

COLOMBIAN LEADER, SEEKING RE-ELECTION, WARNS OF CATASTROPHE

THE NEW YORK TIMES
MAY 28, 2006

BOGOTÁ, [Colombia](#), May 27 — His handlers portray President [Álvaro Uribe](#) as a wonkish technocrat too busy solving Colombia's problems to become mired in its tumultuous politics. But as he finished campaigning for re-election ahead of Sunday's voting, Mr. Uribe transformed himself into a master salesman whose message was simple and effective: it's me or catastrophe.

On a recent night, his staccato voice filling the Plaza de Bolívar here, Mr. Uribe rattled off his accomplishments — military victories against Marxist guerrillas, expanded nutritional programs for the elderly, a free-trade pact with Washington.

"All of it appears like a lot, but it is not very much in the face of what the Colombian people need," Mr. Uribe said in a long speech, emphasizing that more work needed to be done and that he was the man to do it. "The victory will be the Colombian people's, the victory will be yours."

Mr. Uribe's projection as a determined and steady caretaker of a troubled country, coupled with his talents for imagery and populism, have made him the man to beat, and perhaps one of the most popular presidents in Colombia's history.

Polls show Mr. Uribe, a 53-year-old lawyer, at least 30 points ahead of his nearest rival — Carlos Gaviria, a former Constitutional Court justice — and well on his way to capturing the 50 percent needed to avoid a runoff.

The Bush White House, which has given Colombia more than \$3 billion in the Uribe years, mostly as military and antidrug aid, has a lot riding on the election as well, in a region filled with political tumult and rising leftist populism. President Bush himself has not held back on heaping praise, calling Mr. Uribe "a strong and principled leader."

But as Mr. Uribe prepares for what will most likely be another four-year term, political analysts, opposition politicians and human rights groups have raised concern about the concentrated power he will amass and his often heavy-handed style of governing.

Sixty-one percent of Congress is allied with the president. Another four years will most likely put government allies on the Constitutional Court and in the comptroller's office, both now independent institutions prone to oppose Mr. Uribe.

"The Uribe supporters would say this is the price of victory," wrote María Jimena Duzán, a columnist in *El Tiempo* and critic of Mr. Uribe's policies. "If Uribe is re-elected, he will have omnipotent power without precedent in our history."

Uribe administration officials and their allies cringe at such criticism. They say the president has done more than any other leader to reduce Colombia's once-spiraling violence and the spread of its biggest rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC.

Homicides dropped to just above 18,000 last year from nearly 29,000 in 2002, when Mr. Uribe was elected, and kidnappings fell to 800 from nearly 3,000.

Colombia's economy grew 4 percent or better the last three years, foreign investment tripled after Mr. Uribe took office and drug crops were hard hit by crop dusters.

"President Uribe is a responsible and serious man," Senator Óscar Iván Zuluaga said. "You do not get re-elected unless you've met your commitments, and he's met them, on the social front, the political, the economic and on security."

Mr. Uribe, a former governor of his home state, Antioquia, studied at Oxford and [Harvard](#), and tends toward ill-fitting suits, wire-frame glasses and schoolboy haircuts.

But he knows how to appeal to a crowd, often to its lesser instincts, drawing comparisons with populists like President [Hugo Chávez](#) of Venezuela. "Uribe sells products, an image — that is really the authoritarian spell he has," said Eduardo Carreño, director of the Lawyers' Collective, a Bogotá group that fights the government on rights issues.

The strong image has appealed to Colombians, and Mr. Uribe has used it to tighten his hold on power. Mr. Uribe and his ministers have battled with other institutions, like the Constitutional Court, suggesting that they get in the way of governing.

Mr. Uribe is also not above old-fashioned cronyism, political observers, congressmen and critics contend. To get the constitutional amendment that permitted him to run again, Mr. Uribe's government won the support of members of Congress by providing dozens of jobs in embassies, consulates and government agencies to their relatives.

He browbeats the news media, dressing down reporters in public, and has called for corrupt politicians to be lynched. He goes directly to the people in his so-called Community Council meetings, promising to fix potholes and improve schools. He takes notes and jots down the phone numbers of residents. He promises immediate relief.

"He is the only one who has thought of the poor and listened to the people," Nancy Patricia Trujillo, 29, a single mother, said at an Uribe rally in the southern city of Neiva.

Ms. Trujillo and many others dismiss the criticisms of Mr. Uribe.

Experts say he is vulnerable to charges that he has been overly generous in disarmament negotiations with right-wing paramilitary groups, helping them morph into secretive drug-trafficking groups.

The government was also wounded by news reports that the intelligence service collaborated with paramilitaries to assassinate leftist union activists and provided secret information to drug traffickers. Mr. Uribe has angrily denied the allegations.

One of Colombia's incisive analysts, Antonio Caballero, said Mr. Uribe avoided the scandals by separating himself from ministers or generals who blundered. "His role is not to take responsibility in the acts of his government," Mr. Caballero wrote in the newsweekly *Semana*.

Critics often come under withering attack from Mr. Uribe, be they former allies, like Senator Rafael Pardo, or rights groups. He has even accused opponents of ties to Marxist guerrillas, a dangerous charge where death squads frequently go after allies of the FARC rebels.

But that did not stop Mr. Uribe from recently saying the choice on Sunday is between him and Communism. "The country is going to have to choose if we

will improve democratic security as a way to peace," he said, "or if we'll go back to the unseen Communism that will turn the country over to the FARC."