

# Uribe looks to stop leftist insurgents

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**BOGOTA, Colombia** - Strengthened by his landslide presidential re-election, staunch U.S. ally Alvaro Uribe declared Monday that he will fulfill his "huge responsibility" to Colombia.

In Colombia's least violent election in more than a decade, Uribe won a second term with 62 percent of the votes on Sunday - far outpacing his closest rival.

Colombians overwhelmingly returned Uribe to office - the first time for an incumbent in more than a century - because of a surge of economic growth and a decline in crime and violence.

But he has acknowledged the job is far from finished and foremost among his tasks will be fulfilling pledges to end the threat from leftist guerrillas and drug traffickers.

"I have a huge responsibility to serve the fatherland," Uribe told cheering supporters outside the Santa Teresita church in his hometown of Medellin, Colombia's second-largest city.

The victory by the 53-year-old conservative leader came despite a series of election triumphs by leftist candidates in South America: Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay.

President Bush called Uribe Monday morning to congratulate him and to commend the Colombian people for their commitment to democracy, White House spokeswoman Eryn Witcher said.

"The president spoke of strong friendship between them and our two countries. The president reaffirmed his strong support for Columbia in its continued battle against narcoterrorism, in moving forward on our free trade agreement and in helping our democratic friends in the region," Witcher said.

Critics say the president has showed a disinterest in social programs in a country with rampant poverty and fear his re-election will exacerbate what they claim are his autocratic tendencies.

Sen. Carlos Gaviria, of the leftist Alternative Democratic Pole party, finished second with 22 percent of the vote - a record for the left in this decidedly conservative country. Horacio Serpa of the centrist Liberal Party followed with just below 12 percent.

The key challenges facing Uribe will be those that have dominated life in this South American country for decades: poverty, civil war and drug trafficking. Colombia is the world's largest cocaine producer and Uribe is a key U.S. ally in the war on drugs.

Speaking at a downtown hotel in Bogota late Sunday, the bespectacled, earnest leader acknowledged the difficulties ahead.

"All Colombians must improve and I must improve," he told supporters, some wearing blue hats with the campaign slogan "Adelante Presidente" - or "Forward, Mr. President."

He can likely count on a supportive Congress after legislative elections in March gave pro-Uribe parties control of 70 of the Senate's 102 seats.

That will be crucial for what many predict will be a necessary round of belt-tightening measures following a near doubling of defense spending and a 25 percent increase in troop strength during Uribe's first term.

Militarily, the government will focus efforts on defeating the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as the FARC, Latin America's oldest and best-equipped guerrilla force.

Uribe's allies in Washington will judge his second term primarily on his battle against the massive illegal drugs industry, which also funds the illegal groups fighting the civil war.

The U.S. Congress has authorized \$4 billion in aid to Colombia since 2000, largely for the anti-narcotics strategy.

The Harvard and Oxford-trained president will also concentrate on extending the economic growth that has characterized the past four years. The economy grew by 5 percent last year, helping cut unemployment by a third since Uribe took office.