

New Colombian political trend: choice

As the country prepares for local elections on Sunday, many are finding that the murder and intimidation that once defined politics here are diminishing.

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Reporter Sibylla Brodzinsky discusses Columbia's electoral climate following the demobilization of some 31,000 paramilitary fighters.

Bogota, Colombia - The last time voters in the town of San Onofre on Colombia's northern coast were asked to elect a mayor, they were given few choices. Only one candidate ran in the [2003 elections](#) after potential contenders backed down under threats from the [right-wing paramilitary forces](#) that controlled the region.

Four years later, the winner of that vote is in jail on conspiracy and fraud charges in a burgeoning scandal over ties between politicians and paramilitaries. And four candidates from across the political spectrum are vying to replace him in Sunday's local and regional elections.

As paramilitary warlords and their armies have demobilized and [Supreme Court magistrates prosecute](#) politicians who colluded with them, politics in areas once controlled by feared militias are becoming freer and more open. But Sunday's elections will be a measure of how much paramilitary political power has been dismantled, analysts say.

They are the first local and regional elections since a scandal broke in late 2006 that connected politicians with some of Colombia's armed right-wing groups. The para-politics scandal, as it is known, has brought down 40 members of Congress, three governors, and dozens of local politicians – including former San Onofre Mayor Jorge Blanco.

Political scientist Mauricio Romero, who has analyzed the evolution of paramilitary power in Colombia since the groups were formed in the mid-1980s by wealthy landowners and drug traffickers as protection against guerrillas, says the elections will be a test of whether the scandal has hurt their political power. "It would seem that their political support has been shattered but it remains to be seen if they are still capable of getting their candidates elected," he says.

Before news of the scandal broke, some 31,000 paramilitary fighters had already been demobilized in a deal with the government of President Álvaro Uribe to give up their guns in exchange for reduced prison sentences for their crimes – some of the most gruesome in Colombia's four-decade-old conflict. Shortly after the leaders were jailed, the intricate web of political patronage they had woven began to unravel in the courts, leading to the first prosecutions of lawmakers in 2006.

"Four years ago you couldn't even suggest the idea that there could be another candidate that was not imposed by [the paramilitaries]," says Adil Meléndez by telephone from San Onofre, where he is running as a leftist candidate.

Single candidate races in 2003 elections were not uncommon in areas controlled by the paramilitaries, particularly on the north coast. Twenty-five municipalities had only one candidate for mayor, and two provinces had only one person run for governor. People were either too afraid to challenge paramilitary-sanctioned candidates or, if they dared to run, they were threatened into backing down or were killed.

In this year's elections the number of candidates for all governor, mayor, city council, and local committee seats increased by 11 percent from 2003, according to the government, from 77,306 to 86,233. Some municipalities have as many as 13 people vying for the mayor's seat.

Despite continuing investigations, the parties most affected by the para-politics scandal have not shied away from the elections. Colombia Viva, Colombia Democrática and Alas-Equipo Colombia, are all fielding candidates. Many, in fact, are being actively supported by the imprisoned politicians, according to local media.

One has to be careful however, warns Mr. Romero, to draw the conclusion that the election of a candidate from one of the "tainted parties" actually means "the reconstruction of the paramilitary-backed political elites." "If the candidates make a commitment to legality they could be perfectly legitimate," he says.

And while dwindling paramilitary influence has meant less violence in some areas, leftist guerrillas have launched a violent campaign against pro-government candidates. Guerrillas of the revolutionary armed forces of Colombia, or [FARC](#), have seen their territorial control shrink under President Uribe's tough security policies that have driven the rebels away from urban centers to the more remote regions.

"Before they could just ban elections, now it's easier to kill candidates," says Claudia López, an analyst with a nongovernmental organization that monitors Colombia's electoral processes. "It is a paradox because improved security has meant a lot of dead candidates."

More than two dozen candidates have been killed in the run-up to the election, and dozens more have been threatened, kidnapped, or intimidated. About half of the murders are attributed to FARC rebels.

Amnesty International called the killings and intimidation of candidates a threat to freedom of expression. "The Colombian authorities must provide effective guarantees to ensure the safety of candidates," said Susan Lee of the group's Americas program.

But Interior Minister Carlos Holguín admitted last week that the government and security forces were overwhelmed with the task of protecting more than 86,000 candidates in 1,099 municipalities. "It is impossible to ensure the safety of every candidate," he said. However,

the government has offered a \$25,000 reward for information about any of the crimes against candidates.