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## **Colombian President-Elect Andres Pastrana Faces Difficult Challenges**

*by Guest*

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[The following article by Lucien O. Chauvin is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It first appeared in the June 25, 1998, edition of the weekly publication Latinamerica Press.]

Andres Pastrana is Colombia's president-elect, winning the country's highest office June 21 by one of the largest margins in recent history. Pastrana, representing the Partido Conservador, received 50.6% of the votes compared to the 46.2% garnered by his Partido Liberal opponent Horacio Serpa. Pastrana received a final boost the day before the election from Noemi Sanin, who came in third in the first round of voting May 31.

While not mentioning Pastrana by name, Sanin said she was "voting for change," which was Pastrana's campaign theme (see NotiSur, 06/05/98). Pastrana follows in the footsteps of his father, Misael Pastrana, president of Colombia from 1970 to 1974. When inaugurated on Aug. 7, the president-elect will end 12 years of Partido Liberal rule. Pastrana profited politically from Samper's drug scandal. While the country is facing one of its most difficult economic and political periods, the election boiled down to a contest around outgoing President Ernesto Samper, who has been hounded by drug scandals since taking office four years ago.

Serpa, a lawyer, former mayor of Barrancabermeja in the northern state of Santander, former congressional representative and government minister, is best known for his role as interior minister in Samper's government. He was Samper's staunchest defender when the president was accused of accepting money from drug traffickers to finance the 1994 presidential campaign. Although in 1996 Congress found him innocent of accepting US\$6 million from the Cali drug cartel, Samper was plagued throughout his four years by the scandal. Several of his ministers and Partido Liberal representatives were jailed for ties to drug traffickers, and key members of the administration, such as Sanin and vice president Humberto de la Calle, resigned.

Pastrana, a lawyer, former Bogota mayor and Partido Conservador senator, also gained fame from his connections to Samper. Pastrana lost to Samper in 1994. He was the first to accuse the president of ties to drug traffickers and released the now-famous "narcotapes," recordings of Samper allies talking with Cali cartel traffickers about money, two days after the 1994 elections (see NotiSur, 06/24/94). Leading Colombia into the 21st century, Pastrana faces one of the toughest tasks of any Colombian president since democracy was restored in the late 1950s. While possessing one of South America's most developed industrial infrastructures, Colombia is grappling with unprecedented economic difficulties. Inflation is currently running at 20% and urban unemployment is 12.7%, giving the country one of the worst jobless rates in Latin America after Argentina, where unemployment is 15%. Colombia's economy grew by 4.8% in the first four months of this year, off nearly a point from last year.

Complicating the economic picture is a series of external shocks that will hamper the new government. Asian stock- market troubles, and more recently Japan's near economic collapse, have negatively affected most of Latin America's stock markets. The Bogota market has lost nearly 6% of its volume just in the past few weeks. The worldwide oil crisis is also having a negative impact on Colombia's economy. The incoming government predicts that the country's balance-of-payment deficit will be much worse than in 1997, when it represented 5.8% of GDP. "I am receiving a country whose public finances are in terrible shape and my government will place special attention on an economic adjustment package, which cannot be put off," Pastrana said.

Improved relations with US expected under new president Samper's alleged drug connections have also hurt on the economic front, particularly in relation to the US. The US government "decertified" Colombia in 1996 and 1997 in its annual evaluation of the war on drugs. The country was certified this year, but for "security reasons," not merit. As part of its certification process, the US government could impose economic sanctions on Colombia for failing to uphold its part in the drug war.

The next president is expected to have better relations with the US. In a recent editorial, the US daily The Wall Street Journal said relations would be better no matter who won. The question, the paper editorialized, "is not if relations will improve but by how much." Pastrana says that his foreign policy "will be aimed at recovering Colombia's dignity." The US government says it expects better relations with Pastrana's government. "We hope to turn the page" in our relations with Colombia, James Rubin, State Department spokesman, said.

While the US government has praised Colombia for the arrest of nearly all the high-ranking members of the Cali cartel, it has also taken the country to task for its rising levels of drug crops and drug production. Colombia is now the world's largest producer of coca leaves, from which cocaine is produced. The country surpassed Peru last year, with coca production rising to 75,000 hectares. Colombia is now the largest supplier of heroin to the US and a main provider of marijuana.

What has drawn attention to Colombia recently, however, is not drugs or economic troubles, but its horrendous level of political violence. In the weeks leading up to the elections, for example, massacres claimed more than 40 lives. The escalating levels of violence are a result of the surging left-wing rebel groups, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejercito Nacional de Liberacion (ELN), on one side and right-wing paramilitaries, believed to be supported by the military, on the other. While the government tries to blame the violence on the guerrillas, its own statistics show the bulk of human rights violations are committed by the paramilitaries, who are blamed for the recent massacre of 36 people in Barrancabermeja as well as for the high-profile killings of human rights lawyer Eduardo Umama and Communist Party leader Maria Arango a few weeks ago (see NotiSur, 05/15/98).

"I think it is clear that the next president inherits a country in worse shape than anytime in the past 50 years a powerful guerrilla insurgency, paramilitaries who operate freely throughout the country, and a security force that is either unable or unwilling to confront the root cause of violence," said Robin Kirk, who covers Colombia for Human Rights Watch/Americas. "Clearly, the human rights

situation is the worst in the hemisphere. Last year alone, there were at least 185 massacres, meaning the killings of four or more people at the same place and at the same time.

Yet the government has done next to nothing to confront the leading perpetrators of massacres, the paramilitary groups often working with the tacit acquiescence or open support of the Colombian army." The new president will also have to make a serious effort to begin peace negotiations with the guerrillas, but the task will not be easy. The guerrillas are active throughout the country.

On election day, guerrillas ambushed a police convoy outside Bogota, killing 15 officers. Pastrana has promised to personally lead peace negotiations with the two rebel groups. "The Colombian people want peace and change and today they voted for peace and change," said the president-elect in his first statement after being declared the winner. "Today is a day for national reconciliation."

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