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The Security Crisis in Colombia Defines the 2026 Elections

Introduction

Latin America is facing a political-electoral juncture in which security has become one of the main campaign banners and voter demands. According to InSight Crime, the region reports a homicide rate of 20.2 per 100,000 inhabitants, and approximately 50% of these cases are linked to organized crime. The three most affected countries are Ecuador (38.8), Venezuela (26.2, likely underreported), and Colombia (25.4).

This is reflected in the primary concerns of Latin Americans, especially in an electoral context. Surveys such as those conducted by Bloomberg or Atlas (2024) conclude that the two most pressing issues for voters are corruption and insecurity, particularly related to crime and drug trafficking –surpassing concerns such as inflation and democratic backsliding.¹ In fact, according to Latino-barómetro, 53% of people in the region would agree with *a non-democratic government coming to power if it solves these problems*.²

1 More information: <https://www.bloomberglinea.com/opinion/la-crisis-de-seguridad-en-america-latina-impulsa-a-la-derecha/>

2 More information: <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latinobarometro-2024>

Recently, several elections in Latin America have shown that candidates who prioritize solutions to insecurity tend to win or increase their favorability. Examples include President Daniel Noboa in Ecuador,³ President José Antonio Kast in Chile⁴ and presidential candidate Abelardo de la Espriella in Colombia. Most of these figures are positioned on the political right and, in some cases, represent more radical stances. The Colombian scenario is particularly noteworthy given its geopolitical relevance and its history of conflict ahead of the 2026 elections.

Violence in Colombia: A Longstanding Conflict

Colombia is one of the countries with the longest-running armed conflict in the world and the most prolonged in Latin America, spanning more than 50 years. This has generated different episodes or cycles of violence, including bipartisan sectarian violence (1945–1953), mafia-related violence (1954–1964), guerrilla violence (1960–1980), and the waves of violence during the 1990s.⁵ According to the Unit for Victims, there are records of more than 10 million victims of the armed conflict in the country, resulting from more than 13 million victimizing events such as kidnapping, homicide, forced disappearance, torture, and forced displacement,

3 More information: <https://www.dw.com/es/ecuador-acorralado-por-la-violencia-las-opciones-de-noboa/a-72705932>

4 More information: https://www.segurilatam.com/actualidad/propuestas-de-kast-en-seguridad-e-inmigracion_20251216.html

5 There are multiple typologies of cycles of violence. This one is proposed by Palacios and Safford (2012). More information: *Historia de Colombia: país fragmentado, sociedad dividida - Historia de Colombia: país fragmentado, sociedad dividida - Primera parte - Obras generales - Colecciones digitales - Biblioteca Virtual del Banco de la República.*

among others.⁶ In other words, it can be said that approximately one in five people in Colombia has been a victim.

However, security conditions showed a notable improvement following the security policies implemented from the 2000s onward, as well as in the years immediately following the signing of the Final Agreement between the now-defunct FARC-EP and the national government in 2016. In this process, many political actors played crucial roles, including former president Hugo Chávez as a mediator with this armed group. However, this improvement was not permanent. Contrary to expectations, levels of violence have a high probability of increasing after peace negotiations, according to scholars such as Aguirre (2014), Steenkamp (2005), among others.

The withdrawal of the now-defunct FARC-EP from their areas of influence led the National Liberation Army (ELN), post-demobilization armed groups (such as the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces or Clan del Golfo), and dissident factions of the FARC itself to deploy violent dynamics in order to control illegal economies (drug trafficking, non-traditional illegal mining, and smuggling), according to state entities such as the Ombudsman's Office (2018). As Krause (2012) argues, it is not feasible to expect that a peace agreement will "restore" the state's monopoly of force; rather, what emerges is an oligopoly.

According to figures from the Risk Monitoring Mechanism of the Comprehensive Peace System, between December 1, 2016, and August 7, 2022, a total of 13,223 incidents or events related to the armed conflict were reported. Of these, 62% were concentrated

⁶ More information: <https://datos.paz.unidadvictimas.gov.co/registro-unico-de-victimas/>

between 2021 and 2022.⁷ In addition, 353 signatories of the Final Agreement and 1,054 social leaders were killed. Since then –a period that coincides with the inauguration of the current government of Gustavo Petro– violence has increased and intensified.

The Failed Bet of *Total Peace*

Total Peace is the public policy promoted by the current government, aimed at achieving peace through agreements with illegal armed groups in accordance with Law 2272 of 2022. This has been carried out through negotiation tables and/or strategies of submission to justice with more than eight Organized Armed Groups (GAOs) and Organized Criminal Groups (GDOs) simultaneously.

As previously mentioned, security conditions in Colombia became more complex in the years following the Final Agreement (2016). In addition to this, the Total Peace policy did not contain these threats; on the contrary, it triggered critical dynamics within this context. Currently, the conflict is more atomized and fragmented, with armed groups increasing their presence and territorial control. This varies by region, but according to the Foundation for Peace and Reconciliation (*Fundación Ideas para la Paz*), there are 14 zones under dispute: double the number reported at the beginning of President Petro's term.

Between July 2024 and June 2025, the highest levels of armed actions since 2010 were recorded, with a 140% increase in attacks on infrastructure, 111% against the public security forces, and 68%

7 Available at: <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiMGE2MmFkMTQ0OGQ3MC00MGQ0LWEzYzUtYWQ1NTZkYzljMmE1IiwidCI6ImQ3MjlkMmMxLTk4OWUtNDRINS1iN2M1LTE4MmM5MTRhYzYwNyIsImMiOiR9>

in clashes between armed groups. In addition, GAOs increased their presence by 15%, according to information from the Critical Threat Capabilities Assessment (Accam) of the Colombian Public Armed Security Forces (Fuerza Pública). The Clan del Golfo is the largest group, with 8,945 members (+18%), followed by the ELN with 6,450 members (+3%), and finally the FARC-EP dissidents led by “Iván Mordisco,” with 3,919 members (+20%).⁸

Venezuela: ¿mediador?

One of the most critical cases of the “Total Peace” policy was the Catatumbo crisis, which began in January 2025. A territorial dispute emerged between the ELN and the 33rd Front of FARC dissidents, involving homicides, explosive attacks, land dispossession, and the largest mass forced displacement since 1997 (65,000 people according to the Ombudsman’s Office).

As a result, the national government suspended the negotiation table with the ELN, stating that it “has no desire for peace.” In this context, the role of the Venezuelan government remained ambiguous, as it has been suggested that Maduro allowed the movement of ELN guerrillas through Venezuelan territory.

In this regard, it is important to highlight that both the ELN and FARC dissident groups are binational in nature —that is, they operate in both Colombia and Venezuela. For this reason, the role of former president Hugo Chávez was once useful in facilitating negotiations between the now-defunct FARC-EP and the Colombian government.

⁸ More information: <https://ideaspaz.org/publicaciones/investigaciones-analisis/2025-11/lo-que-dicen-las-nuevas-cifras-sobre-el-aumento-de-integrantes-de-grupos-armados-en-colombia>

However, today the neighboring country serves as a strategic rear base for these Organized Armed Groups, allowing them to strengthen their operations, and it is far from acting as a mediator in resolving the Colombian conflict.

The case of the ELN is particularly noteworthy, given the near-hegemonic control it holds along the border. This guerrilla group has used Venezuela as a refuge since the 1980s, particularly in the state of Apure. At that time, the Venezuelan government was hostile toward this Organized Armed Group (GAO). However, this changed with Hugo Chávez's rise to the presidency in 1999, and the guerrilla began to establish itself, benefiting from illicit rents and the struggle for control of the border.

Currently, the ELN has expanded beyond Apure. According to InSight Crime, the guerrilla operates in 40 municipalities across 8 of the country's 24 states, mainly in Zulia, Táchira, Apure, and Amazonas. In this way, it has created clandestine radio stations, controls the distribution of food provided by the state (Local Committees for Supply and Production - CLAP), and benefits from illegal rents such as illegal mining and cocaine production zones.⁹ Both academics and experts on the subject point out that this strengthening is largely based on the relationship between the regime and the guerrilla.

This can be illustrated by many cases, but two stand out. On the one hand, the ELN announced a 72-hour armed strike starting on December 14 in Colombia as a "protest" against what it described as a new phase of Trump's "neocolonial plan" and the alleged threat of intervention in Latin America and the

⁹ More information: <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias-crimen-organizado-venezuela/eln-en-venezuela/>

Caribbean,¹⁰ position supported by the Venezuelan regime. On the other hand, the close relationship between the governor of Táchira, Freddy Bernal, and the ELN dates back to 2010, when the guerrilla group helped displace *Los Rastrojos*¹¹ from the state. Since then, cooperation has been such that citizens identify the ELN as an extension of the state, not only in Táchira. There are even officials who claim that the guerrilla uses its profits to finance public institutions and carries out parallel justice functions.¹²

Presidential Elections 2026

In this context of a security crisis and a neighboring regime that shelters Organized Armed Groups (GAOs) with impact on the country, presidential elections will take place in Colombia, specifically on May 31, 2026. If none of the candidates obtains more than 50% of the vote in these elections, the runoff will be held on June 21. According to the most recent Invamer survey (November 2025), public order ranks as the leading national concern at 35.3%, the highest figure since this measurement began in 2017.

Likewise, the two presidential candidates leading the survey are, first, Iván Cepeda with 31.9%, who represents continuity with the current government from a left-wing position. He has a long political trajectory in Congress, is the architect of the *Total Peace* policy, and is also recognized as a victim and witness in the case

10 More information: <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia-20/conflicto/elN-anuncia-paro-armado-de-72-horas-en-todo-el-pais-desde-el-14-de-diciembre/>

11 Colombian criminal group. It emerged from a faction of the Norte del Valle Cartel.

12 More information: <https://insightcrime.org/es/investigaciones/gobernanza-rebelde-control-social-elN-tachira/>

against former president Álvaro Uribe.¹³ He was selected through an inter-party primary. Regarding Nicolás Maduro's regime, his position is that the results of the July 28 election "must be verified" and that he would not replicate the positions of former president Duque.

In second place is Abelardo De la Espriella with 18.2%, who is considered a political outsider, with professional experience in criminal law. He has defended politicians accused of parapolitics and figures such as Alex Saab, accused of being a frontman for Nicolás Maduro;¹⁴ as well as victims of femicide and gender-based violence on a pro bono basis. He draws inspiration from leaders such as Bukele, Milei, and Trump, representing a radical right-wing position. He promotes a "hardline" approach to terrorism and positions himself well beyond the traditional right. Regarding the situation in Venezuela, he has praised U.S. pressure and stated that "a democrat cannot have any kind of relationship with tyrants, neither with Maduro, nor Ortega, nor Díaz-Canel in Cuba."¹⁵

While it is still too early to determine definitively whether these candidates will make it to the runoff, it appears that the contest is shaping up between them, and with it, the security approach that Colombia will pursue. Whereas Cepeda is committed to continuing the *Total Peace* policy, for De la Espriella the alternative is far more radical, both in terms of the violence scenario and with respect to Venezuela. Despite this, there are other candidates closer to the political center who remain in the race.

13 More information <https://www.lasillavacia.com/silla-nacional/guia-para-entender-el-juicio-a-alvaro-uribe/>

14 More information: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c03yz2r4wxxo>

15 More information: https://www.youtube.com/live/dMSUYMX9Wp0?si=mGl3VQ_kLEAV599_

Conclusions

Colombia, like other countries in the region, will face presidential elections in which security shifts from being just another variable to becoming a central axis. Although the current security situation is not comparable to the most critical periods of the 1980s and 1990s, there is a resurgence of conflict compared to the previous five-year period. These conditions are further complicated by the presence of binational guerrilla groups operating in Venezuela. For this reason, candidates' positions toward Nicolás Maduro's regime and, consequently, the state's deployment along the Colombia-Venezuela border, will also be decisive.

In this sense, it will be essential to have candidates capable of addressing this issue effectively, as the expansion and fragmentation of the Colombian conflict appears imminent. Proposals, therefore, should not be limited to emotional rhetoric without substance or clear strategies. As a result, voters face significant ethical challenges, as they are expected not to choose between populist messianisms, but rather between concrete ideas within the framework of legality that take foreign policy into account. In 2026, the country will elect a new president, following the first left-wing administration in 200 years. With this decision, it will also choose the security model it hopes will mitigate the current security crisis.