



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2024

Colombia

70
/100

FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	31 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	39 /60

LAST YEAR’S SCORE & STATUS

70 /100 Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



Overview

Colombia is among the longest-standing democracies in Latin America, but one with a history of widespread violence and serious human rights abuses. Public institutions have demonstrated the capacity to check executive power, and the country’s main left-wing guerrilla group signed a peace accord in 2016. Nonetheless, Colombia faces enormous challenges in consolidating peace and guaranteeing political rights and civil liberties outside of major urban areas.

Key Developments in 2023

- Elections for governors, mayors, and local bodies were held in October. Opposition and independent candidates obtained major political wins, defeating President Gustavo Petro’s allies in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Cartagena, and Barranquilla, among others.
- Several armed groups continued talks with the Petro administration, but no clear route to a lasting agreement was established. A fragile six-month cease-fire was established with the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group, taking effect in August, while a three-month cease-fire with Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents took effect in October. However, reports of armed activities continued.
- Dozens of assassinations of human rights activists, civil society leaders, labor leaders, and former combatants were reported during the year.
- A number of corruption scandals erupted during the year, including ones involving the son and the brother of the president, and Rodolfo Hernández, the runner-up in the 2022 presidential election.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 o-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	4/4
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The president is directly elected to a four-year term. As part of a series of 2015 constitutional amendments, presidential reelection was eliminated.

No candidate garnered an outright majority in the first round of the 2022 election. Following a polarized runoff campaign, Gustavo Petro, the left-wing Historic Pact (PH) candidate, took 50.4 percent of the second-round vote. He defeated the former mayor of Bucaramanga, Rodolfo Hernández, who was backed by several leaders in incumbent president Iván Duque’s party, the Democratic Center (CD). Voter turnout reached 58 percent, marking the highest turnout for presidential elections in nearly 25 years. The balloting was considered competitive and credible, and the results were accepted by stakeholders. Election observers logged sporadic reports of vote buying and other violations in both rounds of polls.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	3/4
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Congress is composed of the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives, with all seats up for election every four years. The nation at large selects 100 Senate members using a proportional representation system; two additional members are chosen by Indigenous communities, one seat is awarded to the runner-up in the presidential election, and another five seats were reserved in 2018 and 2022 for the left-wing Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebel group under the peace accord. Following the 2022 elections, the Chamber of Representatives featured 188 members: 162 were elected by proportional representation in multimember districts, two chosen by Afro-Colombian communities, one each by Indigenous and expatriate voters, one seat reserved for the runner-up vice presidential candidate, five seats reserved for the FARC, and 16 seats reserved for representatives of victims of the country’s internal conflict; the latter were instituted following an August 2021 law implementing a peace accord provision.

The March 2022 legislative elections were peaceful, though observers reported some irregularities and officials from multiple parties accused the electoral authorities of fraud, vote buying, and allowing candidacies by people with

connections to organized crime figures. Independent observers deemed the polls and results credible. Petro’s PH won a plurality, taking 20 seats, followed by the Conservative Party with 15 seats, and the Liberal Party with 14. In the Chamber of Representatives, three parties won 21 or more seats, led by the Liberal Party with 32 seats. In its second balloting as a legal party, the FARC took no seats aside from the five guaranteed to it in each chamber.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	3/4
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The legal framework generally allows for competitive balloting in practice, though the nine-member National Electoral Council (CNE)—which oversees the conduct of the country’s elections, including the financing of political campaigns and the counting of votes—has faced criticism for ineffective enforcement of electoral laws, blamed in part on the partisan selection system for its members.

An internal audit of the National Registry, Colombia’s election management body, found irregularities in ballot reporting during the 2022 legislative elections, but did not find evidence that fraud had occurred.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?	4/4
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Colombia’s historically rigid two-party system has opened and diversified in recent years. In 2023, candidates representing a wide range of parties freely competed in local elections. The CNE reported in 2023 that there were 35 legally recognized parties in Colombia, up from 18 in 2018. Some were new, others emerged

following a series of court rulings that facilitated the relaunching of extinct parties that were active during the most violent years of Colombia's armed conflict.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

4/4

Democratic transfers of power between rival parties are routine at the national level and in many regions, though significant areas remain under the long-term control of machine-style political clans with ties to organized crime. Following the 2022 presidential elections, opposition leader Gustavo Petro became Colombia's first leftist president and his PH party left the congressional opposition to lead the new governing coalition. Numerous prominent politicians represent parties other than the PH and CD.

Elections for governors, mayors, and local bodies were held in October 2023. Opposition and independent candidates obtained major political wins in all large cities, defeating President Petro's allies in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Cartagena, and Barranquilla, among others.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

2/4

For decades, political violence and insecurity accompanied elections. However, recent elections have been peaceful and safe for most voters. In limited areas, activity by the ELN leftist guerrilla group; the successors of previously disbanded right-wing paramilitary groups; "dissident" FARC members; and criminal gangs has continued to impair the ability of citizens to participate freely in the political process. The Organization of American States (OAS) Electoral Observation Mission, in its November 2023 preliminary report on the year's local elections, denounced instances of voter coercion and numerous violent attacks against candidates and election officials, notably women candidates. Colombia's Peace and Reconciliation Foundation reported numerous instances of related political violence between October 2022 and October 2023, including 37 murders.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	3/4
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Women enjoy equal political rights, and at least 30 percent of the candidates on party lists must be women. Following the March 2022 legislative elections, the share of congressional seats held by women increased to 29 percent. In the October 2023 regional elections, women won 146 municipal mayorships (out of 1,102) and six governorships (out of 32), a slight increase from 2019 but still far from equal representation. Following the 2022 presidential elections, Francia Márquez became the first Afro-Colombian vice president and the second woman to hold the post. Colombia’s Congress has historically disregarded women’s issues, but in 2021 legislators passed several laws intended to improve social and economic conditions for women, including on issues of family violence and employment opportunity.

LGBT+ people’s rights are legally protected and LGBT+ politicians and civil leaders participate in the political process. However, LGBT+ representation is poor in rural areas and in zones where armed groups continue to dominate.

Lighter-skinned Colombians occupy a disproportionate share of government posts. The government has undertaken a series of steps to incorporate Indigenous and Afro-Colombian voices into national political debates, but issues affecting Afro-Colombians and Indigenous groups are rarely priorities in national policymaking.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	3/4
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Elected officials generally determine government policy without interference. However, the Colombian state has long struggled to establish a secure presence in all parts of its territory, meaning threats from guerrilla groups and criminal gangs can disrupt policymaking and implementation in some regions and localities.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

2 / 4

Corruption occurs at multiple levels of public administration. Graft scandals have emerged in recent years within an array of federal agencies, but investigations can result in convictions, including against senior officials.

Major corruption scandals erupted in 2023 involving both the son and the brother of the president and the runner-up to the presidency in 2022. President Petro's son was arrested in July 2023 for money laundering, with the allegations including that he received money from drug traffickers in exchange for their inclusion in the president's peace plan. He pleaded not guilty, pledged to cooperate with prosecutors, and was released on condition he remain in the country and not participate in politics. President Petro's brother, Juan Fernando Petro, faced similar allegations earlier in the year. In September 2023, the attorney general disqualified Hernández, the runner-up in the 2022 presidential race, from running for governor of the Santander Department in an election the following month and banned him from running for public office for 14 years; the decision was related to allegations of involvement with improperly awarding a contract that would have financially benefitted his son.

Separately, the minister of energy resigned in July after evidence surfaced of her pressuring migration officials to grant her son a travel authorization. In June, Petro accepted the resignations of his chief of staff and the Colombian ambassador to Venezuela after reports emerged of their involvement in a wiretapping scandal.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

3 / 4

Government information is generally available to the public, including details about public contracting, though information related to military and security affairs, as well as criminal justice processes, can be difficult to access. The transparency law of 2014 mandates disclosure of government information, but officials do not consistently follow it, sometimes forcing citizens to request judiciary measures to access information. Civil society groups and independent media have used the transparency law to expose irregularities in government spending and contracting in recent years, including identifying shortcomings in government data regarding disbursement and oversight of COVID-19-related emergency spending.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	2/4
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The constitution guarantees freedom of expression, and opposition views are commonly aired in the media. However, journalists face intimidation and violence both while reporting and in retaliation for their work. The government has prosecuted several notorious cases of murdered journalists in recent years, but convictions are rare. Free expression groups including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) harshly criticized the government for a 2021 attempt to undermine the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) ruling that October that the state bore responsibility for the 2000 kidnapping, sexual assault, and torture of journalist Jineth Bedoya. Local authorities had not advanced related prosecutions in late 2023. CPJ documented one murder of a journalist in Colombia in 2023: in May, two gunmen shot and killed Luis Gabriel Pereira as he was riding a motorcycle in Córdoba Department. He was the founder of the local

news outlet Notiorensense, which covered crime and public security in Ciénaga de Oro.

Self-censorship is common, and slander and defamation remain criminal offenses. The government does not restrict access to the internet, nor does it censor websites. Twitter and other social media platforms have become important arenas for political discourse, but large areas of Colombia remain without local news coverage. In 2023 government officials, including President Petro, continued to disparage members of the media in response to negative coverage of the government and ruling coalition.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

4/4

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respects this right in practice.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

4/4

Academic freedom is generally respected, and university debates are often vigorous. However, in some locations, armed groups have maintained a campus presence to generate political support and intimidate opponents.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

3/4

Individual expression is generally protected in major urban centers, but it remains inhibited in more remote areas where the state, insurgents, and criminals vie for control.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

2/4

Although provided for in the constitution, freedom of assembly is restricted in practice by violence. Colombians organized street protests in 2022 and 2023 that were generally free of violence, several of them directly promoted by the Petro government or by the opposition. These contrasted with the 2021 national strike, when some protesters behaved violently and the resulting police crackdown was criticized by domestic and international rights observers as featuring serious human rights abuses.

Freedom of assembly is restricted in practice in areas of the country where rule of law is threatened by armed groups, organized crime, or general lawlessness.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

2/4

The legal framework generally supports nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society is diverse and active, but the threat of violent reprisal poses a major obstacle to freedom of association. While the government provides protection to thousands of threatened human rights workers, hundreds of activists have been murdered in recent years, mostly by insurgents or the criminal organizations that succeeded demobilized right-wing paramilitary groups. Impunity is widespread, with indictments and convictions occurring in only a small minority of cases.

Land rights, victims' rights, and ethnic and Indigenous rights advocates are frequently targeted by illegal armed groups and other powerful interests seeking to control local illicit economies or halt the implementation of rural development

plans, especially coca substitution programs. President Petro committed to increasing protections for civil society leaders when he was elected, but in practice their security remains at risk. According to the human rights group Indepaz, 188 civil society leaders and rights defenders were killed in 2023, and 189 were killed in 2022. Cauca and Antioquia continue to be the main locations of the killings.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	2 / 4
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Workers may form and join trade unions, bargain collectively, and strike, and antiunion discrimination is prohibited. Colombia’s illegal armed groups have killed thousands of union activists and leaders over the past three decades, though killings have declined substantially from their peak in the early 2000s. Nine trade union leaders were murdered in 2023, according to Indepaz. A special prosecutorial unit has substantially increased prosecutions for such assassinations since 2007, but few investigations have targeted those who ordered the killings.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	3 / 4
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The courts play a fairly independent role in checking the power of the president, government branches, and the military, and in protecting civil rights. However, aspects remain compromised by corruption, extortion, and severe inefficiency. The Constitutional Court, the Council of State, and the Supreme Court have exhibited independence from the executive, though corruption allegations involving members of the courts have damaged their credibility in recent years.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	2 / 4
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Colombia's prosecutorial service is relatively professional, but watchdog groups suggest that key oversight institutions, including the Attorney General's Office, became less independent during the Duque administration. Due process protections remain weak, and trial processes move very slowly.

The country's two key transitional justice bodies, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and the Truth Commission, began operations in 2018; by late 2021 they had amassed enormous volumes of evidence and received testimony from thousands of people. The Truth Commission delivered its final report in 2022, calling for "sweeping changes" to the country's military and for a renewed focus on human rights. The JEP continued to take on cases of human rights violations in 2023, in August indicting a former general and several other members of the military for extrajudicial killings known as the "false positives" scandal.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

2/4

Many soldiers operate with limited civilian oversight, though the government has in recent years increased human rights training and investigated violations by security forces personnel. Collaboration between security forces and illegal armed groups has declined, but rights groups report official toleration of paramilitary successor groups in some regions. The police lack necessary resources, some units are prone to abuse, and police are largely absent from many rural areas where the most dangerous groups are active.

Civil-military relations have been a source of significant tension in recent years. A portion of the armed forces opposed the peace process, and the ability of accused human rights violators within the military to receive benefits under the transitional justice system is one of the most controversial elements of the process. Scandals involving both corruption and rights violations have continued to buffet the military, including one, in September 2023, of disguised military members harassing citizens in Tierralta, Córdoba.

Some parts of the country, particularly resource-rich zones and drug-trafficking corridors, remain highly insecure. Remnant guerrilla forces—including both the

ELN and dissident factions of the FARC—and paramilitary successor groups regularly abuse the civilian population, especially in coca-growing areas. The UN reported in September 2023 that the total area of coca cultivation and the production of cocaine in Colombia reached a new historical high in 2022.

A steady trickle of former FARC combatants, including several high-ranking members, have returned to clandestine life, alleging government failure to abide by the peace accord’s terms. Indepaz estimated the total number of “dissidents” at around 4,500 in September 2023. President Petro continued to seek a new peace deal with FARC dissidents in 2023, but no clear route to a lasting agreement was established. The Petro administration also began negotiations with the ELN in December 2022, marking the first new talks with the organization since 2019. Fragile cease-fires were established with both organizations in 2023 but reports of violence continue.

According to the ombudsman’s office, kidnappings increased by 39 percent during the first six months of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022. The number of verified massacres grew 11 percent between the second half of 2022 and the first half of 2023, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, while criminal organizations expanded their presence in the country. Forced displacement continued in 2023, with the ombudsman’s office reporting that nearly 19,000 people were displaced during the first six months of the year, mostly due to clashes between armed groups.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	2 / 4
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The legal framework provides protections against various forms of discrimination based on gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, and other categories, and the government takes some measures to enforce these protections. Nevertheless, several vulnerable groups suffer serious disadvantages in practice.

Afro-Colombians, who account for as much as 25 percent of the population, make up the largest segment of the more than 7 million people who have been displaced by violence. Areas with concentrated Afro-Colombian populations

continue to suffer vastly disproportionate levels of abuse by guerrillas, security forces, and criminal groups, as well as higher poverty and lack of public services. UN officials have reported that impunity is nearly absolute for killers of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous ex-combatants and social leaders.

Most of Colombia's Indigenous inhabitants, who make up more than 3 percent of the population, live on approximately 34 million hectares granted to them by the government, often in resource-rich, strategic regions that are highly contested by armed groups. Indigenous people have been targeted by all sides in the country's various conflicts. In 2023, Indigenous communities in the departments of Chocó, Cauca, Valle de Cauca, and Nariño continued to suffer widespread violence and displacement perpetrated by former FARC members, paramilitary successors, and criminal groups.

Women face employment discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace, as well as gender-based violence. In June 2023, President Petro signed a law establishing a new Ministry of Equality and Equity, with vice ministries for groups including women, youth, various ethnic groups, and *campesino* communities.

Though Colombian law prohibits discrimination against LGBT+ individuals, they often suffer societal discrimination and abuse, and there are high levels of impunity for crimes committed against them. According to a June 2023 report from a group of civil society organizations, 148 LGBT+ citizens were murdered in Colombia in 2022, in crimes they classified as being related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Close to 3 million Venezuelan migrants have entered Colombia in recent years, and they face stigmatization, discrimination, and lack of access to services. The policy of granting full legal temporary status to Venezuelans who were present in Colombia ended in 2021 and no longer protects migrants who enter the country illegally. Those who entered legally could also apply for a stay permit but only until November 2023. Advocates for refugees and other observers have expressed concern that the Petro government, which has eliminated the main government office coordinating policy toward integration of migrants and refugees, lacks a coherent migration policy.

A massive flow of migrants from the Caribbean, Venezuela, and other nations crossed Colombia in 2023 to reach Panama through the Darién Gap, a dense jungle with no infrastructure, and ultimately make their way to the United States. The government allowed them to pass through, but abuses and human rights violations continued against migrants in transit areas. Half a million migrants crossed by foot to the Panama border in 2023. Some also started to use a maritime route from San Andrés into Nicaragua, exposing themselves to great risks in the open sea.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	3/4
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Freedom of movement improved substantially in tandem with the peace process, but it remains restricted by ongoing violence in certain regions, many of which are home to marginalized groups. Almost 19,000 individuals were displaced during the first six months of 2023, mostly due to threats from armed groups. Travel in some remote areas is further limited by illegal checkpoints operated by criminal and guerrilla groups.

As of October 2023, nearly 2.5 million Venezuelan migrants had begun the process of applying for Temporary Protection Status (ETPV), and 1.7 million had been granted it. The status allows them to work and move freely in Colombia for 10 years, under the policy of the previous Duque administration, which ended in 2023. Permit-holders are eligible for a range of state-run programs and services, including healthcare and education.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	2/4
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Violence and instability in some areas threaten property rights and the ability to establish businesses. Guerrillas, paramilitary successor groups, and common criminals regularly extort payments from business owners and rural property holders.

Progress remains slow on the implementation of the 2011 Victims and Land Law, which recognized the legitimacy of claims by victims of conflict-related abuses, including those committed by government forces. While affected citizens continue receiving compensation and modest progress has been made on land titling, the legal process for land restitution is heavily backlogged, and the resettlement of those who were displaced during the conflict moved slowly during the Duque administration. In 2022, the newly elected Petro administration promised to accelerate the process, and that October, the government agreed to a series of land purchases, which will be distributed at a subsidized price to those displaced by the conflict.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	4/4
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Personal social freedoms, such as those related to marriage and divorce, are largely respected. In 2016, after several years of contradictory judicial and administrative decisions regarding same-sex unions, the Constitutional Court voted to legalize them.

In February 2022, the Constitutional Court decriminalized all abortions performed within the first 24 weeks of pregnancy. Prior to this, women continued to face criminal charges for abortion.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	2/4
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Child labor, the recruitment of children by illegal armed groups, and related sexual abuse are serious problems in Colombia; recruitment declined following the peace accord but has increased since 2020 amid pandemic-related disruption and violence. In coca-growing zones, armed groups exert coercive pressure on farmers to engage in coca cultivation and shun government-run crop-substitution programs.

Some 58 percent of the labor force in Colombia continues to work in the informal sector, lacking a contract, retirement savings programs, and other protections. A 2023 labor reform bill faced criticism for lacking measures to reduce the informal labor rate in the country.



On Colombia

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Country Facts

Population

51,870,000

Global Freedom Score

70/100 **Free**

Internet Freedom Score

65/100 **Partly Free**

Other Years

2023

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ADDRESS

1850 M St. NW Floor 11
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 296-5101

GENERAL INQUIRIES

info@freedomhouse.org

PRESS & MEDIA

press@freedomhouse.org

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