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## Charting a known course in Colombia

LSE Ideas

By Guy Burton

Sunday's second round election saw Juan Manuel Santos beat his rival, Antanas Mockus of the Green Party, by 69% to 27.5%. His primary commitments echo those of his predecessor and associate Alvaro Uribe: taking a hardline approach against both the guerrilla movement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and with regard to the lawlessness stemming from drug-trafficking.

Explanations for Santos' victory are not hard to find. On one hand he was the candidate for continuity, especially after it became clear earlier in the year that Uribe would not be able to stand for a third time when the courts blocked a constitutional change on presidential re-election. On the other hand, Mockus did not help himself. He alienated potential allies by refusing to build an anti-Santos alliance after the first round and appeared insufficiently prepared or firm for the job. This included a suggestion to disband the Colombian army and acquiescing in any extradition order against former political leaders if he was to become president.

Despite this, question marks hang over Santos as president, both in terms of foreign relations and the degree of public support for his policies. Santos is expected to remain one of Washington's more reliable allies in the region, especially given his role as Uribe's defence minister between 2006 and 2009, when he oversaw an agreement to expand the US military presence in Colombia. This caused tensions with Venezuela, leading to fiery denunciations of the deal by Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez. At the same time the active pursuit of the FARC has added to difficulties: with Chavez, over how best to engage them and with Ecuador when Colombians engaged in a cross-border raid to kill a FARC commander in early 2008.

On the surface Colombian public opinion appears to support Uribe's – and presumably now Santos' – robust approach to foreign policy. Uribe is frequently cited in the media as enjoying a high level of support, even after two terms as president. [Gallup polls](#) in the country suggest that support for the leadership has shifted back and forth between 45% and 65% between mid-2006 and mid-2009 – a reasonable level, including the lower figures. Uribe was probably also helped by Colombians' general distaste for Chavez: during Uribe's second term those who approved of the Venezuelan president fell from 26% to 14% and those who disapproved rose, from 49% to 65%. By comparison, Venezuelan's opinion of Uribe was relatively more favourable of Uribe.

In addition Colombians' support of Uribe (and Santos) reflects their [greater willingness to place themselves on the right](#) of the political spectrum. The 2006 Latinobarómetro poll occurred during the region's 'pink tide' and shift to the left, highlighting Colombian differences with their neighbours. The average score for Colombians was 5.6 (5 being the centre), with 43% identifying themselves to the right and 14% on the left. This more right-friendly position was similarly reflected in the even split between those who had a favourable view of the US (44%) to those who did not (44%) – this during a period when many in the region had a poor opinion of then US president, George W Bush.

However, it would be inaccurate to assume that Colombian public opinion is completely in line with that of its leadership. First, despite Santos's comprehensive victory, there was a fall in turnout of 11% between the first and second rounds. This does not suggest ringing enthusiasm for Santos across the whole electorate. Second, although Santos took around 45% of the vote in the first round, polling beforehand suggested a more even result between him and Mockus. That it did not happen may have been due to public uncertainty that Mockus would deliver significant change. For example, in the days following the first round, Mockus was unable to build a coalition with the left-wing Polo Democrático. Part of that failure was due to [foreign policy differences](#), with the Polo Democrático wanting to renegotiate the military deal with Washington and Mockus happy to keep it. Third, [as the pollster Marc Lizoain points out](#), measuring public opinion in Colombia may not be entirely accurate. He reports that Gallup, the biggest polling company in the country, tends to carry its surveys in the four largest cities. This means a preponderance of urban voters that make up around a third of the population. Furthermore, it distorts public opinion because the divided nature of the Colombian state – whereby the FARC holds large swathes of the country – means that voters not living in these metropolitan areas controlled by the establishment are largely overlooked.

In sum then, these factors highlight the need to take a more critical view of the relationship between Colombia's leaders and public, including with regard to foreign affairs. The consensus suggests a high degree of convergence between Colombia's political leaders and the policies it is taking. But this may not necessarily be so. Uribe may have been a decisive leader with considerable backing behind him, which he has successfully transferred to Santos. But how widespread or solid is that support? Certainly it is there among those living within those parts of the country controlled by the state. Furthermore, despite Santos's immediate post-election claim for better relations with his neighbours, the adoption of a less confrontational stance by either himself or Venezuela's Chavez could potentially undermine his present level of support. For this reason – as if his previous association with Uribe was not already enough – it is probably more than likely that he will maintain the present course, with the attendant effects of a troubled and fraught relationship with Venezuela and Ecuador.

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