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## Colombian Elections Marred by Paramilitary Violence

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After six decades of uninterrupted violence during which gunfire provided the soundtrack for elections, Colombians were finally able to vote in peace following an agreement signed by the government and guerrilla fighters. They went to the polls March 11 for parliamentary elections and will return for the presidential vote on May 27. No forecast of the presidential race is possible, however, because pollsters can't be believed. Ever since 1998, they have been "creating" winners that end up being the losers when the real ballots are counted.

While the government and armed rebel groups respected both the peace agreement signed with the now dissolved Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the truce agreed to by the still-rebellious Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), other actors took center stage. They achieved their mission of dirtying the democratic process by killings dozens of social activists and former combatants, and by attacking candidates who had once been guerrilla fighters. As a result, the new, legal FARC, which is no longer a rebel force but a political party called Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force) suspended its legislative campaign on Feb. 9. The party's presidential candidate also dropped out of the race ([NotiSur, Feb. 2, 2018](#)).

Coinciding with the political FARC's double announcement, The New York Times quoted the UN Verification Mission—the multinational body to which the guerrillas turned in their rifles, howitzers, and missiles at the time of their final disarmament—to point out that since early January, two candidates have been assassinated and the incidents of harassment by mobs organized to take action against FARC militants have multiplied. According to that source, between 39 and 50 former guerrillas have been assassinated and dozens wounded or mutilated along with family members in attacks since December 2016 when the agreements began to be implemented.

The FARC's leaders and the spokespersons for the top Colombian humanitarian groups accused Sen. Álvaro Uribe, a far-right politician who was president of Colombia between 2002 and 2010, as well as his Centro Democrático (Democratic Center, CD) party, of the "attacks by these gangs of lumpen and henchmen." Uribe has publicly proclaimed himself the greatest enemy of the peace accords and promoted the No vote in last year's plebiscite on the accords. Those denouncing him showed videos and other images in which CD candidates, identified by their full names, are seen instructing and egging on the mercenary gangs. They all denounce the government's passivity regarding the attacks.

Since peace negotiations with the FARC began in September 2012, there has been concern for the security of the demobilized fighters who might decide to enter politics. At the request of former guerrillas, the Colombian government agreed to guarantee their freedom of action and to offer protection and resources so they could engage in legal civilian activities. In their minds were the killing, in the 1980s, of 5,000 former guerrillas, members of the Unión Patriótica party (UP), a legally constituted organization that had signed a peace agreement with then-President Belisario Betancur (1982-1986). Colombia's top consulting entity, the Consejo de Estado, called the killings a "political extermination."

In an August 2011 document written several months before the start of talks with President Juan Manuel Santos' administration, the guerrillas had surprisingly shown their willingness to sit at the table with government representatives. In the document, FARC leaders made reference to "the massacre of the Unión Patriótica party" in the 1980s. "The repressive bodies of the state and paramilitary squadrons and drug dealers assassinated three presidential candidates [Jaime Pardo Leal, Bernardo Jaramillo, and Manuel Cepeda], eight senators, 13 congressional deputies, 70 city council members, and 11 mayors, plus thousands of party militants."

In 2010, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights called the genocide an "act of state terrorism," and in 2015, the Consejo de Estado labeled it an "act of political extermination" and restored legal status to the UP, along with all its properties.

### *Bloodstained history*

Blood has stained Colombia's political history for the last seven decades.

On April 9, 1948, the political leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated, giving rise to a popular rebellion known as "El Bogotazo" because of the violence that ensued in Bogota, the country's capital. Researchers today agree that Gaitán was eliminated because he was committed to agrarian reform, stood up to US banana companies, and took a stand in favor of the nationalization of key economic sectors such as banking.

Other assassinations followed. Pardo Leal was killed on October 1987; another presidential candidate, Luis Carlos Galán, was killed in 1989, Jaramillo and Carlos Pizarro were killed in 1990, and Cepeda in 1994.

### *Authorities close in on Uribe*

It is Cepeda's son, Ivan Cepeda, a senator who is president of the Congressional Commission on Human Rights, who is taking Uribe to court for his suspected participation in many crimes, his involvement with paramilitary groups, and his ties to drug trafficking cartels and money laundering ([NotiSur, June 30, 2017](#), and [Aug. 4, 2017](#)).

February was a terrible month for Uribe, beginning on Tuesday, Feb. 6, when a court in Medellín, the capital of the northwest department of Antioquia, asked the Supreme Court to investigate his alleged participation in two massacres carried out by paramilitary groups. Uribe was governor of Antioquia before he became president. According to the Medellín court, there are "consistent elements of judgment that adversely affect the former president, because meetings to plan the assassinations took place on his family ranch." The two massacres in question were committed in 1996 at La Granja, where five people were killed and another 10 wounded; and in 1997 at El Aro, where 15 people died and 30 were wounded.

The Bogotá daily El Tiempo reported that in 2015 the attorney general had already called for an investigation of Uribe, as several witnesses had sworn that helicopters from the state government had flown at low altitudes, providing protection to the assassins during the massacres.

On Feb. 16, the Supreme Court decided to investigate Uribe on charges of association with paramilitaries and drug cartels, issuing death threats against people testifying against him, and having set up an office to write scripts for phony witnesses who would testify in his favor.

In Colombia, former presidents can only be tried in the Supreme Court. Uribe's case paradoxically began with the former president's attempt to have Sen. Cepeda investigated. As president of the Congressional Commission on Human Rights, Cepeda had recorded the testimony of two paramilitary men who, after their arrest, provided details about Uribe's connections with the crime world, specifically with people involved in paramilitary activities, drug traffickers, and money launderers. Uribe must now explain these details to the Supreme Court.

Uribe's relationships with the crime world go way back. In December 2007, his son Jerónimo, who was just 25 at the time, admitted to doing business with economic entities who had benefitted from his father's administration, and with people—such as financier David Murcia Guzmán—who have been accused of money laundering. Murcia Guzmán is now serving a sentence for money laundering.

Since 2012, Uribe's sister-in-law Dolly Cifuentes Villa and his niece Ana Uribe, the wife and daughter of his brother Jaime, have been in prison as members of the Cifuentes Villa clan, a drug trafficking ring involved in laundering financial assets. In July that year, the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) cited Colombian news media as saying the clan operated in Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Ecuador, Brazil, Spain, and the US. It cited the same source as saying that Uribe's sister-in-law and niece held property valued at more than US\$250 million.

Jaime, the eldest of six Uribe brothers, had been imprisoned in 1986 for his association with Pablo Escobar Gaviria, the most powerful of the Colombian drug traffickers. Another brother, Santiago, has an open file at the Attorney General's Office and is being investigated as an organizer and leader of the paramilitary group known as the 12 Apostles. His cousin Mario, a former senator, is serving a seven-and-a-half-year sentence for his ties to the paramilitary commandos of Antioquia.

Earlier, in 1984, a helicopter owned by Uribe's father, Alberto, was discovered when it was being loaded with cocaine on the clandestine airstrip of a laboratory belonging to Escobar Gaviria, which the DPA called "the largest of all discovered in Colombia" up until July 2012.

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