

Front-runner Uribe is passionate and polarizing

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, seeking a second term in Sunday's election, provokes strong responses on both sides of the political fence.

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BOGOTA - At a recent forum with Bogotá university students, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe answered a question in a way that revealed much about the man almost certain to win a second term Sunday.

Before the student had even finished posing his question on the president's alleged mishandling of protected lands in the Amazon jungle and a controversial free-trade agreement with the United States, Uribe cut him off.

"These discussions are what are polarizing this country," the president snapped. "Whoever has taught this student that the free-trade agreement has sold off the Amazon doesn't deserve to be a professor."

The exchange illustrated the passion that has helped the diminutive, bespectacled 53-year-old president maintain approval ratings near 70 percent through four years in office, and it drew some cheers from the audience. It also showed his disdain for those who criticize him or his government.

Despite his popularity, Uribe is seen by some as a polarizing figure in this war-ravaged country of 45 million people. For every point in his favor, there seems to be a counterpoint against him.

Uribe's pluses are centered on his security plan. He launched an unprecedented military offensive that pushed leftist rebels to remote areas and allowed Colombians to return to their once-insecure highways. He sent police to faraway regions where the government rarely tread, and kidnappings have fallen by more than half. He launched peace talks with right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing guerrillas.

Security also helped the economy, which is growing steadily, while foreign direct investment is up fivefold -- to \$10 billion last year -- since Uribe took office, according to Central Bank statistics.

In sum, the president's supporters see him as a leader who has redirected this country toward stability and a prosperity it hasn't had in decades.

But critics say his tactics are authoritarian, brutish and disrespectful of government institutions. They say Uribe's administration has arrested vast numbers of innocent people who were charged with collaborating with guerrillas, only to release them later. They also contend that the peace process with the paramilitaries is flawed, allowing the top commanders to escape serious prosecution and putting an estimated 32,000 demobilized fighters into poorly funded social programs that may only lead some to join criminal gangs.

Uribe sparks similarly polarized sentiments abroad. For the U.S. government, he is a strong ally in a region that has been shifting to the left and the opposite of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

Uribe is a staunch supporter of the U.S. war on drugs, including the massive aerial spraying of illegal crops with herbicides over the last three years that has cut Colombia's estimated coca acreage by half.

He also has extradited more than 300 suspected drug traffickers to the United States, paving the way for an all but certain continuation of Washington's \$700 million annual aid package if he wins another term.

SUSPICIOUS

But some European nations remain suspect of his peace talks with the paramilitaries, who carried out scores of massacres in their vigilante fight against leftist guerrillas, and the human rights record of his security forces. Venezuelan leader Chávez and Ecuadorean President Alfredo Palacio have been very critical of Colombia's military aggression along their borders.

The latest polls show the president with a 40-point lead over his closest competitors: former Constitutional Court Judge Carlos Gaviria, campaigning on a leftist platform for the Alternative Democratic Pole Party; and longtime Liberal Party politician Horacio Serpa.

He is the only candidate who has refused to participate in the two presidential debates leading up to Sunday's balloting and rarely mentions his competitors by name, even when he criticizes them.

Since winning the election in 2002, Uribe has avoided the foreign media -- he has refused numerous requests by The Miami Herald to interview him -- and prefers to speak to local radio and TV outlets where he can control the message and isn't edited. He keeps his family and private life hidden from the press as well, rarely creating photo ops with them or even mentioning their activities.

Uribe's focus is on an election that seems to be his to lose.

Just before he slapped down the Botogá university student, he told the audience that "the country is going to have to choose if we are going to continue with our democratic strategy and the road toward peace or we're going to go backward toward a communism" that hands the country to the guerrillas.

The communist reference -- dangerous in a country where the paramilitaries have killed thousands of suspected leftist guerrilla sympathizers -- appeared to have been aimed at Gaviria, a Santa Claus look-alike with a sharp tongue who has emerged as the Colombian left's first candidate to ever have a chance to place above third.

Serpa, on in his third try for the presidency, seems to be dragging his once all-powerful Liberal Party down with him. The party, which just 10 years ago dominated Congress and the presidency, won just 17 Senate seats during legislative elections in March, getting one million votes less than it did in 2002. Serpa is polling a lowly 15 percent.

STRING OF SCANDALS

Uribe's only trouble has been fighting a string of recent scandals linking his administration with the paramilitaries, fraud in the 2002 presidential and legislative elections, the murders of labor union leaders and corruption.

Yet his popularity has remained high, and analysts like Fernando Giraldo, a political science professor at the Jesuit University in Cali, say that's because his very passionate approach transcends politics.

"His style is based on being charismatic," Giraldo said. "Uribe the person is more important than any of his political decisions."

Indeed, part of Uribe's high ratings stem from the fact that, like many Colombians, he has suffered as a result of the civil conflict. Leftist rebels kidnapped and killed his father in 1983, and the guerrillas have tried numerous times to kill him -- including during his campaign in 2002 when the rebels set off a car bomb as the candidate's caravan passed.

The attacks may have emboldened Uribe, who won the right to seek reelection, previously blocked by the constitution, last year after a long and pitched battle in Congress in which he was alleged to have handed out political favors to lawmakers in exchange for their votes.

But analysts now worry that another four years would give the president an unprecedented sway over the country's independent institutions such as the Constitutional Court, the attorney general's office and the Central Bank, where he would have the chance to appoint many new members in the coming years.

"He's not a dictator and hasn't violated the constitution," said law professor César Rodríguez of the University of the Andes in Bogotá. ``But he's got a hierarchical and centralized style that, combined with his idiosyncratic character, makes him want to control every aspect of his administration."