

Religious leaders report coercion and intimidation ahead of election



Religious leaders and communities across Colombia have made highly concerning reports of electoral coercion and intimidation by illegal armed groups ahead of the second round of the country's presidential elections on 21 June.

The most concerning reports come from the departments of Arauca, Caquetá, Cauca, Guaviare and Nariño. A pastor from Arauca confirmed to CSW that religious leaders in rural areas have received warnings from the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group, aimed at preventing them from supporting the right-wing candidate Abelardo de la Espriella.

Reports indicate that during meetings, guerrilla members have warned pastors that they will not allow new churches to enter the area or the construction of new temples, stating that 'what already exists is enough'. In forced meetings, religious leaders have also been instructed to be 'very careful' regarding specific candidates, including de la Espriella.

Meanwhile, in Caquetá and Cauca, reports indicate that dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are instructing religious leaders to warn their congregations that their votes will be monitored.

The governor of Caquetá, [Luis Francisco Ruiz](#), warned that a group of religious leaders contacted him to express their concern, specifically regarding the actions of the Jorge Suárez Briceño Bloc, a FARC dissident faction led by alias 'Calarcá'. According to the governor, the group is using pamphlets, mandatory meetings and WhatsApp messages to influence voting decisions in municipalities such as [San Vicente del Caguán](#) and Cartagena del Chairá. Armed groups have also reportedly threatened to require voters to photograph their marked ballot papers and show the images to representatives of the dissident groups, allowing them to identify those who do not follow their orders.

In contrast to these external pressures, the [Quadrangular Christian Church](#) (Arauca Zone) issued an official statement declaring its neutrality regarding the electoral process. The organisation emphasised that its mission is spiritual and that its members are free citizens who can make their own decisions according to their convictions, rejecting any use of faith as a tool for political pressure.

CSW's Director of Advocacy and Americas Team Leader Anna Lee Stangl said: ***'CSW is deeply concerned by credible allegations of voter intimidation and coercion by illegal armed groups across Colombia. It is no surprise that these groups have in many cases specifically targeted religious leaders, as they have long regarded such leaders as a threat to their own influence and control. We call on the government of Colombia to ensure this Sunday's elections are free and fair, and to urgently address the renewed threat of illegal armed and criminal groups across the country.'***

Note to Editors:

1. CSW is currently running a campaign calling on the eventual victor of the upcoming elections to restore specific protections to religious leaders in recognition of the particular risk they face in regions characterised by the presence of illegal armed and criminal groups. The petition has received over 900 signatures and [can be signed from anywhere in the world here](#).

