



PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

Colombia will elect its president after a transparent and credible process and a peaceful election day

Bogotá, 2 June 2026

This preliminary statement of the EU election observation mission (EU EOM) is delivered before the completion of the entire electoral process. Critical stages remain, including the tabulation of official results and the adjudication of petitions. The EU EOM is now only in a position to comment on observation undertaken to date. The mission will also observe the Presidential Election's runoff. The EU EOM may also make additional statements on election-related matters as and when it considers appropriate. After the completion of the process, the EU EOM will publish a final report, including full analysis and recommendations for electoral reform.

Summary

The 31 May presidential election unfolded amid polarisation and persistent violence in parts of the country. Eleven tickets contested the first round in a pluralistic and competitive race. Provisional results indicate a 21 June runoff between Abelardo de la Espriella, of *Defensores de la Patria*, and Iván Cepeda, candidate of the coalition *Alianza por la Vida*, who obtained 43.7 and 40.9 per cent respectively. Turnout reached a record 57.9 per cent.

Election day was peaceful, with no major incidents reported. EU EOM observers assessed all stages as transparent, orderly and smooth, with party representatives performing their duties without restrictions. Voting was well-organized, with high voter turnout occasionally resulting in long queues that were generally well managed. The vote count was carried out transparently and accurately. Although some procedural oversights were noted, these did not affect the integrity of the process. Shortly after the polls closed, the *Registraduría* began announcing preliminary results, which were almost complete within an hour and a half. All results protocols were swiftly published online.

The campaign was pluralistic and conducted predominantly online. While fundamental freedoms were generally respected, campaigning was constrained in some sparsely populated rural areas under illegal armed groups influence. Security issues became even more central to the campaign as violence intensified, with repeated reports of threats, vandalism, attacks, kidnapping and the killing of three campaign staff. *Plan Democracia* reinforced candidate protection and deployed 228,000 military and police personnel to secure polling stations nationwide, at a significant human cost. EU EOM observers reported allegations of voter coercion involving public authorities and illegal armed groups, alongside concerns over the misuse of public resources.

The *Registraduría* organised the election in an efficient and transparent manner, despite logistical and operational challenges, as well as security constraints in certain areas. Electoral officials demonstrated professionalism in the fulfilment of their responsibilities while maintaining a clear commitment to independence in their work. In cooperation with the security forces, the *Registraduría* ensured the distribution of election materials and the deployment of electoral personnel. It also strengthened its dialogue with the candidacies and showed openness to various demands for improved access to information and procedural adjustments put forward by them.

In the lead-up to the presidential election, persistent disinformation continued to pose serious challenges to the election administration, jeopardising public trust in the electoral process. In response, the *Registraduría* strengthened its public communication through educational content

on social media, outreach to the media, and public appearances by its officials, aiming to improve stakeholders' understanding of the electoral process and the safeguards designed to protect its integrity. The CNE improved its accreditation online platform for candidate representatives and extended the accreditation period.

The results management system, based on manual processing of results protocols, ensured transparency and traceability at every stage. It is implemented by judges and notaries in the presence of party representatives and is protected by numerous safeguards. The system underwent numerous stress tests in the presence of candidate representatives and passed an extensive international audit commissioned by the *Registraduría*. Demands to disclose the source code of the underlying software were rejected as this would represent a serious risk for the integrity of the results system. The *Registraduría* offered party auditors an unprecedented four-week exhibition of the source codes of the different components of the results processing.

The campaign finance framework is robust in principle but weak in terms of timely enforcement and oversight. While all presidential candidates submitted campaign finance declarations, EU EOM observers reported campaign activity financed through voluntary contributions and in-kind support not reflected in *Cuentas Claras*, pointing to widespread underreporting. CNE regulatory delays and insurance bottlenecks substantially delayed advances on public funding, leaving smaller campaigns at a disadvantage while the frontrunners relied heavily on bank credit.

Although fraud narratives remained a central theme in the political debate and the media, their presence on social media decreased since the legislative election campaign. Disinformation targeting the leading candidates persisted, alongside sexist, racist, and homophobic hateful content. Meanwhile, government ministries and agencies continue to promote President's achievements, in contravention of Colombian law and international standards. Artificial Intelligence has become a standard tool for producing campaign advertisements.

EU EOM media monitoring confirmed the polarisation of the campaign coverage already observed during the legislative elections. State-run media, which have a heightened obligation of neutrality and balance in their campaign coverage, mostly favoured the president, the government and Cepeda. They allocated much less time to De la Espriella and Valencia, often in a negative tone. Private television channels and radio stations, which account for the largest audience share, dedicated much less time to the president and the government than state-run media, often portraying them in a negative way. They privileged the coverage of the three front-runners, giving them similar airtime and mostly in a neutral tone.

The European Union Election Observation Mission has been present in Colombia since 26 January following an invitation from the Comisión Nacional Electoral and the Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil. The Mission is led by Chief Observer Esteban González Pons, Vice-President of the European Parliament. The EU EOM deployed 143 observers from 24 EU Member States, as well as from Norway, Switzerland and Canada across the country to assess the entire electoral process against international obligations and commitments for democratic elections as well as the laws of Colombia. On 31 May, they observed in 591 polling stations in 30 departments. A delegation from the European Parliament, headed by Leire Pajín, MEP, also joined the mission and endorses this Statement.

The EU EOM is independent in its findings and conclusions and adheres to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation signed at the United Nations in October 2005.

Preliminary Findings

BACKGROUND

The 31 May presidential election took place against a backdrop of polarisation and escalating violence, marked by a wave of terrorist attacks across south-western Colombia in late-April, including the Cajibío bombing in Cauca that killed 21 civilians. Eleven presidential tickets contested the first round in a pluralistic and competitive race, offering choices across the political spectrum.¹ Three candidates withdrew before election day and endorsed Iván Cepeda, the candidate of *Alianza por la Vida*, a left-wing alliance led by the governing *Pacto Histórico*. Preliminary results indicate a 21 June runoff between Abelardo de la Espriella (*Defensores de la Patria*) and Cepeda. *Centro Democrático*'s Paloma Valencia, winner of the centre-right interparty primary, came third, followed by Sergio Fajardo (*Dignidad & Compromiso*). The remaining candidates attracted modest support, with none exceeding one per cent.

CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT

Fundamental freedoms were generally respected, although candidates' freedom to campaign was constrained in some sparsely populated rural areas under the influence of illegal armed groups.² Voter intimidation and coercion by illegal armed groups became a highly contested campaign issue, amid allegations from across the political spectrum.

The campaign was pluralistic and conducted predominantly online and through small, low-visibility local events. Only the three leading candidates sustained a meaningful territorial presence and held large-scale public rallies in the main departmental capitals. Security and public order became the central issue of the campaign.

Campaign violence intensified over the last weeks, with frequent reports of threats against campaign activists, vandalism of campaign offices and materials, physical attacks, kidnapping and the killings of a *Centro Democrático* city councillor, Mileidy Villada, in Valle del Cauca, and a *Defensores de la Patria* campaign manager and his adviser, Rogers Devia and Eder Fabián Cardona, in Meta. All three frontrunner organisations were affected. Several presidential candidates publicly reported death threats, although security forces have to date not corroborated these allegations. State protection measures for candidates were nevertheless reinforced, with expanded security arrangements, including through the provision of armoured vehicles. EU EOM observers reported no observed disruptions or incidents during the campaign events.

The electoral security framework, *Plan Democracia*, deployed 228,000 military and police personnel from 15 May. The military paid a heavy toll during its electoral deployment, with nine soldiers assigned to the plan killed and eight wounded on duty. Three of the main illegal armed groups unilaterally declared an 'electoral truce' for 31 May and largely upheld it.³

Most campaign events observed by the EU EOM were marked by strong voter mobilisation, particularly those in support of Cepeda and De la Espriella. In some departments, interlocutors reported alleged vote-buying and pressure on public employees to support, or mobilise support for specific candidates, although to a lesser extent than during the legislative elections. Concerns over

¹ The candidates were, in ballot order: Iván Cepeda, Claudia López, Santiago Botero, Abelardo de la Espriella, Mauricio Lizcano, Miguel Uribe Londoño, Sondra Macollins, Roy Barreras, Gustavo Matamoros, Paloma Valencia and Sergio Fajardo, with their respective vice-presidential running mates.

² In the departments of Cauca, Valle de Cauca, North of Santander, Arauca, Antioquia, Nariño, Caquetá and Meta.

³ The *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), the FARC dissident faction *Estado Mayor Central* (EMC) and the *Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia* (EGC).

the potential misuse of state resources for electoral purposes were raised in relation to government land allocations, inaugurations of educational infrastructure, scholarship announcements and the use of official platforms during the campaign period. Amid deep polarisation, the opposition alleged that the president had unlawfully engaged in political campaigning, while various political parties accused the president of Ecuador of foreign interference.

Campaign Finance

Although formally robust, the campaign finance legal framework remains weak in terms of effective oversight. Spending limits, public funding, reporting obligations and the CNE's *Cuentas Claras* platform for campaign finance disclosure are broadly consistent with international transparency standards. However, shortcomings persist in terms of real-time enforcement, timely access to public funding advances, inter-institutional coordination and the traceability of in-kind support.

EU EOM observers reported campaign activities financed through voluntary contributions and in-kind support that were not declared on the *Cuentas Claras* platform, pointing to underreporting. All presidential candidates submitted campaign finance declarations, an improvement on the legislative elections, when two-thirds of candidates had failed to do so before election day despite the legal requirement. Although the CNE reactivated 33 local *Tribunales Seccionales de Vigilancia y Garantías Electorales* between January and June, formally mandated to monitor campaign propaganda and financing, the effectiveness of this oversight was limited in practice.

The late regulation and delayed disbursement of state advances disproportionately affected lower-polling candidates, limiting their campaign resources. The CNE's failure to issue, by the 31 January deadline, a resolution defining the insurance requirements for public funding advances, combined with insurers' blanket refusal to underwrite them, left several smaller campaigns unable to access the advance until the final week of campaign, favouring leading contenders with access to bank credit. The three frontrunners relied entirely on bank credit, while smaller campaigns operated with very limited resources, consolidating a credit-dependent funding model that widens pre-existing asymmetries.

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The elections are managed by two bodies: the *Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil* (Civil Registry, RNEC), responsible for operational organisation of elections, and the *Consejo Nacional Electoral* (CNE), vested primarily with oversight powers.

The *Registraduría* organised the election in an efficient and transparent manner, despite logistical and operational challenges, as well as security constraints in certain areas. Electoral officials demonstrated professionalism in the fulfilment of their responsibilities both centrally and throughout the country, while maintaining a clear commitment to independence in their work. Ahead of the presidential elections, they continued to enjoy considerable public confidence according to opinion polls. In response to criticism from some parties regarding shortcomings identified during the legislative elections, the *Registraduría* strengthened its dialogue with stakeholders, including through regular meetings with the candidates' teams, and showed openness to various demands for improved access to information and procedural adjustments put forward by them.

In several municipalities across different departments, *Centro Democrático* requested the relocation of a significant number of polling stations from rural areas to municipal centres, claiming security concerns and potential risk of voter coercion. These requests were rejected by the local *Comisiones de Seguimiento Electoral*, composed of representatives of state and local

authorities as well as political parties, arguing that this could hinder rural voters' access to polling locations while adequate security arrangements were already in place. Ultimately, only one polling centre was relocated to an urban area for security reasons, following a security incident during the deployment of election materials in Cesar. In cooperation with the security forces and other state authorities, the *Registraduría* secured the nationwide distribution of election materials, the deployment of electoral personnel, and the opening of all polling centres, allowing voters to exercise their right to vote.

Drawing on lessons from the legislative elections, the *Registraduría* sought to reinforce the training programme for polling staff and tabulation officers. The training sessions observed by the EU EOM were well organised and comprehensive, placing emphasis on practical exercises, the assessment of ballot validity, the correct completion of electoral documents and forms, as well as measures to ensure the accessibility of the voting process.

In the lead-up to the presidential election, persistent disinformation continued to pose serious challenges for the election administration, threatening public trust in the electoral process. In response, the *Registraduría* strengthened public communication and educational content on social media, outreach to the media, and public appearances by its officials, aiming to enhance stakeholders' understanding of the electoral process and the safeguards designed to protect its integrity.

Addressing some technical and administrative challenges encountered during the legislative elections, the CNE introduced adjustments to its accreditation platform for candidate representatives and related procedures to streamline the process. At the same time, parties were offered training on both the platform's use and the broader electoral process to strengthen their representatives' understanding of their role and the complaints mechanism. The CNE also extended the accreditation period for system auditors and *testigos*. A record 13,872 citizen observers and 1,333 international observers were accredited. The authorities mounted an extensive out-of-country voting operation, reflecting significant efforts to facilitate electoral participation among over 1.4 million citizens residing and registered to vote abroad.

The accuracy of the voter register is widely trusted by the stakeholders. In line with international good practice, the voter register was updated before the election, recording a slight increase compared to the previous electoral process reflecting demographic changes, while voters were also given another opportunity to transfer their electoral address. However, first-time registration of voters is suspended four months before the respective elections, thus disenfranchising citizens who turned 18 during this period. Ahead of the closure of the voter register for the presidential election, the *Registraduría* carried out a special review and cleansing exercise, which resulted in the removal of 47,604 entries belonging to citizens presumed deceased.

Results processing and election technologies

Results management ensures transparency and traceability at every stage and is protected by numerous safeguards. Official results are determined through the manual processing of physical results protocols (*escrutinio*) by judges and notaries under the scrutiny of the candidates' legal teams.⁴ Software, whose reliability was questioned in the pre-election period, was only used to collate and swiftly publish online polling station results that were manually transcribed in presence

⁴ Prior to this, unofficial, purely informative results (*preconteo*) are collected by phone from all polling stations. The information on *preconteo* results, displayed in the *Registraduría* website and apps and broadcast by main media, is updated every five minutes.

of party agents and state institutions representatives, such as the *Procuraduría* and the Ombudsperson office.

As an important transparency measure, the *Registraduría* published scans of individual results protocols online within a few hours of the close of polls, enabling contenders to trace and verify the accuracy of the tabulated results and, if need be, request corrections. In line with best international practices, parties and observer organisations (including the EU EOM) were provided with privileged access to various results monitoring tools, massive download of results forms, system logs and disaggregated results.

The *Registraduría* carried out several technical tests and full load simulations of all components of the results system (*preconteo*, *escrutinio* and scanning), which the EU EOM evaluated positively. During weekly technical meetings, representatives of the candidacies could clarify any concerns regarding the results system. In addition, the *Registraduría* commissioned, for the first time, an international audit of the electoral process, including the results management software, conducted by the *Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos/Centro de Asesoría y Promoción Electoral* (IIDH/CAPEL) whose main findings were shared with the parties just a few days before election day.

President Petro repeatedly requested the source code of the results processing software to be handed over to parties and state institutions for audit. The *Registraduría* refused to do so, as this would jeopardise the security of the results management system. However, attempting to satisfy this demand without compromising its security, the *Registraduría* offered parties an unprecedented four-week programme of exhibition of the software's source code *in situ*. The EU EOM noted only limited interest in this initiative among candidacies.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Colombian Constitution and electoral legislation are generally in line with international standards for democratic elections. Colombia has ratified most international and regional treaties on democratic elections. Electoral legislation is scattered across numerous laws, which are not always consistent, often combining over-regulation (such as on the registration of candidates) with gaps in the development of constitutional provisions (as in the case of the special constituency for the Raizal people). Legal voids persist regarding rules governing campaigning on social media platforms, the oversight of campaign finance and the deadlines for the submission and resolution of complaints and appeals during the tabulation of results.

CANDIDATE REGISTRATION

Fourteen presidential candidates were registered for the 31 May election: eleven through parties, movements or citizen groups, and three emerging from the 8 March inter-party consultations. Three subsequently withdrew, one before the ballot was printed and therefore omitted from it, and two after printing, whose votes will be counted as unmarked⁵. Eleven tickets ultimately competed.

The law allows any person to petition the CNE to deregister presidential candidates, even after the closing of the registration period. Petitions to de-register presidential candidates De la Espriella, Paloma Valencia and Carlos Caicedo, as well as vice-presidential candidate Aida Quilcué (*Pacto Histórico*) were rejected by the CNE in line with its previous decisions during the legislative elections, favouring inclusion.

⁵ Clara López withdrew on 6 April, before the printing of the ballot, and Luis Gilberto Murillo on 6 May and Carlos Caicedo on 25 May after the ballot was printed.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Colombia, one of the most digitally advanced countries in Latin America, does not have a specific law regulating social media during elections. Instead, it is governed by the general rules on campaign advertising and financing, and regulations issued by the CNE.

Although fraud narratives remained a central theme in the political debate and the media, its presence on social media decreased compared to the legislative election. Nevertheless, leading disinformation narratives in the presidential election followed similar patterns to the legislative one: they portrayed Cepeda as linked to illegal armed groups; De la Espriella as untrustworthy; and Valencia as subordinate to former President Uribe. These narratives were frequently disseminated through fake images, audio, and video generated with artificial intelligence (AI).

The EU EOM Monitoring Unit found that hateful content was also present in the presidential election campaign.⁶ Female candidates have been targeted with sexist messages; Aida Quilcué also received racist comments; and Claudia López and Juan Daniel Oviedo faced homophobic remarks. On average, hate messages accounted for roughly four out of 100 replies to these candidates' social media posts.

As in the legislative elections, ministries persistently posted messages mostly praising government's achievements, such as the hashtag *#100LogrosDePetro* (100 Petro's achievements). This practice contravenes Colombian law and international electoral standards.⁷ On average, one out of three messages posted by the main ministries highlighted the administration's accomplishments.⁸

Electoral advertising appearing on Meta platforms amounted to COP 3.8 billion (EUR 919,000), with Paloma Valencia accounting for more than half of the total (53.91 %).⁹ The EU EOM Monitoring Unit detected campaigns financed through third parties which, while not explicitly calling for votes for any specific party, sought to benefit the centre-right options.

While AI was already widely used to produce misleading images, videos, and audio clips, during the presidential election it also became a key tool for political advertising, enabling candidates to produce large volumes of campaign material at a speed and cost that would have been unfeasible only two months earlier.

TRADITIONAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Freedoms of expression and of the press were generally respected during the presidential campaign, although journalists' coverage of areas controlled by illegal armed groups was restricted. A journalist was killed in early May in Antioquia, allegedly by a FARC dissident faction, while reporting on local communities. Since January, the *Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa*

⁶ Sample of 200,000 replies from 10 to 24 April: Paloma Valencia, 5.66 % of sexist messages; Claudia López, 5.36 % of sexist messages and 5.23 % of homophobic messages; Aida Quilcué, 4.68 % of sexist messages and 5.05 % of racist messages; Juan Daniel Oviedo, 6.2 % homophobic messages; Sondra Macollins, 2.09 % of sexist messages; Edna Bonilla, 1.97 % of sexist messages; Clara López, 1.57 % of sexist messages.

⁷ *Ley de Garantías Electorales*. Art. 27. Venice Commission: Report on the Misuse of Administrative Resources during Electoral Processes, Joint Guidelines for Preventing and Responding to the Misuse of Administrative Resources during Electoral Processes.

⁸ Sample of 3,850 posts in Facebook, X, and TikTok from eight ministries' social media profiles, from 30 April to 24 May: *Presidencia*, 64.43 %; *Educación*, 52.46 %; *Salud*, 41.19 %; *Agricultura*, 29.62 %; *Transporte*, 28.03 %; *TIC*, 26.68 %; *Ambiente*, 25.66 %; *Cultura*, 10.84 %.

⁹ Sample of political ads posted on Facebook and Instagram, from 9 March to 18 May. Only Meta publishes political spending in their platforms.

(FLIP) has recorded 49 cases of election-related threats and other types of pressure on journalists, with one presidential candidate allegedly involved in six incidents.

Media coverage of the campaign was extensive, including electoral events, interviews and debates with candidates. The state-run media, which has a legal obligation to broadcast debates, organised three, and other debates were offered by private media. However, none was attended by either Ivan Cepeda or Abelardo de la Espriella. There is no legal obligation for candidates to participate in debates.

EU EOM media monitoring confirmed the polarisation of the campaign coverage already observed during the legislative elections. Discrediting language, misinformation or disinformation were detected by the Mission both in state-run and private media.¹⁰

The mission's media monitoring of news programmes showed that, between 30 April and 30 May, state-run media mainly favoured President Petro, the government and Ivan Cepeda.¹¹ Paloma Valencia and Abelardo de la Espriella were afforded much less time and partly in a negative tone.

Private media provided much less coverage of the president and the government than state-run media, and often in a negative tone. They afforded most time to Paloma Valencia, Abelardo de la Espriella and Ivan Cepeda, well above the other candidates, and mostly in a neutral way.

Paid electoral advertising on private media quadrupled in volume during the last weeks of the campaign, with Valencia, Cepeda and De la Espriella purchasing 70 per cent of the ads. Free airtime slots, provided by law on state-run and private media, were offered to all contestants.

While the law prohibits any increase during the campaign of the budget for state advertising, government ads doubled in volume on state-run and private media during the last weeks of the campaign, with most promoting President Petro's and his government's achievements.

To ensure pluralism and impartiality, private radio stations and television channels are required by law to produce weekly reports on time distribution between candidates throughout the campaign. However, to date this mechanism has proven to be inefficient. The Mission was informed by the CNE that no such reports had been received by the eve of the election, while the media claimed that, unlike in 2022, they were not given instructions by the CNE on their reporting obligation.

ELECTION DAY

Election day was peaceful, with no major incidents reported. EU observers assessed all stages of election day as transparent, orderly and smooth. Party representatives were present in two thirds of the polling stations visited, with no restrictions on their activities reported. All observed polling stations opened on time, with polling staff present and all essential election materials available.

Voting was well-organised in observed polling stations, with high voter turnout occasionally resulting in long queues that were generally well managed. Polling staff performed their duties efficiently, with only a small number of cases observed in which assistance provided to voters with difficulties to mark ballots was not properly managed or recorded. Although secrecy of vote was generally preserved, in one-tenth of the polling stations visited, EU observers identified shortcomings in the layout that could compromise it due to the placement of polling booths, overcrowding, or limited space. Accessibility remained a challenge in one-fifth of polling stations.

¹⁰ State-run *Señal Colombia* and *Radio Nacional de Colombia* frequently covered President Petro's allegations on a potential fraud, during the campaign. Private media extensively covered allegations linking Ivan Cepeda to the FARC and being supported by illegal armed groups.

¹¹ From 30 April to 30 May, the EU EOM monitored quantitatively four private media (Blu Radio, Caracol Radio, Caracol TV and RCN TV) and two state-run media (*Señal Colombia* tv channel and *Radio Nacional de Colombia*).

The vote count was carried out transparently and accurately. Although some minor procedural oversights were noted, these did not affect the integrity of the process. Shortly after the polls closed, the *Registraduría* began announcing preliminary results, reaching 98 per cent by around 17:30. All results protocols were swiftly published online.

EU observers described the *escrutinio* (official results tabulation) in over one hundred *comisiones escrutadoras* (aggregation commissions) visited as transparent and well organised. On election night, the *comisiones escrutadoras*, led by judges and notaries, tallied the results of almost all polling stations. Candidate representatives of the three leading contenders monitored their work without restriction and enjoyed access to all documents.

This preliminary statement is available in English and Spanish but only the English version is official.
An electronic version of this Preliminary Statement is available on the Mission (www.moeUEcolombia2026.eu).

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