

# **A Triumph for Uribe – The Congressional Elections of March 12, 2006 Created a New Political Landscape in Colombia**

Heinrich Meyer

## **Executive Summary**

On March 12, 2006, Colombia elected a new Congress consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives. The elections themselves revolved around several issues. The people were as concerned about the high popularity of President Uribe and the fate of the Liberal Party, which was impaired by uribismo, as they were about the future development of the traditional two-party system, the growing strength of the Left, the transparency of the coming election campaign, and the elections themselves.

In addition to the two traditional parties – Partido Liberal and Partido Conservador – there are numerous smaller parties in Colombia which used to present either their own or combined lists. This practice ended with the political reform of 2003, whose regulations first came into effect in the recent congressional elections. As a result, the number of parties in the future Congress dwindled from 65 to just under 10.

It is by no means easy to classify Colombia's political parties explicitly in terms of their ideology and programme. According to law philosopher Luis Villar Borda, in this South American country there are no parties but rather federaciones de candidatos. Thus, Alas Equipo Colombia, Cambio Radical, Partido de la U, Partido Conservador, Colombia Democrática, and Por el país que soñamos are included among the Uribists, whereas Polo Democrático Alternativo and Partido Liberal are classed as opposition parties. Visionarios con Antanas Mockus is regarded as neutral, Colombia Viva and Convergencia Ciudadana as sceptical towards Uribe.

The Partido General is still considered the strongest force in the Colombian party system, although uribismo, consisting largely of liberal dissidents, has grown into a serious competitor. However, not only did no more than twelve out of 28 liberal senators and no more than 18 out of 47 liberal parliamentary party members in the House of Representatives decide to support Uribe, the liberal party was also weakened by internal tensions in the last few years.

The second traditional force in Colombia, the Partido Conservador, dispensed with nominating its own presidential candidate even in 2002 and supported Uribe instead. Moreover, in a poll among voters conducted by the party at the end of 2005, a marked majority of the conservative citizens of the country spoke out for supporting Uribe, which gave the party an additional boost.

Because of internal conflicts within the Uribe camp and Uribe's own opposition against such a project, founding a Uribist party failed years ago. However, the attempt was repeated in 2005, when the Partido Social de Unidad Nacional, also called Partido de la U, was founded even though Alvaro Uribe continues to disavow the project in which the conservative spectrum of Colombian liberalism has found a political home.

Some of the smaller parties merit a brief look, too: Cambio Radical, which was founded by followers of the assassinated liberal presidential candidate Galán in 1988 and is now led unchallenged by Germán Vargas Lleras, supports Uribe's election as president. Polo Democrático Alternativo is a catch-all movement of leftist groups which, opposing Uribe, receives quite some public attention. ALAS Equipo Colombia resulted from the merger of two conservative parties, Equipo Colombia and Alianza de Avanzada Social, whose strongholds are at Antioquia and the Atlantic coast. This merger took place for tactical reasons.

Colombia Democrática is the actual political home of Alvaro Uribe who, together with his cousin Mario Uribe, founded this group with its liberal roots in 1986. Convergencia Ciudadana, which was founded by the former guerillero and later union leader Luis Alberto Gil, supported uribismo for a long time but was excluded by it in 2006. Led by Enrique Penalosa, the former mayor of Bogotá, Para el país que soñamos is regarded as markedly personalist. Dejen jugar al Moreno is the political project of the eccentric Moreno de Caro who sometimes attracts attention by his daring and polemical activities. Visionarios con Antanas Mockus is also personalist; it lives on the reputation and ideas of Antanas Mockus, a former mayor and head of the Universidad Nacional.

Colombia Vive sees itself as a political force encompassing all social strata, decisively shaped by the evangelical clergyman Enrique Gómez Montalegre. The Movimiento MIRA is close to the Iglesia de Jesucristo Internacional, which is active in more than 40 cities of the country. The movement Juntas de acción comunitaria, which formed at the end of the '90s and concentrates on municipal and community issues, found its party institutionalization in the Movimiento Político Comunal y Comunitario. The Movimiento Compromiso Cívico Cristiano con la Comunidad C4 is closely linked to the political project of Jimmy Chamorro, whose father founded the non-Catholic Cruzada Estudiantil de Colombia. Circunscripción Nacional Indígena (CNI), finally, is the party of the indigenous movement whose political formation has its roots in the '60s.

Even in the run-up to the elections, it was expected that the ELN would refrain from attempts at intimidation, while the FARC, in contrast, would increase its attacks and endanger public security. In 2005 alone, 16 town councillors were killed in Colombia; eleven of these assassinations were ascribed solely to that guerilla group. When, in February 2006, nine members of the Rivera town council were assassinated by the FARC, president Uribe said that this group could do harm but could not endanger the coming elections. In 2005, the number of attacks on the infrastructure and on military bases in the country rose as well. Unlike the guerilla, the paramilitary troops tried to influence the country's policy directly to legalize their position.

At first, the election campaign itself proceeded quietly, but the fact that several Senate candidates, who had connections to the paramilitary troops, were struck from the lists of the Cambio Radical and the Partido de la U soon caused quite a stir. At the same time, the rumour arose that the well-respected liberal politician Pardo had contacted the FARC to persuade it to take action against Uribe. When this rumour was confirmed by the government, sympathy towards the president decreased dramatically, since hardly anybody believed it.

The information that one of their top candidates had sponsored Uribe's presidential campaign in 2002 weighed heavily on the conservatives. The crisis of the Left came when the suggestion to offer a top position on the list of Senate candidates to the renowned María Emma Mejía resulted in internal tension. These and similar incidents marked the election campaign which, to a large extent, lacked a programmatic discussion.

The outcome of the elections came as a surprise to many people. The Partido de la U became the strongest force, and the parties supporting uribismo won just under 70 percent of the seats in the Senate. With 18 seats, the Partido Conservador became the second strongest force. The Polo Democrático Alternativo was able to position itself as a respectable force on the Left, whereas the personalist parties were among the losers.

With the elections, which by and large passed quietly and clearly confirmed Uribe in office, Colombia laid the foundations of a new political landscape. The traditional party system started to change and might now be replaced by a four-block system – right, centre-right, centre-left, left. Moreover, as the elections have shown, the political reform of 2003 resulted in an attenuated party landscape and made it notably more difficult for single-person parties and parties serving particular interests to get into parliament. Even presidentialism itself might

face profound changes. It may be seen as an improvement that paramilitarist influence in politics has become a public issue.

If the encouraging impulses of the election and its outcome should come to fruition and the positive developments of the last few years in the field of internal security and elsewhere should continue, Alvaro Uribe will not have to fear the presidential election of May 28 this year.