Colombia's 2026 Election: Implications for Total Peace, Security and Stability

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The Colombian flag flying above a statue of Simón Bolívar in Bogotá. Photo: Jhonny Estrada / Unsplash. https://unsplash.com/photos/colombian-flag-waves-above-a-statue-6HAzlKfCcaw

Colombia's 2026 presidential election marked a turning point in the country's approach to peace and security. Despite the 2016 Peace Agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), armed violence, territorial competition and humanitarian challenges have persisted. Under President Gustavo Petro, who took office in 2022, the government introduced Paz Total (Total Peace), an ambitious strategy seeking to reduce violence through parallel negotiations and dialogue with guerrilla organisations, FARC dissident factions and organised criminal groups (Vuković et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2025). Although the policy reduced certain forms of armed confrontation, its implementation produced uneven outcomes, par-

ticularly regarding civilian security and the territorial expansion of armed groups (Breda, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2025).

These challenges made security and the future of Total Peace central issues in the 2026 presidential election. While left-wing candidate Iván Cepeda supported continued negotiations, right-wing candidate Abelardo de la Espriella advocated a tougher security strategy centred on military operations and law enforcement (Ellis, 2026; Reuters, 2026). De la Espriella's narrow victory raised questions about the future of Petro's peacebuilding approach and the implications of a more coercive security policy.

This article therefore asks: How is Colombia's new political leadership likely to reshape the Total Peace policy, and what implications could this have for peace, security and stability?

Drawing on academic literature, institutional reports, conflict data and policy analyses, the article examines the transition from Petro's negotiation-centred strategy towards de la Espriella's emerging security approach. It focuses on armed-group negotiations, territorial control and civilian security, rather than offering a comprehensive evaluation of the 2016 Peace Agreement or Colombia's wider socioeconomic challenges.

While existing research has examined the implementation and mixed outcomes of Total Peace, the 2026 political transition raises new questions about the consequences of shifting towards greater military pressure. This article argues that the new administration is substantially reshaping Total Peace, potentially addressing weaknesses in territorial security while creating risks for armed confrontation, civilian protection and negotiated conflict resolution. It first reviews Total Peace and its outcomes, then examines the political transition before assessing the opportunities, risks and longer-term implications of the new strategy.

1. Total Peace: Objectives, Implementation and Outcomes

1.1. The Total Peace Policy

Following his inauguration in August 2022, President Gustavo Petro made Paz Total a central government priority. Rather than replacing the 2016 Peace Agreement with the FARC, Total Peace sought to extend peacebuilding efforts to armed actors excluded from that settlement while continuing its implementation (Cairo et al., 2024; Vuković et al., 2024).

This broader approach built on the concept of territorial peace, which recognised the importance of addressing rural inequality, political participation, illicit economies and the territorial dimensions of Colombia's armed conflict. Total Peace expanded this framework by pursuing dialogue with multiple armed and criminal organisations simultaneously (Cairo et al., 2024).

Law 2272, adopted in November 2022, provided the legal framework, distinguishing political negotiations with organised armed groups from

processes involving organised criminal structures and submission to justice (Johnson et al., 2025, pp. 11–14). Approximately 22 illegal armed groups sought inclusion in the initiative (European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2026). Total Peace thus represented an attempt to address the fragmented post-2016 conflict through parallel negotiations, dialogue and demobilisation processes.

1.2. Implementation of Total Peace

The implementation of Total Peace involved several simultaneous negotiation and dialogue processes. Johnson et al. (2025, pp. 14–15) identify eight negotiation and submission spaces involving actors such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), FARC dissident factions including Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and Segunda Marquetalia, and criminal organisations operating in different regions. Exploratory dialogue also involved the Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (EGC), formerly known as Clan del Golfo.

Ceasefires formed another central component of the strategy. A bilateral ceasefire between the government and the ELN remained in place from August 2023 to August 2024, although negotiations subsequently stalled. Other ceasefire arrangements were suspended following violations and continued armed activity (EUAA, 2026). Consequently, the implementation of Total Peace varied considerably between armed actors, reflecting differences in their organisational structures, political objectives and territorial interests.

1.3. Outcomes and Challenges

The outcomes of Total Peace were mixed. During Petro's first 27 months in office, violent events between state security forces and armed groups declined by 28 per cent compared with the preceding period, while fatalities related to armed-group violence fell by 11 per cent (Breda, 2024). The ELN ceasefire similarly reduced confrontations between the group and state forces. However, Johnson et al. (2025, p. 16) find that these reductions did not translate into comparable improvements in violence against civilians.

Meanwhile, armed groups continued expanding their territorial presence. During the first 27 months of Petro's presidency (August 2022–October 2024), ACLED recorded armed-group activity in more than 580 municipalities, 43 more than during the preceding 27 months (May 2020–July 2022). Violence between armed groups also increased by 40 per cent across those same periods, reflecting continued competition over territory, illicit economies and influence (Breda, 2024). Johnson et al. (2025, pp. 16–18) suggest that aspects of the negotiation environment may have facilitated territorial consolidation by some armed organisations.

Internal divisions within armed groups, ceasefire violations and inconsistent progress across negotiations further complicated implementation. Total Peace therefore demonstrated a central limitation: reducing direct

confrontation between the government and armed groups did not necessarily prevent territorial expansion or improve security for civilian populations.

1.4. Total Peace by the 2026 Election

By the 2026 presidential election, Total Peace had lost considerable momentum. As of November 2025, no national ceasefires remained in place, while several negotiation processes faced fragmentation, renewed confrontation and coordination difficulties (EUAA, 2026). Talks with the ELN were suspended in January 2025 following violence in Catatumbo (Human Rights Watch, 2026).

Humanitarian conditions also remained severe. Human Rights Watch (2026) described 2025 as one of Colombia's worst humanitarian years in a decade. In May 2026, clashes between rival FARC dissident factions in Guaviare killed at least 48 combatants, highlighting persistent armed-group competition ahead of the election (ACLED, 2026).

These developments placed security and the future of Total Peace at the centre of the electoral debate, as candidates offered contrasting responses to armed-group violence and territorial insecurity.

1.5. The 2026 Election and Political Transition

The presidential election presented two competing approaches to Colombia's security challenges. Iván Cepeda supported the continuation of peace negotiations, while Abelardo de la Espriella advocated stronger military operations and a departure from Petro's negotiation-centred strategy (Reuters, 2026).

According to the Consejo Nacional Electoral's official declaration (2026, p. 2), Abelardo de la Espriella won the second round on 21 June 2026 with 12,960,166 votes (49.7 per cent of valid votes), narrowly ahead of Iván Cepeda with 12,708,312 votes (48.7 per cent). The close result suggested a divided electorate, an important consideration when interpreting the political shift and public support for a different security approach. Since taking office on 7 August, the new administration has begun implementing parts of its proposed strategy. On 30 August 2026, President de la Espriella publicly announced the termination of three dialogue processes inherited from Total Peace, involving structures associated with the Calarcá faction, the Coordinadora Nacional Ejército Bolivariano and the Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada. The presidency stated that the decision would be formalised through nine resolutions (Presidencia de la República, 2026).

The administration has also intensified military operations. Between 27 and 31 August, security forces carried out airstrikes against two dissident factions of the FARC, killing at least 31 fighters (Breda, 2026). ACLED reports that the administration also publicly labelled non-state armed groups

active in Colombia as terrorists; this account does not identify individual legal designation decisions for each organisation (Breda, 2026). ACLED recorded at least 84 deaths in clashes between state forces and armed groups between the inauguration and the end of August, making August the deadliest month for these confrontations since its Colombia coverage began in 2018 (Breda, 2026).

These developments demonstrate a clear policy departure from Petro's broad negotiation-centred approach. However, the longer-term security and peacebuilding consequences remain uncertain.

2. Discussion: Implications for Total Peace, Security and Stability

De la Espriella's first decisions signal a shift away from Petro's broad negotiation-centred approach. Yet the distinction is not simply one of negotiation versus military force. Under Total Peace, fewer confrontations between the state and armed groups did not bring comparable gains in civilian security or prevent territorial expansion (Breda, 2024; Johnson et al., 2025). The question is whether renewed military pressure can remedy these shortcomings while preserving ways to protect communities and resolve conflicts.

2.1. Potential Opportunities: Strengthening State Control and Security

A stronger security-oriented approach could address some of the weaknesses exposed under Total Peace, particularly the state's limited ability to constrain armed groups and maintain territorial control. Niño (2024) identifies the disconnect between peace negotiations and security policy as a factor contributing to the strengthening of armed organisations and continued violence against civilians.

Colombia's earlier security campaigns provide a useful, if imperfect, comparison. According to Colombian Ministry of Defence estimates reported by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2008), the proportion of the country under full or partial government control rose from about 70 per cent in 2003 to 90 per cent in 2007; recorded kidnappings also declined. Those changes took place alongside military, police and non-military initiatives, so they cannot be attributed to military operations alone. Today's fragmented armed-group landscape further limits direct comparisons.

The first weeks of de la Espriella's administration offer a narrower indication of possible gains. ACLED recorded roughly one-third fewer clashes between rival armed groups during the first three weeks following his inauguration on 7 August 2026, compared with the three immediately preceding weeks (Breda, 2026). This statistic concerns inter-group fighting, not confrontations between armed groups and state security forces. It does not establish lasting territorial control, and the causes of the short-term reduction remain uncertain. Increased military pressure could therefore create

opportunities for the government to strengthen security and state control in areas affected by armed-group violence. The relevant test is whether people can move safely, armed groups lose influence over local communities, and public institutions remain effective after military operations.

2.2. Potential Risks: Escalation and Civilian Insecurity

Stronger military pressure may also intensify confrontation with the state. ACLED recorded at least 84 deaths in clashes between security forces and armed groups after de la Espriella took office on 7 August; August was the deadliest month for such clashes in its Colombia data since 2018 (Breda, 2026). The same source documented a marked increase in armed-group drone attacks against security forces. These figures describe an early escalation in direct fighting, not its eventual effect on overall security.

The risks to civilians must be assessed against an already severe humanitarian situation. The UN Secretary-General's September report, citing the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), recorded approximately 5,600 people displaced and 4,400 confined across 15 municipalities in seven departments between 27 June and 30 August 2026 (United Nations Security Council, 2026). That reporting period began before the new president took office on 7 August, so the figures cannot be attributed to his strategy. They nevertheless illustrate the vulnerability of communities already affected by armed conflict.

Johnson et al. (2025) describe how armed-group fragmentation, territorial competition and illicit economies shape local conflict dynamics. In this context, military pressure on individual factions could create opportunities for rival organisations to expand their influence. This remains a potential risk rather than an observed consequence of de la Espriella's strategy.

Ending dialogue processes also raises questions about future conflict resolution. International Crisis Group (2025) argues that military pressure is necessary but insufficient on its own, and supports more locally focused negotiations that prioritise civilian protection. Arévalo (2025), examining Colombia's earlier negotiations with the FARC and ELN, shows that negotiations can also influence relationships between conflict parties, beyond the achievement of a formal peace agreement. Although greater military pressure may strengthen the government's position towards armed groups, ending dialogue processes could reduce opportunities for de-escalation and future negotiations. This is particularly relevant in Colombia, where armed groups have different interests and territorial objectives. The challenge is therefore whether the new administration can strengthen security without limiting future opportunities for negotiated conflict resolution.

2.3. Prospects for Long-Term Peace and Stability

The longer-term effectiveness of the new security strategy will depend on whether military operations can contribute to lasting improvements in

territorial control and civilian security. Total Peace reduced some direct confrontations, but did not prevent armed actors from expanding into new areas (Johnson et al., 2025). Stronger military operations may constrain that expansion, but they cannot alone address the local conditions that allow armed groups to retain influence through coercion, recruitment and illicit markets.

Lasting territorial control requires more than increased military presence. In Colombia's conflict-affected regions, armed groups have continued to exercise influence over local communities and territories (Johnson et al., 2025). Eaton (2021) identifies challenges in Colombia's approach to territorial peace, noting that the 2016 Peace Agreement assigned limited responsibilities to local governments, while earlier experiences with decentralisation exposed weaknesses in their institutional capacity. These challenges suggest that stronger military operations alone may not be sufficient to establish effective state control. Improvements in security must therefore be accompanied by functioning state institutions, civilian protection and opportunities for economic development. In October 2026, the United Nations also emphasised the importance of strengthening state institutions and continuing implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 2026).

Civilian outcomes provide a more demanding test of success than the number of operations or combatants killed. Johnson et al. (2025) highlight the importance of considering forms of civilian insecurity beyond direct armed confrontations. A fall in clashes between armed groups, for example, would be less meaningful if residents still faced displacement, confinement or threats. Conversely, measurable improvements in freedom of movement and protection from coercion would help establish whether military pressure was making communities safer. The government will therefore need to assess changes in civilian harm alongside its operational results, rather than treating one as a substitute for the other.

The place of negotiations is another test. International Crisis Group (2025) supports locally tailored agreements aimed at reducing violence against civilians, alongside targeted security pressure. Such efforts need not reproduce Petro's attempt to pursue multiple broad processes simultaneously. They could instead be used selectively, where dialogue offers a credible chance to reduce violence or secure civilian protections, while security operations continue elsewhere. Whether the new administration permits such flexibility will help shape the prospects for lasting de-escalation.

The central issue is therefore what follows military pressure. If operations weaken armed groups but leave weak institutions and lucrative illicit economies intact, the same territorial disputes may persist under different actors. If security gains enable the state to protect residents, establish services and pursue credible local agreements, the new strategy could address shortcomings of Total Peace without abandoning its useful peace-

building mechanisms. These outcomes cannot yet be judged from the administration's first months.

Conclusion

Colombia's 2026 presidential election has initiated a substantial shift in the country's approach to Total Peace. De la Espriella's early decisions to terminate selected dialogue processes and intensify military operations demonstrate a departure from Petro's emphasis on broad negotiations with armed and criminal organisations. Nevertheless, it remains too early to determine the longer-term effects of this shift on Colombia's peace and security environment.

The evidence suggests potential opportunities for strengthening security and state control, although these remain subject to significant limitations. Colombia's earlier security campaigns coincided with improvements in government control, and initial ACLED data show a short-term decline in clashes between armed groups. Neither result proves that the current offensive will make civilians safer. At the same time, the rise in direct state–armed group fighting and the termination of dialogue processes raise risks for protection and de-escalation.

The longer-term implications will therefore depend on whether the government can combine stronger security measures with effective state institutions, civilian protection and opportunities for conflict resolution. De la Espriella has shifted policy away from broad negotiations, but the consequences for lasting peace remain uncertain.

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