



1, COLOMBIA, SOCIAL ISSUES, WORLD NEWS

COLOMBIA: 26 PERCENT OF ELECTED LEGISLATORS HAVE TIES TO PARAMILITARIES

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By Susan Abad

With an abstention rate of 57 percent — which if adding the blank and null votes rises to 67 percent — Colombians showed in the latest elections a profound apathy towards the political class, which is increasingly tainted by corruption.

Only 18.7 million of the 32.8 million registered voters went to the polls on March 9 to elect 102 senators, 166 representatives and five members of the Andean Parliament who will take office on July 20 for the 2014-2018 period.

The election of the “Peace Congress” — so named because it will choose whether to endorse the agreements that the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) may reach in the peace talks taking place in Havana, Cuba, since November 2012 — changed the political landscape of the country but also reflected the power that paramilitary groups still maintain in some regions.

“The emergence of the Democratic Center as a radical right is new in the Colombian political scene,” Jorge Restrepo, director of the Resource Center for Conflict Analysis (CERAC), told Latinamerica Press, referring to the approximately 3.5 million votes the party of former President Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010) obtained, allowing it to become the second political force in Congress with 19 senators and 12 members to the House of Representatives, behind President Juan Manuel Santos’s U Party, which placed 21 senators and 37 representatives.

The Conservative Party unexpectedly won 19 seats in the Senate and 27 in the House of Representatives, which increases its possibility of becoming the force that tilts the balance in the next legislative rounds.

The political left also made headway. The Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA) held its eight seats (five senators and three representatives), while the Green Alliance added three seats for a total of 11 (five senators and six representatives).

Parapolitics

As was expected, 69 politicians linked to paramilitary groups took office in the Legislative branch, most belonging to the ruling U party, Radical Change and the Liberal Party — who support the government of Santos — and some of Uribe’s Democratic Center, according to the Peace and Reconciliation Foundation.

“They were actually elected, but their sons and daughters, spouses and other family members are their representatives [in the Congress],” Leon Valencia, director of Peace and Reconciliation Foundation, told Latinamerica Press.

“Of the 48 contested candidates in the Senate elections, 33 won seats, some of them with a large number of votes. For example, Andrés Felipe García Zuccardi, son of Juan José García — who was convicted of embezzlement by appropriation — and son of Piedad Zuccardi, who was called to trial for relations with paramilitary groups, won more than 50,000 votes in the U Party. His aunt Teresita García was also elected inheriting the votes of her brother Alvaro García, sentenced to 40 years in prison for the massacre of Macayepo [in 2000]. Moreover, Mauricio Aguilar, son of parapolitical activist Hugo Aguilar, achieved one of the highest vote counts,” says the Foundation. “As for the House of Representatives, of the 83 indicted candidates, 36 won a seat. For example, Antenor Durán, heir to Kiko Gómez’s criminal organization, took office in one of the Houses in the department of La Guajira. Likewise in Sucre, the majority of votes went to questionable politician Yair Acuña’s party, the One Hundred Percent Colombia, which took control of two of the three chambers of the department.”

To Restrepo, the distribution of new seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives “undoubtedly defines in significant terms the theme of peace. I think what the right group will do is try to bring up the interests of those whom they represent in the talks in Havana. Such as, for example, the treatment that military personnel accused of atrocities will receive.”

Furthermore, “to what extent will the Democratic Center and part of the conservatives block or encumber the government’s work?” asks Restrepo.

Several analysts agree in the response. The kind of unanimity Santos enjoyed with the parties that in 2010 made up the Alliance of National Unity (the U, Conservative, Liberal and Radical Change) guaranteed success in passing his major reforms and legislative initiatives. Today, the government’s coalition has been reduced to three parties after the Conservatives decided to run with their own presidential candidate. This distribution, which in total amounts to 47 senators and 92 representatives, does not allow a 51 percent majority that would ensure the leader’s governance in an eventual second term.

Additionally, Restrepo mentioned that “it is not only about the approval of the agreements [to be adopted in the negotiations with FARC] that Congress needs to pass, but in due course the bills that allow for the implementation of the agreements. The laws for land reform, rural development, the national budget which must include expenses to cover the agreements — that is where opposition will have some ability to veto.”

In that regard, the PDA's reelected senator Iván Cepeda says that it "will be necessary to foster coalitions and call for strong debates regarding political control in order to defeat the far right and the people who came to Congress with concerning parapolitical backgrounds." The same parapoliticians and corrupt individuals that, as Valencia underlines, helped Uribe "become president with no less than 2 million votes in 2002 and in 2006."

Presidential Elections

Although peace will remain the central theme in the presidential elections of May 25, the factors in play in this Parliament will not be decisive factors for those who want to replace Santos and prevent him from governing for another four years.

The President of Congress, Juan Fernando Cristo, stated to Latinamerica Press that "in this election the parties that go along with the peace proposal and those that run counter to this proposal are clearly defined." In that regard, former President Uribe — the most tenacious Santos opponent and leading critic of the negotiations with the FARC — despite obtaining many votes in the House of Representatives, could not transfer his support to his candidate Oscar Iván Zuluaga, who according to the latest poll by Ipsos-Napoleon Franco published on March 20, is in second place with 9 percent of the vote, far behind Santos's 24 percent.

"Uribe is Uribe and Zuluaga is Zuluaga, they cannot be put on the same level," says Cristo.

The non-correlation between the two elections is also reflected in the Green Alliance. Despite the few seats it obtained, the party's candidate for president, the former mayor of Bogotá Enrique Peñalosa, was highlighted during the week following the election with 17 percent of support. He was seen as having the biggest chance to face Santos in a possible runoff election to be held in June, but then his support fell to 8 percent.

In contrast to how well the Conservative Party fared in the legislative elections, its presidential candidate, former Defense Minister Martha Lucía Ramírez, not only failed to surpass 4 percent of the vote, but her nomination has also divided the party.

Although the candidates for Colombia's government cannot rely on their parliamentarian's influence on the electorate, they can learn from their vote. That is what the PDA and the Patriotic Union parties reasoned, the later failed to win any congressional seat. Both on the political left, they have joined efforts to support Clara López for the presidency and Aida Abella for the vice-presidency. The strategy has led López to share second place in the polls with Zuluaga with 9 percent of the would-be voters.

About the author: **Latinamerica Press**



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