

# Santos takes office as Colombia's president

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On Saturday August 7, Juan Manuel Santos was sworn in as President of Colombia. He succeeds Álvaro Uribe. The swearing in ceremony for Santos took place in Bogota's central Plaza Bolivar Square. The Santos family walked into the square from the Presidential Palace flanked by children from the country's 32 Departments, dressed in regional attire.

Observing that the conservative Uribe left office with an approval rating of 75 percent and that Santos, Uribe's Defense Minister, won a presidential election run-off with ease, the Spanish newspaper *El País* describes an atmosphere of general optimism and hope. While an ally of Uribe, Santos is said to want to follow an independent and more democratic course than his predecessor, who has been tainted by a political scandal involving the wiretapping of government officials, judges and journalists.

However, behind the celebration is a nation in profound crisis. Today's Colombia is socially polarized. The poverty rate is nearly 47 percent, comprising roughly 22 million people, 12 million of whom live on less than US \$2 a day. This is nearly double the poverty rate for the rest of South America. At the same time, the official unemployment rate, 12 percent, masks an informal economy (*el rebusque*) that includes 60 percent of the workforce, who work for significantly less than the minimum wage, with no prospects for retirement.

Relative to the rest of South America, a region notorious for social and economic inequality, Colombia is the most unequal. In global terms, it ranks as the ninth worst. Together with the rest of the world, the rates of inequality have worsened in Colombia during the last decade as a result of *laissez faire* policies pursued by Uribe.

Bordering Ecuador and Venezuela, Colombia is a key asset for US imperialism in the region and provides a launching pad for US military intervention. As such, it

is the largest recipient of US military aid. Under the Colombian Initiative (Plan Colombia) the US has given more than US\$ 7 billion in military aid. As a percentage of GDP, Colombia has the largest military budget in the region (3.4 percent), almost 3 times as much as Venezuela's 1.2 percent. Colombia is truly a client state of the United States. The United States is Colombia's most important trade partner. In January 2009, President Bush awarded Uribe the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Well over one million Colombians have died from six decades of an on and off civil war that began with the assassination of liberal *caudillo* Jorge Eliezer Gaitán and the popular rebellion known as "el Bogotazo" of April 1948. The ensuing decade of civil war ended with the 1957 power-sharing agreement between Liberals and Conservatives. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was formed in 1964 out of Liberal Party elements that refused to accept the 1957 pact and formed a peasant army. In response to the formation of the FARC, in 1965, the Colombian government sponsored the creation of a right-wing terrorist army—the United Self-defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas Colombianas, AUC,) equipped and trained by the Colombian military and under political control of the landed oligarchy.

Under Uribe, and with the assistance of the United States, the AUC expanded. Through torture and assassination, its purpose is to maintain control over rural populations reconquered from FARC control. Time and time again, AUC death squads been used against the working class in the service of transnational corporations such as Drummond Coal and The Chiquita Banana Co.

A report issued on July 31 by two human-rights watch dog groups, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the US Office on Colombia, presents revealing data on US involvement in extrajudicial killings and human

rights abuses since 2001. According to the report there are “alarming links between Colombian military units that receive US assistance and civilian killings committed by the army.” It exposes the routine and continuing practice of massacring civilians to beef up the FARC body count. All these actions are in violation of the 1997 Leahy amendment that ties US anti narcotic military assistance to respect for human rights.

Last October, President Uribe signed a pact with the US military, known as the Defense Cooperation Agreement, which allows a permanent presence of US troops in eight Colombian military bases, including Palenquero, the largest Colombian air base. Both the Uribe and Obama administrations intended for the DCA to remain secret; the Colombian press leaked its details.

Once a US \$46 million expansion to Palenquero is completed, US Air Force planes will be in striking range of all of South America, except for Tierra del Fuego, the southern tip of the continent. The reason given for the DCA was the war on narcotics. This pretext is not credible and the agreement—denounced by every other South American country—led to the deterioration of relations between Colombia and Venezuela.

Coupled with the deployment of US naval forces in the Caribbean, together with a military presence in Costa Rica and Honduras, the US use of Colombian bases has little to do with the war on narcotics. It is far more likely that it is part of a future imperialist invasion of Venezuela. In July Venezuela broke relations with Colombia following provocative accusations by the US State Department and the Uribe administration that the Chavez government provided safe haven for FARC forces and FARC leaders, further escalating tensions between both neighbors and raising the possibility of a proxy war between Colombia—on behalf of the United States—and Venezuela.

The DCA cemented what already had been a less formal relationship between Uribe and the Pentagon. A clause in the agreement that limits the number of US soldiers to 800 turned out to be of no consequence when it was revealed that the number of troops can be increased in case of emergency. Last January US troops were flown into Haiti from Palenquero to protect US interests in the wake of the earthquake.

Uribe has presided over another social catastrophe.

Since 2005, 2.5 million more Colombians have sunk below the poverty line; 3.2 million that were already poor have descended below the line of extreme poverty. The areas under AUC control have seen a reversal of Colombia’s land reform laws; peasants have been dispossessed of their lands, and feudal relations—that had never fully disappeared—have been re-established. Furthermore the AUC has helped displace over 2.5 million peasants from resource-rich regions, with the purpose of easing their exploitation by transnational mining and oil conglomerates.

Santos speech at the swearing in ceremony amounted to a collection of empty promises and platitudes. Calling on Colombians to bury past hatreds, he promised to return land to the peasantry, and to provide jobs for the unemployed on the basis of a government partnership with the private sector. At the same time he pledged to continue the war against the FARC. While Santos has declared that he plans to mend relations with Venezuela, Colombia’s dependence on the United States, the DCA, and the hostility of the Obama administration to Chavez and Venezuela, limits his ability to strike an independent line.

Santos is expected to continue the same free market policies as Uribe.



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