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Canada, Colombia and the Americas: What the Future May Hold

By Carlo Dade

The inauguration this past weekend of Juan Manuel Santos as Colombia's 59th president this past weekend has been a welcome spot of good news on the international beat and also a validation of Canada's support and faith toward in that country and its institutions.

For a hemisphere still disconcerted and acrimonious over last year's events in Honduras, the election of Santos has been a salve.

Earlier this year the Colombian Supreme Court ruled against an attempt by outgoing President Uribe to change the constitution to allow for a third consecutive presidential term. In Colombia, a country still technically waging a civil war and only one of three countries in the hemisphere on this year's Foreign Policy's failed states index, the ruling was simply accepted by all without protests or threats to stability. Foreign Policy was so impressed they now label the country "a stunning success."

In Colombia as in a handful of other countries in the hemisphere success has been less about the individual leader and more about the quality of institutions and elites. President Santos, considered a technocrat with a passion for clean and competent government, has made a clear signal with appointments to his cabinet that are overwhelmingly technocratic as opposed to political and include opposition figures. The new foreign and agricultural ministers are good examples in both regards.

Yet, it was only last week that some saw Colombia as being on the verge of war. Renewed charges from outgoing Colombian President Uribe that Venezuela is knowingly harbouring and actively supporting the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, (FARC by the Spanish acronym) had Venezuela cutting ties with Colombia and deploying air force and infantry to the border.

Countries in the hemisphere fled into well worn and hardened positions in support of one side or the other but mostly sought to simply avoid having anything to do with the fracas.

Flash forward to this past weekend and how things have changed. In apparent response to pronouncements by Santos during his campaign, Ecuador has announced discussions to re-establish diplomatic relations and, in advance of this

occurring, its president, Rafael Corea, traveled to Bogotá to attend the inauguration. More astonishing, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has followed Corea's lead and has indicated that he and Santos will meet this Tuesday. Even the FARC has indicated a renewed willingness to talk.

Improving relations with Ecuador looks promising, but Venezuela will be more difficult. The Chavez-Obama saga may offer some insights. Early attempts at rapprochement between the US and Venezuela were eventually scuttled by the deep, almost structural differences in fundamental ideology and world views. Chavez has already swung more wildly in his pronouncements toward the new Colombian government than he did with the US, from claiming it would not make a difference if Mother Teresa were to be elected President of Colombia to now agreeing to talks.

However, improving relations with Venezuela will be paramount for the new government and economic necessity may be enough to move both countries to bury the hatchet someplace other than in each others' back. Colombia appears to have suffered more from blockages to the estimated US\$7 billion in trade between the two countries but the damage has been severe on both sides. Though growth in Colombia is expected to be in the three to four per cent range this year unemployment remains high and reviving trade with Venezuela will be key to raising employment. Chavez faces similar worries. He has also shown a penchant for becoming more pragmatic as the bottom line draws nearer.

In the end, the provocations by former President Uribe in his last week in office to embarrass and sanction Venezuela and President Chavez at the OAS, may have worked to Santos' advantage as he now gets to play good cop to Uribe's bad cop.

The situation with the FARC will be more difficult. Though it has offered talks with the new government, there is no sign of any change in their position to reflect the reality that they have been militarily crippled and politically weakened. As Defence Minister under Uribe, Santos is well aware of this and will not easily bargain away recent gains. He also has experience in making concessions to the FARC under former president Pastrana when he helped create a demilitarized zone as part of a failed attempt to facilitate peace negotiations.

Beyond this, the now former President Uribe who left office with approval ratings in the 75% to 80% range could have the power to scuttle any deal with which he does not agree.

On the broader hemispheric stage the warm welcome for the new Colombian government is both a validation of Canadian commitment to the country and good boost to our engagement in the hemisphere. Canada and Colombia will be working closely together in preparation for the 2012 Summit of the Americas to be held in Cartagena. Colombia has also emerged as a much sought after source of technical assistance on security issues for countries from Mexico to Guatemala to Haiti.

As Canada seeks to do more on security in the hemisphere this could be a new area for cooperation between the two countries.

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