

Colombia's Democratic Mandate

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On 21 June 2026, Colombians participated in one of the most consequential presidential elections in the country's recent history. Of the 41,421,973 citizens eligible to vote, a record 26,344,960 cast ballots, reflecting an exceptional level of civic engagement and democratic participation.

The election produced a clear mandate for Abelardo de la Espriella and his running mate, José Manuel Restrepo, to govern Colombia for the 2026-2030 term. The unprecedented turnout and narrow but decisive result underscored the electorate's determination to shape the country's future through democratic means.

On 24 June at 9:24 a.m., Iván Cepeda publicly acknowledged the outcome and conceded defeat to De la Espriella. His recognition of the results brought the electoral contest to a definitive close, eliminated any immediate uncertainty, and reinforced confidence in the legitimacy and integrity of Colombia's democratic institutions.

Later that day, Colombia's National Electoral Council (CNE) formally declared Abelardo de la Espriella president-elect and José Manuel Restrepo vice president-elect following the completion of the official national vote count for the 21 June runoff.

According to the final results recorded in Form E-26, De la Espriella secured 12,960,166 votes, while Iván Cepeda Castro, representing the Historic Pact coalition, received 12,708,312 votes. Of the 26,344,960 ballots cast, 26,095,504 were deemed valid. The final tally also included 427,026 blank votes, 220,790 invalid ballots, and 28,666 unmarked ballots.

The Petro-Cepeda presidential campaign was characterized by disrespect for the constitutional order, including claims of the usurpation of electoral competencies by President Petro, instances of political violence, and the assassination of Senator and presidential candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay.

It was also linked to reported cases of territorial and urban intimidation, as well as attacks attributed to actors connected to the Petro-Cepeda "Total Peace" deal, including illegal armed groups and organized criminal organizations. In addition, there are allegations regarding the possible use of more than 100 billion Colombian pesos in public funds to support the Petro-Cepeda presidential campaign during the 2025-2026 period.

The presidential runoff was also marked by the phenomenon known as "vote and rifle," referring to the influence illegal armed groups may exert on elections through threats, intimidation, territorial control, and restrictions on movement. In Colombia, it describes how armed actors can undermine democratic guarantees and condition the free exercise of voting rights.

According to the Ombudsperson's Office (Defensoría del Pueblo), its monitoring of the 2026 electoral process identified persistent risks linked to the expansion of illegal armed groups in several regions. It warned that these actors exercise territorial and social control that can pressure voters and candidates, stressing that the main threat is not the suspension of elections, but elections taking place under coercive conditions that limit free political participation.

The Ombudsperson's Office highlighted the Caribbean, northwestern, and southwestern regions as areas of highest electoral risk, particularly Antioquia, Córdoba, Chocó, Bolívar, Sucre, La Guajira, Magdalena, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Nariño. It also reported hundreds of threats against social leaders and

political actors, alongside an increase in municipalities under urgent or priority alert.

Likewise, the Electoral Observation Mission (MOE) identified 386 municipalities facing electoral risks ahead of the 2026 presidential election, including 139 classified as being at extreme risk. The most critical concentrations were in Cauca, Antioquia, Norte de Santander, and Valle del Cauca, while every municipality in Arauca and Guaviare registered some degree of vulnerability.

Both the MOE and the Conflict Analysis Resource Center (CERAC) concluded that these threats are concentrated in areas characterized by the persistence of armed conflict, illicit economies, and limited state presence. Among the most affected municipalities were Tumaco, Tibú, Arauca, El Tarra, Guapi, and Timbiquí.

In addition, the ICP flagged approximately 327,000 votes cast at polling stations deemed atypical because of the influence or presence of armed groups, recommending heightened scrutiny and strengthened electoral oversight in those locations.

After the election, debate intensified around sharp increases in support for Iván Cepeda in several municipalities. In Campamento (Antioquia), his vote rose from 426 to 2,136; in Angostura, from 559 to 1,907; and in Anorí, from 1,275 to 3,849. In some municipalities, he also reached very high vote shares, including 94% in Guapi, 96% in Alto Baudó, and 98% in El Litoral del San Juan.

Across traditional and social media, sectors of the left and far left have sought to dismiss the "vote-and-rifle" factor as politically insignificant, even though it is estimated to have delivered nearly 2.4 million votes to Petro's movement in the March 8 legislative elections and a similar number in the May 21 presidential runoff.

Rather than confronting this issue, *left* narratives have largely focused on outcomes favorable to the Petro-Cepeda campaign. The controversy echoes concerns raised in 2022, when allegations linked to statements by President Petro's brother and son fueled claims that up to one million votes may have been influenced by illegal armed groups and organized crime.

At stake is a fundamental question: can Colombians vote free from criminal coercion? Opponents argue that the Petro-Cepeda campaigns of 2022 and 2026 failed to draw a clear line against actors operating outside the rule of law, allowing entrenched networks of influence to retain their electoral power.

The result, they contend, was the effective disenfranchisement of nearly three million Colombians and a serious blow to electoral integrity. In his concession speech, Iván Cepeda did not reject votes cast in territories where illegal armed groups and organized crime allegedly coerced support for his candidacy and the Pacto Histórico.

More broadly, Petro-Cepeda's political project has been linked by its opponents to support from the Chávez-Maduro regime, authoritarian governments, illegal armed groups, and criminal networks, reinforcing concerns about the forces shaping Colombia's democracy.

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