

Colombians Keep Uribe In Power In Landslide

U.S. Ally Has Led Fight vs. Rebels
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BOGOTÁ, Colombia, May 28 -- President Álvaro Uribe was reelected in a landslide Sunday in Colombia's most peaceful elections in more than a decade, strengthening the U.S. ally's mandate to crack down on armed groups and drug traffickers.

Uribe's win marks the first time in more than a century that an incumbent Colombian leader has been reelected, and bucks a trend of leftist leaders taking office across South America.

With 96 percent of ballots counted, the conservative Uribe won a stronger-than-expected 62 percent of the vote, according to official results. A majority was needed to win in the first round and avoid a runoff.

In second place, with 22 percent, was Sen. Carlos Gaviria of the Alternative Democratic Pole party. Gaviria's strong support -- a record outcome for the left -- confirmed the growing strength of the democratic left in this conservative nation. Horacio Serpa, of the century-old Liberal Party, finished third with just under 12 percent of the vote.

"We're very happy with the results," Gaviria told Caracol Radio Sunday night after recognizing his defeat. "For the first time in the country's history, the main opposition party will be comprised of the democratic left."

In recent years, left-leaning leaders have taken office in Bolivia, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Chile.

Sunday's vote took place amid relative calm -- underscoring a big reason Colombians backed Uribe. He is credited with bringing down crime rates and violence while overseeing economic growth.

Uribe's critics say he has shown a lack of interest in social programs despite the country's rampant poverty and fear that his reelection will lead to a strengthening of his alleged autocratic tendencies.

There were no reported attacks on voters during the election, but the military reported killing 12 rebels in clashes with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, on Saturday and Sunday. Three soldiers were injured. It was not clear whether the clashes were election-related.

About 220,000 troops guarded polling stations, shopping centers and other sensitive areas after what experts called the most peaceful campaign in more than a decade in a nation battered by violence involving leftist rebels, right-wing militias, drug traffickers and security forces.

Uribe is the first incumbent to be reelected in Colombia since President Rafael Núñez in 1892. A constitutional amendment Uribe pushed through Congress last year allowed him to seek a second term.

Despite predictions of low turnout in a race in which the outcome seemed certain, thousands of people shook off the chill and damp of the morning to vote early at the country's largest polling station, in central Bogotá.

Camouflaged tanks rolled down a leafy street, and heavily armed combat troops frisked motorists at random checkpoints.

While there has been a dramatic drop in kidnappings and murders under Uribe's government, an end to the violence perpetrated by leftist rebels remains elusive.

Rebels who control huge tracts of the countryside have traditionally tried to assert their presence ahead of elections by stepping up attacks and politically motivated kidnappings.

According to a study by the independent Security and Democracy Foundation, 55 politically motivated killings and kidnappings were registered over the past 12 months - an 81 percent reduction from the year before the prior elections, in 2002, when the FARC kidnapped candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who remains captive.

As part of his "democratic security" agenda, Uribe has put 25 percent more troops and police on the streets during four years in office. Military spending has nearly doubled, backed by \$4 billion in U.S. aid for the anti-drug effort known as Plan Colombia.

Also since 2002, about 30,000 members of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia have handed in their weapons as part of a government-brokered amnesty deal with the paramilitary group.

Colombia remains the world's largest producer of cocaine. Uribe is urging the United States to beef up a fleet of 20 planes that spray coca crops