

AMERICAS

Support From the Left Helps Keep a Right-Wing President in Power in Colombia

By WILLIAM NEUMAN JUNE 19, 2014

BOGOTÁ, Colombia — Going into Sunday’s presidential election here, many people expected that the right-wing former president, Álvaro Uribe, would be the one whose outsize influence might tip the balance in favor of his preferred candidate, Óscar Iván Zuluaga.

But instead it was an unlikely kingmaker, Clara López, a soft-spoken leftist who is the polar opposite of Mr. Uribe, who threw her support behind the re-election bid of President Juan Manuel Santos and was singled out at his victory celebration for playing a decisive role in his triumph. Mr. Uribe, a charismatic and choleric populist who was president from 2002 to 2010, casts a long political shadow in Colombia, but he came up empty on election night.

Ms. López, thoughtful and even-tempered, has nothing like Mr. Uribe’s political muscle. To support Mr. Santos, she had to take a leap across a political divide, backing a right-of-center president whose policies she mostly opposed.

But by declaring that a vote for Mr. Santos was a vote in favor of peace negotiations with rebel groups, which the president has championed, she managed to mobilize the country’s usually fractured left and make it politically relevant again.

“The right elected Santos in 2010,” a Green Party politician and former guerrilla leader, Antonio Navarro, wrote on his Twitter account on

election night. “In 2014, he was re-elected by the left. A paradox.”

Ms. López, 64, who once served as interim mayor of Bogotá, the capital, had run against Mr. Santos as the presidential candidate of the leftist Alternative Democratic Pole Party, in a first round of voting last month. She came in fourth among five candidates, but received nearly two million votes, 15 percent, which was considered significant in a country where the left has often been persecuted and pushed to the fringes of the political process.

Mr. Zuluaga, a former finance minister in Mr. Uribe’s cabinet, received the most votes in the first round, while Mr. Santos came in second. The two candidates went to a runoff election, held last Sunday.

Mr. Santos won that round handily, with 51 percent of the vote to 45 percent for Mr. Zuluaga. Analysts credited Ms. López with helping to tip the balance, in particular by urging supporters in Bogotá, a leftist stronghold, to back the president. He tripled his vote tally there in the second round.

The strong show of leftist support for Mr. Santos, a scion of one of the country’s most powerful families, was a complete turnaround from the president’s first election four years ago. At that time, Mr. Santos, the defense minister in Mr. Uribe’s cabinet, pledged to continue Mr. Uribe’s policies, and ran with the backing of the right-wing president.

But Mr. Uribe later split with Mr. Santos after his successor surprised the nation by starting peace talks with the country’s largest rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, saying he wanted to end decades of war. Mr. Uribe saw it as a betrayal, and many expected that Mr. Zuluaga would cut off the peace talks if he became president, and start a new military offensive. They also feared a Zuluaga victory would essentially mean a return to power by the polarizing Mr. Uribe.

Some on the left, including other leaders in Ms. López’s party, wanted to stay on the sidelines in the second round of voting, urging their supporters to check a blank box on their ballots as a protest against the two right-wing candidates.

But Ms. López decided to energetically endorse Mr. Santos. She recorded a television ad and appeared with Mr. Santos at campaign events, drawing harsh criticism from some in her own party who accused her of selling out.

“I dedicated myself to promote the vote for peace,” she said in an interview at her home here, decorated with paintings by famous Colombian artists. “No society can function if it is permanently in confrontation with itself, to the point where rifles are used to defend political positions.”

She said that for decades in Colombia, it was too easy to justify repression of the left by equating it with the guerrilla groups. That pattern, she hopes, will end with a peace deal, creating new opportunities for left-wing candidates like herself.

Jorge Restrepo, director of the Conflict Analysis Resource Center, a research institution, said that Ms. López occupied a unique place in Colombian politics.

“She has entry into the working-class unions, but also the same kinds of acceptance in high-level circles of the Colombian elite,” he said. “That’s precisely what makes her very interesting and defines her as someone who can get votes in a wide spectrum of Colombian electoral constituencies.”

Like Mr. Santos, Ms. López was born into the upper crust of Colombian society, with a family that counted presidents and other influential figures in its family tree. It was a life that she once described as, “That happy world of big houses, horse rides on the hacienda, good manners, stimulating conversation and elegant figures.”

At 14, Ms. López was sent to the Madeira School, an elite boarding school in Virginia. She later went to Harvard, studying economics, and joined protests there against the Vietnam War. She traveled with friends around South America, where their pedigree allowed them to mix with high society and meet with presidents, including Salvador Allende, the socialist president of Chile.

After graduating, she returned to Colombia and took part in the

presidential campaign of her father's cousin, Alfonso López, who was her godfather. Once he was elected in 1974, she served as an economic adviser in his cabinet.

Her marriage to a Wall Street investment banker, Edmond Jacques Courtois Jr., lasted only briefly, she said. He was indicted and eventually pleaded guilty in New York in an insider-trading scheme.

In the mid-1980s, Ms. López joined the left-wing Patriotic Union Party and ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Bogotá. The party was the target of brutal right-wing repression and hundreds, if not more, of its candidates and members were killed.

Ms. López was appointed mayor of Bogotá in 2011, serving about six months to finish the term of a mayor who was removed from office in a corruption scandal.

She is critical of the economic policies of Mr. Santos and advocates alternatives to fight poverty and counter the nation's highly unequal distribution of wealth.

Ms. López casts herself as a more modern, pragmatic leftist and, in a region where the left often disparages the United States, she acknowledges a debt to America, where she says she learned to look beyond class.

"I attribute this attitude to having been educated in the United States," she said. "In the United States, you are much more egalitarian than here."

Ms. López and Mr. Santos share an unusual political connection: They have relatives who served as presidents, back to back, in the 1930s and 1940s. Ms. López mused whether history might repeat itself, allowing her to succeed Mr. Santos in four years. "But there's a lot of water that has to flow under the bridge before that happens," she said.

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