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Colombian Left Gains Modestly Against President Uribe in Regional Elections

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Regional elections somewhat weakened conservative President Alvaro Uribe's control of various posts around the country, although parties allied with him still maintain control of most of the Colombian political scene. A leftist opponent of Uribe, Samuel Moreno, won the mayor's race in Bogota, keeping the post conventionally known as the second-most-important office in the country in the hands of the left-wing Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA).

In the lead-up to the Oct. 28 vote, more than two dozen candidates were assassinated, while 10 others were kidnapped and about 100 faced death threats, according to Miami-based newspaper El Nuevo Herald.

**Moreno takes torch of official opposition**

Colombians voted to fill some 15,000 regional posts, including governors, mayors, regional assembly members, and municipal officials.Uribe's coalition won 17 of 32 governorships and 13 mayoralties in provincial capitals, counting the wins of the Partido Conservador, Cambio Radical, Alas Equipo Colombia, and Partido de la U, all parties allied with the president.

Nevertheless, the press and opposition parties called Uribe the loser of the election, with the failure of his preferred candidate in Bogota. PDA president Carlos Gaviria claimed victory, saying that Uribe "wanted to link his luck to this campaign [against Moreno], and he came out the opposite of his plan. In this moment, the PDA has obtained an overwhelming victory and the president of the republic has been soundly defeated in Bogota."

Moreno, an ally of outgoing Bogota mayor Luis "Lucho" Eduardo Garzon, ran against Enrique Penalosa, an independent candidate backed by Uribe. Moreno, a 47-year-old economist and lawyer, is the grandson of ex-military dictator Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957). He will replace Garzon on Dec. 31.

Garzon, a former labor leader and presidential candidate, won the mayoralty in 2003 (see NotiSur, 2003-10-31), making him a top opposition figure to the generally popular president. Garzon has popularity numbers around 60%. Moreno received about 897,000 votes, 200,000 more than Garzon won four years ago. He took about 43% of the total votes cast in the mayoral race. Penalosa won 543,000 votes, about 28%.

Coming in third was sports announcer William Vinasco with some 350,000 votes, about 16%. Abstention in Bogota declined between 4% and 5% relative to the 2003 election. Moreno expressed his happiness with the "historic" victory, saying, "Starting now, I am the mayor of all Bogotanos."
In his first public statement after the vote, Moreno said, "We are going to construct a more positive, more inclusive, and more democratic Bogota where we can all live better."

Moreno's ambitious plan of governance includes issues like security, education, environmental improvement (Bogota has the third-worst air pollution of any Latin American city), better transit and transport service in a disorderly city with high crime rates. Despite his big win, the city council Moreno will work with will have an Uribista majority. Some observers like opinion columnist Maria Jimena Duzan of Bogota daily newspaper El Tiempo and Simone Bruno of news network TeleSUR accused Uribe of meddling excessively in the Bogota mayor's race. Bruno said Uribe had accused Moreno of "buying votes" and receiving support from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

Duzan's analysis of the Moreno victory credited the voters of Bogota with rejecting Uribe's interference and turning in even greater numbers toward Moreno. El Nuevo Herald reported that Uribe campaigned openly for Penalosa even though the law prohibits it. Some analysts claimed that Uribe's losses reflected a calling to account for the many legislators and Uribe allies who have been investigated by the courts and prosecutors for links to right-wing paramilitary groups (see NotiSur, 2006-12-01 and 2007-03-02).

On Oct. 10, police clashed with hundreds of protesters who blocked roads and burned trucks in demonstrations called by unions, farmers, and indigenous groups who accused the government of ties to the right-wing militias. Picketers blocked traffic for hours on the Panamerican Highway in the southwestern state of Cauca, where at least 1,600 members of indigenous groups squared off against anti-riot police that came to clear the road, police said. Television images showed at least three trucks burning.

Cauca police chief Col. Luis Camacho said at least two police officers and three protesters were injured in the violence, and another eight demonstrators were arrested. The clashes were part of nationwide demonstrations against Uribe's government called by the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), Colombia's main labor federation.

Tens of thousands of people participated in the protests, including nearly 5,000 in Bogota, federation vice president Fabio Arias said. Uribe had a setback in Cali, Colombia's third-largest city, as well, with leftist doctor Jose Ivan Ospina beating the Uribe-favored candidate, Francisco Jose "Kiko" Lloreda. Ex-presidential candidate Horacio Serpa of the Partido Liberal also won the governor's race in his home department of Santander.

Antonio Navarro of the Polo Democratico Independiente (PDI) won the governor's race in the southern department of Narino. The PDA is a coalition of the PDI and Alternativa Democratica. Uribe's Cambio Radical made gains in several municipalities, led by Sen. German Vargas Lleras, one of the politicians with the best chances to succeed Uribe in presidential elections in 2010.

Cesar Gaviria, former president (1990-1994) and secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), led the Partido Liberal forward, strengthening its position with hundreds of victories.
in the provinces and municipalities and defying polls that had predicted otherwise. An OAS mission observing the election reported that the vote went forward normally with isolated events like the burning of ballot slips in some isolated regions and a lack of power in some southern regions. In the department of Narino, on the border with Ecuador, three electrical towers were blown up.

Although the country was generally "tranquil," OAS mission chief Dante Caputo said, "That does not mean there weren't incidents, it means that they didn't affect the normal development of the Colombian democracy in a significant way."

The vote did not result in major changes in the Colombian political map, and there was a national abstention rate of about 50%. During campaign, 29 candidates killed. Death threats, intimidation, kidnap, and murder rocked the political environment prior to the election, with 29 candidates murdered. The government blamed most of the deaths on FARC guerrillas.

Some parties withdrew candidates because of the increasing violence. In the week before the vote, for example, Gratiniario Murcia and Liliana Polania from the Convergencia Ciudadana were shot as they campaigned in the southwestern province of Caqueta. The two murdered candidates were visiting the town of El Diamante on Oct. 23 when they were shot. "Police urged them not to go to that area," Interior Minister Carlos Holguin told local radio. "There are still investigations underway, but we believe this is the FARC."

Uribe announced the week before a US$25,000 reward for any information leading to the arrests of those responsible for the murders of candidates. He also offered a US$5,000 reward for proof of vote fraud. Uribe, whose policies often get credit for a nationwide drop in homicides and kidnappings but which have not slowed attacks on political candidates, denounced the killings. He acknowledged the danger during a visit to El Doncello on Oct. 23, saying that "terrorists have managed to cause damage." However, he said, "The terrorists can't alter the democratic will of the Colombian people, who will head to the ballot boxes Sunday to express themselves in unprecedented numbers."

Some opposition candidates asked that the vote be delayed. The government called the safety worries exaggerated. The Interior Ministry provided bulletproof vests, armored vehicles, and bodyguards for 131 candidates in high-risk areas, and all such politicians have so far escaped harm. "But it's impossible to provide a bodyguard and armored SUV to all 87,000 candidates," said Maria Isabel Nieto, the deputy interior minister. "Candidates also need to do their part and avoid exposing themselves too much."

That was not easy in places like El Doncello, where half the 24,000 residents live in isolated hamlets where guerrillas roam freely. On July 10, leftist rebels targeted the town's 11 council members, killing two. The surprise attack, along with a January car bombing that flattened a dairy plant, forcing Swiss food giant Nestle SA from town, disrupted what the rebels called a sham democratic process.

Today, town business is done by telephone and the Internet. Most councilmembers fear the FARC will pursue their relatives. Only one councilman sought re-election; the others left Caqueta state. "Even if we have to go hungry, I'm not going back," said councilman Luis Gonzago Murcia, who
now supports his wife and four children by working in construction and selling pirated CDs in Bogota. "I know it's bad, but I have to feed my family."

Uribe decided to go to El Doncello after an Oct. 12 roadside bombing nearly killed Sen. Luis Fernando Velasco. "The response of El Doncello to this bad news caused by the FARC attack on Sen. Velasco has to be a mass rush to the polls next Sunday," Uribe told the crowd. But just as the president boarded a helicopter for Bogota, masked assailants presumed to be from the FARC killed two more candidates in a neighboring municipality.

Vice President Francisco Santos has accused the rebels of trying to meet a kill quota to show their muscle locally as their national power erodes. In their sights were people like mayoral candidate John Edward Monje in the town of Milan. Traveling by river to a campaign event Oct. 21, his floating caravan was ambushed by six guerrillas. He paddled furiously and then swam to safety under heavy fire, but an aide and bodyguard were killed. Monje dedicated his campaign to them. "They can kill me, but the FARC will never assassinate our democracy or the ideals I believe in," he said.

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