

6-5-1998

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Serpa, Pastrana to Face Off in Runoff for Colombian Presidency

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 1998-06-05

Colombians went to the polls May 31 to elect a new president. In a very close race, Horacio Serpa took 34.6%, Andres Pastrana 34.3%, and Noemi Sanin 26.8%. Retired Gen. Haroldo Bedoya came in a distant fourth, with less than 2%. The runoff will take place June 21, with Sanin in a key position to influence the outcome. The new president will begin a four-year term Aug. 7. Abstention was high, with 48% of the 10.5 million eligible voters choosing to stay home. It is, however, the lowest abstention rate in a first-round presidential election in Colombia since 1974.

Serpa's first-place finish came as a surprise, since polls had consistently put him behind Pastrana by between 4% and 7%. In the week preceding the vote, the polls suggested Serpa might come in third behind Sanin. Because the pre-election polls predicted a first-place finish for Pastrana, the outcome was a decided blow.

Third-place Sanin big winner

Because of her strong showing, Sanin is the big victor in the election. She received the highest percentage ever for an independent presidential candidate in Colombia, and, for the first time in recent history, threatened Colombia's entrenched two-party tradition. She won outright in six of Colombia's largest cities, including Bogota, Cali, and Medellin.

In pre-election polls, Sanin received the highest favorable ratings of any candidate. But when asked for whom they would vote, most respondents picked either Serpa or Pastrana because they thought Sanin couldn't win. Although many Colombians are tired of "patronage" politics and rampant corruption, Sanin still had to battle the political machinery of the established parties. Especially in rural areas, local party bosses distribute favors, expecting and getting votes in return.

The 49-year-old Sanin, a former foreign minister, now plays a key role in the runoff. Immediately after the results became known, both Pastrana and Serpa began courting Sanin, hoping for an endorsement. "The votes for Noemi Sanin and Andres Pastrana are both votes for change," said Pastrana. "I'm calling on Noemi Sanin because we need her. We cannot do this alone and need all those votes to return hope to Colombia." "Maria Emma [Mejia, Serpa's running mate] and I share Noemi's message of national reconciliation," said Serpa.

"The most important challenge facing all Colombians is achieving peace." Sanin's first response was that her supporters, who are independents, were free to choose their candidate. Nevertheless, analysts agreed that Sanin could hold the cards to the runoff if she decides to play them. Colombia's leading newspapers said it would be almost impossible for Sanin to swing all her supporters to one of the second-round candidates, even if she wanted to. They speculated that about half her backers would lean toward Pastrana, with the rest divided between Serpa and abstention. "The majority

of Noemi's voters are sympathizers of Pastrana," said Eduardo Pizarro, a political analyst at the National University.

Runoff promises to be close

Clearly, neither Serpa nor Pastrana has a significant electoral edge. "We could speak of a new start," said political analyst Vicente Torrijos, "because to believe that her votes would automatically run to Serpa or to Pastrana is not at all certain or yet defined." Another factor affecting the outcome is that both candidates have high "negatives," characteristics that stir significant dislike in a portion of the electorate.

Serpa's biggest drawback is his unwavering loyalty to Samper. Pastrana is seen as representing the wealthy and being out of touch with the problems of Colombia's 18 million people who live in poverty. Pastrana, who narrowly lost to Samper in 1994, broke the scandal that overshadowed the entire Samper presidency when he released three "narcocassettes" that revealed ties between Samper and the Cali Cartel (see NotiSur, 07/29/94 and 04/14/95). His Gran Alianza por el Cambio includes the traditional Partido Social Conservador (PSC) of his late father, Misael, president from 1970 to 1974.

Pastrana says a vote for Serpa is a vote for "more of the same." "They spoke of creating a million and a half jobs, and they are leaving us with a million and a half more unemployed," said Pastrana. "They spoke of making government more honest and ended up with the most corrupt government in Colombia's history. They spoke of bringing peace to Colombia, and they brought us worse violence." Serpa, Samper's former interior minister, staunchly stood by the president amid charges his campaign took US\$6 million from the Cali cartel in 1994.

Many credit Serpa's political skill with saving Samper from being ousted as a result of the charges. Serpa was a key figure in the 1994 campaign and was implicated in the scandal that followed, but earlier this year, prosecutors told Serpa he would not face formal charges. Serpa's campaign centered on his pledge to end the half century of political violence that has wracked Colombia. Serpa said he had taken part in at least four negotiations with leftist guerrillas in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, and would personally lead efforts to demobilize the insurgents.

Peace and economy will be key issues

The candidates' platforms for resolving economic problems and achieving peace will be important issues to the voters. But the tasks are monumental. The winner of the runoff will inherit a sagging economy, growing guerrilla and paramilitary violence, and strained relations with the US, which has criticized President Samper's alleged drug ties and corruption as well as human rights abuses by the military. "Unless the new president is willing to undertake terribly risky and politically costly reforms, what can be expected is four more years of the same," said Rodrigo Losada, an analyst at the Javeriana University. In addition, either candidate would face major political obstacles if elected.

If Pastrana triumphs, experts say a hostile Congress controlled by the Partido Liberal could tie his hands. If Serpa wins, many Colombians will be angry at what they see as chapter two of the scandal-ridden Samper government. The growing grassroots movement clamoring for peace has left little doubt about the importance that negotiations with the guerrillas will have during the next

administration. The main rebel groups have said they would negotiate with the new president, and both Pastrana and Serpa have accepted the offer, although each said would approach it differently. Pastrana said he would dialogue directly with the Coordinadora Nacional Guerrillera Simon Bolivar (CNG), a loose umbrella group that includes the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), and the Ejercito Popular de Liberacion (EPL).

Pastrana would thus break from dialoging with each guerrilla group separately as the Samper administration has attempted. Pastrana considers international mediation important in facilitating dialogue and proposes an agreement on human rights before a cease fire. Serpa also said he would personally dialogue with the guerrilla leaders and would withdraw the army from the area established for negotiations. The military withdrawal from five municipalities in southern Colombia is one of the FARC's preconditions for negotiations. Serpa said he is willing to call a Constitutional Assembly, something suggested by both the FARC and the ELN, as essential for civil participation in designing a long-term peace project.

Serpa said peace must be accompanied by "deep social, economic and political changes, the fight against citizen insecurity, which is the product of other forms of violence, and the eradication of the drug-trafficking problem." A well-articulated peace proposal is likely to capture votes in the runoff. The conflict is now estimated to be costing the equivalent of 4% of GDP annually while defense spending, set at US\$2.69 billion for 1998, is taking a growing chunk of the national budget. [Sources: Associated Press, Clarin (Argentina), 05/30/98, 06/01/98; Inter Press Service, Notimex, Reuters, 06/01/98; The Miami Herald, 05/28/98, 06/01/98, 06/02/98; Spanish news service EFE, 05/31/98-06/02/98; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 05/31/98, 06/01/98, 06/03/98]

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