



POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE 2018 CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION IN COLOMBIA

March 11, 2018

*Misión de Observación
Electoral MOE*

The campaign for the congressional elections started in mid-December 2017 and culminated with the nation-wide vote held on the 11th of March, 2018. The process for the presidential elections initiated officially at the end of February with the interparty consultations and primaries being held parallel to the congressional vote in March this year as well. In turn, the dynamics of this election period have intertwined and been determined by the evolution of the peace process and the implementation of recently introduced institutional reforms in the Colombian political system. The following have been the most salient issues within the congressional election that coincided with the presidential campaign.

First, there is the fact that these were the first congressional elections and presidential campaign carried out after the signing of the historic Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC in 2016 in the context of growing polarization of the public debate and the citizenry on this issue. This divide has defined the political panorama since negotiations between the parties started in 2012, and has deepened after the Agreement was signed and the plebiscite that was meant to validate the deal resulted in a narrow and unexpected victory of the 'NO' option in 2016. Since then, the peace process began to be implemented in a context of increasing skepticism, uncertainty and polarization in the lead up to the electoral processes of 2018.

As a result, although the violence from the armed conflict decreased significantly, the political debate within the congressional and presidential campaign during the first trimester of 2018 has seen an increasing presence of messages and feelings of hatred and intolerance in the discourses from all sides of the political spectrum. The growing belligerence on social media went beyond the virtual world and transcended to everyday spaces and interactions, with stigmatization and confrontation becoming more frequent during the electoral campaigns – including direct threats attacks to congressional and presidential candidates, which had not occurred in, at least the two last election periods.

In addition, the implementation of the Peace agreement that began in late 2017 has seen the emergence of two new critical spaces for the reconfiguration of political power in

Colombia: (i) the Special Circumscriptions for Peace and (ii) the former FARC-controlled territory which began to be disputed by illegal armed groups. The accommodation of power in the national territory has meant that the conditions for the electoral competition have changed – casualties associated with the armed conflict has been reduced but new groups and forms of violence have arisen, and new criminal and fraudulent dynamics concerning the electoral process have spread and become more salient in the public debate through their dissemination on social media.

Second, the electoral processes during the first trimester of 2018 have also been defined by recent institutional reforms introduced in Colombia that are being implemented for the first time. Since the last congressional elections of 2014, reforms have been introduced that have changed the structure of the Congress of the Republic of Colombia. Four years ago, a total of 268 members for Congress were chosen, while for the 11th of March elections the number of seats has increased to 279. Also, out of the 279, 10 of the seats were granted to members of FARC in compliance with what was convened on the Peace Agreement. Lastly, the Law of Balance of Powers (2015) introduced reforms regarding the presidential election – namely the prohibition of the presidential reelection and the provision that the presidential candidate that gets the second place will be granted a seat in the Senate and its vice-presidential formula shall be entitled to a seat in the House of Representatives.

The congressional election that took place in March 2018 has also been a very singular one for the history of Colombia for the following reasons. On the one hand, it was characterized for the historically high-level of participation of the electorate. According to pre-count, voter turnout reached a 49% - four percentage points above the average voter turnout since 1991 (45%). On the other hand, these elections have also stood out due to the widespread use of signature campaigns to back presidential candidates and the massive participation of voters in the interparty consultations and primaries held in parallel by the strongest left and right-wing parties and electoral platforms in the running up to the presidential elections in May. These emerging new trends have made evident the potential problems arising from the lack of regulation on some of their aspects – such as the financing of signature campaigns and the election of candidates to represent constituted citizen platforms.

The outcome of the congressional (Senate and House) elections of 11th of March consolidated a solid center-right win majority in power. In terms of gender participation in the legislative power, the affirmative action measures introduced for the inclusion of at least 30% of women in the candidate lists, has resulted in an all-time high female representation in the Senate and the House of Representatives – 25 seats were won by women, which meant an increase of 2 compared to the 2014 elections.

For more information on the results go to:

<https://moe.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Resultados-Congreso-2018.pdf>