7-2-2010

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Recommended Citation
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Colombia: Juan Manuel Santos Wins Presidency In Runoff

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: Friday, July 2, 2010

In Colombia's June 20 presidential-runoff election, Juan Manuel Santos, President Álvaro Uribe's choice to be his successor, was elected for a four-year term beginning Aug. 7. Santos won nearly 70% of the votes, compared with less than 28% for opponent Antanas Mockus (see NotiSur, 2010-05-21), leader of the Partido Verde (PV). In a country where voting is not mandatory, analysts were still surprised at the high (54%) abstention rate, which will limit the new president's mandate and call into question the essence of democracy in the South American country. With such high abstention, Colombia outdid the US, where abstention is common, and Iraq, a country at war. After eight years of the authoritarian Uribe administrations, the country must now face a reality in which basic questions demand immediate attention and correction. No other runoff result was possible. Since the first round on May 30, the only doubt was what the final numbers would be. Now is the time, then, to review the challenges the new president will face. Analysts summarize them as follows: he must fight corruption, unemployment, and poverty; improve institutional quality, public health, and education; reduce violence and end the systematic violation of human rights; respond to the humanitarian drama of 4 million people displaced by the internal war. That is no small task. This is also the time for those running opinion polls all of them, including the most well-known in the world to explain why they got it so wrong when only six weeks ago they were sure that Mockus would be the next president. Or, if they were not wrong, they should explain why they imagined that the "green" candidate could win. Senator alleges Mockus was used to give election legitimacy Sen. Piedad Córdoba said, "Mockus was a candidate invented by the establishment to legitimize an anti-democratic electoral process." No one, not even Mockus, has responded to the allegation of the woman who became famous for her humanitarian role in obtaining the release of hostages held in the jungle by guerrilla groups (see NotiSur, 2009-03-06 and 2010-04-23). "The corruption issue is critical because it affects absolutely everything and all societal actions, the public sector and the private sector, politics, the economy, Congress, the judicial system, and the executive branch," political analyst Elizabeth Ungar, director of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Transparencia por Colombia, told Reuters news agency. Ungar said that, if Santos "does not energetically tackle corruption, governability will be seriously undermined, not only because corruption affects quality of life but also because it threatens the legitimacy and credibility of institutions, which are the pillars of any democracy." Ungar's statements have their rationale. The Uribe administration was tainted by the most serious corruption scandals: improperly awarding subsidies to the agrarian oligarchy, providing perks to lawmakers, spying on people from all walks of life, and killing thousands of people. (Although Colombia has no death penalty, officially these crimes are called "extrajudicial executions.") For the Transparencia por Colombia expert, social issues should rank as high as corruption on the future president's agenda. "In Uribe's eight years in office, by making security policy his absolute priority, he has neglected social issues and that could become a time bomb," she said. (Uribe has served two consecutive terms as president: 2002-2006 and 2006-2010.) Government statistics show that in March the unemployment rate was 12.3% and the poverty rate was 45.5%. Meanwhile, the health sector is in a crisis that threatens its own sustainability because of a lack of resources, and access to quality education has become the exclusive privilege of families with ample economic resources. Education effectively became
privatized during Uribe's years in office. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) says Colombia is among the countries with the greatest gap between the rich and the poor. "Economically, and above all socially, things are bad not only because of the crisis," wrote a Radio Nederland analyst, who added, "Defense spending pushed aside what should have been essential priorities health, housing, and education. During the Uribe administrations, Colombia increased its defense spending from 3% to 6% of GDP. The armed forces went from 260,000 troops to 450,000. Its Army now equals that of Brazil, a country eight times larger with five times the population." Difficulty in dealing with corrupt institutions Consuelo Ahumada, an analyst at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, agrees with Ungar but emphasizes the "enormous" deterioration in institutional quality. "As if the list of challenges weren't enough, Santos will have to be transparent in his relations with Congress, considered one of the most corrupt institutions and involved in a scandal because of the proven ties of so many lawmakers with drug trafficking and paramilitary organizations. Here there is something more basic, it is distinct from the corruption in other areas. It has to do with the power of the mafias and the control of the state," said the Catholic university academic. Ahumada was not mistaken. UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers Gabriela Carina Knaul de Albuquerque e Silva said that "at least one-third of the 268 members of Congress [102 senators and 166 deputies] were or are being investigated by the judiciary. Ninety-three lawmakers have been charged with illicit ties to paramilitary organizations, 22 of them sentenced by the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ). Summary proceedings have been opened against 13 deputies, 188 departmental governors and mayors, and 58 municipal councilors." Sources cited by various international media say at least 500 other politicians have been implicated in the same cases. As if that were not enough, the UN rapporteur said that "impunity continues being the backbone of the human rights crisis; the vast majority of the killers were not identified and that is because Uribe lacks political will." During the two Uribe administrations, Santos held three ministerial positions but was especially prominent as defense minister. There are other important facts. The four-decade-long internal conflict has left more than 4 million people displaced, according to the UN. The Colombian NGO Somos Defensores says that, in 2009, 32 human rights activists were killed and assassination attempts were made against 142 others. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) a labor central born in 2006 with the merger of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Confederation of Labor(WCL) said that 50 union activists were killed in 2009, bringing to 613 the number of labor leaders killed since 2002, when Uribe took office. Radio Nederland reported that, with Santos' election, "Colombians forgave the Uribe government for everything: the corruption, the false positives [a form of describing youth assassinated by the Army as guerrillas killed in combat to demonstrate the alleged effectiveness of the repressive policies], the nonreimbursable subsidies to members of the country's agricultural caste, the collusion of a large number of governing-party lawmakers with the predatory and killer paramilitaries." With similar opinions and data, former guerrilla Gustavo Petro, the frustrated candidate of Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA), seemed almost naïve when he asked, "How is it possible that the vast majority of Colombians voted for Uribe/Santos?" "What has happened to us that we vote for a mafioso and criminal [referring to Santos], for people who aim to solve problems with bullets?" asked an advisor to Mockus who was quoted in the Uruguayan magazine Brecha. Nevertheless, it was difficult for analysts to explain why the governing party received its highest percentages in the most depressed geographic areas or those in which everything indicated that Mockus was going to win. Against all predictions, Santos scored an overwhelming victory in the PV's two supposed strongholds, Bogotá and Medellín, the largest cities in the country and those where Mockus and running mate Sergio Fajardo were
highly respected mayors. Moreover, Santos won with more than 60% of the vote in the teeming municipality of Soacha, adjacent to Bogotá, where the majority of people displaced by the war and the families of the false-positive victims live. The media highlighted those results, but no one stopped to observe that in neither of the two electoral rounds did even half the eligible voters go to the polls, which narrows the mandate of the one elected president.

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