

ICP and Fundación Colombia 2050 warn of the risk of state capture by criminal groups and silent territorial control in the March 8 elections

Bogotá, D.C., March 7, 2026. Two days before Colombia's congressional elections and inter-party presidential primaries, the Instituto de Ciencia Política Hernán Echavarría Olózaga (ICP) and the Fundación Colombia 2050 issue a public warning about the risks facing Colombian democracy. The greatest threat to the electoral process is not only traditional electoral fraud, but criminal pressure over territories, candidates, and communities that can distort political representation and potentially lead to a co-opted **reconfiguration of the State**.

We call on the national Government and President Gustavo Petro to prioritize State intervention in territories where free voting is at risk. Rather than questioning the legitimacy of the electoral process or undermining confidence in the institutions responsible for administering it, the country must focus on guaranteeing electoral security and fair political competition on March 8.

The absence of visible violence does not necessarily mean that democratic guarantees are in place. In some territories, criminal control is so entrenched that illegal armed groups no longer need assassinations or direct attacks to influence politics. Fear, underreporting of complaints, intimidation, and restrictions on campaigning may all signal **criminal subjugation**.

The most serious risk is that these dynamics may lead to **institutional capture** processes, in which criminal structures favor authorities or representatives who are functional to their interests. Where genuinely free political competition does not exist, certain candidates or political organizations are likely to be favored. Colombia has already experienced the **parapolitics** scandal and cannot afford a new chapter of **narco-politics**.

According to the Electoral Observation Mission (MOE), the deterioration compared to 2022 is alarming: 170 municipalities face **overlapping risks of violence and electoral fraud**, and 81 of them are classified as at extreme risk, an increase of 65.31% compared to the previous electoral cycle. In addition, political parties, election monitors, and territorial observers have reported extortion targeting candidates, bans on campaigning, threats against social leaders, checkpoints on strategic roads, attacks on electoral logistics, and the use of drones to intimidate communities and restrict mobility.

Entorno Electoral 2026

In light of these risks, Colombian authorities and international organizations should closely examine possible links between elected political actors and criminal structures operating in these territories. Several of these organizations are part of transnational organized crime networks and, in some cases, have been designated by the United States government as threats to its national security.

In its analysis titled [**“The Risk of Criminal Networks Instrumentalizing Elections to Gain Power within the State,”**](#) the ICP warns that the government’s *Paz Total* policy without effective protocols to verify ceasefires and without sufficient action to confront illegal armed groups and protect civilian populations, has allowed various criminal structures to strengthen, expand their territorial control, and increase their capacity for political pressure.

The ICP and the Colombia 2050 Foundation have established the **Citizen Oversight Initiative: Electoral Environment 2026**, composed of **126 observers and territorial coordinators across 42 prioritized municipalities**, to monitor and shed light on risks of criminal interference and coercion in the electoral process. This monitoring combines field observation with open-source intelligence. Its findings will be presented to Colombian authorities and to international actors committed to defending democracy in Colombia and addressing transnational organized crime.

The organizations also call on authorities, the media, and democratic leaders not to focus solely on the transparency of the vote count. It is equally essential to expose **territorial vetoes** and identify which candidates were unable to campaign and where entire communities face restrictions on gathering, participating in politics, or voting freely.

An apparently peaceful election may conceal a structural capture of the vote. For this reason, authorities must investigate forced confinement of communities, “codes of conduct” imposed by criminal groups, unusual increases in voter registration, and other forms of illegal pressure, applying standards similar to those used to establish criminal responsibility in the **parapolitics** cases.

Democracy is not defended merely by holding elections, but by ensuring that citizens can choose **without criminal pressure or territorial capture of political power**.

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