

Rightist leads Colombian election in which over 60 percent abstained

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Oscar Ivan Zuluaga, a former finance minister in the right-wing US-backed government of ex-president Alvaro Uribe, placed first in Colombia's presidential elections Sunday, setting the stage for a run-off in less than three weeks against incumbent President Juan Manuel Santos, who was Uribe's defense minister.

Barely four percentage points separated the two main candidates of the Colombian right, both representing the country's landowning oligarchy, the transnational corporations and the country's bulging military-police apparatus. However, the real winner of Sunday's vote—"none of the above"—led all of the five candidates on the ballot by a crushing margin.

More than 60 percent of Colombians eligible to cast a ballot stayed away from the polls. Little more than 13 million out of the nearly 33 million eligible voters turned out on election day. Another 6 percent marked their ballots "blank" in a protest vote against the choices on offer, a significant rise in this category over the last election. Thus, all of the candidates combined received the votes of barely one third of the electorate in this, the third most populous country in Latin America.

Zuluaga won 29.27 percent of the slim number of ballots cast. A relative political nobody in Colombia, he is the scion of a bourgeois family that owns a steelmaking company, who was a small town mayor and member of congress before being tapped by Uribe as his finance minister. After Santos succeeded Uribe as president, Zuluaga was dropped from the cabinet and drew closer to Uribe as the former and current presidents became increasingly bitter enemies.

He essentially serves as the figurehead in Uribe's quest, via his recently formed "Democratic Center" party, to topple his successor. Indeed, at his campaign rally Sunday night, Zuluaga's speech was interrupted by loud chants of "U-ri-be, U-ri-be."

Santos came in second with 25.69 percent, losing to his right-wing rival in a number of key areas, including the capital of Bogota.

Marta Lucía Ramírez, another right-winger and, like Santos, a former defense minister in the Uribe government, placed third as the candidate of the Colombian Conservative Party with 15.52 percent. Clara López Obregón, the candidate of the Alternative Democratic Pole (Polo Democrático Alternativo), a

pseudo-left electoral party formed by ex-guerrillas, union bureaucrats and political liberals, followed closely behind with 15.23 percent—a substantial increase over its previous vote. And running last with 8.28 percent was Enrique Peñalosa, a former Bogota mayor and former Liberal Party politician who ran as the candidate of the Colombian Green Party.

Along with the deep alienation of the overwhelming majority of the Colombian people from the country's corrupt and repressive political system, the election also demonstrated the continuing political power within the existing ruling setup of Uribe, a president whose presidency was distinguished by his and his supporters' close ties to the right-wing paramilitary death squads such as the AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), which, while responsible for the greatest share of the wholesale killings in the country, played a major role in securing their elections. His last term was dominated by the so-called "parapolitica" scandal, in which a number of Uribe's closest political allies in the Colombian congress, including his own cousin, were jailed for conspiring with paramilitary groups. Numerous charges were also made linking Uribe himself directly to the organization of massacres.

His final years in office also saw damning revelations over his use of the country's political police, the DAS (Department of Administrative Security) to carry out massive spying on his political opponents, journalists and judges. It was also exposed that much of this intelligence was shared with the right-wing paramilitaries.

Through it all, however, Uribe retained his status as Washington's closest ally in the hemisphere, providing unconditional support to the US "war on terror" as well as the invasion and occupation of Iraq, while receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid.

The current presidential campaign has seen bitter denunciations made by the incumbent Santos and his challenger Zuluaga against each other. Zuluaga came under fire after the release of a video showing him talking to a computer hacker who gained access for his campaign to the communications of the president and other government officials as well as those of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas with which the government is negotiating a peace agreement.

Uribe, meanwhile, has sought to aid the Zuluaga campaign by charging that Santos accepted \$2 million in drug money for his 2010 campaign. This followed the forced resignation of Santos' chief political aide over a press report that he had accepted \$12 million from drug traffickers.

Nonetheless, the reality is that both candidates are in all essentials *uribistas*—continuators of the right-wing, corrupt and repressive political legacy of former president Uribe.

The one issue that distinguishes them—and which will apparently dominate the second round—is that of the negotiations with the FARC in Havana, Cuba, which began in November 2012 and are aimed at ending over half a century of uninterrupted armed conflict that has claimed an estimated 220,000 lives in Colombia and driven millions from their homes. The leadership of the FARC is intent on transforming itself into a new bourgeois party.

Zuluaga has vowed that should he win and take office in August, he will immediately suspend talks with the FARC and demand a unilateral permanent cease-fire by the guerrilla group before any new talks are held. He also said he will demand that members of the FARC leadership accept six-year jail terms. “We cannot let the FARC pretend to command the country from Havana,” Zuluaga declared in a typical right-wing tirade. He has appealed for the third-place candidate Marta Lucía Ramírez, also an opponent of the talks, to back him in the second round.

Santos, meanwhile, has made his support for continued negotiations the centerpiece of his campaign, ludicrously posturing as a candidate of peace and social progress. Clearly with an eye toward winning the endorsement of the “Democratic Pole” and the Greens, Santos declared that the second round would be a contest between “those who want an end to war and those who want war without end” and called on the other parties to “join this crusade for peace” and “join us in the struggle against poverty, against war, against pessimism.”

As Uribe's defense minister, Santos was wholly culpable for the terrible crimes carried out against the Colombian people, including the so-called “false positives” scandal in which troops were deliberately killing civilians in order to present their bodies as those of guerrillas.

While posturing as the candidate of “peace,” Santos has in reality continued offensive military operations, even as the FARC proclaimed a temporary unilateral cease-fire. There is no question that the results of the election's first round will drive him even further to the right.

Nonetheless, there are ample indications that the large sections of the so-called left in Colombia will heed Santos' call. Already, the mayor of Bogota, Gustavo Petro, a former M-19 guerrilla and the Alternative Democratic Pole's presidential candidate in Colombia's 2010 election, has declared his support for Santos in the second round and directed three of his top aides to join the president's campaign staff.

The Colombian Communist Party (PCC), which joined the Democratic Pole's campaign through a union between the Pole and the Patriotic Union (UP) party within which the CP operates, has also signaled its support. Carlos Lozano Guillen, a member of the PCC's national executive committee made a statement for the party warning that the election of “Alvaro Uribe's peon, Oscar Ivan Zuluaga,” constitutes the “greatest danger” not only for Colombia, but for Latin America as a whole.

While pointing to Santos' “contradictions”—presumably, his ruthless defense of capitalist interests and repression of the struggles of Colombian workers and peasants—the Stalinist leader insisted that the incumbent president “has maintained his decision to continue with the dialogue for peace.”

He went on to declare that the increase in the vote for the Democratic Pole was not only “important,” but “could be decisive for the final decision” given the narrow margin between Santos and Zuluaga.

One analyst close to the positions within the Democratic Pole, Luis Alfonso Mena, the editor of *Parentesis* magazine in Cali, wrote that the situation in Colombia parallels the “experience of the French left in 2002, when it had to decide between the right of Jacques Chirac and the ultra-right of [National Front candidate] Jean-Marie Le Pen.”

That “experience” consisted of an abject betrayal by the French Socialist Party and various pseudo-left groups which worked to channel the mass opposition of the French working class to the whole electoral setup—expressed in spontaneous mass protests against Le Pen—behind incumbent Chirac and the right wing, which, having won the second round, embarked on drastic attacks on the working class and anti-Muslim agitation that only ended up strengthening the National Front neo-fascists.

There is every indication that the Colombian pseudo-left is preparing to embark on just such a political betrayal by giving its political support to Santos, even as the vast majority of the country's working people turns against the entire political establishment.



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