

Rightist death squads hail Colombia's new president

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Colombia's main right-wing paramilitary organization hailed the election May 26 of Alvaro Uribe Vélez, a son of the rural aristocracy who has vowed to double the size of the country's armed forces in order to prosecute an all-out counterinsurgency campaign backed by Washington.

In a statement issued by the Self-Defense Units of Colombia, or AUC, Salvatore Mancuso, a commander of the paramilitaries, described Uribe as "a fitting president ... for a country that wants to be pacified and to grow in solidarity." The AUC, he added, is analyzing the election results, and will "be alert to orient our military strategy, our international diplomacy and our own internal policies."

There were widespread reports, confirmed by Organization of American States monitors, that AUC units had threatened to massacre entire villages if they failed to turn out and vote for Uribe.

The US ambassador in Bogota, Anne Patterson, was one of the first to congratulate Uribe after the election. "We are ready to work with the new government," she declared. Like the death squads, Washington made no secret that Uribe was its favored candidate.

The victory of Uribe, who campaigned on the slogan "firm hand, big heart," was universally described by the media as a "landslide" and a popular mandate for a sharp escalation in the Colombian military's war against the country's two armed guerrilla movements. In fact, the majority of Colombia's voters, fully 53.7 percent, did not cast ballots at all. Of the country's 24 million registered voters, only 11.2 million went to the polls. Out of those, Uribe won approximately 6 million, giving him the support of just one-quarter of the electorate.

This abstention rate reflects the deep-going alienation of masses of poor and working people from a corrupt

political setup that has long served the interests only of the economic elite, as well as fear of reprisals by the right-wing death squads.

Liberal Party candidate Horacio Serpa, who denounced Uribe for working in league with the paramilitaries, came in second with 31.8 percent of the vote, while Lucho Garzón, a former member of the Communist Party who heads Colombia's largest trade union federation, placed third with approximately 6 percent.

The day after his victory at the polls, Uribe, who takes office in August, announced that he will seek international mediation to restart peace negotiations with the two guerrilla groups, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (National Liberation Army).

Because the president-elect has conditioned any resumption of the talks, broken off by incumbent president Andres Pastrana earlier this year, on a unilateral cease-fire by the guerrillas, the mediation proposal was largely seen as a propaganda ploy aimed at deflecting warnings by human rights groups that his hard-line policies will only intensify the killing in Colombia.

Uribe spelled out his real policy both before and after the election, proposing a huge increase in military spending. In addition to doubling the military budget of Colombia—already the recipient of the third largest US military aid package in the world—Uribe said he will mobilize 30,000 reservists and recruit one million civilians to serve as a network of informers and vigilantes working with the army.

The network is to be modeled on civilian patrols that were established in Antioquia when Uribe was governor of the Colombian province in the 1990s. Members were supplied with radios and motorcycles

and allowed to carry guns, for the supposed purpose of watching for guerrilla activity. In Antioquia the patrols were linked to the right-wing paramilitaries as well as drug traffickers, and were implicated in the assassination of civilian opponents of the government. After Uribe left office the civil patrols were outlawed.

In an interview with a Colombian newspaper shortly before the election, Uribe defended the plan, declaring, “There is not a state in the world that can guarantee security if its citizens do not participate. It is one thing to arm a million bandits and quite another to organize citizens’ private security enterprises, organizations of civil and neighborhood defense, who observe groups in order to be able to help the armed forces.”

It is widely feared that the proposed civilian patrols will only give rise to a new generation of death squads in Colombia.

To achieve his goal of increasing the country’s military budget by close to \$1 billion, Uribe is calling for more aid from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in restructuring payments on the country’s \$40 billion debt. He has also called for new taxes and drastic cuts in other areas of government spending.

These policies will only deepen the grinding poverty and social inequality that have given rise to nearly 40 years of armed civil strife in Colombia. Uribe is taking office in a country where 60 percent of the 40 million inhabitants are living below the poverty line and nearly 20 percent of the working population is unemployed. Nearly half of those who are working are eking out a living in the so-called “informal sector.”

Uribe, heir to a wealthy landowning family in Antioquia, is committed to upholding this oppressive social structure and using whatever level of military force is required to do so.

In the course of the election campaign, his political opponents called attention to Uribe’s apparent ties to the drug trade throughout much of his political career. His family had close business connections to the Ochoas, the clan that headed the so-called Medellin Cartel. Later, as head of Colombia’s civil aviation authority, Uribe granted permits to drug traffickers to build air strips used to transport cocaine out of the country.

Uribe’s election coincides with the Bush administration’s attempt to lift restrictions on the use of

US military aid, allowing it to be utilized not just in anti-narcotics operations, but in prosecuting the war against the guerrillas. It is widely anticipated that Uribe’s victory will lead to an escalation of the US military intervention in the South American country, with an increase in the number of US “advisors” and arms aid. Washington has already provided more than \$2 billion in military assistance in the four years since the Clinton administration launched Plan Colombia.



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