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## FEATURED Q&A

# Why Is Violence Plaguing Colombia's Local Elections?



Karina García, a 32-year-old mayoral candidate from Colombia's Cauca Department, was killed Sept. 1, leaving behind her husband and three-year-old son. She was among several candidates killed this year in Colombia. // File Photo: Facebook site of Karina Garcia.

**Q At least seven political candidates running in Colombia's local elections have been killed ahead of the Oct. 27 vote, prompting the country's National Protection Unit to increase candidates' security. Why has violence plagued Colombia's local campaigns this year, and does the current situation differ greatly from previous elections? Which are the most salient races to keep an eye on? To what extent are the local elections a referendum on President Iván Duque's administration, nearly 15 months after he took office?**

**A Fernando Cepeda Ulloa, professor of political science at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá and former Colombian interior minister:** "Human rights defenders and social leaders of all persuasions have been killed. Fifty-two former FARC-EP members have been killed this year, and 64 last year. Who are the perpetrators? Vendettas, conflicts among drug-trafficking gangs, conflicts among former guerrilla groups and demobilized members, and criminal organizations linked to the very prosperous global gold business. Of course, the killings occur in places relevant to drug and gold trafficking, including Nariño, Cauca, Norte de Santander, Putumayo and Antioquia. The final peace agreement did not overcome the weakness of the Colombian state. However, investigations have been effective, with at least 13 convictions. The United Nations verification mission is providing important information on this delicate issue. The Colombian political system is in disarray. Political parties have lost citizens' confidence. Only 5 percent have plenty of trust in them, according to the Global Values Survey. There are almost 120,000 candidates for governors, mayors, regional assem-

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## TODAY'S NEWS

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## Anti-Government Protesters Parade Officers on Stage in Ecuador

Protesters opposed to President Lenin Moreno's elimination of a fuel subsidy paraded captive police officers on stage and forced some to carry the coffin of an indigenous activist said to have been killed in the protests.

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### ECONOMIC

## Banxico Has Room to Cut Rates Further: Members

Two Bank of Mexico board members said the central bank can cut interest rates more aggressively than the U.S. Federal Reserve.

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### POLITICAL

## Head of Peru's Congress Seeks to Nix Dissolution

The head of Peru's dissolved Congress, Pedro Olaechea, appealed to the country's highest court, seeking to suspend President Martín Vizcarra's closure of the legislature.

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Olaechea // File Photo: TV Perú.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Ecuador Anti-Gov't Protesters Parade Officers on Stage

Anti-government protests continued raging in Ecuador on Thursday as demonstrators paraded captive police officers on a stage in Quito and forced some of them to carry the coffin of an indigenous activist who was said to have been killed during the demonstrations, the Associated Press reported. At least five people have been killed in the protests, according to the country's public defender's office. The office added that 266 people have been injured, and 864 have been arrested. President Lenín Moreno's office gave a smaller death toll, saying two people had been killed in accidents connected to the protests. The demonstrations were sparked by Moreno's elimination of a popular fuel subsidy, which led to a spike in prices for gasoline and diesel. Moreno has staunchly refused to reinstate the subsidy, which he cut as part of an austerity plan connected to \$4.2 billion in financing with the International Monetary Fund. In the demonstrations on Thursday, activists forced a police officer they had taken hostage to wear a hat of a style worn by some indigenous Ecuadoreans and also wrap himself in a national flag. He and other captive officers were forced to remove their boots in front of a group of hundreds of protesters. The officers appeared to be unharmed and were later released and received medical checks. The protesters also barred about 20 journalists from leaving the cultural center. "With the blood of our brothers, we won't negotiate," indigenous leader Jaime Vargas told the protesters. He accused the government of neglecting indigenous groups and the poor and said offers of incentives such as agricultural aid amounted

### SUBSCRIBER NOTICE

The Latin America Advisor will not be published on Monday, Oct. 14 in observance of the Columbus Day holiday in the United States. We will resume publishing on Tuesday, Oct. 15.

to efforts by the government at deception. The president's secretary general, José Briones, said Thursday that the protesters must free everyone they have "kidnapped" before the government will engage in talks with the protesters. Despite days of chaos and unrest, Briones insisted that order was being restored in Ecuador, with more than 70 percent of the country's cities remaining calm. On Wednesday, Ecuador's state oil company, Petroecuador, declared force majeure on all of its oil trading operations, citing the demonstrations, Oilprice.com reported. The company said it had shut down the TransEcuadorean Pipeline System, also known as SOTE, which carries about 360,000 barrels daily because there is not enough oil to move through the pipeline. The demonstrations have disrupted approximately 200,000 barrels of oil production at a loss of \$12.8 million. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Oct. 4 issue of the Advisor.]

## Head of Peru's Congress Seeks to Suspend Dissolution

The head of Peru's dissolved Congress appealed to the country's top court on Thursday seeking to suspend the legislature's closure on the grounds that President Martín Vizcarra had exceeded his constitutional powers, Reuters reported. In an effort to get around obstacles to his anticorruption reforms, Vizcarra dissolved Congress late last month and swore in a new cabinet last week. Pedro Olaechea, who now leads the smaller permanent parliamentary commission, submitted the appeal requesting that the "arbitrary" dissolution of Congress be suspended, according to the document seen by Reuters. In related news, Vizcarra's approval rating soared to 82 percent from 52 percent last month, according to a poll by Lima-based Datum Internacional published in *Gestión* and *Peru21* newspapers on Thursday, Bloomberg News reported. That level of support makes him the most popular Peruvian leader in more than three decades. "The public associated Congress with corruption, obstructionism and a sense of paralysis, which eroded confidence

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Bank of Mexico Has Room to Cut Rates More Than U.S. Fed: Board Members

Mexico's central bank can cut interest rates more aggressively than the U.S. Federal Reserve without harming its commitment to keep inflation low and stable, two of the bank's board members said at the Bank of Mexico's meeting last month, according to released minutes, *The Wall Street Journal* reported. Gerardo Esquivel and Jonathan Heath voted for a 50-basis-point reduction. The bank lowered its key rate 25 basis points to 7.75 percent on Sept. 26.

## Migrants Block Bridge Linking U.S. to Mexico

Migrants seeking to request asylum in the United States blocked a major U.S.-Mexico border bridge Thursday for 13 hours before U.S. authorities were able to reopen the crossing, the Associated Press reported. The span linking the Mexican city of Matamoros to Brownsville, Tex., handles about 80 percent of the pedestrian traffic between the two cities. The blockage, caused by several hundred men, women and children, caused long lines at the other nearby international crossings.

## Venezuela's PDVSA Denies Responsibility for Brazil Oil Spills

Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA on Thursday rejected allegations it was responsible for oil spills that have contaminated beaches in Brazil since September, after a Brazil's Environment Minister, Ricardo Salles, this week said the crude was likely from Venezuela, Reuters reported. PDVSA "categorically rejects" Salles's "tendentious claims," the statement said, adding that "We have not received any report, in which our clients and / or subsidiaries report a possible breakdown or spill in the vicinity of the Brazilian coast."

and fueled demand for change,” said Urpi Torrado, Datum’s chief executive officer, in interpreting the poll results. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for Jan. 26. President Alberto Fujimori’s decision to shut Peru’s Congress in 1992 was also popular, though his methods were heavy-handed and he eventually was imprisoned for human rights crimes and graft.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

# Trump Wants Brazil to Join OECD But Backs Argentina First

U.S. President Donald Trump on Thursday said he supports Brazil’s taking steps toward joining the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), although the United States is first backing accession by Argentina and Romania, Reuters reported. News reports earlier this week, citing a leaked letter written in August by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, suggested the United States had reversed its position supporting Brazil’s entry and would reject Brazil’s effort to enter the OECD, according to The Hill. However, Pompeo said in a statement earlier on Thursday that the leaked letter “does not accurately represent the United States’ position with respect to OECD enlargement.” Trump moved quickly to tamp down any controversy as well. In a Twitter post Thursday, Trump said that a joint statement he released with Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in March “makes absolutely clear that I support Brazil beginning the process for full OECD membership.” “The United States stands by that statement and stands by @jairbolsonaro,” he said. For his part, Bolsonaro played down the U.S. support for Argentina on Thursday, saying OECD accession was a drawn-out process and it could take Brazil up to a year and a half to become a member. “We’re almost there, but there were two countries in front of us, Argentina and Romania,” he said in a Facebook live webcast to supporters, Reuters reported. In addition to Argentina and Brazil, Colombia is also undergoing the process to join the OECD.

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blies and municipal counsellors, among others. It is impossible to anticipate who will win. Coalitions of all types proliferate for each departmental and local election. Even in the aftermath of the election, many interpretations will create confusion as to the real result. Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Barranquilla and Bucaramanga are the cities

“The final peace agreement did not overcome the weakness of the Colombian state.”

— Fernando Cepeda Ulloa

to watch. Many will try to anticipate the outcome of the 2022 presidential election on this basis. Surveys are very inconsistent. Only in Barranquilla is there total clarity: the Char family reigns. Given the proliferation of political competitors, the most probable outcome is a victory by minority forces. This scenario is a great opportunity for the so-called ‘political-criminal enterprises’ to take control of the public budget and public policies. This concept was introduced in 2018 by the then-Comptroller General Edgardo Maya. Former President Gaviria preferred to talk about the ‘políticos-contratistas.’ In his own words: ‘one of the biggest challenges is the increasingly serious nexus between organized crime and the illicit organizations and political actors that support it.’ It is not at all a referendum on Duque’s presidency.”

**A** **Beatrice Rangel, member of the Advisor board and director of AMLA Consulting in Miami Beach:** “Violence is inextricably tied to contemporary politics in Colombia. From the Bogotazo in 1947, when about 1,500 people died in an upsurge in violence triggered by the assassination of Liberal Party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, to our era, violence is a given in Colombian elections.

Several aspects of Colombian culture and political development seem to interact to ignite violence. First and most traditional is the fact that most Colombians do not feel protected by the rule of law. There is a widespread sentiment that the legal playing field is not equal for all citizens. That is to say that the powerful are not subject to the law. This creates an incentive to resolve conflicts through violence. Then there is the peace process and its multiple challenges. To begin with, the FARC has morphed into two organizations. One is doing its best to mutate into a political party, and the other is holding tight to the narco-guerrilla model and is turning against the other faction in a violent fashion. Enter the ELN, which not only continues its criminal armed struggle but has haven in Venezuela to hide, rearm, smuggle drugs and launder money. The races to watch, of course, are Barranquilla-Cartagena, as their outcome will be a good predictor of whether anti-corruption campaigns were effective. In Bogotá, the potential victory of Carlos Galán could thrust the city into a development-cum-transparency route that reduces polarization and propels a new generation to power. Medellín will most probably continue electing development-oriented governors and mayors. The city paid a high price with nested drug gangs led by Pablo Escobar, reinvented itself and is now one of the most innovative places in the Americas. The ‘paisas’ will not elect anyone who steps off this trail.”

**A** **Maria Velez de Berliner, managing director of RTG-Red Team Group, Inc.:** “Since 2015, Colombia has not seen this number of attacks, threats, and assassinations of candidates occurring in an election cycle. Reasons vary, but some are salient: 1) Decisions made by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) have led to a generalized perception of impunity and lawlessness, regardless of the crime; 2) The regionality of the elections means that sectarian animosity

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exacerbates among candidates who rally the masses around hot-button issues within their regions or municipalities; 3) Criminal gangs of different political affiliations use elections to gain control of territory, put in office candidates amicable to them or eliminate candidates perceived as actual or potential enemies; and 4) Colombians' history of violent, often murderous, settlement of political differences. The governorships of Cundinamarca and Antioquia and the mayor-

“**Colombians will elect whomever they feel can pull their municipality or region from insecurity and uncertainty.**”

— Maria Velez de Berliner

alties of Bogotá and Medellín are key races. If candidates supported by ex-president Álvaro Uribe/Centro Democrático lose in those jurisdictions, those losses will mark the beginning of the decline of Uribe as the most influential Colombian politician of the last 27 years. Despite his errors in judgment and as-yet unproven illegalities, there is no politician in today's Colombia who can fill the vacuum Uribe's absence from politics will create. More than a referendum on President Duque, these elections are a referendum on Colombia's current political, social, cultural, economic, legal and security decline. Colombians will elect whomever they feel can pull their municipality or region from insecurity and uncertainty. Time will tell whether she or he can keep her or his promises. A unified opposition ensures Duque does not keep his, to Duque's and Colombians' loss.”

**A** Sergio Guzmán, director of Colombia Risk Analysis: “Colombia's local elections on Oct. 27 will determine who controls its 32 departments, 1,103 municipalities, close to 500 departmental assemblies and 11,000 seats on municipal councils starting in 2020. Broadly speaking, these elections will measure how much, if at all, Colombian democracy has evolved from a traditional, family-based system to a party-driven system based on policy platforms. Family affiliation continues to be a primary determinant of candidacies and party endorsements across the political spectrum. Consequently, businesses must understand how family ties often transcend politics and interfere with the business environment, for example, through the promotion of monopolies or oligopolies—a candidate from a large family clan is usually a larger part of a business strategy. At Colombia Risk Analysis, we see the diminished importance of ideology and political parties. Many candidates are the product of alliances between ideologically incompatible parties, while others have dispensed with parties altogether and are running independently. For businesses, this means that political analysis of party affiliation will be of marginal utility in assessing local receptiveness to investment/business propositions. Instead, understanding the connections between powerful families and their business interests would be a more useful approach. The elections will also show where Colombian public opinion stands one year into Iván Duque's presidency. Finally, they will test alternative candidates and parties' ability to chip away power from traditional parties, a trend that has emerged in Colombia's more sophisticated urban centers but remains elusive in peripheral regions.”

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