

Colombia: new president, promising ties

By CARLO DADE and LESLEY BURNS

As the Bank of Nova Scotia was celebrating its first acquisition in Colombia in the past month, the Andean country was inaugurating its 59th president, Juan Manuel Santos. This change in leader is both good news for the region and a validation of Canada's support and faith in that country and its institutions.

Canada and Colombia sealed a free trade agreement last June after an amendment spearheaded by Nova Scotia MP Scott Brison was accepted, which will require Bogotá to submit annual human rights reports. With this deal, the Harper government is progressing toward the bilateral trade goals set out in its Americas Strategy and jump-starting good relations with the incoming government.

Earlier this year, the Colombian Supreme Court ruled against an attempt by outgoing President Álvaro Uribe to change the constitution to allow him to run for a third consecutive term. In a country still technically in the midst of a civil war and listed on this year's Foreign Policy's failed states index as one "in danger," it is notable that the ruling was accepted without national protests or threats to stability. Foreign Policy was so impressed with this sign of democratic improvement, it called the country "a stunning success." The election of Santos symbolizes the strength of Colombia's democratic institutions, warranting Canada's closer involvement.

President Santos has demonstrated his intention to lead a clean and competent government by appointing an overwhelmingly technocratic cabinet, which also included opposition figures. The new foreign and agricultural ministers are good examples in this regard.

Yet, only a month ago, some analysts considered Colombia on the verge of war. Renewed charges from President Uribe that Venezuela was harbouring and actively supporting the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) led his Venezuelan counterpart, Hugo Chávez, to cut diplomatic ties and deploy the air force and infantry along the border. Countries in the hemisphere fled into well-worn and hardened positions in support of one side or the other, but mostly avoided becoming entangled in the fracas.

Flash-forward to changes brought about this August. Astonishingly, Chávez has re-established diplomatic ties with Colombia and the Aug. 22 meeting of ministers of foreign relations led to the establishment of bilateral commissions on security, trade and border control with the purpose of normalizing and strengthening relations. The two governments

have reportedly agreed to discuss the divisive issue of U.S. military bases in private meetings.

Similarly, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa launched discussions to renew diplomatic relations and even attended Santos's inauguration. This comes two years after bilateral ties were breached following the controversial 2008 raiding of a FARC camp by the Colombian military that resulted in the death of paramilitary leader Raul Reyes and the seizing of his computers. These computers are important because they are believed to contain evidence of Chávez's support for the FARC. Shortly after taking office, Santos returned this material to the Ecuadorian government.

Improving relations with Venezuela is paramount for the new Colombian government. Economic necessity may be enough to encourage both countries to bury the hatchet. Colombia appears to have suffered most from blockages to the estimated US\$7 billion in bilateral trade, although the damage has proven severe on both sides. Economic growth in Colombia is expected to range between three and four per cent this year, yet unemployment remains high and reviving trade with Venezuela will be key to reverse this.

In the end, the provocations carried out by former president Uribe in his last week in office to embarrass and sanction Venezuela and President Chávez at the Organization of American States may have worked to Santos's advantage as he now gets to play good cop.

Talks with the FARC will be more challenging for Santos. Though the paramilitary group has offered to negotiate with the new government, there is no sign of change in its position to reflect the fact that it has been crippled militarily and weakened politically. As a defence minister in the Uribe administration, Santos is well aware of this and will not easily bargain away recent gains. He also had 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. Yet Uribe, who left office with approval ratings of roughly 75 per cent, 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 Canada's commitment to the country and a good boost to our engagement in the hemisphere. Canada will be working closely with Colombia as it prepares to host the 2012 Summit of the Americas. Colombia has also emerged as a much sought-after source of technical assistance on security issues in countries such as Haiti importantly, but also Guatemala or Mexico.

As Canada seeks to do more on security in the hemisphere, this could become a new area for co-operation with Colombia.

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