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Local Elections Carried Out in Colombia Amid Violence

by LADB Staff

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On Oct. 26, state and local elections in Colombia took place against a backdrop of violence marked by the resignation of almost 2,000 candidates, the murders of 38 others, and the kidnapping of two international election observers. In some areas, winners may refuse to take office because of death threats by the guerrillas. In others, the losers are likely to demand new elections because of the low turnout.

With official results not yet in, President Ernesto Samper's Partido Liberal appears to have held a majority of state and local posts. The party won 19 of 32 governorships, compared with four for the Partido Social Conservador. It also captured 412 city halls against 301 for the Conservatives.

In the election, Colombians also chose 502 departmental legislators, 11,815 city council representatives, and 5,927 members of local administrative boards. The Liberal's Enrique Penalosa, a 42-year-old economist, was elected mayor of Santa Fe de Bogota, the capital, while Conservative Juan Gomez Martinez won the mayoral race in Medellin, the country's second largest city. The vote has limited political implications since the two major parties have few ideological differences.

Moreover, the rebels' revitalized insurgency captured far more attention during the campaign than any political platforms, making the question of whether the people could vote at all the central issue in the elections. Marked difference in turnout in cities & countryside In most cities, residents turned out in relatively large numbers, but in the remote rural areas, votes could be counted in the dozens instead of the thousands, as many campesinos heeded the guerrilla's boycott. The picture described by mayors and local officials, especially in rural areas, contrasted sharply with the government's depiction of the election as a triumph for democracy in which the victors were "ballots not bullets."

The national election commissioner, Orlando Abello, put the turnout at about 10 million of 20.4 million registered voters, or 49%. He said voting was not held in 20 of Colombia's 1,072 municipalities, but Colombian news media said no balloting took place in more than 150 towns. Low turnout could bring challenges The larger voter turnout in the cities helped offset the sparse turnout in rural areas, where intimidation tactics dissuaded tens of thousands of Colombians from voting.

Officials said the intimidation opened the door to the election of scores of "illegitimate" local governments across the country. Mayors in at least nine towns were elected with fewer than 20 votes. "Where turnout was very low, the elections may well have been legal but not necessarily legitimate," said Gilberto Toro, chair of the Federation of Municipalities, which represents mayors and town councils. "That may cause serious problems in the near future because local government will be seen as weak."

In the municipality of Murindo in Antioquia, mayoral candidate Hector Ayala won by one vote, the only vote cast. In Meta, Holmes Pulgarin received 50% of the votes cast: one was for him, the other

blank. Not one of the 9,200 inhabitants of Cabrera cast a ballot. Even if people wanted to defy death threats from the guerrillas, most election workers were too scared to go to the precinct. Besides, all the candidates for mayor and town council quit weeks ago after guerrillas warned them that they could be assassinated.

Violence affects everyone from candidates to bystanders

After the guerrillas announced that they would impede the elections, violence permeated the electoral process. More than 350 mayoral candidates withdrew their names, as did more than 1,500 city council candidates; 244 people were kidnapped; 22 municipalities were left without any candidates; scores of candidates or election workers were threatened; and 110 party leaders were assassinated.

While the insurgency worked to sabotage the elections in 13 of the country's 32 departments, right-wing paramilitary groups threatened and attacked candidates in other areas. A Catholic priest was killed in San Francisco, a remote farming town northwest of Bogota, the day before the elections. He was shot minutes after meeting with Antioquia Gov. Alvaro Uribe Velez, who escaped uninjured from what aides called a bungled assassination attempt.

Authorities blamed the attack on the ELN, the same group that, two days earlier, kidnapped two Organization of American States (OAS) election observers. The two observers, Chilean Raul Martinez and Guatemalan Manfredo Marroquin, were among the 36 experts sent by the OAS. Juan Ardila, coordinator of the Antioquia human rights office, was also abducted. The armed forces was unable to stop the rebel offensive and was humiliated by the abduction of the election observers. But fears of a barrage of attacks on voting day proved largely unfounded. Despite clashes in which four guerrillas died and one soldier was wounded, authorities said the elections took place in a climate of relative normalcy.

Nevertheless, a helicopter transporting voter- registration officials was forced to make an emergency landing after FARC rebels hit it with machine-gun fire. In southern Narino province, voting was halted in five towns because snipers opened fire on voters. Elsewhere, insurgents dynamited power lines and detonated four small bombs in the northeast town of Cucuta. The violence did not end when the polls closed. Residents burned down a town hall in southern Colombia the day after elections to protest alleged ballot rigging. "There was vote buying here," Felipe Martinez, one of the protesters, told a television news program. "That was clear. This is the people's response."

The clearest vote is a vote for peace

Meanwhile, in a parallel vote, more than nine million voters cast a ballot against the violence that has claimed 30,000 lives and that displaces more than a million people each year. Civic groups organized the campaign, asking voters to place a "Citizens' Mandate for Peace, Life and Liberty" flier in a special ballot box. The flier calls on the parties involved in the conflict, including the government, the army, guerrilla groups, right-wing paramilitary organizations, and drug cartels, to seek a negotiated solution for peace.

Support for the vote for peace surpassed the projections of its organizers, who hoped for a response of six million. The chief organizer of the symbolic vote, former El Tiempo news editor

Francisco Santos, said he had no illusions about what the vote will mean in the short term. "Peace is something that you build from day to day," he said. Colombia's two main rebel groups, calling Samper's administration illegitimate, have refused even to consider peace negotiations until a new president takes office next year. [Sources: Agence France-Presse, Spanish news service EFE, 10/26/97; Associated Press, CNN, El Nuevo Herald, Inter Press Service, The Miami Herald, 10/27/97; Reuter, 10/24/97, 10/27/97, 10/28/97; Agence France-Presse, Clarin (Argentina), The New York Times, The Washington Post, 10/28/97]

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