

Elections in Colombia: Return of Uribism and Uncertainty of the Peace Process

Written by Edgar Andrés Londoño Niño

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EDGAR ANDRÉS LONDOÑO NIÑO, JUN 28 2018

The 2018 Presidential elections in Colombia show several particularities in comparison with past elections. For the first time, a dispute between economic and political models was not as strong as usual because, for the first time in Colombia's history, a leftist candidate went to the second round and became a feasible alternative. In addition, for the first time in 50 years the presidential poll was free of the threat of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC in Spanish), so the candidates' proposals went beyond the fight against terrorism.

Colombia, where the vote is not compulsory, has one of the highest abstention levels of the world, traditionally above 50% in the last 20 years, the two exceptions were the elections of 1998 and 2018, when more than half of the electoral registration participated. In the 2014 elections, the abstention levels were 59.35% and 52.03% in the first and in the second round, respectively. In the 2018 elections, abstention levels decreased to 46.62% in the first round and 46.96% in the second round. However, in the second round, there was no significant increase in the levels of electoral participation, unlike in the previous elections four years ago. The blank vote grew from 1.76% in the first round to 4.20% in the second round but is still lower than in the past elections (5.98% and 4.02% in the first and the second rounds, respectively).

This article analyses the 2018 presidential elections in Colombia, the main expected tensions in Duque's government and the future of the peace process.

The Return of the Right vs. the Emergence of Alternative Options

In the first round, the rightist candidate Iván Duque received 39.14% of the votes, the leftist Gustavo Petro 25.08%, the candidate for the center Sergio Fajardo 23.73% and the other two candidates, obtained less than 10%. In this way, Duque and Petro went to the second round, and Fajardo, with a very small difference of votes in relation to Petro, came out of the election contest, but the votes he received demonstrated the force of a center option and their anti-political and anti-polarization speech.

On one side, there was Gustavo Petro who was a member of the M-19 guerrilla in his youth. The 19th of April Movement (M-19 in Spanish) aimed to open up democracy in Colombia. Initially, the guerrilla had a failed attempt of armed revolutionary struggle, but thereafter managed a reincorporation into civil society and political life. This fact, together with the past affinity of Petro with Hugo Chávez, was used by his detractors to justify the possibility that Colombia might become a "second Venezuela", just like Uribism's argument.

In the senate, Gustavo Petro exposed the Parapolitics scandal, accusing congressmen and other politicians who were followers of Uribe's government of mingling with paramilitary groups. Petro accused even the then president Alvaro Uribe of paramilitary ties. In 2010, Petro was one of the presidential candidates, obtaining fourth place in the total votes. Moreover, Petro was Mayor of Bogotá between 2012 and 2015 but was removed from his seat for four months because of disciplinary investigations related to problems in the implementation of the waste collection system in the city. Petro has more progressive proposals in issues like environment protection, LGBT rights and social policies, also he has defended the peace process, so the continuity of the peace agreements was not

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contested.

On the other hand, there was the lawyer Iván Duque of the Democratic Center, Uribe's party.

It should be recalled that Colombia's political reality in the 21st century must be understood from the end of bipartisanship and the consolidation of Uribism like a political trend but also for the emergence of other alternative political forces from the left and the center sectors. By this way, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who was president between 2002 and 2010, succeeded in consolidating a political force founded on conservative ideas and economic liberalism, and the policy of Democratic security, based on the government's struggle against illegal armed groups, like the guerrillas. For that reason, and a broad support from military sectors, entrepreneurs, and a large proportion of the population, he is considered the most powerful politician in Colombia.

Juan Manuel Santos, Colombian president between 2010-2018, was the former Defense Minister in Uribe's administration and was supported by the ex-president in the 2010 elections, but when Santos began the peace process with the FARC, Uribe moved to the opposition. In 2013, Uribe founded the Democratic Center party, with which he was elected senator in 2014 and re-elected in the 2018 parliamentary elections. Ivan Duque, a little-known political figure into Uribism, was also a senator for that period.

Despite the fact that the victory of Santos in 2014 took power away from Uribism, Uribe, as senator and the main opponent of Santos and his party, managed to gain the second largest vote in the parliamentary elections of that year and in the 2018 elections. The Democratic Center was the party which received the most votes and Uribe the senator with the highest number of votes. The power of Uribism and its opposition to the FARC was also reinforced in the plebiscite of 2016, the consultation to ratify the final agreement on the termination of the Colombian conflict between the government and the FARC guerrillas. The NO option, which's campaign was led by Uribism, was the winner by a short difference to the YES (0,43%) in a controversial campaign, whereby Uribism used lies and fear as a strategy. The opposition to the FARC's party was evidenced in legislative elections, when no FARC's candidates were elected.

In that sense, Uribe was considered an obstacle to peace in Colombia. The opposition alleged impunity in the peace process, especially about the mechanism of Transitional justice, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP in Spanish).

In the legislative elections, on March 11, 2018, the right coalition did a query. Duque won with a significant number of votes. At the time, the Democratic Center was the most voted party and had more senators.

In this respect, Uribism recovered strength with the plebiscite and the legislative elections. It went from being a minority force against the peace to achieving important support around Duque. Accordingly, after the first-round, many parties joined the right-wing candidate, including the leader of the liberal party, the former president César Gaviria, paradoxically the head of the YES campaign of the plebiscite in 2016 and a strong critic of the Uribe's position about the peace process. The partisan support became an important weapon in favor of Duque.

Duque is Ivan Duque Escobar's son, who was Antioquia's governor, Minister of Mines and Development, and National Civil Registrar. Duque worked at the Inter-American Development Bank and was a senator between 2014 and 2018 with a low profile within the Democratic Center, consequently he was an unknown figure in Colombian politics until a couple of years ago. Duque has been criticized by the opposition because of his lack of experience in public administration in comparison to the other four candidates in the first-round. For this reason, the opposition calls him "Uribe's puppet" since he achieved the candidacy and went to the second round because of the fact of being chosen by Uribe.

Duque has been introduced as a young candidate able to address the renovation in the Colombian politics. But he represents the return of "Uribism" to power and the opportunity to modify the peace agreement signed between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC in Spanish) and the government of Juan Manuel Santos. During the election campaign, Duque has shown conservative positions on themes such as abortion and equal marriage, the defense of the mining activity, and did few mentions about education policies in comparison to Petro and Fajardo.

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Contrary to the broad support of the right, center and left parties were divided between supporting Petro or voting blank. Fajardo and De la Calle decided to vote blank despite some approximations. It was not possible to make a coalition among three candidates, unlike the right that brought together the traditional political class, such as former Presidents Gaviria, Pastrana and, obviously, Uribe. It buried the possibility of a direct support to Petro and crystallized the division among alternative sectors and its voters.

Given Duque's refusal to participate in electoral debates in the second round with Petro, there was not a chance to know better Duque's arguments. In addition, while Petro was questioned by journalists about his administration as Mayor of Bogotá, a part of the Colombian mass media demonstrated some sympathy with Duque.

Tensions and Worries about Duque's Victory

In the second round, Duque obtained 53.98% and Petro 41.81%, which made him the most voted president of the Colombian history and the youngest president of the contemporary history.

After Duque's victory, there are two key questions: what will the role of the "Eternal President", as Duque called Uribe in a political meeting in Medellín in March 2018, be in the new government? And what will be the future of the peace process in the country?

On one side, it is important to remember that Colombia's Supreme Court is investigating Uribe over three massacres and one homicide. There have been several accusations linking the former president to paramilitary groups, and his involvement in the massacres and attempts to silence witnesses. However, on several occasions during the election campaign, Duque came out in Uribe's defense when he was asked whether, in case of becoming president, he would respect the investigations against the former president. Nevertheless, Uribe has also been accused of alleged links with drug trafficking, for instance, declassified US cables link Uribe to Colombian drug cartels when he was Antioquia's governor. As a result, there are concerns of Uribism using its return to power to hinder progress in criminal investigations against Uribe.

Unless Duque achieves an autonomous government, direct influence of Uribe is expected in domestic and foreign policy.

In his victory speech, Duque had a conciliatory tone and raised several issues about the fight against corruption, poverty reduction, health care reform, environmental care, security, and many others. Duque has had a more moderate speech, criticizing the polarization in the country between the right and the left and friends and enemies of peace. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that Uribe's position has been radical on topics like the fight against armed groups and the peace process. As well, it seems contradictory that Duque has prioritized the fight against corruption in his speech when several political parties that supported his candidature are involved in disciplinary and judicial investigations for corruption, relationship with armed groups, and other crimes. Likewise, Duque has defended Uribe's government officials who are being prosecuted or investigated by the justice authorities, for example the former Minister of Agriculture, Andrés Felipe Arias.

Regarding foreign policy, it is not clear the orientation of Duque's administration, but a return of a foreign policy aligned to the United States is possible, as happened during Uribe's administration. For instance, Duque opened the possibility of relocation of the Colombian Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem following Trump's decision. Equally, it is expected a harder position about the Venezuelan government, being the growing migration of Venezuelan people one of the most important issues that the new government must deal with. In fact, the Venezuelan crisis and its external consequences, has impacted Colombian domestic policy and even the elections results, for instance with the argument that Colombia could become another Venezuela if the left came to power.

Duque, unlike Petro, will have better governability because besides the parliamentary caucus of the Democratic Center, there is the added political support of other parties obtained after the first round. Nevertheless, the elected President will probably have the opposition of the parties of the center and the left, who were strengthened in this election, led by Petro, who will be senator. Similarly, an active opposition is expected, specially by human rights

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defenders, environmentalists, and some society sectors like social leaders, victims of the conflict, teachers, public university students, among others.

The Peace Process: From Hope to Incertitude

The peace agreement, as a result of the negotiation between the Colombian government and the FARC since 2012, include strategies for rural development, political participation of the FARC's members, solution to the problem of illicit drugs and reparation for victims (with the creation of the Truth Commission, search unit for missing people, Special Jurisdiction for Peace and mechanisms of sanctions and punishments, reparations, and non-repetition). Also, the agreement is about the end of the bilateral conflict and achieve a definite ceasefire, the creation of a Monitoring and Verification Mechanism, the transitory rural settlement normalization zones and encampments, decommissioning, reincorporation of the FARC with transformation into a political party and security guarantees for FARC's members.

Although the peace agreement's implementation is facing different difficulties, the military option has had high human and social costs, as has been noted during Uribe's government. Indeed, statistics show that the peace agreement has reduced violent events in Colombia. The number of injuries, weapons, deaths, displacements, threats, and mines have since declined considerably.

However, the killings of FARC's former members, the systematic murder of social leaders – despite that the Santos government does not recognize the severity of this problem – the violent actions of dissident groups, are extremely worrying. Likewise, the implementation of the agreement has problems like those associated with resources management and compliance with some points of the peace agreements. For that reason, many people are concerned about the future of the peace process in Colombia and the possible return of the military option.

There is no doubt that some sectors of the Democratic Center Party want to destroy the peace agreement. In any case, it is probable that the new president, who has the majority in Congress, will modify some points of the agreement. Even though, a guarantee of the continuity of the peace process is that the agreement is protected by the Constitutional Court, it is important to remember that in Uribe's first administration the Constitution was modified so he could be reelected.

Duque said that the peace agreement's implementation has different problems and, in his victory speech, asserted that he will not destroy the agreements with the FARC guerrilla, but that he will modify it in order to ensure security and justice in the country.

For this reason, there might be possible modifications of the precepts in the Constitution that introduced the peace agreements and their regulation laws that might lead to the weakening of the process. The FARC leaders, who clarified that they will not return to war, asked the new president to continue the implementation of the agreement and proposed a meeting with Duque.

But the continuation of negotiations between the government and the National Liberation Army (ELN in Spanish), which has gone through several ups and downs, generates special concern. The dialogues between Colombian government and ELN rebels was initiated in Quito in February of 2017 and were finished the fifth round of the Roundtable of Dialogues for Peace in Havana in June of 2018 without achieving the bilateral ceasefire. The negotiation includes discussions about social participation, democracy, victims, transformations for the peace, peace security, surrendering of arms and guarantees for the political action.

About the ELN negotiations, Duque has said that he disagrees with the negotiations with the ELN guerrilla of a bilateral ceasefire, but he announced that even with the ELN ceasefire he will not continue with the negotiations at the Havana if the guerrilla does not fulfil new conditions like territorial concentration and suspension of all “criminal activities”, such as extortion. In turn, ELN members have asked to continue with the negotiations. In any case, if Duque insists in penalizing the guerrilla members, it will be very difficult to continue this peace process.

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In conclusion, with the right recovering strength, and Uribe being once more one of the most powerful politicians of the country, with a disciple in the presidency and the majorities of his party in the Congress, and the support of a big percentage of the Colombian society governability is guaranteed, but the power will be concentrated. Also, it is uncertain whether Duque will be able to govern without the direct influence of Uribe. On the other hand, opposition from advocates of the peace agreements is expected if Duque decides to modify essential parts of the agreement and there are serious concerns about the return of Uribe's policies and impunity in Uribe's investigations in cases such as of extrajudicial executions during his government.

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