

Right wing wins Colombian elections - workers must prepare to fight

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The victory of Juan Manuel Santos represents a continuation of the murderous Uribe regime, writes Tim West

On August 7th Colombia inaugurated a new President, Juan Manuel Santos of the Social Party of National Unity, also known as the 'U-Party'. He replaces the notorious Alvaro Uribe, who governed the country for eight years, waging a relentless war against the guerrilla forces of the FARC and sponsoring death squad attacks on the leaders of both peasants' and workers' trade unions.

Thirty one trade unionists have been murdered since January 2010 at the hands of state forces or paramilitaries, in what United Workers Confederation (CUT), Colombia's largest trade union confederation, called a systematic campaign of violence. The latest comrade killed was Nelson Camacho of the Workers Sindical Union (USO) of the oil industry, which came after a series of threats to members of this organization, in the context of a dispute with companies such as BP, ECOPETROL and TGI.

Not content with presiding over such a violent anti union regime, in his last days of power Uribe seemed to be doing all he could to provoke Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, claiming top commanders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), were launching attacks against Colombian troops from bases in Venezuela.

Yet within weeks of taking power Santos has met with Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, with mediation by ex-Argentine President Néstor Kirchner who is currently President of the regional organization Unison of South American Nations (UNASUR), as well as Brazilian representatives. The outcome of this was praised by the US Department of State, with Chávez once more calling on the FARC to lay down their arms, as well as agreeing military co-operation with Colombia to combat the guerrillas.

So what lies behind this sudden turnaround from Santos and Chávez and can it last?

Santos was Uribe's Minister of National Defence. He represents the more 'moderate' wing of the U-Party, with a profile of being relatively independent of Uribe, though this did not extend to opposing any of his policies. However his campaign promised 'employment, employment, employment' - as his top priority. Currently Colombia has Latin America's highest official unemployment rate at 12 per cent, but it remains to be seen how he will achieve his goal of getting the unemployment rate down to single digits.

The elections did reflect a crisis of orientation for the Colombian ruling class, which 8 years ago had

achieved unity under Uribe's project. Uribe came to power promising to restore the legitimacy of Colombia's institutions through defeating the guerillas, demobilizing the paramilitaries and bringing the drugs trade (controlled by a powerful 'narco-bourgeoisie') under control, while dealing with the country's severe levels of corruption.

However by the end of his reign none of this has been achieved; nor is this any surprise since these 'problems' are structural - rooted in the very way Colombian capitalism has developed.

Colombia today finds itself in a severe economic and social crisis, isolated in the region and fearing the possibility of unrest at home due to high unemployment. Its poor relations with its neighbours have hit hard economically, especially with regards to Venezuela, which is its second trading partner after the USA.

Its chronic dependence on the US made it especially vulnerable to the global economic crisis and it is only now entering a fragile recovery from the recession it has been in since 2007. Moreover the proposed Free Trade Agreement with the US, which the Uribe regime had pinned its hopes on, remains trapped in the US Congress, lacking Democrat enthusiasm (it is hoped that Santos will be able to forge better relations with the latter party than Uribe).

The splits within the bourgeoisie which Uribe's hard-line government had led to, was expressed in the elections by the wide range of parties competing and the levels of division and debate within the parties. Increasingly, the dominant sectors of Colombian capitalism consider that an economic reactivation - especially in the case of traditional, employment creating exports which can be effectively taxed - will need increased co-operation with the country's South American neighbours; though of course there is disagreement on the scale of this.

However Santos will have to negotiate with the more hardline, pro-Uribe faction which is predominant among U-Party Senators and Congress members; while in addition his own party has only a minority in Congress, though with allies in the Cambio Radical and Liberal parties pro- government forces command a majority.

The 'Green Party'

The most unexpected aspect of the election was the rise of the Green Party and its eventual Presidential candidate (after Primaries), the centre-right Antanas Mockus, former Mayor of Bogotá. Mockus represented more than anything the aspiration of the urban middle classes; in terms of foreign policy he compared himself to Lula of Brazil, openly stating the need now felt by an important part of the Colombian ruling class to strike a more independent line from the US and improve relations with the rest of the region, while fundamentally defending increased imperialist penetration of Latin America.

Domestically, his main appeal to people tired of the U-Party was his call for a reorientation from Uribe's 'Democratic Security' to a so-called 'Democratic Legality?'; a vision of a society based on respect for the country's constitution, the separation of powers, and where the armed forces would be subject to limitations by the other arms of the state.

This should be understood in the context of Colombia's appalling human rights record and the impunity enjoyed by the military - which tripled in size under Uribe and the US backed Plan Colombia.

For example, only days before the election the latest such scandal erupted, concerning the practice of parts of the armed forces to kidnap and murder people from the poor districts of the cities and then presenting their bodies as guerrillas killed in combat. Along with 'disappearances', the victims of these crimes number thousands, while Uribe and Santos both support returning to the military the privilege to

supposedly legally monitor itself, taking away the power of the courts to judge it.

However, Mockus and the Green Party proposed a change of emphasis not a change in policy. He himself stated that he wanted to 'build on the work done' by Uribe, and even went as far as stating that 'If I was the FARC I would negotiate pretty quickly with Uribe, because what is to come will be stronger?.'

Likewise, his answer to the economic crisis was the same as that of the U-Party; preserving the labour 'reforms' of Uribe and seeking to extend and deepen them with attacks on 'privileged' sectors of the working class and a lowering of the minimum wage. In other words, the one thing on which both candidates were in full agreement was that the working class must be made to pay for this crisis through austerity measures.

Prospects for the new government, and the Colombian working class and peasantry

So what does the peace overtures between Colombia and Venezuela mean for the masses? The US has welcomed them, worried that threats of war from Colombia might boost Chávez' standing in the upcoming congressional elections. As a result of his peace talks with Santos, Chávez stated that the key question of the network of US military bases in Colombia was a question for Colombia alone, 'as long as they don't encroach on the sovereignty of other countries?'. This is either naïve or deceitful. The US bases will be used to reassert US imperialist hegemony across the region and undermine 'rebellious' regimes. Such attempts will get more, not less, frequent in the coming period.

Chavez's unprincipled zig-zags with Colombia (a continuation of his violent mood swings against Uribe) are based on the twists and turns of Venezuela's strategic interests. Likewise his criticism of the FARC's guerrillism ('this is not the 1970s?') in favour of a peaceful 'democratic road' to socialism shows that a president of a capitalist state is unfitted to be the leader of a Fifth International and that the new International must not be tied to any such state.

With regards to the FARC, despite Chavez's renewed criticisms of them, and the serious defeats they have suffered in the past period, they do not look like disappearing in the near future, retaining thousands of fighters and the support from many peasants in the rural areas. However as they are weakening, their methods are becoming more desperate - more traps rather than open combat - and more abhorrent too, such as random kidnappings of civilians.

At the same time their politics have moved further to the right and they now claim to raise the 'Bolivarian' flag and be fighting for a 'sovereign Colombia' with 'social justice, respect for human rights, welfare and economic development for all who live here?'. In other words it is a programme of national capitalism.

While revolutionaries defend the FARC's right to be recognized as a military force and not terrorists, and to bear arms against the tool of US imperialism that is the Colombian state, we are completely clear that their strategy cannot lead the workers and peasants of the country to any kind of liberation or victory.

The future of Latin America

As long as the Latin American states remain divided and under the control of the capitalist class they cannot be free from imperialism. As long as the forces that consider themselves revolutionary Marxists are themselves divided and dominated by national traditions or even by a vacuous petty bourgeois 'Bolivarianism' a breakthrough to working class power will elude them. A continental and a global programme and party are needed, based on the political independence of the workers and poor peasantry from all bourgeois forces - even the radical populism of a Chavez or a Morales.

Central to this is the fight for Leon Trotsky's perspective of permanent revolution - transcending the boundaries of democratic anti-imperialism or capitalist unification of the continent, to pose the socialisation of the means of production and the fight for a United Socialist States of Latin America

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