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Colombia: Possible Upset In Presidential Elections

by Andrés Gaudín

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Colombians are to elect a new president on May 30, and what did not enter anyone's mind until late April was that the winner might be Antanas Mockus, who had been running last in all the polls. But even more surprising is that the loser might be governing-party candidate Juan Manuel Santos, who has the backing of two-term President Alvaro Uribe. Had Uribe been constitutionally allowed to run for a third term, he would likely have swept the election. Seven candidates six men and one woman will be on the ballot, all hoping to find favor with the nearly 30 million eligible voters. Only three candidates show voter-preference numbers in the double digits: Mockus, of the Partido Verde (PV); Santos, of the Partido Social de Unidad Nacional (Partido de la U); and Noemí Sanín, of the traditional Partido Conservador Colombiano (PCC). Mockus represents the new, the leadership uncontaminated by corruption in a country where, within a democracy, corruption has reached levels seldom seen in Latin America. In contrast, Santos and Sanín both prominent Cabinet ministers during the Uribe administrations, he as minister of foreign trade, treasury, and defense, she as minister of foreign relations symbolize the old, the leadership tainted by corruption but also by the systematic violation of human rights and the growth of paramilitary and drug-trafficking mafias. Being Uribe's pick could be hurting Santos What has happened in recent weeks that has caused Santos and Sanín to lose their preeminence in the polls? Or, turning the question around, what has happened to send Mockus' numbers on a seemingly endless upward spiral? Regarding the first question, in recent years, human rights organizations around the world led by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) have the Uribe government topping the lists of all forms of threats to life (see NotiSur, 2009-07-17, 2010-03-05). The two rightist candidates are as compromised as Uribe in those aberrant practices. Now new accusations have come to light. The attorney general (fiscal general) released details of a plan by the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS) the state espionage and secret-police agency to implicate opposition leaders and even nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in crimes, including kidnappings, acts of terrorism, blackmail, support for guerrilla groups, and links to paramilitary drug traffickers. (The DAS reports directly to President Uribe, and both Santos and Sanín had direct participation in decisions.) In addition, the Red Cross presented a document in Geneva alleging that Uribe's repressive policies and his refusal to negotiate peace with the rebels have turned Colombia into the second country in the world after Sudan and before even Iraq in the number of persons displaced by conflict. In Colombia, the displaced are a result of the four-decade-long conflict, a reality that Uribe stubbornly ignores. Moreover, the Ecuadoran judiciary requested an international arrest warrant for Santos for having ordered and been responsible for invading its territory, which led to a rupture in Colombia's diplomatic relations with both Ecuador and Venezuela since March 2008, with dire economic consequences (see NotiSur, 2010-04-16). Last but not least, former President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) and traditional Partido Liberal Colombiano (PLC) candidate Rafael Pardo accuse Santos of having planned assassination attempts against them. Regarding the second question, Mockus has presented himself as the standard-bearer of the struggle against corruption, the issue that most concerns Colombians, and he has generated what has been called the "green wave," taking it upon himself to extol the virtues of social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. He has thus won the sympathy of society, especially young people who are almost half the electorate, which is precisely
what makes the Internet so valuable for his campaign. However, the Internet could also be Mockus' weak point and might even ruin his chance at the presidency, despite poll results. The "green" candidate has no party apparatus that facilitates his contact with those living in rural Colombia, and Facebook and Twitter are, for now, available only to those in the cities. Santos' profile As in old Spanish and Portuguese families where the future of each child was meticulously assigned military, law, religious life, spinster in charge of caring for the infirm and elderly among the Santos of Colombia, children of Iberian immigrants, each one also had his or her destiny decided. Until mid-April, everything pointed to Juan Manuel Santos Calderón fulfilling that plan and being installed in the Casa de Gobierno in August as the new president of the republic. It had been decided that he was to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather Eduardo, who was president from 1938 to 1942 and who handed down a saying that the favorite grandchild did not always know how to follow: "Repent for what you did, but do not grow old regretting what you failed to do." In his long public life, while his father founded a newspaper, one brother ran it, and another served as vice president, Juan Manuel was laboriously building his future. The first step was a reluctant wager, made to the happiness of his father for 37 years the editor and owner of the daily El Tiempo and head of the most influential multimedia company in Colombia: when Juan Manuel finished high school, he entered the Escuela Naval, a step on the road to a doctorate in economics and business administration, with post-graduate studies at the London School of Economics, and further advanced studies in journalism at Harvard and at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in Medford, Massachusetts. A multifaceted Cabinet minister he headed the Ministerios de Comercio Exterior, Hacienda, and Defensa, always serving rightist governments and accused of links with the feared paramilitary bands and the no-less-feared drug trafficking cartels the favorite Santos son created the Good Government Foundation (Fundación del Buen Gobierno, FBG). Guided by the slogan "transparency, efficiency, and efficacy," the FBG is intended to be the think tank for a hypothetical government with his seal. The FBG's bylaws seem designed to set in motion a project of "democratic and productive progress." In recent weeks, polls seem to indicate that Santos' commitment to Uribe's policies militarist, repressive, and exclusionary and the resonant cases of human rights violations in which he played a leading role as defense minister torture, forced recruitment of youth who were later assassinated and presented as guerrillas killed in battle are costing him dearly, and the Presidential Palace could end up being only an illusory destiny postponed for a more opportune moment. Perhaps it is all because he never repented, as his grandfather Eduardo counseled. Profile of Mockus World War II had just ended when the Mockus and Sivickas families emigrated from far-away Latvia. They did not come with the grand goal of "making it in America," as did so many immigrants; they arrived in Colombia with the mundane hope of just having something to eat every day. Shortly after they arrived, the eldest of the Mockus children met the youngest Sivickas. They fell in love and soon their new home happily welcomed a son. They named him Aurelijus Rutenis Antanas. His destiny was set: first, school, then work. The parents never imagined that their first-born would be a distinguished student and that he would soon obtain a doctorate in philosophy, then another in mathematics, and that he would twice be elected mayor of Bogotá (see Notisur, 2000-11-03). And much less did they imagine that he would be a candidate for president of the republic with a good chance of assuming the office on Aug. 7. Biographers prefer to characterize him as eccentric or, at best, as a prestigious professor, a teacher who captures the electorate with a simple message, to "clean up politics." Those who focus on his eccentricities are expansive. They recall that, as rector of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (UN), he dropped his pants to get the attention of a group of students whose laughter was interrupting his lecture; that he got married at a circus riding an elephant; that he dressed as a superhero to encourage Bogotá residents
to be "supercitizens;" that as mayor he rode a bicycle to his office; that he once appeared on TV soaping himself in the shower with the faucet turned off to urge people to save water; and that in this campaign he refused to accept the US$2 million in government campaign funds allotted him based on the number of votes he received in the March legislative elections. Armed with umbrellas symbolizing peace and pencils representing education, he has made a deep impression on a society that has the highest indices of violence in Latin America. Biographers do not put much emphasis on Mockus the charismatic teacher because in these elections the winner was supposed to be the one chosen by Uribe, a hard-liner who made the slogan "democratic security" repression, human rights violations, corruption his calling card. For Mockus, there is nothing wrong with wanting to bring order, he did so as mayor of the capital, but when he pits that slogan against "democratic legality," without saying so directly he is saying that respect for the law comes first. His discourse is conciliatory and pedagogic although sometimes digressive, say his critics who nevertheless recognize that he has won over thousands upon thousands of young people who gather in Bogotá's public plazas dressed in green and especially visit his virtual platform on Facebook. "Millions are fed up and disgusted with the politicking and clientelism, with corruption, with the takeover of the state by private interests," wrote journalist María Elvia Samper. "They want respect for the rules of the game, decency, participation, and cleanliness in managing public money, and that's what the Partido Verde candidate offers them." Mayor of Bogotá from 1995-1997 and again from 2001-2003, Mockus has as his running mate Sergio Fajardo, former mayor of Medellín (2004-2007), the second-largest city in the country. An incorruptible mathematician like Mockus, Fajardo brings a clever slogan to the campaign: "We're going to show that when you add two mathematicians together, in reality they multiply."

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