

# A Latin leader set to defy leftist trend

**Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe looks likely to win reelection Sunday.**

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**BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA** – As leftists and populist politicians - some of them overtly anti-American - gain strength across Latin America, Colombia's conservative president, Alvaro Uribe, stands out as a political island.

The slight, bespectacled yoga enthusiast with an amateur historian's interest in the US Civil War (he knows the Gettysburg Address by heart) is expected to be reelected here Sunday. Uribe has more than 57 percent support, enough to win elections in the first round, according to the Napoleón Franco Group, a polling firm here.

The reason, say observers, is that Colombians feel safer - and better off economically - today.

"Uribe is a remarkable leader," says Michael Shifter, vice president of the InterAmerican Dialogue, a think tank in Washington, D.C. "He has an acute sense of what the people want, and despite continuing, serious problems, has made real progress on the security front."

Indeed, three days before the elections wealthy young Colombians while away the late afternoon at trendy outdoor cafes in Bogotá. In Plaza Bolívar, school children in plaid uniforms race to scatter the pigeons and small groups of tourists gather for the changing of the presidential guard nearby.

Four years ago, when Mr. Uribe took office, Colombia looked much different. Car bombings and kidnappings were an almost daily occurrence. Talks between the government and leftist rebels to end 40 years of insurgency had just collapsed, and Frommer's didn't even bother including Colombia in its South America tour guide.

Today, the ongoing conflict between rebels and right-wing paramilitaries, both fueled by drug money, still kills thousands each year and has

displaced, according to UN estimates, more than 2 million people. But there has been progress.

Homicides and kidnapping rates here are among the world's highest - but are down sharply. The murder rate has fallen 36 percent since 2002, according to Uribe's spokesman. Kidnappings dropped to 800 last year from nearly 3,000 in 2002, and are down 47 percent so far this year.

Highways in some parts of the country are still off limits and dangerous, but many that were long-controlled by bandits have been reopened.

The country's largest rebel group, the 17,000-strong Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), preparing to celebrate its 42nd anniversary next week, still refuses to negotiate. But the smaller leftist National Liberation Army (ELN) rebel group is in preliminary peace talks, and 30,635 United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) rightist paramilitaries have demobilized.

The improved security situation in Colombia, meanwhile, has also helped the economy: reviving tourism, consumer demand, and investment. According to Central Bank statistics, foreign direct investment here is up fivefold - to \$10 billion last year - since Uribe took office.

"I can go to the countryside for the weekend without being killed on the road, I can go out for lunch without fear of being kidnapped, and I have more money in my pocket. What's not to like?" asks Pedro Quintero, an accountant.

Uribe, a Harvard University graduate, is popular in Washington, too, where President Bush has referred to him as a "strong and principled leader," and has poured \$3 billion in aid into Colombia since 2002, most of that for the war on drugs.

Despite having his hands tied by the war at home, Uribe is a natural bulwark to Washington nemesis Hugo Chávez, the leftist Venezuelan president, says Alvaro Vargas Llosa, a Latin America expert at The Independent Institute in Oakland, Calif., public policy think tank. "Uribe can be more forceful a counter than some of the more moderate left in the region, and the US needs that," says Mr. Vargas Llosa.

Uribe's tough antirebel offensive and willingness to extradite suspected drug traffickers to the US also play well. The State Department's annual report on terrorism, released last month, lists both the leftist rebel groups

and the rightist paramilitaries here as terrorist organizations - and hails Colombia as "a model of success in its counter-terrorism campaign."

By contrast, the State Department claims that next-door neighbor Venezuela is "unwilling or unable" to control traffic in arms, supplies, and drugs to the FARC and ELN - a designation that prompted Washington last week to announce a suspension of arms sales to Mr. Chávez.

Uribe, if he wins, would be the first Colombian president immediately elected to a second term after congress changed the constitution last year to allow him to run. Uribe has maintained popularity levels of near 70 percent throughout his first term. But the history of second- or third- term presidencies in Latin America offers a caution. Argentina's Carlos Menem similarly won congressional permission to run for a second term, and Peru's Alberto Fujimori dissolved congress in a "self-coup" to get his second term, and changed the constitution to get a third term. Both ultimately left office amid declining popularity and corruption allegations.

"A second administration will be very tough because Colombians' instincts are against excess of power," says Vargas Llosa. "They will be hard on Uribe."

Criticisms of Uribe center around accusations that the wealthy landowner, whose father was killed by the rebels in the early 1980s, maintains too-cozy ties with paramilitary leaders, protecting them from long jail sentences and extradition to the US, and that he has allowed his security forces to commit abuses. Uribe is also charged with ignoring grave social problems in a country where more than half of the 41 million population live in poverty.

But perhaps the most serious criticism of him is how - in the tradition of Latin American strongmen who trample the judicial and legislative branches - he handles criticism. "Uribe has an authoritarian streak ... and embodies a new kind of conservative populism," charges Bruce Bagley, a professor of international studies at the University of Miami in Florida.

"He is intolerant of criticism, especially by human rights organizations and NGOs. He runs his foreign policy out of the presidential palace ... and most important, he has made no effort to build an effective political party that would allow the country to continue to function democratically after he leaves office," says Mr. Bagley.

Carlos Gavira, a left-wing judge who is also running for president, and who was once Uribe's law professor at the University of Antioquia in

Medellin, joked to the Associated Press this week that Uribe "was a good student, but he forgot to come to the class on constitutional law."

Uribe's recent tirades against journalists critical of him - which earned him reprimands from Human Rights Watch - and his refusal to participate in any presidential debates, have not helped this image. "He projects himself as a messiah, saying that only he can bring the country out of chaos," says Maria Jimena Duzan, a columnist at Colombia's most influential newspaper, El Tiempo. "He manages the country like it's his farm, and I am afraid this will get worse."

The Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA) party's Mr. Gavira, who opposes free trade agreements with the US, is second behind Uribe, with some 19 percent of the votes, according to last Friday's Napoleón Franco poll. Former minister Horacio Serpa of the Colombian Liberal Party (PLC) is behind with 13 percent.