

## **Colombian Elections: Choosing between rights or the Right...**

By Judy Meltzer, FOCAL Policy Analyst

Upcoming Presidential elections seem to indicate that Colombians are heading for a sharp turn to the right on the political road map, taking them further down the path of escalating violence and human rights abuses. Although an unlikely contender at the early stages of Presidential campaigning, Alvaro Uribe, an independent candidate representing hard-liner conservatives, seems to be headed to win either in the first or second round of elections, scheduled for May 26th, 2002.

This does not bode well for the prospect of peace in Colombia, a country wracked by conflict for over four decades. Although the illicit drug trade provides the conflict's financial fuel and most often catches international media attention, at the root of the conflict lies extremely uneven access to resources and power—a pervasive characteristic of the region as a whole. Two main guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), with respective (and increasingly tenuous) Marxist / Gueverian revolutionary roots, wage guerrilla warfare against the state primarily through kidnapping and extortion. The State's historically weak response to such tactics has given rise to privately funded paramilitary forces which have become notorious for atrocities against civilian populations and direct and indirect links to official security forces, including Alvaro Uribe himself. The victims of the conflict are Colombian citizens, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable sectors, who have been displaced, kidnapped, and killed beyond tolerance.

Uribe's platform promises—to increase the military crackdown with, what he hopes, will be greater U.S. military involvement, and not to negotiate with the guerrilla without a ceasefire—are a recipe for war. Uribe also advocates the creation of a civilian militia, which many fear could potentially evolve into an even larger paramilitary than the existing AUC, responsible for a great number of conflict related civilian deaths. Clearly an Uribe victory would further set back the already derailed peace negotiations between guerrilla organizations and government, and ultimately guarantee increased warfare among all three parties.

Under President Pastrana's (now lame duck) government, political negotiations were accepted both nationally and internationally as the only feasible way out of the conflict. What has changed? Most importantly, there have been changes in both international and domestic contexts. A shift in the global discourse on terrorism, notably the U.S.'s military response to terrorist attacks, has influenced popular opinion on how to deal with the guerrilla and paramilitary, who are both officially listed as terrorist organizations by the U.S. post-9/11. In the domestic context two changes stand out: the increasing urbanization of guerrilla warfare, which has brought violence into the lives of middle and upper classes who had previously felt sheltered from the 'chaos' in the countryside, and unacceptable acts of violence in the lead up to the elections, including the kidnapping of a Presidential candidate, murder of a Senator, and targeted bombing.

Given this context, negotiated peace in Colombia promises to be a long, challenging and extremely frustrating process. But with Colombia's history of spiraling violence, it is clearly the preferred option. Can negotiations be resumed as before? No, they need a fresh face, ideally one which meaningfully incorporates the increasingly cohesive groups within civil society, as well as international actors including Canada, who could offer tangible support through verification and mediation.

As elections approach, one can only hope that the fragmentation of traditional political coalitions will undermine Uribe's plans, or better yet, that rural populations—often neglected in urban polls—will swing the vote away from the hard right and increased violence that will no doubt entail. Author: Judy Meltzer, Policy Analyst, Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL)

May 2002