

'Massive fraud': Colombia's pro-Trump candidate accused of stealing election

The Trump administration directly interfered in Colombia's presidential election in favor of Abelardo De La Espriella, a right-wing hardliner, against his leftist opponent, Ivan Cepeda. The Grayzone's Oscar Leon investigates well-documented charges of massive electoral fraud which may have tipped the scales for De La Espriella in the first round. If he wins, De La Espriella has pledged to emulate Trump's draconian approach toward narco-trafficking, foreshadowing a revival of Plan Colombia, the US-sponsored counter-insurgency program that saw widespread human rights violations including the massacre of rural social leaders, mass displacement and the notorious false positives scandal in a failed war on drugs during the early 2000s. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

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On Sunday, May 31st, Colombia held the first round of its presidential election. The election pitted a militantly right-wing challenger, Abelardo de la Espriella, against Iván Cepeda, a social democratic candidate from the ruling party of left-wing president Gustavo Petro. De la Espriella has pledged to emulate Donald Trump's draconian approach toward narco-trafficking, foreshadowing a revival of Plan Colombia, the U.S.-sponsored counterinsurgency program, which saw widespread human rights violations, including the massacre of social leaders, mass displacement, and the notorious false positives scandal in a failed war on drugs during the early 2000s. If he becomes president, de la Espriella would therefore serve as the linchpin of the Monroe Doctrine, which calls for total U.S. domination of the Americas through ruthless military force. Already, he is promising to repress Colombia's political left.

#Speaker 1

I have said that Petro is the mafia boss, because that government is a criminal gang, and the mafia boss is the president of the republic. So, calling me the mafia lawyer is unoriginal after I called him the mafia boss. He is unhinged. He is going to lose. He knows we have come to confront him, defeat him, and punish him, because what he has done will not go unpunished.

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The Trump administration blatantly interfered in the election, sending Republican Senator Bernie Moreno, a wealthy Colombian American, to the country to campaign for de la Espriella. One of Trump's top right-wing allies in the region, U.S.-born Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa, also interfered, first levying 50% tariffs and then threatening to increase them to 100% on Colombian goods if Cepeda won. If de la Espriella won, he pledged to keep the tariffs at zero. Following the vote, the media declared de la Espriella the winner of the first round, even though every poll up until that point had shown him trailing Cepeda. That meant that the two would have to go to a runoff election. But soon after the vote, allegations of blatant electoral fraud began to surface, some of them broadcast live from voting centers. Had the election been rigged? Given that Cepeda had led by up to 13 points as recently as May 22nd, thousands of people, mostly youth, took to the streets in some of the country's main cities to cry foul.

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In Colombia, the electoral system has a digital interface that allows citizens to access and review scanned voting records and election tally sheets. As soon as these records became available, Colombians from all over the world took to social media to document what they considered clear evidence of electoral fraud.

#Speaker 2

We've taken it upon ourselves to cross-reference records at the registrar's office with what we see here in Bello, specifically regarding the polling stations. Look at what we've found. Take a look, for instance. Look at this school. Which school is this?

#Speaker 3

It's an educational institution in the Barrio Paris neighborhood.

#Speaker 2

And look at what we've uncovered. Look here, at polling station 4 specifically. See, there are 32 votes recorded at that station for Iván Cepeda, one for Claudia López. And then look at this one. Look right here. It supposedly reads 89, but it was originally a 9, which has been altered. Look at the decimal point. They've added a... well, man, what on earth is that?

#Speaker 3

They've scribbled an 8 right over it to turn it into 89.

#Speaker 2

Ah, and we've found several instances of that. Yeah, there have been quite a few. Though all the votes cast for Cepeda appear clean. I mean, we haven't seen any cross-outs or alterations on those. The votes for Cepeda have been clean.

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Colombians only became aware of these allegations because citizens are allowed to film in polling stations, and because voting records and election tally sheets are immediately scanned and made public.

#Speaker 4

Who's in this area? Board 16.

#Speaker 2

Put a, puta.

#Speaker 4

What's the table number? Board 16. Let's see.

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These kids are checking fraud alert tips from exposed posts.

#Speaker 5

It says Nariño, Pasto. Seven polling stations are reporting. Five for Gerardo Romero. There is fraud involving Abelardo.

#Speaker 2

Wait, wait. Nariño, Pasto.

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Social media provided a viral factor to this phenomenon, which not even mainstream media were able to hide.

#Speaker 6

Table five.

#Speaker 2

Okay, let's see if we can find anything.

#Speaker 7

Hey, check this out. They mistakenly added 1,000 votes. The error was 1,000 votes. Practically nothing here. Well, over here it was more generous. They gave him 74, and here they gave him 44.

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If such fraud took place, there were many accomplices, because access to the voting tables was needed not only during the summation and evident alteration of the election tally sheets, but during the voting process as well.

#Speaker 8

You wrote down my number next to someone else's name. But how is that possible? I have my ID card right here in my hand. Why are you putting down a different name? How many times do you make mistakes?

#Speaker 9

Yes. That's just how I entered. She made a mistake.

#Speaker 8

This? It's something they're already doing in a lot of places.

#Speaker 9

Yes, look, here's what we'll do. We'll call the lady from the electoral office and file an amendment. These things happen, ma'am. We don't have any bad intentions.

#Speaker 8

It shows. Your bad intentions are obvious because you have the number right there. Look, there's my number. Yes, sure, so you are cheating. That settles it. There are already several complaints. And look, they're doing it right here, right now. I'm going to make a call. Watch out, everyone. They are tampering with ID cards. In Yarumito, there are already over 100 complaints, and they just did it to mine. They took my ID number and assigned it to someone else's name. Look, if you haven't realized it yet, they are stealing our democracy.

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Camilo Bautista Palacio is one of two brothers who own the firm in charge of the election software and vote counting in Colombia. As a young man, he was sentenced to nine years for bank fraud but wound up serving less than three years in prison. He's presided over fictitious inventories, forged bills, loans totaling \$130 million obtained through falsified documents, and a \$500,000 bribe to facilitate a loan. Today, he and his brother, the Bautista brothers, manage Colombia's passport and electoral systems. Going into the election, the Colombian electoral system was tainted with bias and corruption. Hernán Penagos, the chair of the electoral authority, happens to have deep ties to the country's conservative forces and now stands accused of fabricating 800,000 votes out of thin air. During an interview, President Petro made the case that the election had indeed been rigged.

#Speaker 10

I had already been criticizing the electoral system because since 2014, the software being used by a private firm—mind you, the entity that actually tallies the votes is not the Colombian state but a private company—has been problematic. The firm belonging to the Bautista brothers had been implicated in fraud back in 2014. It had been judicially proven that the software is vulnerable to manipulation from both within and without, meaning specifically that electoral fraud did occur in 2014, undermining the integrity of the oversight process. Look, it had already been established that, pursuant to a court order, specific actions were required, yet the National Registry never carried them out. The Council of State, sitting in plenary session, ordered the National Registry to implement publicly owned software—software that would be fully auditable and developed internally by the state itself, by the registry itself. And that never happened.

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Petro presented official logs metadata, which seemed to confirm that the election's algorithm had been altered. A criminal complaint was filed, submitting data from 5,300 polling stations.

#Speaker 11

636 votes? And where did this madness come from? If, regarding the number of total voters, it clearly says that only 87 people voted.

#Speaker 12

This is an invitation for you to visit the National Registry's website yourselves and examine the vote counts on the E14 forms. There, you can clearly see how votes were added for Abelardo de la Espriella. During the tally, one can observe amendments and numbers written over existing figures. We can also see instances, such as with candidate Zepeda, where numbers were erased and then reattributed to candidate Abelardo de la Espriella.

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Hernán Penagos, the conservative chair of the electoral authority, rejected the accusations, denying what thousands of Colombian voters had seen with their very own eyes and documented.

#Speaker 13

I must emphasize that on May 26th, absolutely no modifications were made to the electoral software. We are absolutely clear on this point, and it is fully substantiated. I would like to urge party representatives and auditors not to distort the information that is consistently provided to them by the National Registry Office with such diligence and rigor. Doing so poses grave risks not only to the electoral process itself, but to Colombian democracy as a whole.

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As Colombia heads to the second round, the fate of the Duque doctrine hangs in the balance.