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Uribe-Allied Parties Now in Congress

by LADB Staff

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Colombia's congressional elections on March 12 handed control of the legislature to parties allied with President Alvaro Uribe. Winners included the Partido Conservador (PC), Cambio Radical, Partido de la U, and Convergencia Ciudadana, while the Partido Liberal (PL) lost many of the seats it was trying to gain and slipped even further from its historically central role in Colombian politics.

The leftist Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA), however, has gained unprecedented strength in the Congress. The vote also served as a primary election for the presidential race for the PL and PDA, determining the opposition parties' candidates who will run against Uribe in May, although neither winner appears to have much chance of success.

The landslide victory for Uribe-allied parties gave the president 72 allied seats in the 102-seat Congress, while his opponents will have 28. Results show similar gains in the lower house, with government parties taking 91 of 166 seats. Some independent winners have yet to say whether they will be a part of Uribe's coalition. The Partido de la U will be the largest presence in both houses, the PC will be the second-strongest party, Cambio Radical fourth-largest, and Convergencia Ciudadana the sixth-largest. Uribe's allies also include four other smaller movements.

The PL took only 17 of the 30 seats it had campaigned for, while the PDA will have 11 legislators, making it the fifth-largest force in the body. It was the first time that the PDA gained so many seats. Voter turnout was only about 40%, with about 10.78 million people voting. Analysts said the low voter turnout and the fact that 13% of voters cast invalid ballots could not be entirely attributed to the leftist guerrillas, although they fomented abstention through attacks in the days leading up to the vote.

A number of conservative candidates took up the campaign strategy that served Uribe patron US President George W. Bush so well during his 2004 re-election campaign: they stirred up fears regarding marriage rights for gay Colombians. In addition to campaigning against same-sex marriage rights, they promised voters that they would fight Colombia's growing movement to decriminalize abortion.

Primaries nominate Serpa, Gaviria to oppose Uribe

The PL is apparently plummeting from its strength in decades past when, as one of Colombia's traditional parties, it traded power with the PC. Former secretary of the Organization of American States (OAS) from 1994 to 2004 and former President Cesar Gaviria (1990-1994), who heads the PL, took some responsibility for the Liberals' overwhelming defeat, though he did allege that "the paramilitaries and 'easy money' played an important role in the legislative elections."

Gaviria's party will put forward Horacio Serpa to run against Uribe in his drive for re-election. Serpa won against Rafael Pardo and Rodrigo Rivera with more than one million votes, while Pardo and Rivera each received only a half-million votes. Serpa lost prior campaigns for the presidency in 1998 and 2002. The PDA primary resulted in a surprise win for Carlos Gaviria against former guerrilla Antonio Navarro Wolff, who had been seen as the front-runner for the leftists. Gaviria, a retired judge, received about 573,000 votes, while Navarro got about 498,000. In addition to Serpa and Navarro, independent candidates Alvaro Leyva (conservative) and former Bogota mayor Antanas Mockus will tilt their lances at the Uribe windmill in May.

Strong indication that Uribe's re-election is imminent

The victory for Uribe-allied groups indicates that his presidential re-election bid is in strong shape and voters will likely come out in his favor on May 28. Serpa is the nearest contender, but he has yet to get within 20 points of Uribe in most opinion surveys and has faced a gulf of as much as 35 points in some of those polls. Uribe's lead has been slipping, however. The president lost more than 10 points between February and the start of March, according to Bogota daily El Tiempo. The president had held 65.2% in a February survey of 1,200 respondents, but his advantage fell to 53.9%.

Analysts said that tensions with the Ecuadoran government regarding alleged military incursions on the countries' border and the negative perceptions about the conduct of the war had eaten into Uribe's lead. Paramilitary-influenced candidates supposedly lose power. Candidates who had been publicly associated with paramilitary groups (see NotiSur, 2006-02-03) lost a number of seats in the election, although there were reports of paramilitary groups controlling voting patterns in some areas.

On March 9, the human rights group Hijos e Hijos por la Memoria y contra la Impunidad issued a communique urging voters not to cast their ballots for 13 candidates with ties to the paramilitaries. So far, "17 or 18 legislators come from forces" that would appear to be linked to the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), said Ivan Cepeda, spokesperson for the newly created group, who cited "suspicious-looking local alliances."

In the Santo Domingo Savio slum neighborhood in the northwestern city of Medellin, Colombia's second-largest city, paramilitary fighters who had taken part in the disarmament process were seen lining up outside a tent identified with the city government, where campaign offices of Sen. Rocio Arias an open admirer of the paramilitaries and PL candidate Jorge Morales functioned unofficially.

The mother of one demobilized paramilitary fighter reported that the former paramilitaries had been "instructed to present 10 votes each" for Arias and Morales, said Luis David Obando, director of public opinion in the nongovernmental Instituto Popular de Capacitacion (IPC) whose experts observed the elections in conjunction with representatives of the Universidad Nacional. This "shows that the disarmed-paramilitary apparatus continues to have a grip on certain areas and that its control must be effective, given that there were lines of demobilized fighters" outside the campaign tent, said Obando. Arias was defeated, while Morales won his seat in the lower house of Congress.

Arias was one of the 13 candidates on the list put out by the Hijos e Hijos por la Memoria y contra la Impunidad, only six of whom were elected. "One important phenomenon that must be highlighted is that voters punished those candidates who are recognized human rights violators or have been publicly identified with the paramilitary groups," said Cepeda. Among the candidates on the list who lost the elections was retired Gen. Rito Alejo del Rio. He is blamed by local communities along the Atrato River for implementing a combined military-paramilitary strategy in that northwestern region that included massacres and caused forced displacement of large numbers of people in 1997, according to the pre-election statement by the Hijos e Hijos group.

Also defeated were two other military men on the list and pro-Uribe candidates Eleonora Pineda, Muriel Benito-Revollo, and Vicente Blel. Uribe calls on FARC to negotiate Leftist rebels intensified attacks in rural areas ahead of the weekend elections but announced plans to free two police officers. The FARC had offered to deliver the prisoners to Leyva, but Uribe said the hostages were being used as "human political merchandise."

Attackers dynamited an oil pipeline and downed electrical towers, authorities said, and a bomb killed three people in the southern town of San Vicente del Caguan, the site of failed 1999-2002 peace negotiations with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). The bomb killed a child and two women, Mayor Edwin Valdez told the Associated Press by telephone. He blamed the rebels and said three soldiers were among the nine wounded. The attack was the second fatal strike blamed on rebels in 48 hours.

Three people were killed, including a 6-month-old baby, in the hamlet of Montebonito, 60 km northeast of Bogota, on March 4. Later, Uribe took advantage of the results of the election to urge peace and an end to the war. "I ask the FARC to change its behavior, review the democratic calling of all Colombians, and consider the possibility of serious and urgent peace talks," Uribe said.

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