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LADB Staff

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Uribe Wins Second Term

by LADB Staff

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Colombian President Alvaro Uribe won a second four-year term by a landslide in a May 28 vote marked by high abstention rates. It represented a solid consolidation of his power two months after parties allied to Uribe took a majority in the Congress (see NotiSur, 2006-03-31), but it also represented the first time a leftist candidate had a significant showing in a presidential election. Threats marred the electoral-campaign period, with one candidate dropping out claiming that he was being threatened and many reports of intimidation by paramilitary groups and increased attacks by rebel forces.

Second term for US ally after constitutional change

One might argue that Uribe won his re-election not on May 28 but in 2005 when he convinced the Congress and courts to approve changes to the Constitution that allowed the president of Colombia to seek a second term (see NotiSur, 2005-02-11, 2005-10-28, and 2005-12-02). Pre-election polls consistently showed Uribe would get the majority necessary to eliminate the need for a runoff election, though the numbers did not quite reflect his 62% win. Most polls foresaw his victory in the upper 50% range. The vote made Uribe the first Colombian president to win a second term since the 1940s and the first to have a second consecutive term since Simon Bolivar ruled Gran Colombia (modern-day Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela) from 1831 to 1830. The conservative Uribe beat his nearest rival by more than 40% with pledges to continue fighting crime and reducing poverty.

In what, according to the Associated Press, was Colombia's least-violent election in more than a decade, Uribe won the landslide victory. His closest rival was Sen. Carlos Gaviria of the leftist Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA) party. Washington's staunchest ally in Latin America will begin his second term on Aug. 7. Gaviria wins most votes for a leftist candidate in history. Despite finishing far behind, Gaviria captured 22% of the vote, a record for the left in the historically conservative country and almost four times the group's numbers in 2002. Horacio Serpa of the centrist Partido Liberal (PL) trailed in third place with just below 12%. Former Bogota mayor Antanas Mockus ran under his own party banner and took just over 1% of the vote. Former Cabinet minister Alvaro Leyva, who proposed a strategy to achieve a cease-fire in six months, bowed out of the race on May 18, complaining about receiving "intimidation" from authorities rather than protection.

Speaking at a downtown hotel in Bogota late on May 28, the bespectacled Uribe acknowledged the difficulties of the road ahead. "All Colombians must improve, and I must improve," he told supporters, some of them wearing blue hats with the victorious campaign slogan Adelante Presidente (Forge Ahead, Mr. President). "We must work for our country to achieve the enduring goodness our people and future generations of Colombians deserve." Uribe can rely on a supportive Congress where pro-Uribe parties control 70 of the Senate's 102 seats.

A friendly Congress will be crucial for what many predict will be a necessary round of belt-tightening following a near-doubling of defense spending and a 25% increase in troop strength during Uribe's first term.

Paramilitaries rearming

Uribe will also have to complete the demobilization of 30,000 far-right paramilitary fighters, even as evidence mounts that some of the militants have rearmed and their leaders continue to wield power in and out of the areas they once controlled. Human rights groups and foreign diplomats have criticized the government for being too lenient with the paramilitaries, many of whom were offered a complete amnesty despite having committed atrocities (see NotiSur, 2005-06-17, 2005-07-22, 2006-02-03, and 2006-03-10). Uribe conceded recently that he understood these complaints, calling it "the cost of peace."

Critics, both international and domestic, continue to allege that Uribe favors the paramilitaries and even has family links to them. Critics of Uribe also say the president has shown a disinterest in social programs in a country with rampant poverty, and they fear his re-election will exacerbate his alleged autocratic tendencies. But Colombians who decided to vote overwhelmingly backed Uribe because of reduced levels of crime and violence following his crackdown on armed groups and because of a surge in economic growth.

Militarily, the government will focus its efforts on defeating the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Latin America's oldest and best-equipped guerrilla force. An unprecedented offensive against the FARC during Uribe's first term forced the rebels to retreat into the jungle but failed to catch the group's top leaders. But the group stepped up attacks in the lead-up to the election, killing civilians and soldiers in significant numbers. The government has been conducting peace negotiations in Havana, Cuba, with representatives of the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), the second-strongest rebel force in the country.

Outside of Colombia, Uribe's allies in Washington will judge his second term primarily on how successful he is in stamping out the country's massive illegal drugs industry. The drug trade is closely related to the country's conflict, given that it funds the groups fighting the civil war. After solid backing for the past six years, the US Congress which has authorized US\$4 billion in aid to Colombia since 2000 may be tiring of the lackluster results of the anti-narcotics strategy known as Plan Colombia. A recent report by the White House drug czar showed that the production of coca, the base ingredient of cocaine, expanded by 25% in Colombia in 2005. Officials attributed the rise to a change in methodology, but the news emboldened critics to call the anti-drug plan a failure.

The Harvard- and Oxford-trained Colombian president will also concentrate on extending the economic growth of the past four years. The economy grew by 5% last year, helping cut unemployment by a third since Uribe took office. Two-party monopoly on presidential votes ended Gaviria's strong showing and Uribe's decision to set up his own party rather than sticking with the Partido Conservador (PC) that brought him into office in 2002 left Serpa and the PL severely weakened. It also ended the decades-old system wherein the conservatives and liberals traded periods of being in power.

The PDA emerged as a real strength as Gaviria surged late in the race, while the PL appeared desperate. If the PL does not reinvigorate its base in the coming years, the PL-PC duopoly on power, which dates back to the 19th Century, may become a historical phenomenon. The party system that has emerged based on Uribe's personality and popular strength may have long-term implications for the PC as well, with the possibility that the conservative party may find itself fragmented if and when their leader is no longer the central figure in Colombian politics. If voters tire of ongoing violence or begin to associate Uribe with various scandals that have emerged under his government (see NotiSur, 2006-05-12), the PDA could capitalize on the fabled "second-term curse" that has haunted former Colombian presidents and presidents of other countries in the region.

Gaviria has called on his party not to accept any offer of high political office or diplomatic appointments from the Uribe administration, signaling a possible long-term strategy to remain the alternative to the Uribistas.

Majority abstain from voting

Once again, the choice that most voters made was not to participate in the elections at all. Results showed that 7.3 million voters supported Uribe and his controversial "democratic security" policy and that 4.2 million were against him (including the small numbers of voters who cast ballots for other candidates). But 14.6 million voters either did not come out for the elections or cast blank ballots. The abstention rate grew from 48.4% in 2002 to 54.9% in May, according to the Inter Press Service. Critics claim, therefore, that Uribe will govern with the support of just 27.5% of the country's voters. The abstention rate was even higher during the congressional election in March, with the number reaching a record 66%.

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