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Colombia Candidate Toes Hard Line

First-Round Winner Accuses President of Being Soft on Rebels, Criticizes Slow Pace of Negotiations

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By DAN MOLINSKI
June 1, 2014 8:30 p.m. ET



NOW > Zuluaga campaigns in Pensilvania, Colombia, where he was once mayor, on Sunday ahead of presidential elections. *Dan Molinski/The Wall Street Journal*

PENSILVANIA, Colombia— Fabio Muñoz bitterly recalls how guerrillas kidnapped him in 2001, forcing his family to pay a \$100,000 ransom that nearly bankrupted his once-successful cattle brokerage.

So on Sunday, he arrived with hundreds of other eager and prospective voters to this picturesque town in central Colombia to welcome the man they hope will be the next president of Colombia, Óscar Iván Zuluaga.

A native and former mayor of Pensilvania, Mr. Zuluaga is scouring communities like this with a simple, reverberating message: that Colombians should vote for him and not President Juan Manuel Santos, whom he accuses of being soft on guerrillas in the long-running peace talks that are a pillar of his administration.

Asked in an interview with The Wall Street Journal whether the guerrillas could be trusted, 55-year-old Mr. Zuluaga emphatically answered: "No, never."

"All Colombians want peace, but the key is a peace based on justice and conditions," said Mr. Zuluaga, referring to tough stipulations he would place on the guerrillas in peace talks, should he become president. "FARC leaders should serve six years in prison," he said, referring to the rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

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Mr. Zuluaga's message is resonating with townspeople here and elsewhere who remember how the rebels have kidnapped, extorted and killed with impunity. He is running neck and neck with Mr. Santos ahead of the June 15 vote.

"They don't negotiate fairly and can't be trusted," said Mr. Muñoz. "We don't want to be at war. But this peace process of Santos's, it's simply not feasible."

A week after finishing second to Mr. Zuluaga in a first round of voting, Mr. Santos has defended his government's 18 months of negotiations with FARC in Havana, Cuba. FARC has said it wouldn't comment on the election until its conclusion.

"If we manage to reach a peace agreement, that means that the war is over," Mr. Santos said in a recent interview on the campaign trail. He has also repeatedly said that if Mr. Zuluaga wins, his conditions would be so onerous that FARC would step away from talks.

Mr. Zuluaga said he is simply proposing limits and demands that many Colombians want, such as speeding up the timetable to reach an accord. "Colombian people want limits," he said. "Talks shouldn't take much time."

The tough line has paid off politically for Mr. Zuluaga, an economist and former senator who was little-known just two months ago. He is now a political force, having used the hard line against FARC and an alliance with former President Álvaro Uribe, a folksy, tough-talking rancher who targeted the rebels with a U.S.-funded military offensive during his 2002-2010 presidency.

But while the criticism of the peace process won over voters in the first round, analysts said Mr. Zuluaga needs to ease his stance to win the presidency because polls show a majority of Colombians support peace negotiations.

Even here in Pensilvania—a town of 10,000 named for the U.S. state—where Mr. Zuluaga's years as mayor are fondly remembered, some say they want the talks in Cuba to prosper.

Jairo Antonio Rios, the town's current mayor, said the tough policies of Mr. Uribe's presidency—militarizing all towns, launching blistering assaults and targeting FARC commanders— was required a decade ago. But he worries that Mr. Zuluaga may be too much of a hawk for a different time, which has seen Latin America's fourth-most-populous country grow safer and more stable.

"We need a new solution, one that doesn't include killing people," he said.

Last Monday, Mr. Zuluaga told reporters that he would suspend peace talks upon winning the presidency, giving FARC a week to end operations as a condition for continuing negotiations.

By midweek, though, he said peace talks would continue under his government as long as FARC ended its recruitment of child fighters, the use of land mines, and attacks on civilians and the country's infrastructure. He now gives the rebels a month to make good on the new conditions.

Jorge Restrepo, director of the conflict-analysis center at Bogota's Javeriana University, said Mr. Zuluaga is trying to appeal to people fearful of perceived FARC gains while at the same time "sending a message to investors who are interested in the peace process, that his government could be competent negotiating peace."

Still, Mr. Zuluaga made clear he would have little patience for FARC commanders. Those who have committed atrocities, he said, would have to go to jail and be barred from politics. Mr. Santos's peace plan gives FARC the possibility of starting a political movement, and FARC commanders have repeatedly said they don't expect to spend a day in jail.

On the surface to many Colombians, Mr. Zuluaga would seem distant from the conflict that has long buffeted Colombia's countryside. His mentor, Mr. Uribe, had a far different image—a man long associated with ranching in conflicted regions (Mr. Uribe's father had been killed by guerrillas).

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Mr. Zuluaga has instead been known more for being a work and businessman. He studied at Britain's University of Exeter and then ran a Colombian steelmaker, Acesco. He later served Mr. Uribe as his finance minister, steering Colombia's economy through the global financial crisis.

But Mr. Zuluaga was also mayor of this town in the early 1990s, when the FARC was rising as a military force, and remained engaged in the early 2000s when kidnapping and murder wasn't uncommon here.

"He saw firsthand the effects the FARC had on this town over the past 10 or 15 years," said Mauricio Villegas, who is 41, a longtime friend of Mr. Zuluaga and a former army commander in Pensilvania.

Another friend, Jesus "Chepe" Ramirez, 49, remembered how Pensilvania—like many small towns in Colombia's outback— was largely forgotten by the seat of government in Bogotá. "Around 2000, this whole town was collectively kidnapped by the guerrillas," he said.

But people here remembered how Mr. Zuluaga didn't give up on the town.

Residents said Mr. Zuluaga went to the besieged government in Bogotá with an unusual plan. He donated family land for a military base and then paid for the upkeep. The government only needed to provide soldiers and arms. "The town needed the support," said Mr. Ramirez, "and Óscar Iván came up with a practical solution."

—Sara Schaefer Muñoz and Juan Forero contributed to this article.

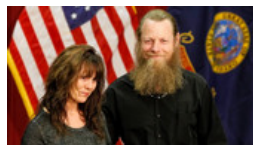
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