has undergone a notable shift. This follows a period marked by confrontational rhetoric from President Gustavo Petro and Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro toward U.S. President Donald Trump.

In early January 2026, U.S. authorities detained Maduro and presented him before a federal court in the Southern District of

New York, signaling a decisive escalation in Washington's approach toward the Venezuelan regime. Within days, President Petro formally *requested*<sup>1</sup> a meeting with President Trump, which was *approved*.

On the eve of that meeting, the Colombian government authorized its first airstrike in more than three years against an ELN position in Catatumbo. This marked a clear departure from Petro's earlier reluctance to authorize offensive military operations against the ELN who Petro's calls his *brothers*.

At the same time, Colombia extradited Andrés Felipe Marun Silva ("Pipe Tuluá") to the United States at the request of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Texas—one of the most consequential judicial cooperation actions of Petro's presidency.

Already decertified and on the Clinton list, Petro managed to secure a meeting with Trump, a *mixed blessing* obtained only through a forced negotiation, a humiliating display of deference, and the acceptance of all commitments imposed by Washington, including the handover of additional criminals.

In the process, he distanced himself from Maduro, abandoned his anti-oil industry stance, and undermined Iván Cepeda by conceding that Total Peace had empowered illegal armed groups and organized crime. His overriding aim is now to leave office unburdened by U.S. sanctions and legal liabilities.

Simultaneously, despite previously opposing domestic fossil fuel exploration, the Petro administration has agreed to U.S.-led cooperation in Venezuela's gas and oil sector, underscoring a broader reversal in both energy and security policy. This shift reflects an opportunist pivot: prioritizing *personal* alignment and legal protection over ideological consistency.

Domestically, the fallout has been significant. Audio recordings associated with Pipe Tuluá's extradition have fueled allegations of illicit campaign financing related to the 2022 presidential race and prompted formal complaints involving the president's brother, Juan Fernando Petro<sup>2</sup>.

#### 2. Governance, Electoral Integrity, and Political Violence

A second dynamic shaping the electoral environment concerns governance and electoral integrity. Critics argue that President Petro has increasingly relied on executive decrees while the *Pacto Histórico*, has pursued electoral strategies that test Colombia's regulatory framework. Allegations include opaque campaign financing, irregular candidate registration, and controversial internal consultation procedures led by Senator and presidential aspirant Iván Cepeda.

While *Pacto Histórico* denies these accusations, they have triggered ongoing investigations before Colombia's electoral authorities and the Constitutional Court. Opponents contend that similar practices were employed in 2022 to secure a congressional majority and propel Petro to the presidency—legal disputes that remain unresolved within a Attorney General Office partially reshaped by appointments made during his administration.

<sup>1</sup> Petro's request landed at a critical moment, just as the U.S. administration appeared poised to consider a bounty on his capture, mirroring its earlier move against Maduro.

<sup>2</sup> Petro is accused by family members and others of securing the Presidency with funds linked to narco-traffickers and contraband networks. The Attorney General has allegedly allowed the contraband king—alias *Pitufo*—to leave Colombia and take refuge in Portugal, a

country that almost immediately received opaque contracts worth millions of dollars from Petro's government, apparently intended to persuade Portugal not to extradite him back to Colombia.

These institutional tensions are unfolding amid a sustained rise in political violence. Assassinations and attempted attacks against opposition figures, judicial officials, and electoral authorities have raised alarm among civil society groups.

Supporters of the government characterize these incidents as part of Colombia's longstanding security challenges; critics argue they form part of a broader pattern of intimidation aimed at weakening democratic oversight, amplified by sympathetic media narratives and segments of academia.

Notably, international responses have been limited. Multilateral organizations—including the United Nations, the European Commission, and the Organization of American States—have largely refrained from sustained public engagement, relying heavily on official government reporting and aligned civil society sources. *This has constrained independent international scrutiny at a moment of heightened institutional vulnerability.*

### 3. Foreign Influence and Selective Condemnation

A third key concern centers on claims of foreign interference in elections. Some academics close to the Petro administration and U.S. Democratic-aligned analysts argue that the Trump administration has timed policy decisions to influence elections abroad. Critics say these claims distract from deeper, sustained external influence in the region.

Venezuela's strategic ties with Iran, Russia, and China—built under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro—are long documented, and critics contend that President Petro has maintained similar geopolitical alignments since 2022. U.S. law enforcement has linked Venezuelan officials to narcotics and terrorist financing networks, with investigations revealing schemes involving fraudulent passports and support that aided groups like Hezbollah in expanding across the Western Hemisphere.

Venezuela has also been accused of offering political and logistical backing to Colombian armed groups such as the FARC and ELN, both designated terrorist organizations by Western governments, and U.S. prosecutions have charged former Venezuelan officials in narcotics conspiracies tied to these networks. Testimony in U.S. courts has further alleged financial support from Venezuela to Colombian political campaigns linked to Petro's political rise even to the presidency of Colombia.

Despite these concerns, neither Venezuela under Maduro and now Delcy Rodríguez nor Colombia under Petro has strongly condemned major global crises, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Tehran's repression of protests, or activities of groups like Hezbollah and Hamas—raising questions about their foreign policy stances.

This asymmetry has reinforced perceptions of selective outrage and ideological alignment, raising questions about the consistency of democratic commitments among sectors of the regional left and their international allies.

### March Legislative Elections and Interparty Consultations

On 8 March, alongside congressional elections, Colombian voters may participate in presidential interparty consultations.

Three consultations will be held:

*The Great Consultation for Colombia (center-right)*

*The Front for Life (government-aligned center-left)*

*The Consultation of Solutions (government-aligned left)*

Since their introduction in 2018, consultations have played a decisive role in presidential races. Both Iván Duque (2018) and Gustavo Petro (2022) emerged through this mechanism, while Rodolfo Hernández's 2022 run demonstrated that bypassing consultations remains the exception.

### The Great Consultation for Colombia

The largest interparty consultation in Colombian history brings together nine candidates spanning the center and right<sup>3</sup>. Initially conceived as a technocratic coalition aimed at countering polarization, its ideological balance shifted with the entry of Senator Paloma Valencia of the Democratic Center.

Valencia currently leads internal polling and benefits from a disciplined party machine competing simultaneously in the legislative elections, with former president Álvaro Uribe on the Senate ballot. Analysts estimate the consultation could mobilize between five and six million voters, placing its eventual nominee in a strong position ahead of May.

### The Front for Life

Launched with President Petro's backing, this consultation seeks to consolidate government-aligned forces and reconnect them with traditional political structures. Internal divisions intensified after electoral authorities barred Iván Cepeda from the ballot due to prior participation in another consultation.

The contest now centers on former Medellín mayor Daniel Quintero and Roy Barreras. Polling favors Quintero, while Barreras relies on congressional machinery and traditional alliances. The outcome will determine whether the governing coalition consolidates or further fragments.

### The Consultation of Solutions

Former Bogotá mayor Claudia López has staked her presidential ambitions on this consultation. While presenting herself as a centrist alternative, her political trajectory remains closely tied to Petro's coalition. Her sole opponent lacks national recognition and measurable polling support.

For López, defeat would represent a major political setback and underscore the volatility of the governing bloc's electoral strategy.

### The May 31 Presidential First Round

The 2026 presidential election is shaping up to be one of the most competitive in recent history. As of early 2026, twelve candidates have formally confirmed their participation in the first round, while sixteen pre-candidates are competing in the March consultations.

Several prominent figures are expected to bypass the consultations and run directly<sup>4</sup>, producing a crowded and fragmented ballot. Notably, at least five candidates are aligned with or emerging from President Petro's political orbit<sup>5</sup>,

<sup>3</sup> Mauricio Cárdenas, David Luna, Vicky Dávila, Juan Manuel Galán, Paloma Valencia, Juan Carlos Pinzón, Aníbal Gaviria, Enrique Peñalosa y Juan Daniel Oviedo.

<sup>4</sup> Abelardo de la Espriella; Iván Cepeda; Sergio Fajardo; Clara López; Maurice Armitage; Mauricio Lizcano; Sonda Macollins; Daniel Palacios; Carlos Felipe Córdoba; and Santiago Botero.

<sup>5</sup> Claudia López, Clara López, Iván Cepeda, Mauricio Lizcano, and Roy Barreras.

reflecting both the breadth and internal divisions of the governing coalition.

By contrast, candidates emerging from the center-right consultation and independent movements position themselves as alternatives to the current administration, appealing to voters seeking institutional stability and a clear break from the Petro era.

#### Strategic Assessment

Colombia enters the 2026 electoral cycle amid accelerating humanitarian deterioration, growing institutional stress, and an unusually fragmented political arena. The proliferation of government-aligned candidacies significantly diminishes the likelihood of a first-round victory, while simultaneously

expanding opportunities for opposition and independent actors to consolidate electoral support.

The March consultations will constitute a critical stress test of party organization, territorial reach, and voter mobilization capacity.

Their outcomes will shape not only first-round electoral dynamics but also the balance of power heading into a highly probable runoff-one that will place Colombia's democratic resilience under exceptional strain at a moment of deep national uncertainty.

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