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Protecting Colombia's Democracy: Election-related Violence and Political Fragmentation



Election results showing presidential candidates Abelardo de la Espiella of the Defenders of the Motherland movement and Ivan Cepeda of the ruling Historic Pact coalition advancing to a runoff election are projected at Cepeda's campaign headquarters in Bogota, Colombia, Sunday, May 31, 2026.

Recent fraud allegations surrounding Colombia's latest runoff election have made targeted stabilization measures even more pressing. The allegations have weakened institutional legitimacy at a moment when armed groups are already positioned to expand in regions where state authority remains limited. In Colombia's past, political fragmentation, institutional weakness, and contested governance allowed organizations like the National Liberation Army (ELN) and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to expand their territorial influence and coerce local populations. When considering both Colombia's past and present, it becomes clear that addressing the country's institutional legitimacy crisis is central to any workable policy recommendation. While some may argue that policy intervention risks the government appearing politically motivated, inaction carries a greater cost: high institutional illegitimacy may reverse security gains from Colombia's 2016 Peace Agreement with the FARC and further erode what little public confidence remains in the country's government. Given Colombia's compounding vulnerabilities, this policy brief recommends an integrated

stabilization strategy that combines targeted preventative security operations with strengthened civilian governance. It will also include enhanced protection for political actors, accelerated implementation of the aforementioned 2016 Peace Agreement, and prioritized and sustained investment in rural development. These measures could reduce opportunities for armed groups to exploit political fragmentation, while simultaneously strengthening Colombia's state legitimacy and long-term resilience.



A Colombian soldier stands guard at a checkpoint set up ahead of the upcoming Colombian presidential election on May 31, in Jamundi, Colombia on May 26, 2026. © Jair Coll, Reuters

Colombia's Presidential election has culminated in a highly contested runoff between conservative candidate Abelardo de la Espriella, endorsed by Donald Trump, and the left-wing candidate Ivan Cepeda, endorsed by President Gustavo Petro's Coalition. De la Espriella won one of the closest elections in Colombian history, having surpassed Cepeda by less than one percent of votes.¹

The election has only deepened Colombia's preexisting issue with political polarization. President Petro and members of his governing coalition have questioned the election's legitimacy, accusing President-elect De la Espriella of staging a coup d'état. The controversy

¹ Nelson Bocanegra, Luis Jaime Acosta and Alexander Villegas, "Colombian right-wing candidate De La Espriella wins tight presidential race," Reuters, June 22, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/colombia-votes-runoff-pitting-leftist-reformer-against-law-and-order-newcomer-2026-06-21/election's>.

went so far as to cause a suspension in the transition of presidential power.² However, international observers, such as the European Union and the Carter Center, have reported that there were no election irregularities.³ These competing narratives have only heightened the tensions over the legitimacy of Colombia's democratic institutions.

Meanwhile, Colombia is continuing to face security threats, expanded activity by long-standing armed groups, and rising homicide and extortion rates. Beyond that, an incomplete implementation of Colombia's aforementioned 2016 Peace Agreement means that the country's political crisis is unfolding at exactly the moment it can least afford institutional gridlock. Although President Petro claims he will exit office come August seventh, this year's period of inaction and institutional strain serves as a test of the durability of Colombia's democracy.

The uncertainty and conflict produced under President Petro has created a vacuum, giving military groups a prime opportunity to regain political influence and force control over Colombia. This will have impacts of its own as future pressing issues in Colombia are likely to remain under-addressed due to gridlock. The Atlantic Council says that the country's political instability also threatens the future of Colombia's peace progress and institutional reforms.⁴

Empirical research consistently shows that armed groups take advantage of periods of political competition and weakened government institutions to expand their territory, intimidate voters, and influence who wins elections. Paramilitary violence increases during election years,⁵ as armed organizations strategically intervene in democratic processes to secure political influence.⁶ Historical evidence from parapolitics scandals and recent FARC dissident expansion further illustrates how weak governance during political transitions enables non-state armed actors to consolidate power. Policymakers and researchers have an opportunity to apply predictive analysis now, before armed organizations exploit Colombia's political instability to expand their influence.

² Suárez, A. (2026, July 7). Colombia's president-elect suspends transition after Petro alleges fraud. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/colombia-president-petro-de-la-espriella-659cd24bbaaa6669137b1a8b78a2a6a2>

³ Rueda, M. (2026, June 2). European Union observers reject Petro's fraud claims, calling Colombia's vote "transparent." AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/colombia-election-vote-count-president-petro-d796b6b3336448ee62cdb83048b862a9>

⁴ Atlantic Council experts, "Experts react: Colombia's presidential runoff pits the far right against the far left. What's next?," Atlantic Council, June 1, 2026, atlanticcouncil.org.

⁵ Dube, O., & Naidu, S. (2015). Bases, Bullets, and Ballots: The Effect of U.S. Military Aid on Political Conflict in Colombia. *Journal of Politics*, 77(1), 249–267.

⁶ Matanock, A. M., & Staniland, P. (2018). How and Why Armed Groups Participate in Elections. *Perspectives on Politics*, 16(3), 710–727.

Recommendations:

- The Colombian government should adopt an **Integrated Territorial Stabilization Strategy** that combines targeted security operations with investments in civilian governance, judicial institutions, and public services in municipalities most vulnerable to armed groups. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development shows that military operations alone can only produce temporary reductions in violence if the state does not establish a lasting civilian presence.⁷ By simultaneously deploying security forces, prosecutors, judges, and necessary social services – such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure – the Colombian government will be able to close the vacuums that armed organizations tend to exploit.⁸
- The Colombian government must bolster the **National Protection Unit (Unidad Nacional de Protección, UNP)** to safeguard candidates, election officials, journalists, and community leaders in high-risk areas. Armed groups exploit intimidation, assassination, and coercion to sway elections and suppress civic participation. Enhanced protection – including bodyguards, secure transportation, emergency communication systems, and rapid response – would cripple armed groups' influence and revive public trust. The UNP would also broaden political participation and rebuild lost public confidence.
- Colombia should establish a **permanent intelligence task force** that integrates information from the National Policy, Armed Forces, Attorney General's Office, and electoral authorities to disrupt armed-group activity before it escalates into violence.⁹ Improved intelligence sharing would allow authorities to detect voter intimidation, illicit campaign financing, illegal recruitment, and territorial expansion earlier, enabling preventative interventions rather than reactionary measures.¹⁰ Improved intelligence coordination would also reduce duplication among agencies, giving each institution a clearer role and more targeted resources and keeping enforcement focused on specific

⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022). *States of Fragility 2022*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

⁸ World Bank. (2017). *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

⁹ United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia. (2024). *Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia*.

¹⁰ Matanock, A. M., & Staniland, P. (2018). How and Why Armed Groups Participate in Elections. *Perspectives on Politics*, 16(3), 710–727.

criminal networks rather than broad military sweeps.¹¹ Research on counterinsurgency consistently shows that intelligence-driven operations are more effective and less costly than broad military offensives because they focus enforcement on the most significant threats while minimizing threats to citizens – especially those disproportionately targeted.¹²¹³¹⁴

- The Colombian government should invest in rural infrastructure, agricultural opportunities, education, healthcare, and land titling programs in regions where armed groups maintain influence. Many vulnerable communities receive limited government resources, enabling illegal groups to take on governance roles and take advantage of local populations. Expanding economic opportunities would reduce dependence on illicit economies such as coca cultivation while increasing citizens' confidence in state institutions.¹⁵ The plan would also promote long-term economic development, reducing the vulnerabilities that currently sustain armed organizations.¹⁶ Research consistently finds that long-term reductions in conflict require addressing the socioeconomic conditions that allow insurgent organizations to recruit members and maintain territorial control.¹⁷
- The Colombian government should accelerate the implementation of the provisions of the 2016 Final Peace Agreement, particularly those related to rural reform, reintegration of former combatants, and the extension of state institutions into historically neglected regions. Research indicates that incomplete implementation has contributed to governance vacuums that have been exploited by FARC dissident factions and other armed groups.¹⁸ Completing the Peace Agreement's commitments would strengthen

¹¹ United Nations & World Bank. (2018). Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict. Washington, DC: World Bank.

¹² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022). States of Fragility 2022. Paris: OECD Publishing.

¹³ Kilcullen, D. (2010). Counterinsurgency. Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Paul, C., Clarke, C. P., Grill, B., & Dunigan, M. (2013). Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies. RAND Corporation.

¹⁵ World Bank. (2017). Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict.

¹⁶ United Nations, & World Bank. (2018). Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict. Washington, DC: World Bank.

¹⁷ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (2024, January 25). 2016 peace agreement has made remarkable progress, although structural problems in the country remain the main challenge to achieving sustainable peace. ReliefWeb.
<https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/2016-peace-agreement-has-made-remarkable-progress-although-structural-problems-country-remain-main-challenge-achieving-sustainable-peace-o>

¹⁸ Wyer, F. (2024). Peace Versus Profit: Rebel Fragmentation and Conflict Resurgence in Colombia. International Organization.

government legitimacy and improve security in former conflict zones.¹⁹ Successful implementation would also enhance confidence in peace progress while reducing the likelihood that armed organizations will capitalize on political instability.

¹⁹ United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia. (2024). Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia.