



PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

Transparent and well-organised elections despite mistrust and security challenges

Bogotá, 10 March 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. After the completion of the process, the EU EOM will publish a final report, including full analysis and recommendations for electoral reform.

Summary

On 8 March, Colombians voted to elect the bicameral Congress, as well as presidential candidates in three inter-party primaries. The legislative elections took place in a highly polarised yet competitive environment, marked by the reconfiguration and expansion of armed groups and recurring questioning of certain aspects of the electoral results management system by the incumbent. The 16 special transitory peace constituencies (*Circunscripciones Transitorias Especiales de Paz - CITREP*), established under the 2016 Peace Accord, were contested for the second and final time amid persistent threats and co-optation by illegal armed groups, as well as ongoing financial constraints.

Election day, which, close to 51 per cent, saw the highest turnout in legislative elections in the last three decades, was peaceful and well organised. The armed forces and police carried out a large-scale deployment to ensure that voting could take place throughout the country. European Union observers positively assessed the performance of polling station members during voting and counting, which was described as transparent, accurate and well organised. The preliminary results were promptly published by the *Registraduría* online, enhancing transparency.

The electoral campaign was pluralistic and largely driven by social media. Fundamental freedoms were respected and parties and coalitions campaigned freely in most parts of the country, particularly in the most populated areas. However, the presence of illegal armed groups in sparsely populated rural areas contributed to increased electoral violence and interfered with the freedom of campaigning, potentially affecting the integrity of the vote in those areas. Allegations of vote buying and undue pressure on public employees and voters, including through coercive mechanisms, were reported in most departments.

The *Registraduría* performed its duties professionally, demonstrating a strong commitment to transparency and institutional independence. However, recurring allegations regarding the reliability of the results tabulation system, vote counting procedures and completion of results protocols risked undermining public trust in the electoral process. To address these concerns, the *Registraduría* implemented a communication campaign which ensured stakeholder access to all stages of the electoral preparations. Responding to political parties' demands, the *Consejo Nacional Electoral* (CNE) extended the accreditation period for party representatives. This facilitated their greater participation.

The *Registraduría* also managed technical preparations in a timely manner, despite significant logistical challenges. It responded to operational difficulties caused by floods and heavy rainfall by relocating 27 affected polling stations and issuing replacement identity documents to ensure voters could exercise their right to vote. To enhance voters' access, the number of polling centres was considerably increased, although access difficulties persist in remote rural areas and those affected by security concerns. The *Registraduría* implemented a comprehensive training programme for temporary electoral personnel which included practical exercises, with particular emphasis on the completion of results protocols.

The results management system has effective safeguards and transparency features, including the publication of all polling station results and protocols, in line with the best international practices. In response to the President's repeated questioning of the reliability of the software used to aggregate the results, the *Registraduría* extended the time for the political parties' IT specialists to inspect its source code by several days. In addition, the tabulation system was reviewed by international and CNE auditors.

Colombia has a highly connected and politically active digital landscape, yet marked by AI-driven disinformation, harassment of candidates and public allegations of fraud by the President, alongside the misuse of official government accounts for campaign purposes.

EU EOM media monitoring revealed that the state-owned television and radio, which have a heightened obligation of neutrality and balance in their campaign coverage, mostly favoured the President, the government and its supporting parties, while coverage of opposition parties was very limited and often negative in tone. Private television channels and radio stations gave less prominence to the Executive, often with a negative tone. The time allocated to the coverage of opposition and pro-government parties was more balanced than in state-owned media, although more negative in tone for the latter.

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. In total, the EU EOM deployed 145 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 8 March, they observed in 550 polling stations (of which 26 in 7 CITREP) in 30 departments. A delegation from the European Parliament, headed by Nicolás González Casares, 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

Legislative elections for 103 senators and 182 members of the House of Representatives were held concurrently with three inter-party presidential primaries.¹ The elections were competitive and unfolded amid heightened security challenges linked to the expansion of illegal armed groups, as well as public questioning by President Gustavo Petro of certain aspects of the electoral results management system. The assassination of presidential precandidate and senator Miguel Uribe Turbay (*Centro Democrático*) in the summer of 2025 brought concerns over the security of candidates to the forefront of public and political debate.

CANDIDATE REGISTRATION

The *Registraduría* is responsible for candidate registration, and its decisions may be appealed before the CNE. The *Registraduría* registered over 3,000 candidates across the political spectrum, 40 per cent of whom were women.² Ineligibility criteria are generally in line with international standards and parties may replace disqualified candidates before the election. However, candidates previously convicted of intentional crime, regardless of the severity of the offence or the length of the sentence, are permanently disqualified. This contravenes international commitments on the right to stand, which requires restrictions to be reasonable. Of the 27 candidates revoked by the CNE from standing for Congress, 12 were deregistered on these grounds.

Over 175 petitions were filed challenging candidate registrations. The most notable case was the one of *Pacto Histórico* presidential candidate Ivan Cepeda to run in the *Frente por la Vida* primary election. The CNE ruled that Cepeda had already participated in an inter-party primary in October 2025 and, according to the Constitution, could not participate in a second one. Cepeda remains eligible to stand as a presidential candidate in May. The largest number of deregistrations were related to the House of Representatives lists for reasons such as dual-party membership, failure to respect the results of the primaries, as well as not meeting the gender quota or the requirements for joining coalitions. For the latter reason, eight *Pacto Histórico* lists, presented in coalition with *Colombia Humana*, were revoked. Faced with the risk that some of the lists could be annulled, the *Pacto* endorsed all candidates previously presented by *Colombia Humana*. Ultimately, all *Pacto* lists were validated by the CNE and the fusion between both parties approved.

The CNE can decide on candidate registration until the day before the election, which significantly limits legal certainty. Furthermore, the State Council can be called to review appeals on candidate registration, and its rulings may be handed down years after an election took place.

CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT

The election campaign was pluralistic and low intensity on the ground. Fundamental freedoms were respected and the EU EOM observed parties and coalitions campaigning freely in most parts of the country, particularly in the country's most populated areas. However, a growing number of illegal armed groups have consolidated territorial control across significant rural, thinly populated areas, establishing criminal governance structures sustained by illicit economies. EU observers reported that in these territories, candidates' freedom to campaign was constrained and citizens'

¹ The centre-right *Gran Consulta por Colombia*, the centre-left *Frente por la Vida* and centrist *Consulta de las Soluciones*.

² 1,071 candidates were registered for the Senate, 2,010 for the House of Representatives, and 237 candidates for the CITREP constituencies.

ability to vote without coercion or intimidation undermined.³ Security threats, disproportionately affecting smaller parties, have led some candidates to avoid or curtail campaigning in certain regions.

Electoral violence increased prior to the elections, including the kidnapping of three candidates and a senator, the killing of a senator's two security escorts, as well as armed threats, campaign obstruction and vandalism reported in several departments across the political spectrum, with *Centro Democrático* and *Pacto Histórico* among the most affected. Under *Plan Democracia*, an electoral security framework led by the armed forces and national police, protection measures were provided to most presidential pre-candidates, to 14 per cent of congressional candidates and to more than one-third of CITREP candidates. However, opposition parties considered these guarantees insufficient. Authorities also reported the deployment of more than 120,000 police officers and 126,000 soldiers nationwide to secure polling stations on election day. The mission condemns the killing of three soldiers while they were providing protection for the deployment of election materials in Cartagena del Chairá, in Caquetá.

Colombians in conflict-affected municipalities elected 16 members of the *Cámara de Representantes* through the CITREP peace constituencies for the second and final time, a mechanism established under the 2016 Peace Accord as a compensatory measure to ensure greater representation of those affected by the conflict. Although candidacies were restricted to officially recognised victims of the conflict without party affiliation, the system faced co-optation by armed groups and traditional political interests, facilitated by instances of *transhumancia electoral* (fraudulent voter registration to boost support for certain candidates). Persistent financial barriers and armed groups intimidation, which prompted several candidates to withdraw, resulted in a 40 per cent decline in candidate lists compared to 2022. Victims in CITREP areas reported a sense of disconnection from candidates. In conflict-affected areas, EU EOM observers reported significant risks that forced displacement and movement restrictions could potentially hinder voters' ability to exercise their rights. According to the *Defensoría del Pueblo*, over 21,000 citizens have been affected by these actions by armed groups since January 2026.

Across the country, social media served as the primary communication channel and public debate centred on security, institutional credibility, corruption, health services and the economy. EU EOM observers reported persistent allegations of vote buying in most departments, particularly targeting vulnerable communities. In fact, several high-profile arrests around election day received extensive media coverage, reflecting a strengthened official focus on the enforcement of electoral offences. Despite legal prohibitions on the use of public appointments for campaign purposes, in some instances, elected local officials were promising public employment in exchange for votes. They were also reported to have exerted coercion on public employees to secure support for specific candidates or to attend campaign events.⁴

Although the official campaign period began on 8 December 2025 for the legislative elections and on 31 January 2026 for the presidential race, both campaigns effectively started much earlier, with citizen groups initiating signature collection and prospective candidates publicly announcing their intention to run up to a year in advance. These activities fall outside the regulated campaign period and are therefore not subject to spending limits. The campaign for primary elections further raised concerns about campaign finance equity, since spending during this period is unregulated.

³ In Antioquia, Valle del Cauca, Córdoba, Meta, Guaviare, Cesar and Tolima.

⁴ In Valle del Cauca, Magdalena, Córdoba, Atlántico, Cesar, Guaviare, Bolívar, Huila and Caquetá.

The CNE has yet to fully enforce campaign finance rules through effective oversight, verification of reported information, and strengthened capacity to prevent illicit funding. While the CNE's *Cuentas Claras* platform has enhanced overall transparency by facilitating disclosure of campaign income and expenditure by parties and candidates, compliance remains limited. The CNE resolution authorising advance payments, the sole permitted funding source for CITREP candidates, was issued only three weeks before election day, severely constraining their access to campaign funds.

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.

The last major reform of electoral legislation passed by the Congress (2023), which adopted many of the 2022 EU EOM's recommendations, was declared unconstitutional on procedural grounds by the Constitutional Court. However, other recommendations which did not require legal reform have been adopted by the election management bodies or even by the government. These include CNE's budgetary independence, the increase of the number of polling stations, and improvements in the provisional results' transmission protocols and tabulation procedures.

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, which has newly acquired financial and administrative autonomy.

The *Registraduría* performed its duties professionally, demonstrating a strong commitment to transparency and institutional independence. It managed technical preparations in a timely and efficient manner, despite considerable logistical challenges, including adverse weather conditions and security concerns.

In some departments, electoral operations were affected by floods and heavy rainfall, resulting in relocation of 27 polling centres in 11 municipalities.⁵ In these areas, the *Registraduría* launched special services to promptly issue voters with identification documents to replace those lost or damaged. In line with a prior EU EOM recommendation, the *Registraduría* increased the number of voting centres (*puestos de votación*) by almost 10 per cent compared to the 2022 general elections, bringing the electoral premises closer to voters. However, persistent access difficulties and long distances to polling centres were reported in remote rural areas and those affected by security constraints.

Over 850,000 poll workers were recruited, by random selection from among lists of registered voters provided by public offices, private companies and educational institutions. While political

⁵ A further 30 centres were moved due to poor infrastructure or displacement of voters, and two following security concerns on the eve of election day.

parties were also entitled to nominate poll workers, only a few did so, and rather directed resources to appointment of their representatives (*testigos*) at polling stations and tabulation commissions. The *Registraduría* implemented a comprehensive, well-organised and interactive training programme for temporary electoral personnel, with a particular emphasis on result forms.

The *Registraduría* generally enjoys public confidence. However, it had to confront numerous allegations casting doubt over several elements of the electoral system, mainly regarding reliability of the tabulation software, vote counting procedures and completing of results protocols, potentially jeopardising public trust in the electoral process. The *Registraduría* sought to dispel these concerns with a communication campaign, aimed at strengthening public confidence and curbing disinformation, and provided electoral stakeholders with extensive information and access to all phases of the electoral preparations. Nonetheless, the EU EOM noted limited participation of political parties in activities largely held for them, such as meetings of the election coordination and follow-up commissions or testing events.

Despite initial difficulties reported with the accreditation platform for *testigos*, the online system ultimately facilitated the accreditation process and ensured the efficient issuance of credentials. Positively, the CNE extended the accreditation period, responding to political parties that had struggled to identify sufficient representatives in several places.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the election administration made significant efforts to facilitate out-of-country voting for Colombian citizens residing abroad, with 253 polling centres in a total of 77 countries. However, due to security concerns, the polling centres in Ramallah and Tel-Aviv could not open.

The results management system retains strong transparency and traceability features, including the tabulation conducted by judges and notaries in presence of party representatives and the publication of all polling station protocols and fully disaggregated results. However, in the weeks preceding the elections, the President repeatedly raised concerns about potential vulnerabilities and flaws in the employed software. In this context, the *Registraduría* extended the time for the inspection of its source code by parties and observers, alongside with the review of the whole tabulation system by international and CNE auditors. Furthermore, the technological tools and systems for results tabulation underwent numerous tests and rehearsals in presence of political parties, auditors and observers. The EU EOM regards the design of the results tabulation system, which provides for public tracing of individual polling station protocols up to the consolidated results, as compliant with the best international practices in the matter.

VOTER REGISTRATION

There is general confidence in the accuracy of the voter register, which is built on a passive system, whereby eligible voters are automatically registered and assigned to a polling centre once issued with an identity card. In recent years, the *Registraduría* has applied measures to improve civil and voter register updates, with better interinstitutional data exchange, that has facilitated the removal of deceased citizens. However, despite efforts to enhance civil registration, such as targeted registration days, the *Registraduría* estimates that, out of a population of approximately 53 million, over a million of Colombians – predominantly in areas inhabited by indigenous communities, remote and hard-to-access regions or marginalised urban zones – remain unregistered.

First-time registration of voters is suspended four months before the respective elections, thus disenfranchising citizens who turn 18 during this period. For this reason, 172,278 eligible citizens

remained unregistered for these elections. The final voter register comprised 41,286,084 voters, including 1,250,846 registered to vote abroad, which constitutes an increase of approximately six per cent since the last general elections in 2022, reflecting the demographic growth.

Prior to elections, voters could request a change in their electoral residence, which is broader than the *domicilio* (habitual residence), without supplying evidence. Over two million voters requested such a change. Of these, roughly 150,000 were reported in *CITREP* constituencies, reflecting higher rates of registration changes than the national average, and constituting an issue of concern given that their small size means *CITREP* seats can be obtained with comparatively fewer votes.⁶ Most municipal areas under *CITREP* recorded substantial increases in transfers of residence, which indicates voter movements within the respective municipalities, from urban to rural areas. While some of these transfers may reflect the return of internally displaced persons to their previous addresses, EU observers have reported allegations of instances of fraudulent registrations aimed at bolstering electoral support in certain municipalities (*transhumacia electoral*).

SOCIAL MEDIA

Colombia is one of the most digitally advanced countries in Latin America. Internet access is widespread, although it remains constrained by geographical complexity, socio-economic inequality and violence. Nevertheless, political debate is vibrant on social media, and parties and candidates claim to be spending more on online than on offline campaigning. There is no 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.

Colombia has established fact-checking organisations, and both the *Registraduría* and the CNE have dedicated units to monitor social media and debunk harmful narratives during the electoral process. However, both are understaffed. The EU EOM observed at least three instances in which social media were used to threaten one male candidate and to harass two female candidates through sexist rhetoric. However, the CNE reported that it had not received any complaint on these cases.

The main disinformation narratives during the campaign focused on Iván Cepeda, who was portrayed as a guerrilla fighter, and on Abelardo de la Espriella, depicted as untrustworthy. The electoral authority has also been questioned, particularly by the President of the Republic, who published numerous posts on his X account referring to an alleged manipulation of the results forms and the tabulation software. Artificial intelligence has been widely used to create fake photographs, videos and audio recordings that impersonate candidates to damage their reputation.

During the campaign period, most ministries and municipal governments used their digital profiles to announce public works, disseminate political messages, and even call for street protests.⁷ Such practices contravene Colombian legislation and international standards requiring neutrality and impartiality of public authorities in electoral processes.

TRADITIONAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Freedoms of expression and press were generally respected throughout the campaign period. However, threats against journalists, not least from illegal armed groups, were reported by EU observers in several departments. Since the beginning of 2026, the Colombian *Fundación para la*

⁶ *CITREP* represent 3.5 per cent of the electorate and elect 8.8 per cent of the House seats.

⁷ Percentage of messages with illegal content. Sample of 2,658 tweets from nine ministries and two city councils between 8 and 28 February: Ministry of the Presidency (63 per cent), Mining (56.6 per cent), Health (42 per cent), Transport (33.33 per cent), Agriculture (30.4 per cent), Environment (21.5 per cent), Technology (15.5 per cent), Culture (13.6 per cent), Foreign Affairs (13.5 per cent), Medellín City Council (50.8 per cent), and Bogotá City Council (11 per cent).

Libertad de Prensa (FLIP) has recorded several cases of intimidation against journalists related to election coverage.

Campaign coverage on national media was pluralistic and polarised, and provided substantial information on the electoral process as well as interviews and debates with congressional and presidential candidates. The campaign in the local media, vibrant in most of the country, was barely existent in vast, sparsely populated areas. EU observers reported numerous allegations of influence by the government, local authorities and candidates on local media.

EU EOM media monitoring revealed that the state-owned television and radio, which have a heightened obligation of neutrality and balance in their campaign coverage, mostly covered the activities of the President and the government.⁸ They also favoured *Pacto Histórico* and the *Consulta Frente por la Vida*. Coverage of the opposition parties' campaign was limited and often negative in tone.

Private television channels and radio stations allocated less time to the President and the government than the state-owned media, often with a negative tone. However, the coverage of the opposition and of the left, pro-government parties was more balanced in time, although more negative in tone for the latter. Paid electoral advertisement in the private media, which was relatively modest, increased during the last week, with *Centro Democrático*, *Alianza por Colombia*, *La Gran Consulta* and *Partido Conservador* in the lead.

WOMEN IN ELECTIONS

According to preliminary results, there will be no increase in women representation compared to the outgoing Congress, where women were 29 per cent of its members. As it was the case in 2022, PH, a party that presented closed, zippered lists, was the political organisation with the most women elected in the Senate.

In 2020 and 2023, electoral reforms were passed by Congress, including among other modifications, gender parity and alternation on party lists. These laws were rejected by the Constitutional Court on procedural grounds. Despite the Constitutional mandate that gender parity and alternation must be gradually introduced into the election legislation, there has been no significant development so far. The 30 per cent quota introduced in 2011 is still applicable and there is no requirement for gender alternation on closed lists nor rules to ensure parity on open lists. A legislative amendment in 2024 established that in the lists for constituencies electing less than five seats, at least one candidate should be a woman.

Psychological and economic violence are the most frequently forms of abuse reported by female candidates, including attacks on social media. Instances of physical violence have also been reported. In this sense, a law on Political Violence Against Women was passed in 2025.

ELECTION DAY

Election day was generally calm and polling proceeded smoothly, although isolated instances of pressure on voters were reported by observers. Campaign activities, forbidden on election day, were observed in the vicinity of some polling centres visited, with a few indications of vote buying.

Polling stations opened on time, with the vast majority of polling staff and all essential election materials present. EU observers evaluated the opening process as smooth and calm in all polling

⁸ The EU EOM monitored (8 February-8 March) a selection of national media: television - *Señal Colombia* (public), Caracol TV and RCN TV (private); *Radio Nacional* (public), Blu Radio and Caracol Radio (private).

stations observed, with procedures largely followed. Women made up for more than half of polling staff.

Observers also assessed positively the voting process in virtually all polling stations and described it as well-organized, orderly and transparent. The few negative assessments were mostly connected with campaign activities which in some cases were coupled with tension outside the polling stations. Voting procedures and integrity safeguards, such as voter identification, were largely respected. However, the EU EOM observed a number of inconsistencies such as poll workers not offering the ballots for special constituencies and not informing the voters about the interparty primaries, as well as a certain lack of instructions on complex voting procedures. While the secrecy of the vote was generally respected, in 17 per cent of cases observers noted that the polling station layout could compromise it. Party representatives were present in 72 per cent of the polling stations observed, while citizen observers were reported in 10 per cent of them. Despite efforts to improve accessibility, a fifth of polling stations were difficult for voters with reduced mobility to access or had unsuitable interior layouts.

The conduct of vote count was assessed as accurate, transparent and well organised. However, closing procedures and integrity checks, such as reconciliation of number of voters and ballots, were not completed correctly in close to a fourth of the polling stations, while in almost half of the cases confusion on how to fill out the lines of the results forms (E-14) with no votes was reported. Observers attributed this to an insufficient understanding of the complex procedures by poll workers, as well as to well-intentioned efforts to hasten the process which, however, did not affect the accuracy of the count. The preliminary results were promptly published by the *Registraduría* online, enhancing transparency.

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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