

Colombia's Uribe Begins Second Term

The Washington Post
August 8, 2006

BOGOTA, Colombia, Aug. 7 -- President Alvaro Uribe began a second term Monday, promising to seek an elusive peace with leftist rebels while maintaining the hard-line security policies credited with a sharp drop in murder and kidnappings.

In an inauguration ceremony attended by 11 heads of state, Uribe said he would devote "all of his energies" to pursuing a peaceful end to this nation's four-decade-old civil war.

"I'm not afraid of negotiating peace," Uribe, 54, said after taking the oath of office. "I confess what worries me more is falling short of that goal and instead seeing our gains in security eroded."

After reforming the constitution last year to allow himself to seek a second term, Uribe coasted to victory in the May 28 elections with 62 percent of the vote -- 10 percentage points more than he won in 2002. He is Colombia's first sitting president to be reelected.

Despite his reputation as a free-market conservative and Washington's closest ally in Latin America, Uribe at times in his speech sounded like the left-leaning social democrats favored of late by voters in neighboring countries.

"We are against a fiscally tight macro-economic policy that leaves economic growth to the luck of supply and demand. The state must be devoted in equal parts to growth and equality," he said.

Uribe made no bold proposals for improving the lot of the 50 percent of Colombians who live below the poverty line -- on less than three U.S. dollars a day -- even as the rich benefit from the increased foreign investment that improved security has brought.