

Colombia's Legislative and Presidential Elections www.360geopolitica.org

Colombia's 2026 electoral cycle is a pivotal moment for the country's democratic institutions and governance. Legislative elections on 8 March will determine the composition of Congress, followed by the presidential election on 31 May, with a possible runoff on 21 June. Together, these elections will define Colombia's political and institutional trajectory for 2026-2030.

Context

The 2026 elections are unfolding amid a profound erosion of state authority, the entrenchment of illegal armed groups across extensive regions, and escalating political violence. President Gustavo Petro's "Total Peace" policy has intensified these challenges, dismantling traditional deterrence mechanisms, emboldening criminal actors, and enabling at least 20,000 killings as armed groups expanded under his administration.

Petro's political alliances extend beyond Colombia, including ties to Nicolás Maduro's regime and transnational criminal networks such as the Cartel de los Soles, Tren de Aragua, and the Clan del Golfo, as well as Colombian and Venezuelan armed groups. These networks may have provided financial support to Petro's coalition, directly shaping both the 2026 Congressional and presidential campaigns.

Internationally, Petro has cultivated connections with actors linked to Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, as well as governments and corporations in Portugal, Sweden, and Spain that have benefited from multimillion-dollar Colombian state contracts of questionable legality. These domestic-international alliances have provided Petro's movement with significant advantages, undermining democratic competition in 2026.

Concerns over electoral integrity have intensified following findings by the National Electoral Council that Petro's 2022 campaign violated finance regulations, prompting sanctions in November 2025. These issues were compounded by a Noticias Caracol investigation revealing contacts between FARC dissident groups and members of the National Intelligence Directorate

and the Colombian Army, suggesting infiltration of state security institutions.

Documents, communications, and intercepted chats implicate senior dissident figures and raise serious questions about the integrity of Colombia's intelligence apparatus. Allegedly, Petro's 2022 campaign received funding from FARC dissidents in Colombia and Venezuela, channeled through Vice President Francia Márquez. These revelations have sparked public scrutiny and formal legal complaints, with the Attorney General's Office confirming the materials' authenticity and heightening concerns over illegal influence and campaign finance violations.

These risks are compounded by evidence linking individuals close to Petro to targeted political violence. Investigations suggest that the assassination of Senator and presidential candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay was orchestrated by the Second Marquetalia FARC dissident group, allegedly through criminal intermediaries. The convergence of peace negotiations, criminal networks, and political violence highlights acute threats to Colombia's democratic institutions, electoral integrity, and public security ahead of the 2026 elections.

Security Environment

Colombia's security forces are at their weakest point since the era of Plan Colombia. Over the past three years, the Petro administration has retired or dismissed 40 percent of army generals and over half of police generals, replacing experienced leaders with politically aligned but less seasoned officers. This has eroded institutional expertise, disrupted command structures, and weakened counterdrug and counterterrorism capabilities. The National Police Intelligence Directorate (DIPOL) has lost senior officers with critical experience collaborating with U.S. partners, creating a severe knowledge gap.

The "Paz Total" strategy has further undermined security. Since 2022, military operations against armed groups have largely ceased, and coca eradication programs have been suspended in favor of negotiations. Colombia has become the world's leading coca producer, armed groups have expanded territorial control, and peace talks have largely stalled. Ending U.S. assistance—something

Petro has publicly sought—would exacerbate this crisis. Funding and intelligence support, totaling over \$60 million in 2024 alone, are critical for the operational capacity of Colombia's security forces to confront the ELN, Clan del Golfo, and FARC dissidents. Without it, violence, extortion, and displacement among Colombia's more than seven million internally displaced citizens will likely intensify.

Two troubling realities illustrate the moral and political distortion of Petro's security approach. First, he has referred to the ELN, an illegal armed group, as "brothers and sisters," creating an alarming equivalence between state and criminal actors. Second, when dangerous criminals are arrested or neutralized, Petro's administration and the Pacto Histórico recast them as "poor people" or "poor young people," framing perpetrators as victims while legitimizing the Total Peace partners. Between 2018 and 2022, international institutions contributed to this narrative, deepening societal polarization.

Violence by non-State armed groups and criminal organizations—many associated with Petro's Total Peace Initiative—continues to devastate Colombian communities, particularly Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants, rural farmers, and urban residents. In 2024 alone, 252 individuals were killed in 72 massacres, 89 human rights defenders were murdered, and 216 children were recruited by armed groups. The UN Human Rights Chief has urged the government to protect civilians, prevent child recruitment, and uphold the Escazú Agreement, emphasizing human rights and environmental safeguards. Alarming, armed groups and organized crime control at least 75 percent of Colombian territory, leaving vast areas beyond government or international oversight.

Legislative and Presidential Landscape

The 8 March 2026 congressional elections are shaping up as a fragmented and highly competitive contest. A total of 1,124 candidates are registered for 108 Senate seats, while 2,107 candidates vie for 188 House seats, reflecting intense political mobilization and ongoing party atomization.

The presidential race, set for 31 May 2026, remains fluid as nominations are finalized. Candidates can

access the ballot through party endorsement, citizen signature petitions, or primary consultations, with formal registration due by 13 March 2026. Early consolidation across ideological blocs remains absent, highlighting a dynamic and uncertain electoral field.

Several figures are expected to contest the May 31 elections, including Sergio Fajardo as a centrist moderate, Paloma Valencia as the standard-bearer of the conservative opposition, and Abelardo de la Espriella pursuing a right-wing outsider bid via signature collection. On the far left, Iván Cepeda signals Petro-Pacto Histórico continuity. This field remains far from definitive.

Candidates aligned with Petro enter the race with a decisive financial and operational advantage. Funding from illicit sources, preferential access to public contracts, and backing from armed groups and criminal networks within the Total Peace Initiative give Petro's coalition a significant edge. These actors actively pressure communities and influence electoral behavior, further undermining democratic competition.

Petro and Cepeda's alignment with Maduro-era strategies reflects coordinated loyalty to a regime underpinned by criminal networks. Groups such as Tren de Aragua, Cartel de los Soles, ELN, Segunda Marquetalia, Clan del Golfo, and FARC dissidents operate under the Total Peace framework, commanding resources, manpower, and territorial control sufficient to secure both presidential and congressional victories. This is not a democratic process; it is organized power consolidating itself through coercion, financial leverage, and control over local populations.

The pattern is clear: the 2022 elections demonstrated the coalition's ability to leverage these networks to win power. Today, mounting evidence implicates organized crime in sustaining these outcomes, yet Petro and Cepeda remain committed to maintaining control through the same mechanisms. Their objective is not democratic governance—it is the preservation of power.

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