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Colombia 2026: the 'Tiger' strikes. From total peace to total security

security.

Abstract:

This analysis examines Colombia's political transition following the 2026 presidential elections, characterised by the shift from the 'Total Peace' strategy to the 'Total Security' paradigm promoted by the government of Abelardo de la Espriella. The study examines the causes of this political change, the institutional constraints affecting the new administration's actions, and the impact of its initial measures on security and governance. It also addresses the effects of this reorientation on social polarisation, the dynamics of violence in rural outlying areas, confrontation in the media sphere, and the mobilisation of political and social actors. It concludes that the main challenge for Colombia lies in reconciling the restoration of state authority with the preservation of democratic stability and social cohesion, against a backdrop of profound political and territorial fragmentation.

Keywords:

Colombia, 2026 elections, geopolitics, governance, 'Tiger'.

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*Just as violence is a symptom of weakness,
the injustice that accompanies it is the product of arrogance.*

Carlos Llera Restrepo,
President of Colombia (1966–1970)

Introduction

Over the past decade, Colombia has experienced a series of political cycles that have tested both the stability of its institutions and the adaptability of its development model. Whilst for the most part of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st century the country was characterised by a notable continuity among traditional elites and a democracy without any real rotation in the presidency, the election of Gustavo Petro in 2022 marked the first historic break with that dynamic. For the first time, a candidate who openly identified as left-wing —with a past in the M-19 guerrilla movement, a former mayor of Bogotá and a long-serving senator— reached the presidential palace, Palacio de Nariño, after two failed attempts¹.

That victory cannot be understood without the cumulative context of the previous years. The country was emerging from social unrest in 2019 and 2021, a pandemic that had left the public coffers in the red, and a deep disappointment with the traditional political class². The Peace Agreement signed in 2016 with the former FARC-EP had polarised society between supporters and opponents, and its implementation had progressed very unevenly during President Iván Duque's administration. Added to this was persistent inequality— Colombia remains one of the most unequal countries in the world. Not to mention the violence which, although it had taken on a different form, had not disappeared from the country.

Petro capitalised on this desire for profound change. His programme was not merely a peace programme; it was a proposal to transform the Republic's development model. It set out a tax reform to reduce the fiscal deficit and address inequality, a reform of the pension and healthcare systems, an ecological transition involving a gradual move away from dependence on oil, and a commitment to clean energy. On the international stage,

¹ CNN ESPAÑOL. Resultados elecciones 2022. 20 June 2022. Available at:
<https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2022/06/19/resultados-elecciones-presidenciales-2022-colombia-petro-rodolfo-segunda-vuelta-boletines-orix/>

² REYES RAMÍREZ, Rocío de los. DIEEEA 67/2022.
https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA67_2022_ROCREY_Colombia.pdf

he proposed resuming diplomatic and trade relations with Venezuela and redefining the relationship with the United States in terms of environmental and drug-related cooperation.

The project originally enjoyed broad parliamentary support, but it was clear from the outset that its main task would be to maintain the unity of a diverse coalition and retain the backing of traditional political forces that were beginning to support it. The diversity of the 'Pacto Histórico' (Historic Pact) —where liberalism and conservatism coexisted but took opposing stances when sensitive matters arose— necessitated a constant exercise in political balance³.



Figure 1. Colombia 2026. Own creation

In terms of security, the most ambitious initiative was the so-called 'total peace'. Understood as the willingness to negotiate simultaneously with all illegal armed groups—from the ELN to the FARC dissidents and the organised crime structures that had emerged from paramilitarism— this entailed a complex institutional framework requiring the involvement of several ministries and the willingness of the armed groups to engage. To this end, arrest warrants were lifted and negotiation protocols that had been suspended years earlier were reinstated. The conditions on the ground, however, were

³ REYES RAMÍREZ. *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

marked by extreme fragmentation. Reports from research centres documented the presence of dozens of active armed groups in hundreds of municipalities across the country, with illicit economies linked to cocaine and illegal mining as the main driving force⁴.

This fragmentation was partly explained by a historical governance gap. In many regions, formal state institutions have been absent for decades and have been replaced by other actors who provide authority and resolve conflicts, creating what the literature has defined as a hybrid political order. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the Pacific region, in Cauca and in Catatumbo, where illicit crops are displacing traditional ones and jeopardising the subsistence economy, and where substitution agreements have not always been accompanied by the promised investment⁵.

Despite an initially conciliatory tone and a desire to govern for the benefit of all without letting down those who voted for it, the Government found itself faced with expectations that clearly exceeded what an administration can achieve in four years. The combination of political, economic and social factors limited the scope of its ambitions and forced it to compromise or significantly scale back its objectives in uncharted territory. Early victories in the first few months of the term were seen as essential to setting a course and giving the government breathing space for four years that were expected to be extremely challenging.

It is against this backdrop —between a historic change of government laden with expectations and the structural difficulties in realising them— that the new alternative represented by the new president, Abelardo de la Espriella, emerges. His rise to prominence cannot be interpreted simply as a conservative reaction, but rather as the channelling of a widespread sense of weariness affecting the political sphere, the economy and everyday life alike. In contrast to a narrative that had emphasised the signing of agreements and the institutional architecture of peace, De la Espriella

⁴ Insight Crime. *La arriesgada apuesta de Colombia por la 'Paz Total'*, 13 September 2022. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/arriesgada-apuesta-colombia-paz-total>; Fundación Ideas Para la Paz.

El costo de negociar mal: 29.000 integrantes de grupos armados entre disputas y gobernanzas criminales, 8 August 2026. Available at: <https://ideaspaz.org/publicaciones/investigaciones-analisis/2026-08/el-costo-de-negociar-mal-29-mil-integrantes-de-grupos-armados-entre-disputas-y-gobernanzas-criminales>

⁵ Fundación Ideas para la Paz (2023). *Gobernanza criminal, órdenes híbridos y los desafíos de la sustitución de cultivos en Colombia* (Informe de investigación). FIP. Available at: https://storage.ideaspaz.org/documents/fip_informe_seis_desafios_pg.pdf

constructs a narrative centred on the effective presence of the state and the restoration of authority as a prerequisite for any transformation.

A high-profile criminal lawyer, unconnected to traditional political machines and with a long-standing media presence, he managed to bring together what until now had been separate strands: the discontent in the major cities, where everyday insecurity had become an electoral priority; the mobilisation of an electorate linked to the security forces who felt sidelined from public debate; and the support of social sectors, particularly Christian churches, which found a voice in his discourse on order and family. Added to this is a narrative of breaking with 'the usual suspects' that resonates with young, non-partisan voters, who are more accustomed to the logic of social media influencers and patriotic symbolism than to traditional party activism. It is, therefore, not merely the return of 'Uribism' in a new guise; it is a new outsider right-wing movement that capitalises on the desire for authority without needing to invoke party affiliations⁶.

In this context, Colombia has not merely voted for a change of president; it has voted for the end of a model of change and for the search for a new balance between peace, security, governance and development—a transition that this analysis addresses under the framework of 'total peace' to 'total security'.

The crisis of the narrative: the power vacuum that fuelled the 'Tiger'

The cycle that began in 2022 is entering a phase of exhaustion in 2026. The architecture of Total Peace, conceived as simultaneous negotiations with all armed groups, revealed a growing disconnect between the regulatory framework and effective control of the territory. This resulted in the expansion and reconfiguration of criminal structures, as well as a deterioration in urban security, which end-of-year surveys already identified as the public's main concern, ahead of the economy⁷.

This exhaustion is not merely a failure of results, but of narrative. The paralysis of structural reforms such as those in the health sector, the fragmentation of the governing coalition and a growing perception of a lack of implementation shifted the focus of public

⁶ Corporación Congreso Visible. Perfiles y dinámicas político-electorales en Colombia, September 2026, p. 4. Available at: el Repositorio de Análisis Electoral (Congreso Visible). <https://congresovisible.uniandes.edu.co/>

⁷ INDEPAZ. Informe sobre expansión de estructuras armadas, 2025. Available at: <https://indepaz.org.co/category/informes/>

debate from the agenda of social transformation towards the demand for effective authority. It is a shift that the traditional right, fragmented amongst candidates lacking the capacity to unite support and without a clear territorial base, failed to fully capitalise on.

It is worth noting, however, that this is not a power vacuum in the strict sense. In many parts of the country, armed and criminal groups continued to operate, capable of exercising local governance, regulating illicit economic activities and shaping the daily lives of communities. The problem lay in the state's insufficient capacity to exercise its functions of authority, security and the provision of public services effectively and sustainably. Rather than a power vacuum, it is a growing substitution of state authority by hybrid orders and parallel control structures.

It was within this vacuum that, in early 2026, the candidacy of Abelardo de la Espriella was formalised. A criminal lawyer, he stood for election via a petition drive under the 'Defensores de la Patria' (Defenders of the Fatherland) movement, outside the established parties⁸. It was precisely at this point that his public identity became firmly established under the alias 'el Tigre' (the Tiger), a nickname inherited from his career in the courts as a relentless and fierce litigator. Far from toning down the aggressiveness associated with the feline, De la Espriella embraced this cinematic and zoological nickname in his foray into politics, using it as a powerful marketing asset to present himself as the only leader with the strength and determination needed to deal a decisive 'strike' to crime and institutional disorder.

The formalisation of his candidacy was not merely another administrative formality. The choice of Cali —the epicentre of the 2021 social unrest— for his registration, rather than Popayán as initially planned, sought to symbolically anchor his emergence precisely where the gap between formal institutions and actual control was most visible, and where the demand for order was felt most acutely.

From that moment on, the candidacy underwent a rapid transformation. What had been, until February, a media presence with legal prominence became a campaign structure capable of mobilising support across the country, organised around three sources of support that had until then remained scattered: networks of retired military personnel and

⁸ CNN EN ESPAÑOL. *¿Quién es Abelardo de la Espriella, el abogado de ultraderecha que será el nuevo presidente de Colombia?*, 24 June 2026. Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2026/06/24/colombia/quien-abelardo-de-la-espriella-presidente-electo-orix>

active reservists, evangelical churches with a strong presence in the south-west, and regional business networks that saw his stance on defending property rights and reducing the size of the state apparatus as a direct response to legal uncertainty. This coalition explains how, in just three months, he went from being perceived as a token outsider to appearing in the polls as a contender with a genuine chance of reaching the second round.

His rhetoric consolidated this coalition by fundamentally challenging the model of negotiated justice and calling for the restoration of the state's coercive capacity as a prerequisite for any other public policy. At the same time, on the international stage, he aligned with leaders who have made the downsizing of the state apparatus and the reaffirmation of sovereignty their hallmark —such as Javier Milei— and stood for the re-establishment of relations with Israel following the Petro government's severance of ties. This placed him outside the traditional Atlanticist consensus and embedded him within a network of new regional right-wing movements that are observing the Colombian process with growing attention⁹.

The first round on 31 May confirmed the realignment of the right-wing political spectrum around the figure of Abelardo de la Espriella, who managed to prevail over Iván Cepeda —the candidate of the Pacto Histórico and heir to Gustavo Petro's political capital— and build an initial lead that would prove decisive for the electoral outcome. The second round, held on 21 June, was decided by a margin of less than 1 per cent of the vote, making it one of the closest presidential contests in Colombia's recent history¹⁰. Although Cepeda's campaign initially questioned various aspects of the vote count, the virtually perfect match between the preliminary count and the final result ultimately cemented the formal legitimacy of the election and facilitated the opposition's public acknowledgement of the victory.

The significance of these results goes beyond mere statistics. De la Espriella not only managed to reunify a traditionally fragmented conservative electorate, but also to

⁹ El País. *De Milei a Noboa, pero sin Trump: la ultraderecha global celebra el triunfo de Abelardo de la Espriella*, 1 June 2026. Available at: <https://elpais.com/america-colombia/elecciones-presidenciales/2026-06-01/de-milei-a-noboa-pero-sin-trump-la-ultraderecha-global-celebra-el-triunfo-de-abelardo-de-la-espriella.html>

¹⁰ El País. *Resultados de la segunda vuelta presidencial 2026 en Colombia, EN VIVO: Abelardo de la Espriella, presidente electo; reviva el preconteo*, 21 June 2026. Available at: <https://www.elpais.com.co/elecciones/resultados-de-la-segunda-vuelta-presidencial-2026-en-colombia-en-vivo-se-cierran-las-urnas-siga-el-preconteo-de-votos-2144.html>

broaden his support base to include urban middle-class sectors for whom insecurity, the deterioration of public order and the perception of state inefficiency had become key concerns. Cepeda, for his part, demonstrated a remarkable capacity for mobilisation during the second round, reflecting a deeply polarised society split into two blocks of similar size. The diaspora likewise mirrored this political divide: whilst De la Espriella dominated the vote in the Americas, Cepeda fared better in Europe, with Spain split by a narrow margin¹¹. The final result did not grant a broad mandate to either of the two competing visions but rather confirmed the existence of a country practically split into two halves—a circumstance that would shape the new president's ability to govern from day one.



Figure 2. Colombian President Abelardo de la Espriella at the USC Arena in Cali.

Source: Colprensa – Catalina Olaya

With this limited mandate, the inauguration on 7 August at the impressive USC Arena in Santiago de Cali—the first to take place outside Bogotá in the history of the republic—capped the territorial narrative that had begun with the registration of candidates. It was not a neutral election. Moving the inauguration from the traditional Plaza de Bolívar to Cali sought to provide a territorial anchor for a narrow victory and to send an explicit political message: the new axis of legitimacy lies not in the country's administrative centre, but where the demand for order is felt most keenly. However, the fundamental question that marked the start of his term, remains open: what can a president who takes office

¹¹ El Tiempo. *De la Espriella se quedó con los votos de América y Europa respaldó a Cepeda: así quedó la radiografía del voto en el exterior*, 21 June 2026. Available at: <https://www.eltiempo.com/mundo/mas-regiones/de-la-espriella-se-queda-con-los-votos-de-america-y-europa-respaldo-a-cepeda-asi-quedo-la-radiografia-del-voto-en-el-exterior-3565968>

with such a narrow lead—without an automatic legislative majority and with a country divided into two virtually equal halves—do, and what is he already doing?

The government of limits

Just over a month and a half after taking office as head of state, Abelardo de la Espriella's administration finds itself confined within a complex web of structural friction, where the bold anti-establishment rhetoric that propelled his political rise systematically clashes with the traditional checks and balances of the Colombian constitutional order. To understand the scale of this clash, it is necessary to recall that his victory was secured by an extremely narrow margin over Iván Cepeda. This is not merely a statistical fact, but the Achilles' heel that shapes his entire leadership style.

The new president, lacking a majority parliamentary group of his own in Congress and distanced from the traditional political machines, finds himself compelled to swing back and forth between the institutional pragmatism demanded of him by his technically-qualified ministers —tasked with providing certainty to the markets— and the maximalist impulse to undermine institutional checks and balances through the intensive use of emergency decrees¹².

This governance dilemma was abruptly precipitated just three days after his inauguration, when a violent 7.4-magnitude earthquake struck sixteen departments across the country on 10 August. Far from being a mere administrative setback, this humanitarian and infrastructural catastrophe forced the executive to immediately declare a State of Economic, Social and Ecological Emergency, which granted the Casa de Nariño extraordinary legislative powers that swiftly opened a window of opportunity to fast-track some of its initiatives¹³.

On a financial level, the government's plan, known as 'Colombia, Patria Milagro' (Colombia, Miracle Homeland), soon revealed itself to be an ambitious programme of public-sector downsizing and economic deregulation. This ideological project envisages

¹² Ávila, R. 'Colombia's Bukele? Abelardo De La Espriella Surges Ahead', 11 February 2026, in: Americas Quarterly. Available at: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/colombias-bukele-abelardo-de-la-espriella-surges-ahead/>

¹³ PERALTA GIRALDO, C. *Presidente Abelardo De La Espriella continúa la conformación de su equipo en medio de la emergencia: estos fueron los nombramientos de la semana*, 15 August 2026, in: El Tiempo. Available at: <https://www.eltiempo.com/politica/abelardo-de-la-espriella/presidente-abelardo-de-la-espriella-continua-la-conformacion-de-su-equipo-en-medio-de-la-emergencia-estos-fueron-los-nombramientos-de-la-semana-3578685>

a drastic downsizing of the state apparatus, aiming to reduce the number of ministries from nineteen to ten, abolish thousands of bureaucratic posts to eradicate the so-called 'parallel payroll', and implement tax relief measures that have resonated strongly with the public, such as the abolition of the 4x1000 tax on financial transactions¹⁴. However, the manner in which the executive introduced these proposals into the eleven emergency decrees enacted in the wake of the August earthquake sparked a profound legal controversy. By disguising mining and energy reforms—including regulatory nods to revive practices such as fracking—under the guise of reconstruction following the natural disaster, the government demonstrated its inability to push these unpopular initiatives through the ordinary parliamentary process¹⁵. This strategy of governing through exceptional measures seeks to circumvent the parliamentary deadlock, but, in return, sows intense institutional uncertainty that puts international investors and credit rating agencies on alert—these bodies demand fiscal rigour amidst a persistent climate of social protest driven by farmers' and trade union groups.

At the same time, in the areas of internal security and foreign policy, the new president's mandate has brought about a Copernican shift away from the outgoing government's policy of containment, adopting the doctrinal principle of 'democratic authority'—that is, that the legitimately elected state should enforce the law and firmly uphold the constitutional order within a democratic framework. From this perspective, democratic authority is presented not as an exception to the constitutional order, but as a prerequisite for guaranteeing the effective exercise of rights, public safety and the rule of law. This strategic realignment reached its climax earlier this month with the official visit to Bogotá by the senior US official Marco Rubio, during which the so-called 'Barranquilla Agreements' were formally signed. This bilateral pact is not limited to a simple anti-drug alliance, but rather subordinates national security to the regional architecture of the 'Shield of the Americas', making Washington's technological and financial cooperation

¹⁴ INFOBAE. *Abelardo de la Espriella propone recortar la nómina del Estado y reducir ministerios si llega a la Presidencia de Colombia*, 17 June 2026. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2026/06/17/abelardo-de-la-espriella-propone-recortar-la-nomina-del-estado-y-reducir-ministerios-si-llega-a-la-presidencia-de-colombia/>

¹⁵ El País. *Del Fondo Milagro al acceso a estadísticas reservadas: los 11 decretos del Gobierno colombiano para atender la crisis por el terremoto*, 26 June 2010. Available at: <https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2026-09-10/del-fondo-milagro-al-acceso-a-estadisticas-reservadas-los-11-decretos-del-gobierno-colombiano-para-atender-la-crisis-por-el-terremoto.html>

conditional upon a drastic return to policies of forced eradication¹⁶. As a demonstration of operational compliance to its US allies and its hardline electoral base, the government rushed through the signing of seventy 'express' extradition agreements during its first weeks in power. However, this punitive offensive suffered a sudden institutional setback in mid-September, when a court in the Republic issued an interim injunction ordering the government to immediately cease and remove its military propaganda videos from social media, which showed explicit images of combatants killed in action and corpses¹⁷. This clash with the judiciary accurately illustrates the insurmountable limit of the president's model: a style of governance conceived within the logic of punitive combat and emotional polarisation clashes head-on with the formal checks and balances of the rule of law, one which resists subordinating procedural safeguards to the 'Tiger's' crusading morality.

Vectors of community polarisation: from rural corridors to communicative mediation

The transition from purely electoral confrontation to the administration of the state has shifted the focus of political conflict in Colombia from the ballot box to the fabric of the community, opening a complex chapter of dispute at the grassroots level of society. The paralysis in the procedural processing of reforms within the National Capitol and the judicial blockade of the emergency decrees issued by the Palacio de Nariño are not isolated phenomena; they are reflected immediately in a deep fracture in the country's social fabric, which exacerbates the emotional polarisation of the citizenry¹⁸. In this first month and a half of the administration, the doctrinal shift from the former 'total peace' towards the punitive approach of 'total security' has left the country caught between two mutually exclusive visions of society, whose daily friction far exceeds the formal channels of political representation. This division is not limited to a mere ideological discrepancy; it manifests itself in a marked geographical segmentation where the demands for coercive

¹⁶ CNN. *Tras reunirse con De la Espriella, Rubio dice que EE.UU. busca retomar "época dorada" en las relaciones con Colombia*, 8 August 2026. Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2026/09/08/colombia/de-la-espriella-rubio-eeuu-retomar-epoca-dorada-colombia-orix>

¹⁷ Noticias Caracol. *Ordenan a Presidencia retirar "imágenes explícitas de cadáveres" del Gobierno De la Espriella*, 9 September 2026. Available at: <https://www.noticiascaracol.com/judicial/ordenan-a-presidencia-retirar-imagenes-explicitas-de-cadaveres-del-gobierno-de-la-espriella-rg10?>

¹⁸ CDP. *Colombia ante una transición que pone en juego la fortaleza de la democracia*, 9 July 26. Available at: <https://siquese puede.jimdofree.com/2026/07/09/colombia-ante-una-transici%C3%B3n-que-pone-en-juego-la-fortaleza-de-la-democracia/>

order from the major urban centres clash head-on with the reality of communities on the rural periphery, which are experiencing a violent reconfiguration of territorial control due to the suspension of bilateral ceasefires with illegal armed groups. Technical reports on rural dynamics reveal that the scaling back of state programmes for the voluntary substitution of illicit crops and the resumption of military operations in vulnerable areas such as the Pacific coast and the Catatumbo region have exacerbated discontent amongst peasant and ethnic communities, who resent the return of forced eradication in the absence of the social and infrastructure investments promised in the transition agreements of the past¹⁹. For the populations in these marginalised areas, peace was not an abstract concept debated in the offices of Bogotá, but a network of basic community safeguards and local productive projects aimed at replacing the cocaine economy with lawful subsistence crops. With the cancellation of regional dialogue and the prioritisation of the state's purely military presence, these communities have found themselves caught in the crossfire between army offensives and the violent reorganisation of drug trafficking networks seeking to safeguard their export routes. This pressure has led to a phenomenon of forced displacement and confinement in rural hamlets which belies the promises of urban pacification celebrated by the middle classes in the capital cities, widening a historic rift of mutual distrust between urban, institutional Colombia and rural, peripheral Colombia, which has historically suffered the brunt of the war.

The most alarming aspect of this deterioration in public order in rural peripheral areas is the direct impact on the conflict's registry of victims, particularly in the worrying form of enforced disappearance in areas with high rates of armed violence. The paralysis of dialogue mechanisms and the breakdown of humanitarian channels with the armed groups that exercised local hegemony have led to a surge in reports of social leaders, land claimants and young people from rural villages going missing²⁰. Unlike the previous round of negotiations, where the existence of dialogue forums made it possible to set up

¹⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and INDEPAZ (2026): *Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos y dinámicas de conflictividad rural en Colombia. Informe conjunto sobre la suspensión fáctica de los planes de sustitución voluntaria (PNIS), el impacto socioeconómico de los operativos de interdicción militarizados en el Catatumbo y el Pacífico, y las protestas de comunidades étnicas y campesinas ante la ausencia de inversión estructural*. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/colombia/en/simci/simci.html>

²⁰ Defensoría del Pueblo. Colombia. La desaparición forzada es un fenómeno que persiste en Colombia, 30 August 2026. Available at: <https://www.defensoria.gov.co/-/la-desaparicion-forzada-es-un-fenomeno-que-persiste-en-colombia>

joint search commissions and humanitarian corridors in the Catatumbo or the Pacific region, the imposition of 'total security' has shut down these minimal channels of mediation. This situation has left victims' relatives completely exposed to institutional neglect, forced to report the rise in forced confinement without the protection of the former institutional framework for peace. Local reports from non-governmental organisations warn that the shift towards a strictly punitive doctrine has rendered the criminal dynamics of enforced disappearances invisible in areas controlled by dissident groups and drug-trafficking networks, which systematically conceal bodies to prevent official statistics from contradicting the central government's narrative of pacification and territorial control²¹.

At the same time, civil conflict has been intensified by the opening of a cultural war front fuelled by the government's own rhetoric, interpreted by broad sections of the opposition as an attempt to rally the most radical conservative electoral base through identity-based principles centred on traditional family values and civil order. On the left, it is believed that the executive's statements on digital platforms and social media—which insist on dismantling the inclusion policies of the previous four-year term and outright reject gender diversity agendas—have set off alarm bells among human rights organisations and civil society groups, who perceive this anti-establishment rhetoric as a direct threat to established individual freedoms. By labelling defenders of minority rights and progressive sectors as proponents of agendas contrary to the nation's common sense, the Casa de Nariño has shut down traditional spaces for social dialogue, replacing technical debate with rhetoric of moral and existential confrontation. This strategy seeks to polarise digital spaces and keep the evangelical and conservative vote—which proved decisive in the second round—mobilised, but its social cost is measured in increased stigmatisation and intolerance in everyday public debate²².

²¹ Institute for Development and Peace Studies (INDEPAZ), Balance de protección a la población civil e impactos territoriales de las dinámicas criminales (Bogotá: INDEPAZ, 2026), sección de subregistro y dinámicas de ocultamiento estadístico. Available at: indepaz.org.co/category/informes/

²² Revista Raya. *Agenda anti-woke: la otra guerra de Abelardo de la Espriella contra las minorías*, 10 September 26. Available at: <https://revistaraya.com/agenda-anti-woke-la-otra-guerra-de-abelardo-de-la-espriella-contra-las-minorias.html>



Figure 3. Protests in Bogotá in September. Source: District Government Secretariat

This ecosystem of digital polarisation organically introduces an analysis of public opinion and the severe assault on press freedom under the new administration. Abelardo de la Espriella has transferred the aggressiveness of his courtroom style to a hyper-personalised management of official social media accounts, using them as the primary channel of government communication to bypass the mediation of traditional media. This communication strategy may seek to forge a direct relationship with its audience through inflammatory language that divides public opinion into 'patriots' and 'villains', revealing a history of open hostility towards independent journalism. The Casa de Nariño's platforms do not operate merely as disseminators of technical information, but as tools for digital lynching and stigmatisation against reporters and columnists who scrutinise the president's private wealth, his former clients or the setbacks in security policy²³. By exploiting official social media channels to discredit press criticism by labelling it as malicious falsehoods from the radical left, the executive is fostering a hostile environment that undermines the safeguards for the practice of journalism in Colombia. This pattern of institutional harassment in online spaces exacerbates civil intolerance and paves the way for legal battles before the Council of State, signalling a worrying erosion of democratic freedoms and the right to information within the framework of 'total security'. This clash of values has led the progressive opposition, energetically led by Iván Cepeda

²³ CAMBIO. *La FLIP le exige a Abelardo de la Espriella garantías reales para la libertad de prensa tras un mes de gobierno*, 10 September 2026. Available at: <https://cambiocolombia.com/poder/articulo/2026/9/la-flip-le-exige-a-abelardo-de-la-espriella-garantias-reales-para-la-libertad-de-prensa-tras-un-mes-de-gobierno>.

in the Senate, to swiftly re-establish its links with student movements, trade unions and workers' federations, immediately shifting the debate from legislative chambers to the streets by calling for sustained social mobilisation. The protests in the main squares of the country are not merely a reaction against the Casa de Nariño's libertarian deregulation programme; they also constitute a mechanism of popular pressure designed to constrain the president's ability to govern and weaken his operational capacity in the face of the traditional parliamentary groups in Congress²⁴. The mobilisation of these social sectors aims to demonstrate to international financial markets and investors that the government's programme lacks the social peace essential for its long-term implementation, transforming every public demonstration into a citizens' veto against privatisation and market-opening reforms. The social landscape of recent weeks thus reveals a nation fractured into two virtually identical halves competing for control of the public narrative, demonstrating that the viability of the 'Tiger's' mandate will be decided by the combined resistance of the streets, the judicial bureaucracy and the ability of organised communities to contain the state's punitive turn.

Conclusion

Abelardo de la Espriella's victory constitutes much more than a change in political leadership. It represents the electoral expression of a growing demand for authority, territorial control and state effectiveness in a society where broad sections of the population perceive that the institutions have been unable to guarantee security, reduce crime and ensure an effective state presence across much of the national territory. In this sense, the victory of the so-called 'Tiger' must be interpreted as the consequence of a crisis of confidence in the transformative capacity of the previous political cycle and as the search for a new formula for governance based on the restoration of the principle of authority.

However, the early stages of the new term of office over the past month and a half clearly demonstrate that the legitimacy secured at the ballot box does not automatically translate into a real and swift capacity for implementation. The narrow margin of the election result,

²⁴ France 24. *De la Espriella: ¿"guerra cultural" contra los derechos sociales en Colombia?*, 3 September 2026. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/es/programas/ellas-hoy/20260903-de-la-espriella-guerra-cultural-contra-los-derechos-sociales-en-colombia>

the absence of a cohesive legislative platform with a majority in Congress, the resilience of the anti-populist machinery embodied by the High Courts and the Central Bank, and the active mobilisation of opposition social sectors severely limit the room for manoeuvre of the Casa de Nariño. The experience of these opening weeks demonstrates that Colombia possesses an institutional architecture robust enough to frustrate plebiscitary or hyper-presidentialist approaches, inevitably forcing the administration to negotiate its reforms within a complex system of constitutional checks and balances.

From a security perspective, the transition from 'total peace' to 'total security' represents a highly significant doctrinal shift. The new approach prioritises state coercion over negotiation as the primary tool for tackling organised violence. However, the analysis carried out leads to the conclusion that regaining territorial control is unlikely to be achieved solely through police and military means. The persistence of illicit economies, the structural deficiencies in numerous peripheral regions and the historical weakness of the state's presence continue to constitute factors of instability that no exclusively punitive strategy seems capable of resolving on its own.

At the same time, the main challenge to Colombian governance in the coming years may not lie with illegal armed groups, but rather in the progressive deterioration of social cohesion. The political, cultural and territorial polarisation observed during the election campaign has carried over into the exercise of power, generating dynamics of confrontation that affect public debate, the relationship between institutions and coexistence amongst increasingly estranged social sectors. This rift threatens to turn any government initiative into a new source of conflict and political deadlock.

Consequently, Colombia's immediate future will depend less on the government's ability to impose its agenda than on its skill in building a minimum consensus that allows for the reconciliation of security, the rule of law and democratic stability. The true success or failure of 'democratic authority' will not be measured solely by the number of security operations, extraditions or reforms passed, but by its ability to reinforce the legitimacy of the state without eroding the institutional balances and freedoms that form the foundation of the Colombian democratic system.

Rather than the beginning of a period of stability, the arrival of Abelardo de la Espriella seems to mark the start of a new cycle of debate over the nature of the state, the scope

of public authority and the balance between order and democracy. The outcome of this debate will determine not only the viability of his political project, but also the direction Colombia takes over the coming years.

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