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President Uribe Weakened in Vote

by LADB Staff

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In an election process tarnished by political violence, the few voters who went to the polls Oct. 25-26 dealt Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez a serious setback. Most, if not all, of the 15 points in the referendum, which Uribe said was vital to defeat terrorism and ward off an economic collapse, were defeated.

In local elections the following day, the Colombian left received a large boost with the victory of Luis Eduardo "Lucho" Garzon in the race for mayor of Bogota. Besides the vote on the referendum, Colombians elected 32 governors, 1,091 mayors, more than 11,000 city councilors, and 398 departmental deputies.

Voting on the referendum was marred by guerrilla attacks that killed seven Colombian soldiers and six civilians. Despite guarantees of protection offered by the Colombian government to encourage candidates to stay in the races, the candidate death toll during the campaign was at least 30, including one candidate for governor, 11 for mayor, and 17 for municipal councils. Many more received death threats.

The Registraduria Nacional del Estado Civil, the agency in charge of elections, said 48 candidates withdrew from their respective races for security-related problems and another 88 did so citing "personal reasons." Uribe tries to parlay popularity into referendum votes Uribe went all out to convince voters to back his referendum, and in so doing turned it into a vote of confidence on his presidency.

Counting on approval ratings that have been around 75%, Uribe said the referendum was essential to his programs, and he added that "if the referendum fails, governability fails as well."

"President Uribe, who is still popular, is trying to salvage an ill-conceived and incomprehensible referendum by converting it into a plebiscite on his approval," says Antonio Navarro Wolff, a leading opposition senator, before the vote.

Harold Rozo, director of postgraduate studies in the political science department at the Universidad Javeriana, said a rejection of the referendum could jeopardize Uribe's credibility. "If he loses, [Uribe] could put the credibility he has at risk, even more so given that in this first year of his administration the measures to combat the violence have not been as effective as had been expected," said Rozo.

Many voters were apparently put off by the sheer complexity of a voting process that required responses to 14 different questions on a ballot that analysts estimated took an average of 22 minutes to read. In addition, the questions were written in highly technical and legalistic language, in a

country with a rural-illiteracy rate of 20%. As an expression of popular democracy, the referendum left something to be desired.

In urging support for the referendum, Uribe said the proposed reforms would combat official corruption, bring financial stability through cost-cutting measures, assuage international markets, and provide scarce government resources for his hard-line efforts to end Colombia's 39-year civil war. He estimated the referendum would save the government US\$7 billion a year.

The referendum also aimed to reduce the number of seats in Congress from 267 to 218, ban tainted politicians from holding office, make congressional spending more accountable, freeze public-sector salaries for at least two years, and cap state pensions while still allowing the government to spend vast sums on defense.

The two-year salary freeze which would apply to state workers earning at least twice the minimum wage of about US\$120 a month would account for 90% of the total US\$7 billion in savings over seven years that Uribe hoped for from the referendum. Attempting to cast the referendum as the way to avert financial disaster, Uribe compared the country's situation to that of Argentina before its economy collapsed in December 2001.

Opponents accused Uribe of gross exaggeration, a charge economic analysts agreed with, and said his stark warnings were a desperate bid to win votes. "He is scared of losing so he resorting to extremist arguments," said Navarro Wolff, who saw the referendum as a plot by Uribe to grab more power. Even some members of Uribe's own party opposed the referendum, favoring increased social spending over an austerity program they said was a sellout to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Opponents said the reforms would concentrate more power in the executive, and the savings would be diverted into boosting defense spending. They said it was "a trap," that it would not combat political corruption but would "cut salaries and labor rights...privatize education and fiscal control...and reduce democracy and promote authoritarianism."

The Partido Liberal and the Polo Democratico Independiente (PDI) joined forces to urge voters to abstain in the referendum vote. In their final campaign speeches, the president and other officials implied that voting for the referendum was being on the side of democracy, while abstaining amounted to complicity with terrorism, said Marco Romero, a member of the Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES).

Unofficial results show big loss for Uribe

The results of the referendum are still in the hands of the nine magistrates of the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE), who must do the official count. With 97.95% of the votes counted on Oct. 27, none of the 15 points on the referendum had the necessary votes. At least 25% of registered voters, 6.27 million votes, were needed for the referendum to be valid. Abstentionism was close to 70% for the referendum. Although in all 15 referendum questions, at least 80% of the votes cast were in favor,

most if not all appear headed for defeat because their totals were less than the 25% of the electorate needed.

The question about freezing state salaries for two years and another to cut the size of Congress had clearly failed. Analysts said there was a chance that, in the final, official count, two of the 15 points could squeak past the 25% barrier the ban on corrupt politicians holding office and a key reduction in state pensions.

Election officials said it would likely be several days before the remaining 2% of the votes were counted and the official results announced. The results of the referendum vote were "surprising," said political analyst Fernando Cepeda Ulloa. He said no one, certainly not the president and his ministers, expected such a low turnout, especially when the government had staked so much on it. "If the [pensions reduction] question is approved that would be good for the president," said Cepeda. "Overall, this is not a victory for Uribe, but neither is it a major defeat. He still has options." The government has already said it will take other measures to save an equivalent amount of money. But Uribe will have to work with political opponents to push his proposals through Congress. "The government cannot ignore what has happened. There is a need to establish a new political dialogue and find solutions to corruption and fiscal reform through consensus," Cepeda said.

Legislators confirmed on Oct. 29 that Uribe has prepared a package of measures that include more taxes, including an increase in the value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) from the present 16% to 18%, cuts in social spending, and layoffs of state employees. These measures are sure to meet strong resistance, since Colombians have been growing more concerned that a major part of the national budget has been directed at the war while poverty and unemployment have increased.

On Oct. 27, Interior and Justice Minister Fernando Lodono Hoyos, a key player in the referendum fight, accepted responsibility for its failure and offered to resign, as did several other ministers. In the aftermath of the referendum defeat, one thing is clear Uribe can no longer assume the public will back him unconditionally.

One lesson for Uribe, said an editorial in *El Tiempo* newspaper, is that positive ratings for the president and his "democratic security" policy "do not represent a blank check, nor do they exempt him from listening to dissident voices." Uribe received "a very strong lesson in humility, both in the referendum vote and in Sunday's elections," said PDI Sen. Carlos Gaviria.

Left wins in Bogota

Uribe could take little comfort from the elections the day after the referendum vote. PDI candidate Lucho Garzon, a moderate leftist and former communist who once headed the country's largest labor federation (Confederacion Unitaria de Trabajadores, CUT), received 47% of the vote in the mayoral race in Bogota. He defeated Juan Francisco Lozano, a former television executive identified as the candidate of Bogota's upper classes and the president. Garzon will take office Jan. 1.

The PDI gained notice on the political scene in 2002, when Garzon came in third in the presidential elections, behind Uribe and Horacio Serpa (see NotiSur, 2002-05-31). Garzon is an opponent of the war, a critic of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), and a staunch proponent of a negotiated settlement to the armed conflict.

In his campaign, Garzon proposed a social program that included setting up an investment bank for the poor and programs to protect merchants in the informal sector. He said he would redirect investment in the capital toward the 70% of the inhabitants who are below the poverty line. Garzon's victory was a significant boost for Colombia's embattled leftist politicians, who have long been targets of assassination by outlawed rightist militias. It could also give Garzon a powerful springboard for another run for the presidency.

Following his victory, the mayor-elect was nonconfrontational but firm in his commitment to principles. "No one should fear this mayor," said Garzon, a former golf caddie and the son of a maid. He added that he did not intend to pit "the rich against the poor." Garzon said his administration would open food banks in neighborhoods flooded by families fleeing violence in the countryside. He also said he would oppose some of Uribe's hard-line tactics in the campaign to crush the insurgency particularly the mass arrests of suspected guerrillas.

"The president will not have me as an ally in these policies," he said. "I will reject and resist anything that violates human rights." PDI-backed candidates also won mayoral posts in the cities of Barranquilla and Medellin and the governorship in Valle del Cauca department.

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