Colombia’s congressional elections saw greater advances for the underworld than for democracy. The risk of disillusioned ex-guerrillas returning to arms was heightened by blows to the FARC peace process, politicians with underworld ties consolidated power, and campaign season killings were rife.
The elections for the Senate and the House of Representatives were supposed to mark the evolution of the insurgent Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) into the political party The Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común – FARC. But the FARC’s democratic coming out party was marred by violence and a disastrous performance at the ballot box.

In the pacific region, the FARC denounced receiving threats purporting to be from the Urabeños, and accused the ELN of murdering party activists. Pamphlets circulated signed by Ex-FARC mafia cells that threatened the FARC and banned them from campaigning in certain territories. Elsewhere, their attempts at campaigning were met by hostility and even violent protests.

In the end, the FARC obtained just 0.34 percent of the senate vote and just 0.21 percent in the house race. The disappointing results were compounded by the strong showing of anti-peace process parties, which could now use their increased clout in congress to wreak havoc on the implementation of the peace agreement.

The FARC’s disastrous first foray into democratic politics could have serious consequences. Shunned by the public and targeted by armed actors, the peace accords’ promise of political participation looks increasingly hollow, and this will likely drive yet more disenchanted former guerrillas into the arms of the Ex-FARC Mafia.

While the FARC struggled to gain traction in politics, mafias and armed groups continue to penetrate the system. The Fundacion Paz y Reconciliacion identified 70 congressional candidates with alleged links to organized crime, armed groups or corruption cases, 42 of whom won their elections. The results were a reminder that political clans and caudillos, which often act as points of intersection between the underworld and the legal world, still hold sway over much of Colombia.

Underworld influence on the elections was also visible in political violence. MOE recorded 62 violent actions against political and community leaders during campaign season, including 31 murders. The killings were a brutal sign that while Colombia is getting ever close to leaving behind the era of political violence, violence in politics remains a serious threat.

ELN – EPL Tensions Erupt into Open Conflict in Catatumbo

• Fighting has broken out between the ELN and the EPL in the drug trafficking hub of Catatumbo. Community leaders told media there had been at least 19 deaths,² while the United Nations warned the conflict has had a humanitarian impact on 17,000 people.³

• Both the ELN and the EPL have put out public statements condemning the actions and questioning the revolutionary credentials of the other side.

• Despite the aggression and accusations, the rivals also both called for a negotiated resolution to the conflict, and brokering a truce would clearly be the best outcome for both sides.

• Militarily, the conflict is a dangerous strategy. Both the ELN and the EPL are firmly entrenched in the region militarily and socially, so neither side is likely to be able to defeat the other without paying a heavy price. Furthermore, both already have to contend with another enemy - the 6,000 troops currently deployed in Catatumbo.

• The conflict is also bad for business. The ELN primarily profit from the Catatumbo coca trade, while the EPL run processing and trafficking networks. As the two groups control different links in the regional drug trafficking chain, cooperation is more profitable than competition.

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³ OCHA Flash Update No.1, March 16, 2018, available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/180316_flashupdate_1_catatumbo_vf.pdf
ELN Return to Talks but Peace Process Faces Uncertain Future

• President Juan Manuel Santos announced that peace talks with the ELN, which were suspended after a series of deadly attacks in January, are to restart. Brokering a new ceasefire will be top of the agenda.

• Santos is about to become a lame duck president, and so he has little to lose in gambling on another run of talks before his term ends. If negotiations produce significant and concrete advances then they may survive the handover of presidential power. If not, then war with the ELN will no longer be his problem.

• The events of recent months make success an outside bet. The ELN, already internally divided over making peace and aggressively expanding, will have little faith in any commitments made by a government whose days are numbered, and that has so far delivered little of what was promised to the guerrillas’ demobilized cousins in the FARC. On the other side of the equation, anti-peace parties now outnumber pro-peace factions in congress, while two out of the three frontrunners for president would almost certainly kill off negotiations if elected.

Playboy “Invisible” Narco Caught Hiding in Plain Sight

• Spanish police arrested Juan Pablo Muñoz Hernández, alias “Carlos Ciro,” a previously unknown figure who allegedly trafficked Colombian cocaine to Europe via Brazil while posing as a publicist and manager of artists.

• Ciro fits the profile of an “invisible” – the hidden Colombian drug traffickers that broker international cocaine deals. However, while many invisibles prefer a low profile, Ciro built an ostentatious façade, living a jet set lifestyle and rubbing shoulders with global elites and celebrities.

• He is the second captured capo to have been caught hiding in plain sight recently. In February, authorities arrested Sebastián Murillo Echeverry, alias, Lindolfo, the son of a drug trafficker and an alleged Oficina de Envigado crime boss who ingratiated himself into Colombian high society.
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