A foretold tragedy in Bogotá

A young senator shot at close range. A president who fans the flames. And a democracy sleepwalking into the past.

Antonio De La Cruz
Executive Director
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"Any minister who signs the decree calling for a popular referendum will be charged for malfeasance. The Constitution comes first. The Colombian people come first." - Miguel Uribe Turbay

In Colombia, the dead do not rest. They drift through coffee plantations in Huila, haunt the rubble of Medellín, and whisper down the corridors of the National Capitol. On foggy nights, their names return like inverted prayers: Gaitán. Galán. Jaramillo. Pizarro. Now, to that mournful litany, a new name has been added—not one buried, but one hovering between life and death: Miguel Uribe Turbay. His heart still beats, but his fate now belongs to the tragic annals of a country where dissent is met not with debate, but with bullets.

Political violence is not a novelty in Colombia. It is tradition—bitter, deep-rooted, and sustained by a partisan press that, since the 19th century, has preferred vitriol over reason. During *La Violencia*, liberal and conservative editorials served as calls to arms. Today, the battleground has moved to social media, where the polarization of uribismo and petrismo—right versus left, order versus social justice—plays out in viral posts and digital lynchings.

Gustavo Petro, the president who once promised a peaceful transformation, has become a preacher of rage. He has called his opponents "slavers", "Nazis", and worse. His recent national address, meandering and opaque, failed to clarify anything about the attempt on Uribe Turbay's life. But it revealed something far more dangerous: the president has ceased to govern. He agitates. The Casa de Nariño has become a stage—not for leadership, but for division.

Uribe Turbay, a young senator and prominent critic of the administration's labor reform, had warned that the government's push for a referendum was a maneuver to bypass Congress and set the stage for 2026. When the Senate rejected the plan, the government's rhetoric darkened. Lawmakers were accused of treason. The interior minister, Armando Benedetti, called it "sabotage"—language with echoes from Colombia's bloodiest eras.

And then, violence.

At a public event, a 15-year-old approached Uribe Turbay and shot him in the head at point-blank range. The weapon was a Glock, legally imported from Arizona, once part of the National Protection Unit's arsenal. Four of the senator's six bodyguards were absent. The shooter was

apprehended, but the phone containing evidence vanished. As if the country were not merely repeating its past, but improving its cynicism.

Petro condemned the attack—then pivoted back to grievance. He equated threats against his family with intelligence reports of a possible attack against former president Álvaro Uribe. The message was clear: everyone is a victim, no one is accountable. The U.S. State Department, less ambiguous, warned that the attack was a direct assault on democracy, fueled by a climate of violent rhetoric.

Meanwhile, the government's "Total Peace" plan has yielded a chilling result: the normalization of armed criminal groups. According to the Ombudsman's Office, 70% of Colombia is under illegal control. In those territories, democracy arrives only with permission. The military is garrisoned. Opposition candidates hide. Elections are announced by press release—if at all.

The referendum, resuscitated by decree, triggered a constitutional storm. The high court has yet to rule. But the damage is done. Petro has reportedly ordered ministers to sign the decree or resign. Congress, the National Registrar, and the Electoral Council have faced pressure and delegitimization. The separation of powers—a bedrock of any democratic republic—has been replaced by personal loyalty to the president.

In response, public figures across the political spectrum—Ingrid Betancourt, Andrés Pastrana, Vicky Dávila, and others—have called for Congress to consider constitutional remedies. They accuse Petro of electoral fraud, of undermining democratic guarantees, of fostering hatred. These are not calls for insurrection. They are calls for the system to defend itself.

But a deeper question looms: how much political violence will Colombians continue to normalize?

In 1948, the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán sparked the Bogotazo and ushered in a decade of bloodshed. In 1989, the killing of Luis Carlos Galán marked the rise of narco-terrorism. What will the attack on Miguel Uribe signify? What point in Colombia's tragic cycle will this become?

Uribe Turbay still fights for his life. But his public image has already shifted—from politician to symbol. Before the shooting, he had spoken softly but clearly: *"We do not want to return to a violent Colombia"*. That hope was answered with gunfire.

In cities like Cali and Medellín, citizens dressed in white. In Bucaramanga, flags were hung upside down. On social media, thousands prayed for him. In Congress, even ideological

opponents stood in silence. That moment—fragile, fleeting—may be the last flicker of civic unity left.

Gabriel García Márquez wrote that Macondo's downfall began with a plague of insomnia that stole memory. Colombia's begins when it remembers too late. This time, the warning is clear. If political leaders refuse to disarm their words, if institutions surrender their autonomy, if the Constitution is once again treated as expendable—the country will not see an election. It will see a reckoning.

And this time, no one can say they didn't know.

Epilogue

I met Miguel Uribe Turbay in January, during a conference in Washington, D.C., where Argentina's Javier Milei was speaking. It was a brief encounter, but a sincere one. Miguel had traveled north just before launching his presidential bid. We spoke about Colombia's future, about populism, about building a democratic center that does not flinch in the face of authoritarianism.

I told him that, at the time, I thought Vicky Dávila might be a stronger candidate. He didn't flinch. "First, we go through the primaries", he said. "If I win, I'll speak with her. If she leads, I'll support her. What matters is Colombia—not ego".

That response stayed with me. It was not the answer of an ambitious politician. It was the answer of a servant of the Republic.

Miguel Uribe Turbay does not just represent a campaign. He represents the possibility of disagreement without bloodshed, of democracy without fear. That is what I saw in him that day in Washington.

And that is what must not be forgotten.