

## BUSH ALLY COASTS TO 2ND TERM IN COLOMBIA

THE NEW YORK TIMES  
MAY 29, 2006

BOGOTÁ, [Colombia](#), May 28 — President [Álvaro Uribe](#), considered by the Bush administration to be an unswerving caretaker for Washington's drug war in Latin America, was re-elected Sunday in a landslide to a second four-year term.

Colombians gave Mr. Uribe 62 percent of the vote, with nearly all of the votes counted. Voters were apparently satisfied that he had made headway during his first term in wresting control of this country from Marxist rebels and drug traffickers. He overwhelmed the second-place finisher, Carlos Gaviria, a left-of-center former Constitutional Court justice who received 22 percent of the vote, and Horacio Serpa, the Liberal Party's standard-bearer, who garnered less than 12 percent.

"The victory by President Uribe will permit the young people of Colombia to learn about the conflict from the history books — not like us who have had to live with it," said Martha Lucía Ramírez, a former defense minister under Mr. Uribe.

Buttressed by more than \$3 billion from the [United States](#), most of it military aid, Mr. Uribe has fought Latin America's most persistent leftist insurgency while cooperating with an ambitious American program intended to eradicate drug crops through aerial spraying.

He has also supported American trade initiatives, signing a free trade treaty with the Bush administration which, if approved by lawmakers here and in Washington, would become the second-largest trade pact signed by the United States with a Latin American country.

In a region where Mr. Bush is unpopular, Mr. Uribe also represents a trusted counterweight to rising leftist populism, particularly in neighboring Venezuela, where President [Hugo Chávez](#) is relentlessly challenging American policy.

Mr. Uribe's most important accomplishments have been in security. The army, with 100,000 more troops than it had four years ago — close to a one-third increase — has taken back towns and roads once under the control of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the largest rebel group. When Mr.

Uribe took office, nearly one-fifth of Colombia's towns had no police or army presence and kidnappings were out of control.

The rebels often had control of communities like the farming village of Choachí, an hour's drive over rugged mountains from Bogotá's presidential palace.

In Choachí on Sunday, farmers in wool ponchos and faded fedoras and their wives in their best clothes came down from the hills and stood in long lines to cast their paper ballots. Several of these stoic, hard-working people, used to producing potatoes and onions, said they were fed up with kidnappings, road blockades and the ever-present threat of violence.

"Now there's at least some tranquillity and you can get around," said Ángel Díaz, 61. "Before you could not move. The violence was just terrible, kidnappings, shootings."

Moments after voting for Mr. Uribe in a school here, Arturo Hoyos, another farmer, explained, "There has been peace with this president."

Mr. Uribe, though, faces difficult challenges, which some political analysts say will be particularly thorny because of his own government's bungling.

Right-wing paramilitary groups, antiguerrilla forces that were given generous concessions to demobilize fighters, are evolving into drug-trafficking cartels that control politicians and extortion rackets across the northern coast. The government has also been plagued by accusations that important agencies, like the intelligence service, have closely collaborated with the paramilitaries.

Though his popularity ratings have been among the highest of any Latin American leader — often above 70 percent — Mr. Uribe leads a loose coalition of movements that could splinter. That means he will have to move quickly to gain congressional approval of some of his most ambitious programs, including the trade agreement with the United States and revisions in the tax code.

"The challenges will not be few," said Colombia's leading newspaper, *El Tiempo*, in an editorial on Sunday. "The political checkbook can run out sooner than expected. Everything depends on the cohesion of the Uribe supporters and the coherence of the opposition."

Still, Mr. Uribe, the first president to win re-election since President Rafael Nuñez in 1892, is the most popular leader in Colombia's modern history. Mr. Uribe received even more votes this time than when he was first elected in 2002, when he garnered 53 percent of the vote.

Colombian presidents had been barred from seeking a second term under the 1991 Constitution, and the Congress approved an amendment permitting him to seek a second term. Many members who voted for the amendment were rewarded with jobs, a development that did not seem to tarnish Mr. Uribe's image. Nor have disclosures about paramilitary ties to the security services or the news that an army patrol wiped out an elite anti-drug police unit on Monday, killing 10 officers in a clash and causing speculation that the soldiers had ties to traffickers.

Mr. Uribe's main opponents — Mr. Gaviria, from the Democratic Pole party, and Mr. Serpa, who has run unsuccessfully for president three times — tried to take advantage of Mr. Uribe's setbacks, his sometimes caustic personality and the country's grinding poverty.

Mr. Gaviria and his party did for the first time replace a traditional party to become the largest opposition force, demonstrating that the left has future here.

There was little else to celebrate for Mr. Uribe's opponents. Mr. Serpa's third-place finish was an especially hard blow for the Liberal Party, whose influence had steadily eroded in recent months.

In March, Uribe allies took overwhelming control of the country's 268-member Congress. Four more years will give Mr. Uribe the chance to place his allies in major government institutions like the Constitutional Court, the comptroller's office, the Bank of the Republic and the electoral board.

"President Uribe has all the powers in his hands," wrote Daniel Coronell, a columnist with a newsweekly, *Semana*. "He will own the executive branch like never before, and be proprietor of big chunks of the legislative and judicial branches."