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Andrés Gaudountain

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Juan Manuel Santos Re-elected President of Colombia
by Andrés Gaudín
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After two rounds of voting, Colombia’s bitterly contested presidential election resulted in the re-election of President Juan Manuel Santos, who beat hard-right challenger Óscar Iván Zuluaga to secure a second four-year term in office.

Analysts throughout the world hailed the decision as a victory for not just the conservative incumbent but also for the left-wing Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrilla army. They say that because the contest, most observers agree, was ultimately a referendum on the prospect of peace, which is supported by both Santos and the FARC rebels but opposed by powerful internal enemies, precisely the forces against whom the president competed in the June 15 runoff. The heads of the 11 nations that, together with Colombia, make up the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) offered similar assessments. In congratulating Santos, each UNASUR leader described the election result as a triumph for peace.

Colombia has an opportunity now to finally close the painful chapter of its fratricidal war. Eighteen months ago, the Santos government and guerrillas initiated talks aimed at ending, once and for all, a half-century-old civil war that has cost countless thousands of lives, forced hundreds of thousands into exile, and displaced millions (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012). The peace process was and continues to be challenged by the losers of the June runoff—Zuluaga and his powerful patron, ex–President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010)—who were responsible for imposing upon Colombian society one of the dirtiest electoral campaigns in memory.

Smear tactics

Taking their lead from the Uribe-Zuluaga team, campaigners for President Santos employed a fair share of dirty tricks as well, analyst Daniel Coronell noted in the weekly news magazine Semana. Both campaign teams hired sociologists, marketing experts, electronics engineers, and even hackers, and made extensive use of social-media networks to discredit anyone and everyone involved on the opposing side. Hackers working for the Zuluaga campaign went so far as to intercept President Santos’ emails. They also eavesdropped on communications between government and guerrilla representatives involved in the ongoing peace talks, which began in November 2012 in Havana, Cuba (NotiSur, June 6, 2014).

"The spying was carried out not to discredit the [peace] talks in the eyes of the Colombian people but rather to let the FARC know that it was being spied on so that it would then denounce the government and break off the negotiations. The goal was to ruin the dialogue," Spaniard Rafael Revert, one of the hackers hired by the Zuluaga team, told Colombian legal authorities.

Shortly before details of the hacking case went public, President Santos became embroiled in his own campaign scandal, triggered by accusations of influence peddling involving one of his marketing advisors, Juan José Rendón of Venezuela. Rendón allegedly accepted US$12 million in cash from three drug-trafficking bosses. The traffickers were hoping, via the marketing advisor, to reach a deal with Santos that would allow them to avoid extradition to the US, journalist Coronell, who ended up playing a key role in the campaign, reported in Semana.
"New dogs of war"

Illustrative of just how dirty the now-concluded electoral process was, the two scandals have not, however, been fully proven. What is clear regarding the hacking allegations is that Zuluaga and Uribe are committed opponents of the peace process. Just after the first-round election concluded, on May 25, Uribe and Zuluaga both promised that, if elected, Zuluaga would call off the government-FARC negotiations immediately upon taking office on Aug. 7.

Colombia’s far right believes that peace can only be established by continuing the war and annihilating the rebels. In a June 16 opinion piece in the Buenos Aires daily Tiempo, Argentine academic Lido Iacomini dubbed Zuluaga, Uribe, and their allies "the new dogs of war."

Brazilian sociologist Emir Sader offered a similar take in an article published last month on the Web portal Carta Maior. The Uribe-Zuluaga faction, by promising to shut down the peace talks, threatened to "return [Colombia] to a terrible past that was supposed to have been overcome by the negotiations, currently taking place in Cuba, which look to end something that has marked so many generations of Colombians," Sader wrote.

The sociologist went on to say that Uribe, with statements such as, "We cannot allow the FARC to govern the country from Cuba," is taking an approach that harkens back to the worst days of the Cold War. "He’s manipulating the ghost of communism to position himself as the great defender of democracy and freedom," Sader explained.

Baseless accusations

During the campaign, Uribe also took to attacking Santos personally. Prior to the first-round vote, the ex-president claimed to have proof that his successor accepted US$2 million in narco-money (separate from the US$12 million supposedly received by Rendón) to cover campaign costs. "Uribe used his immense popularity to influence public opinion regarding the honor of the president," wrote Armando Neira, another Semana columnist.

Uribe’s accusations set into motion a rapidly escalating scandal that threatened the country’s institutional stability and prompted an intervention by former President César Gaviria (1990-1994), who took to the airwaves to defend Santos. "Uribe lies. Uribe is a liar," Gaviria told Radio W. "Uribe’s statements are meant to stir up trouble. He always speaks with hate, with rage, with a destructive spirit. Not even the armed extreme left attacks [Colombia’s] institutions and leaders so obsessively."

Uribe was a no-show when called upon by legal authorities to produce the evidence he claimed to have against Santos. Obliged to retract his accusations, he used an odd argument that was unbefitting an ex-president and practicing lawyer. "I checked the dictionary and must say now that there is a difference between evidence and information. What I have is information," said Uribe, who has since dropped the subject entirely.

Pushing for peace

And yet as much as it was marked by the dirty tactics employed by both teams, last month’s runoff also produced something unexpected: a surge in support for the peace process. Prompted by the far right’s fierce attacks against the negotiations, the country’s progressive sectors all decided in the
end to endorse Santos. The FARC also took advantage of the situation to send what proved to be a popular message of peace. In an open sent to Zuluaga on June 7, the rebel force announced the start of a new unilateral truce that would be honored until two weeks after the elections.

"It’s sad and troubling that, after 50 years of national blood letting, key sectors within the political leadership continue to carry out irresponsible war mongering," the letter read. "We’ve been the first to put forth a political solution to the Colombian conflict based on responding to the causes that led to the outbreak of war in the first place. For that reason, regardless of the orders and declarations being issued by high-level government officials bent on our extermination, we do not hesitate to express our willingness to have a cease-fire."

Santos was re-elected with 50.9% of the vote, beating Zuluaga (45%) in the runoff by nearly six percentage points. Voter turnout was higher than for the first round—more than 47% of eligible voters cast their ballots in the runoff compared with only 40% for the May 25 contest—but still relatively low, a fact that did not go unnoticed.

"It can’t be said that this is happening only because people are not obliged to vote. What this tells us, clearly, is that Colombians don’t believe right now in the institutional model," wrote Lido Iacomini. "It’s all well and good to say that peace has triumphed. But we must acknowledge, too, that Colombia will have a president voted in by only 7.7 million of the 32.9 million people eligible to participate in the election. Only 7.7 million voters said they want peace. Nearly 7 million voted for Zuluaga, which was a vote for war."

"Opt for social justice"

With the elections finally over, Santos is now preparing for his second term in office (2014-2018). Many Colombians continue to dream about a possible end to the decades-long war. Many more decided not to even bother with the voting process. Uribe, in the meantime, is keeping up his attacks, claiming the election was fraudulent and using outdated language to report that "the country has been handed over to Castro-Chavismo."

The FARC continues to benefit from the situation by coming across as more moderate than both the Santos government and, of course, the far right. "The FARC is investing in the future," wrote one El Espectador columnist. On June 22—one week after the runoff—the same daily published an interview with Pablo Catatumbo, a guerrilla leader involved in the talks taking place in Havana. "This was a triumph for [reaching] a political solution to the armed conflict rather than for Mr. Santos’ particular vision of peace," said Catatumbo. "The prevailing desire among those who voted is for peace with social justice and change, something that goes beyond the opinions expressed by Santos and Zuluaga."

The rebel leader also took the liberty of offering the newly elected president some advice: "Opt for social justice," he said. Catatumbo pointed out that Santos finished second in the first round and was able to win the second only because all the progressive forces—which, following the election, have gone back to challenging the government—voted for the right (Santos) to prevent the far right from returning to power.
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