1-14-2011

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Andrés Gaudàn

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President Juan Manuel Santos Repositions Colombia in Region

by Andrés Gaudín

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: Friday, January 14, 2011

Colombia is no longer the country that South Americans think of only for its persistent human rights violations, unconditional political alignment with the US, and the 50-year internal conflict that has cost tens of thousands of lives. It is not that those realities have disappeared, that they do not exist. It is, simply, that, with the departure of former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) in August 2010 and the arrival of President Juan Manuel Santos (NotiSur, July 2, 2010), Colombia has turned an important page in its history.

The country still has its dark chapters, such as the possibility of granting a reprieve or other type of pardon to some 30,000 former paramilitary fighters responsible for crimes against humanity, or the only partial admission of the deep social roots of the internal conflict and the insistence on resolving it militarily.

But Santos repositioned the country on the international stage, reduced the most polemic issues of Uribe's political agenda with the US, and did nothing to prevent light being shed on the most serious scandals of the administration that preceded his. None of this would attract attention if Santos had not been Uribe's defense minister and hand-picked candidate to replace him.

Santos repairs fractured relations with neighbors

The opinion is almost unanimous, even among the opposition, that Santos' major achievements in his five months in office are primarily in international relations, an opinion supported by evidence and not just perceptions.

In his first week in office, the new president was able to mend fences with neighboring Venezuela and Ecuador. Serious tensions with Venezuela had been a permanent feature of the eight-year Uribe presidency and, in the days prior to Santos taking office, escalated to such an extent that many in the region saw an armed confrontation as inevitable. Diplomatic relations had been frozen since March 2008, when Colombia's military entered Ecuadoran territory and bombed a camp of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), killing 22 people, including Raúl Reyes, a top FARC leader (NotiSur, March 7, 2008).

In that incident, which mobilized all of South America to defend the territorial integrity of Ecuador, Santos was a central figure: he planned the attack with information provided by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), ordered the troops to enter Ecuadoran territory, and justified the operation in international arenas. As a result of the operation, Santos has an outstanding international warrant requested by the Ecuadoran judiciary.

Despite this history, but confident that he would not be detained, Santos visited Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa and extended a hand toward restoring longstanding normal diplomatic and trade relations.
With Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, the dialogue also improved immediately. Today, Chávez calls Santos "my friend," and Santos says that Chávez is "my new best friend." During the Uribe presidency, Santos had referred to Chávez as an "authoritarian president," and Chávez called Santos a pitiyanqui, a pejorative Central American and Caribbean expression for those who reject their culture and customs and try to emulate the US lifestyle.

In a poll published by the magazine Semana and reproduced by Italian news agency ANSA, in early November, 83% of Colombian respondents praised the country's new foreign policy and the end of tensions with Venezuela.

"Santos' actions in international politics have been spectacular; it was almost unthinkable that he would make such a notable change of direction regarding Uribe," said Augusto Ramírez Ocampo, ex-minister of foreign relations. The head of Colombian diplomacy during the administration of former President Belisario Betancur (1982-1986) also praised the change in bilateral Colombia-US relations, dominated during the Uribe years by the signing of a free-trade agreement (FTA) and Colombia's generous concession of a network of seven military bases for the use of US troops (NotiSur, July 31, 2009). That agreement is no longer in effect given that last August Colombia's Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) ruled it unconstitutional (NotiSur, Nov. 5, 2010).

**Change evident in relations with US**

Santos, whose first trip abroad did not include a visit to the White House, maintains an interest in the FTA—stalled in the US Congress for more than four years—although he made it clear during his speech at the last UN General Assembly that he does not want "a subordinate relationship, we want a relationship of equals."

Ramírez Ocampo said, "With these actions and with his immediate backing of Ecuador during the attempted coup on Sept. 30, 2010, Santos ended the country's diplomatic submission and put Colombia back on the South American map."

Analyst Armando Novoa, director of the Centro de Estudios Constitucionales Plural, said, "With Santos there is evidence of a new international language, and there is a better and better dialogue with the Unión de Naciones Suramericanos (UNASUR)."

Novoa spoke of the meeting between the new Colombian president and US President Barack Obama when Santos traveled to the US for the UN General Assembly, saying, "That meeting was doubly revealing because it marked a change, because it focused not on Colombian security, the military bases, or the FTA—that is, Uribe's agenda—but rather on establishing a relationship of partners, of equals, an attitude that must have surprised the US president."

Novoa made an observation that was not part of the discourse of his colleagues or Colombia's political leadership. "This is not just a cosmetic change but rather a change of the government elites," he said. "In Uribe's eight years in office, some regional elites, in many cases associated with illegal, drug-trafficking, or paramilitary ties, were empowered, while Santos signifies the return of the Bogotá elites [those from the capital, the cities], with new alternatives to Uribe's worn-out discourse of permanent confrontation."

Analysts agreed that Santos' gradual moving away from Uribe is positive, in that the wave of criticism directly involving the ex-president does not touch the president directly, even though he was Uribe's defense minister and political heir.
Between August and November 2010, Uribe was in the middle of a series of serious episodes. Santos did nothing to shield him.

Former Sen. Luis Alberto Builes, a key figure in the Uribista legislative maneuverings, was sentenced to seven years in prison for his ties to the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the paramilitary bands blamed for between 50,000 and 60,000 killings.

Congress began an investigation to determine the president's level of responsibility in the spying by the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS) on judges, political leaders, journalists, and human rights activists. (The judiciary convicted 17 DAS members, and former director María del Pilar Hurtado fled to Panama seeking political asylum.)

More than 150 US university scholars demanded that Georgetown University in Washington, DC, revoke Uribe's "distinguished-scholar" status. In a letter to Georgetown President John J. DeGioia, they pointed out Uribe's human rights record and said that his presence at the prestigious educational institution is "an affront to scholars and their educational mission." The signatories included Noam Chomsky of MIT, Deborah Poole of Johns Hopkins University, and Gilbert Joseph of Yale.

The series of events ended in early November when it became known that the attorney general had begun to issue detention orders against some of the more than 31,000 paramilitaries given amnesty by Uribe under the controversial Ley de Justicia y Paz signed in 2005 (NotiSur, July 22, 2005) and (June 16, 2006).

Gustavo Galión, director of the Comisión Colombiana de Juristas (CCJ), said that this is one of the worst injustices of the prior administration and that the Santos administration will have to resolve it. "Of 31,600 paramilitaries supposedly demobilized collectively, 28,000 went from the mountains to their homes with no legal investigation, based on the argument that they had been neither tried nor convicted, despite having been found in flagrant violation of the law," wrote Galión in the Bogotá daily.

The jurist explained that an interministerial committee gave the paramilitaries a demobilization certificate and then, "with that paper, the attorney general formalized their exoneration from criminal responsibility for having been part of illegal organizations, as if it were a simple traffic violation and not something involving the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity [large-scale massacres, rape, kidnapping, and other atrocities]."

What is relevant is that the secretariat of the interministerial committee was under the Ministerio de Defensa, and the minister was Juan Manuel Santos, who as of 2005 was in charge of signing the demobilization certificates.

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