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“An Agenda for the Next President”

Cynthia Arnson*

The spectacular rise in popular support for Colombian presidential candidate Antanas Mockus has injected new uncertainty as well as energy in the country's presidential elections scheduled for May. In the past several weeks, Mockus has steadily narrowed the gap separating him and front-runner Juan Manuel Santos; Santos, a former defense minister, has long been considered the heir of President Alvaro Uribe's high popularity on security and defense matters. On April 23, an opinion poll released by Colombia's CM& television channel and the Centro Nacional de Consultoría upset predictions even further. The telephone poll among residents of urban areas showed Santos leading by only one percentage point in a first round that includes 9 candidates for president. However, in a second round pitting Santos against Mockus, Mockus held an astonishing six-point lead. An Ipsos-Napoleón Franco poll released on Monday showed Mockus defeating Santos by an even larger 13-point margin Colombians who intended to vote in the second round.

If for the first time it appears that a continuation of *uribismo* is by no means in the cards (Mockus has avoided the label altogether), recent trends in Colombian public opinion show large vulnerabilities for the ruling coalition. Regardless of who wins Colombia's next presidential election, the polls show strong dissatisfaction with several areas of economic performance and “good governance” that should figure prominently on the agenda of the next administration.

According to a pre-electoral season poll by Gallup-Colombia in November 2009, Uribe predictably gets high marks for his democratic security policy. Three-fourths of Colombians polled last November approved of the president's handling of the war against the guerrillas and the same number supported his conduct of the fight against narcotrafficking. Uribe's approval ratings on security matters soared close to 90 percent following *Operación Jaque*, the daring military rescue of guerrilla-held hostages in June 2008, a time when Juan Manuel Santos was defense minister.

On other matters, however, notably the economy and corruption, Uribe's polling numbers have grown increasingly negative over time. In the November poll 46 percent of Colombians thought that things in the country were getting worse as opposed to better; by contrast, in 2006, following Uribe's election to a second term, 57 percent believed that things in the country were improving. By more than two to one, those polled late last year considered the economy, rather than security, as the country's key problem. Three-fourths of the population thought that unemployment was worsening, 61 percent disapproved of the government's handling of the cost of living, and—in a sharp reversal of earlier trends—fully 57 percent disapproved of Uribe's handling of the fight against poverty.

Recent data from the World Bank and the UN Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) may explain the trends. Colombian government officials boast that GDP has more than doubled since 2002, spurring a huge increase in per capita GDP and a drop in unemployment. World Bank rankings on the ease of doing business, moreover, place Colombia third in the region, behind only Puerto Rico and St. Lucia. Poverty levels have also fallen over the last decade, from over 51 percent of the population when Uribe took office to 43 percent in 2008, according to CEPAL. But in rural areas, poverty remained stubbornly high, encompassing some 62 percent of the population in 2006. Indigence rose between 2007 and 2008, as it did in several countries in Latin America in the midst of global recession.

Other World Bank figures demonstrate that high inequality has accompanied Colombia's economic boom. In the middle of this decade, Bolivia, Brazil, and Colombia led the region in rates of inequality, all of which are far above the regional average. Bank statistics show that in 2006, the bottom 40 percent of Colombia's population held just over 8 percent of the country's income, while the top 10 percent controlled 46 percent of wealth. The gap has steadily widened since 1996, continuing to do so during the Uribe years. According to CEPAL, per capita social spending in Colombia has gone up in recent years, but remains at levels that are less than half the regional average. World Bank figures show that health expenditure as a percent of the government's budget has actually declined.

Another area of vulnerability for the government concerns the key issue of corruption. In June 2008 only 41 percent of those polled viewed corruption as worsening, as opposed to 43 percent who believed it was getting better. But by November 2009 those numbers had sharply reversed: fully 61 percent of respondents saw corruption as worsening, a majority of the public disapproved of the way Uribe was handling corruption, and only 25 percent viewed the situation as improving. The poll does not correlate public attitudes with specific developments in public life. But the numbers give credence to the thesis that such issues as the long-simmering scandal over paramilitary infiltration of key institutions, together with a string of revelations concerning government use of the internal security apparatus to spy on political opponents and journalists, among others, have taken a toll on *uribismo*.

When Uribe won the presidency in 2002 and again in 2006, he did so at the expense of Colombia's two traditional parties, the Liberals and Conservatives. This trend has accelerated during the Uribe years, such that Uribe's *Partido de la U* now claims the most adherents among Colombian voters, followed by the Green Party of Antanas Mockus. If recent polls prove correct, Colombians may turn to another outsider to lead them through the next four years.

* Director, Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars