

THE  
CARTER CENTER



**Preliminary Statement of the Carter Center Electoral Expert Mission on  
the Colombia Presidential Election (May 31, 2026)**

**June 2, 2026**

**Executive Summary**

The Carter Center deployed a 10-member Election Expert Mission (EEM) to Bogotá on May 12, 2026, in response to an invitation from the electoral authorities to observe the presidential election.<sup>1</sup> The Carter Center EEM focused on key aspects of this electoral process: the legal framework, work of the election management bodies, political party and candidate registration, use of election technology, and voter education efforts. The Center assesses elections against the national legal framework and international standards for democratic elections in accordance with the Declaration of Principles for Electoral Observation.<sup>2</sup> While team members visited some polling centers in Bogotá during opening, voting, and closing processes, the mission did not comprehensively observe election day counting and tabulation. The Carter Center will release a final report on the elections, with recommendations on the aspects of the process it observed.

Election day appeared to be well-organized and proceeded without major incidents. Voter turnout, at 57.8%, was one of the highest on record in Colombia. A total of 41,421,973 voters were registered, including 1,414,661 Colombians living abroad. Voting was conducted in 122,016 polling stations situated in 13,742 voting centers nationwide, including 253 voting centers in 67 countries abroad. Preliminary results indicated that Abelardo de la Espriella won 43.72% of the vote and will face Iván Cepeda, who received 40.91%, in the runoff election on June 21. On election night, Cepeda, echoing President Gustavo Petro, rejected the preliminary results and said he would wait for the outcome of the official results process overseen by the consolidation commissions (*comisiones escrutadoras*).

The first round of the presidential election was characterized by high levels of polarization, fragmented public debate, and growing political and social tensions surrounding governance, security, and the country's institutional direction, dynamics that intensified confrontation in the digital sphere. Colombia is internationally recognized for its peacebuilding efforts, particularly following the 2016 Peace Agreement that helped reduce armed violence and expand opportunities for political and social participation. However, its implementation has not yet been fully realized, and important challenges remain.

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<sup>1</sup> The Carter Center EEM consisted of eight international and two national experts accredited as observers.

<sup>2</sup> The Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, launched at the United Nations in 2005 and endorsed by 54 intergovernmental and international organizations, establishes the foundation for professional and credible international election observation.

Colombia's electoral authorities are the National Election Council (CNE), which oversees campaign finance and consolidation of results, and the National Civil Registry (*Registraduría*), which administers the elections. The *Registraduría* administered the election efficiently and sought to ensure transparency, legality, and credibility. Political parties and citizens generally expressed confidence in the *Registraduría's* competence and impartiality. However, The Carter Center EEM noted that public criticism of the electoral process by the President of the Republic and certain senior government officials amid growing political polarization contributed to a climate of heightened tension and risked harming confidence in the process.

Eleven candidates contested the presidential election, reflecting a competitive and plural environment and offering voters a wide choice. In general, candidates were able to campaign and hold large-scale public events, albeit under strict security measures. However, structural challenges persisted due to insecurity caused by the ongoing presence of illegal armed groups and conflict dynamics in certain areas. This limited, and in some places effectively prevented, the election campaign of the leading candidates, particularly in rural areas. Coercion affecting citizens' political rights is a continuing challenge in these zones, according to the Ombudsman's Office (*Defensoría del Pueblo*). There were persistent allegations of the misuse of public resources and patronage practices, including vote-buying.

The growing impact of disinformation, manipulated content, and hate speech, particularly online, diminished the quality of public debate and potentially undermined trust in the electoral process. Fraud narratives from different political sectors increased in the final week of the campaign. These dynamics contributed to increased social and political tensions. Due to disputes among candidates, no debates were held among leading candidates, reducing opportunities for voters to compare proposals.

Preliminary results were published at 92% within an hour and a half of polls closing and were disaggregated by polling station, in accordance with good electoral practice. The system for the consolidation and publication of official results guarantees that results are traceable and verifiable at all stages. It is largely manual, with results forms scanned and published immediately, and incremental consolidations available on a regular basis to political parties, as well as included in the disaggregation of published national results.

## **Context**

Colombia has a longstanding tradition of respecting electoral results and democratic participation mechanisms. Over recent decades, electoral outcomes have generally been accepted by political and social actors, strengthening a democratic culture based on the legitimacy of the popular vote and trust in electoral institutions. Legislative elections were held on March 8, 2026. The guarantees provided by electoral authorities and oversight bodies were adequate, reinforcing confidence in the integrity of the elections. However, The Carter Center EEM noted with concern repeated public criticism of this electoral process by the President of the Republic and some members of the government. Such statements may have affected public trust. The political landscape was characterized by high levels of polarization and increasing fragmentation in public debate centered on security and governance. This dynamic deepened political and social tensions and increased confrontation on social media.

Colombia has gained international recognition for its efforts to build peace through negotiation and reconciliation processes. The 2016 Peace Agreement marked an important

milestone in reducing armed violence and expanding opportunities for political and social participation across the country, although significant aspects of the accord remain to be fully implemented. The electoral context continues to face challenges linked to the presence of illegal armed groups, reflected in incidents of violence, intimidation, and attacks against political, social, and community leaders. These situations limit the full exercise of political rights and highlight persistent concerns regarding security, peaceful coexistence, and democratic participation in the affected areas.

## **Security**

The Carter Center EEM expresses its solidarity with all individuals, organizations, and political and social leaders affected by violence while exercising their right to political participation.

The Ombudsman's Office, the government, and the national citizen observer group, *Misión de Observación Electoral* (MOE), reported incidents of violence, threats, and intimidation targeting political figures, candidates, social leaders, and others involved in democratic processes during the pre-electoral period. The attack on Senator and presidential pre-candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay in June 2025, followed by his death in August of the same year, highlighted the risks associated with political activity in the current electoral context. During the campaign, murders of campaign staff were also reported in the department of Meta, and several candidates reported receiving threats, some disseminated online. These events reflect continuing challenges in ensuring the security conditions required for a fully free and inclusive electoral process. In response, authorities adopted additional prevention and protection measures under the government's *Plan Democracia* security program. However, stakeholders highlighted persistent challenges in implementing these measures locally and preventing violence and intimidation affecting the exercise of political rights.

The Carter Center has long supported peacebuilding in Colombia and reaffirms its conviction that peace and democracy are closely linked and mutually reinforcing. In this regard, the persistence of violence during the electoral process underscores that ensuring safe conditions for political participation remains essential to strengthening public trust and guaranteeing the effective exercise of democratic rights throughout the country.

## **Campaign and Media**

Overall, candidates were able to hold public rallies and large-scale events, maintaining a visible public presence. However, campaign activities were constrained in areas affected by armed groups. This limited, and in some places effectively prevented, the election campaign of the leading candidates, particularly in rural areas. Concerns were also raised regarding clientelist practices, including vote-buying. Some interlocutors pointed to possible misuse of state resources during the campaign, including public contracting practices and the use of public media that could confer political advantage. Interlocutors also highlighted limited oversight and enforcement capacity to address these issues proactively, as well as insufficient leadership by authorities in promoting measures to detect, investigate, and address such practices. Several campaigns denounced the participation of executive branch officials in political activities, despite legal restrictions.

Although election debates are not required by law, they remain an established part of Colombia's democratic practice. Disagreements among campaigns regarding formats,

participation conditions, and organizational criteria affected the number and scope of debates. No comprehensive debate took place among leading candidates before the first round, reducing opportunities for the public to compare their proposals and positions directly.

The Carter Center EEM observed that the electoral process took place in an information environment characterized by greater use of digital communication tools, including the first widespread use of artificial intelligence in Colombia's presidential campaigns. Manipulated content, altered audiovisual material, and disinformation on social media were widespread, undermining the quality of public debate. The campaign was also marked by negative and polarizing content aimed at discrediting and ridiculing candidates and political actors. Fraud narratives intensified in the final weeks of the campaign across the political spectrum, jeopardizing public confidence in the electoral process. In the Colombian context, the rapid dissemination of disinformation and hate speech on digital platforms raised concerns about their potential to intensify tensions and contribute to violence.

In the media landscape, journalist organizations and media outlets documented a range of threats to the free exercise of journalism. These threats encompassed the dissemination of disinformation, fabricated content, gender-based violence, political harassment, and judicial intimidation, which have significantly impaired the capacity of journalists to fulfill their public function to cover political campaigns.

## **Campaign Financing**

The system of financing presidential campaigns is based primarily on public funding, complemented by private contributions, subject to limits and reporting requirements. However, interlocutors pointed to administrative burdens and delays in disbursement. According to the CNE, advance public funding for campaigns was received only nine days before election day, limiting its effectiveness. Interlocutors also raised concerns about the vote reimbursement mechanism. Campaigns that receive advance public funding are penalized by reduced vote reimbursements. The current arrangements tend to disadvantage candidates with lower financial capacity and increase inequalities in electoral competition.

Despite extensive regulation and reporting obligations, concerns remain regarding the system's capacity to prevent and detect illicit funding effectively and in a timely manner. The Carter Center EEM observed that the financial reporting system continues to face implementation and oversight challenges. The CNE's *Cuentas Claras* platform, used to register and publish campaign income and expenditure, provides public access to financial information. However, its effectiveness depends on timely reporting, the quality of submitted data, and institutional capacity to verify reports. The system's predominantly declaratory nature may limit the early detection of inconsistencies. Monitoring by civil society organizations and media identified delays in reporting by some campaigns and a widespread perception of underreporting. For the first round, the campaign expenditure ceiling was set at Colombian Pesos (COP) 39 billion (approximately \$10.5 million). Candidates' financial reports showed a significant concentration of campaign spending among the three leading candidates: De la Espriella COP 32 billion, Valencia 30 billion, and Cepeda 14 billion. All remaining candidates reported expenditures below 2 billion.

## **Legal Framework**

The legal framework provides a good basis for the conduct of democratic elections in accordance with democratic standards. However, structural shortcomings identified since 2017 by the Colombian Special Electoral Mission (*Misión Electoral Especial*) established by the 2016 Peace Agreement and reiterated by successive election observation missions remain. These include a fragmented legal framework, deficiencies in political finance regulations and oversight, and an electoral institutional architecture that has not fully adapted to current electoral challenges. In addition, timelines and procedures, including dispute resolution mechanisms, remain inadequate, limiting the ability to provide timely and effective responses during the electoral process.

Colombia has had extensive debate on electoral reform and multiple attempts to restructure the electoral institutions and legislation. The most recent reform approved by Congress in 2023 concerned the adoption of a new Electoral Code that would modernize and consolidate the fragmented electoral legislation into one text. The new Electoral Code was declared unconstitutional on procedural grounds in 2024, marking the second failed attempt to adopt the Code after a previous reform was annulled in 2022, also due to procedural defects.

Two electoral reforms were adopted in 2025: a law to strengthen the prevention of political violence against women – the implementation of which continues to face challenges in institutional capacity and monitoring – and access to protective measures; and second, a reform of electoral surveys to strengthen methodological and transparency requirements and expand supervisory powers. The latter became controversial due to its effects on poll dissemination and is currently under constitutional review.

## **Voter Registration**

Colombia's voter register is extracted from the Civil Registry, through the automatic inclusion of all citizens with an identity card (*cédula*), ensuring that it is inclusive. The voter register is systematically updated with new inclusions and removal of entries and is closed two months before any election. For the presidential election, The *Registraduría* updated the voter register with 203,589 first-time voters, as well as 7,471 entries for citizens who regained full civil rights, such as after serving a sentence. The *Registraduría* removed 124,115 entries, mostly for reported deaths or presumed deaths (citizens born 110 years ago with no *cédula* renewal), as well as some (9,084) cases of suspension of rights, as above. In all, 41,421,973 voters were registered, including 1.4 million abroad.

## **Candidate Registration**

Candidates could be nominated by political parties or movements with legal status, registered party coalitions, or citizen signature groups. Initially, 14 presidential tickets were registered. Reelection is constitutionally prohibited. Three candidates withdrew, but two of these remained on the printed ballot. Of the remaining 11, six were nominated by political parties (including one backed by a formal coalition), and five independent candidates were supported by citizen groups, reflecting a competitive and plural environment. Three presidential candidates were women (there were none in 2022).

The candidate registration process was generally inclusive and was not subject to undue restrictions. However, the electoral calendar lacked coherence, as the official campaign period began before candidate selection procedures concluded. Voluntary but legally binding intra- and interparty primaries (*consultas*) raised concerns regarding the transparency and

reporting of primary-related expenditures. In practice, candidates participating in primaries benefited from increased public visibility without being subject to the same campaign finance reporting obligations applicable to formal campaign activities. Independent candidates were required to collect 635,216 signatures of support. Reportedly, the financial and logistic costs associated with signature collection were prohibitive for many aspiring candidates. The law does not require reporting of costs related to signature collection.

## **Election Administration**

The electoral authorities include the National Election Council (CNE) and the National Civil Registry (*Registraduría*). The CNE is a collegial body made up of political representatives and oversees campaign finance and the consolidation of official results. The *Registraduría* is in charge of administering elections. The *Registraduría* is a professional and experienced organization that has previously conducted elections efficiently and transparently. For the presidential election, 850,000 new polling station staff were selected. A training strategy was implemented, featuring in-person sessions nationwide with a focus on practical exercises, as well as online courses and innovative formats such as short WhatsApp messages for young polling station staff. The *Registraduría* also hired delegates with more extensive training to support election staff at polling stations.

The *Registraduría* introduced several measures to improve the voting environment. An improved design for voting booths better ensured the secrecy of the vote. In order to reduce bottlenecks and overcrowding, polling staff were asked to split the polling station's voter list and attend to several voters at a time. The *Centro Democrático* party requested the relocation of polling stations to municipal capitals in several rural areas affected by armed groups. The requests were rejected by the local *Comisiones de Seguimiento Electoral* to keep voting centers close to voters' residences and based on security forces' assessments. Nine polling stations were relocated due to damage to infrastructure.

The *Registraduría* maintained constructive communication with the public and political parties, making significant efforts to provide information concerning the consolidation and publication of results to promote well-informed confidence in the electoral process. Communication with the parties was frequent and flexible, and the *Registraduría* introduced weekly meetings for candidates and representatives, in addition to the *Comisiones de Seguimiento Electoral*. Despite President Petro's criticism, all participating political parties expressed confidence in the *Registraduría's* competence and impartiality.

The CNE did not enjoy the same level of trust, as some stakeholders suggested that its politically nominated membership tended to act in the interests of their respective parties, rather than as an independent body. In addition, operational limitations, primarily linked to insufficient budgetary and administrative autonomy and the absence of a territorial structure, affected the exercise of its functions. As a result, there was a widespread perception that key aspects of the electoral process, including oversight of the campaign and its financing, were not subject to effective supervision.

## **Election Technology**

The *Registraduría* made considerable efforts to strengthen confidence in the software used to consolidate official results by expanding technical review and audit mechanisms. These measures included supervised access for political parties to examine the software, functional

testing, source code review, and static code analysis, and exposition of the underlying technological architecture. The *Registraduría* also commissioned an international external audit from the *Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos* (IIDH/CAPEL). Political parties requested the audit report. Two days before the presidential election, IIDH/CAPEL released a statement outlining its main conclusions to date, namely that the audited system processes and technological infrastructure met the technical requirements for security, traceability, and integrity.

President Petro and some government ministers called the vote consolidation software into question, and the *Registraduría* sought to address these concerns while avoiding disclosing sensitive components of the technology, which could pose a risk to the integrity of the process. Simultaneously, the *Registraduría* emphasized to political parties and the public that the function of the software is limited to consolidating results, which are traceable and verifiable.

## **Election Day**

The Carter Center EEM visited polling centers in metropolitan Bogotá during opening, voting, and closing, but did not comprehensively observe election day processes.

Voting was conducted in 122,016 polling stations within 13,742 voting centers. According to the *Registraduría* and the *Misión de Observación Electoral* – which deployed 2,535 observers across the country – the vast majority of polling stations opened on time, and voting took place in a peaceful and ordered manner. Some 373,000 party agents (*testigos*) were accredited, and electoral authorities reported they were present in 98% of voting centers. According to the Minister of the Interior, 450,000 members of the security forces were deployed to secure the election.

The 2026 presidential election has seen a record number of national election observers: 13,755 national observers were accredited – over four times more than during the 2022 presidential election. In addition, the European Union, Organization of American States, and International Republican Institute (IRI), organizations that have also committed to the Declaration of Principles for International Electoral Observation, once again deployed missions to the country.

Electoral authorities and oversight institutions maintained active monitoring throughout election day. The Ministry of Interior coordinated national monitoring through the “URIEL” platform, while the Inspector General’s office (*Procuraduría*) called for political neutrality and respect for the election results. The Ombudsman’s Office deployed some 2,500 officials nationwide, and maintained enhanced monitoring in security-sensitive areas, including Catatumbo, Cauca, Chocó, and northeastern Antioquia. A relatively low number of complaints were reported on election day, with most originating from the departments of Bogotá, Antioquia, Cundinamarca, Santander, and Atlántico. Although localized incidents of possible irregularities were recorded by the MOE, mainly in the functioning of polling stations, they did not affect the overall conduct of the day.

Fact-checkers from Colombia Check and La Silla Vacía’s fake news detector identified misinformation spread via WhatsApp and social media. This included false messages about voting, out-of-context videos suggesting fraud, alleged early results, and misleading narratives about the transparency of the vote count.

## Results Processing and Publication

According to preliminary results, voter turnout reached 57.8%, one of the highest recorded in Colombia. Abelardo de la Espriella received 43.72% of the vote and will face Iván Cepeda, who received 40.91%, in the runoff election on June 21. On the night of the election, Cepeda, echoing President Petro, rejected the preliminary results, alleging a discrepancy of 885,000 voters in the voter register and irregularities at an unspecified number of polling stations. He nonetheless said that he would wait for the outcome of the official results process overseen by the consolidation commissions (*comisiones escrutadoras*).

Preliminary results were phoned in from voting centers to data entry staff, who followed strengthened procedures to ensure accuracy, including verification of entered data. Simultaneously, polling station results forms were scanned at 55 centers throughout the country, for immediate publication on the *Registraduría* website. For the first time, all three original copies of the results forms (E-14) were published. Several rehearsals (*simulacros*) of the preliminary results process were held prior to election day, contributing to swift reporting: 1.5 hours after voting ended, more than 90% of results had been reported.

The official election results system (*escrutinio*), which proceeds in parallel to the preliminary results process, is largely manual, with paper results forms scanned and published immediately. In addition, data from original polling station results forms are entered in an electronic system by *comisiones escrutadoras* – composed of judges and notaries – in the presence of party representatives.

Consolidated results at each level are made available to political parties, as well as included in the disaggregation of published national results. This ensures that results are traceable and verifiable at every stage. Political parties can check consolidation results in any of the 3,000 *comisiones escrutadoras*, as well as verify data centrally through a dedicated [online platform](#), identify any errors and call for a review. All essential information concerning election results is available to the public on the *Registraduría* website: <https://escrutiniopresidente2026.registraduria.gov.co/actas-escrutinio>.

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