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Governing Partido Liberal Wins Congressional Election in Colombia

by LADB Staff

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Legislative elections took place in Colombia on March 8, during the strongest guerrilla offensive in years (see related article in this edition). Although the opposition increased its share of the vote compared with previous elections, the governing Partido Liberal maintained control of both houses of Congress. The strong showing by independent candidates or party members perceived as more independent could affect the upcoming presidential race. This was the first legislative election since President Ernesto Samper won the presidency in 1994.

Two days after his election, charges surfaced that his campaign was financed with drug money. In almost four years in office, and despite a congressional exoneration, Samper has been unable to shake off the charges. Since he took office, more than twenty legislators have been jailed or have charges pending against them, most related to drug money (see NotiSur, 06/21/96 and 12/06/96).

Opponents hoped that voters would do a major housecleaning in Congress. What they did, however, with absenteeism that topped 65%, was demonstrate their lack of faith in the political process. Election observers charge corruption and vote-buying. Those few voters who went to the polls chose 102 senators and 161 representatives to replace a sitting Congress that is considered one of the country's most corrupt institutions.

Reports of vote buying and campaign contributions from drug cartels arose frequently during the campaign. Hundreds of people were arrested on election day with forged identity cards or other evidence of attempted fraud. About 240 of the 7,000 candidates are under criminal investigation, including Senate president Amylkar Acosta. The wives of two deputies who are in jail on charges of illicit enrichment were elected to their seats. The Partido Liberal held its congressional majority, with 50% of the 102 seats in the Senate and 53% in the Chamber of Deputies. The major opposition party, the Partido Conservador, will have 23% of the Senate seats and 20% in the lower house. Independents increased their share of the vote, and will control 26% of the Senate, an increase of 8%. Nearly 35% of the total vote was divided among 7,700 candidates from 88 small and regional parties.

In the new Congress, however, not all Liberal deputies support the president or party candidate Horacio Serpa for the upcoming presidential elections, and not all Conservador deputies oppose the administration nor support their party candidate, Andres Pastrana. Ingrid Betancourt of the Partido Liberal obtained the highest percentage of votes for a single candidate in the Senate race. Betancourt has repeatedly opposed Samper and attacked the rampant corruption in his administration, describing it as a "puppet of the mafia." Because of Betancourt's unbending opposition to the president during the congressional investigations into his ties to drug cartels, some analysts called her strong victory a wake-up call for the traditional parties and for Samper's close allies.

Another top voter-getter was Partido Conservador candidate Fabio Valencia Cossio, also an outspoken Samper critic. In the lower house, Antonio Navarro Wolff, former guerrilla and president of the Constituent Assembly in 1991, and journalist Maria Isabel Rueda took the highest percentage of votes. Rueda, a lawyer and one-time director of the now-defunct QAP newscast, was instrumental in uncovering the scandal surrounding the 1994 elections. In Bogota, acclaimed film director Sergio Cabrera won a seat in the lower house. The "narcoscandal" influenced the elections more than had been expected.

Many of Samper's staunch defenders, including Heyne Mogollon, who headed the congressional committee that twice exonerated the president, and Samper's personal lawyer, Luis Guillermo Nieto Roa, were defeated. The vote also seemed to go against those most closely tied with the "official" wings of both major parties, with those like Betancourt who have been more independent faring better. Government downplays guerrilla offensive The election was held amid one of the bloodiest offensives in the 35 years of insurgency by leftist groups. In the week prior to the election, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) offensive in Caqueta province took the lives of nearly 100 soldiers. About 100,000 in Caqueta were without power on election day after rebels dynamited an electrical tower.

Still, government officials downplayed the election violence, describing the situation as "normal" in a country long accustomed to war. Nevertheless, rebel interference forced the cancellation of voting in at least 11 municipalities, and at least three candidates and 10 mayors were kidnapped just before the election. About 100 polling stations had their operations disrupted, with ballots stolen or burned and electoral officials kidnapped. Seventeen people died in election-related violence. (Sources: CNN, 03/08/98; Associated Press, BBC News, El Nuevo Herald, Reuter, 03/09/98; Spanish news service EFE, 03/08-10/98; The Miami Herald, 03/09/98, 03/10/98)

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