

COLOMBIA: DRUGS, REBELS, POLITICS

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Less Violent, More Viable

Drugs and Colombia were once inseparable, and the country faced a significant left-wing rebel movement too. Now, much of the drug-related violence has migrated north to Mexico, closer to the giant American market. Politicians are daring to hope they can recreate a relatively normal country.



COLOMBIA IS ABOUT TO HOLD PRESIDENTIAL elections that could bring a new era for this troubled nation. For decades, the country has been facing a double challenge that has shaken its foundation as a viable state: left-wing insurgencies – Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) is the strongest – and the increasing power of narco cartels, enriched beyond imagination by the drugs boom that started in the early 1980s, particularly in the United States.

These two quite separate groups, motivated by very different aspirations, have gradually become increasingly entangled. The vast sums of money generated by the drugs trade was channeled to fund insurgency, and for many years the central government in the capital Bogota seemed terrified, incapable of developing a viable strategy to combat extreme levels of violence and political and social disorder.

Not so long ago, the description ‘failed state’ was used to define the plight of this beautiful and vibrant country; both insurgents and drug gangs were becoming more daring, and threatened the survival of national institutions in a country proud of its democratic credentials.

With a presidential election approaching on May 30, the overall conditions are much improved from the horrors of the 1980s and 1990s. Despite a lot of criticism for his alleged closeness to Washington and a certain heavy handedness in dealing with the insurgents and left-wing movements, the two administrations of departing President Alvaro Uribe have turned round the domestic security situation.

The son of a well-known public figure murdered by the insurgents, Uribe made the fight against insurgents and drug cartels his number one priority. Most of the funding was provided by the US with its Plan Colombia.

Uribe has used every instrument available to combat widespread violence; improve the lot of the poor, especially in rural areas; and offer alternatives for those involved in insurgency and the drugs trade.

The President achieved a considerable degree of success, reflected in a high level of public support. Today his government, and he himself, has an approval rating of more than seventy percent, a figure hard to achieve after two consecutive terms, particularly in a troubled nation such as Colombia.

MIGRATING NORTH

The might of the drug cartels, a plague that was for many years associated mainly with Colombia, has now somehow moved north, much closer to the US border. Mexico is now where most of them are based. Partly because it is much

closer to the main consumer market, and partly because of the great mobility of the dozens of millions of Mexicans who move back and forward between their country and the US.

Ciudad Juarez, right on the US border, is at the heart of the current power struggle between drug cartels who supply the American market, and this is where most of the fighting between drug gangs is taking place.

This could be a blessing for Colombia, which destroyed most of its powerful cartels in the 1980s and early 1990s, and where a new generation seems less prone to street violence, more sophisticated and business-like.

On the other hand, in Mexico, next door to the world’s biggest market for cocaine – it has been reported that about \$40 billion in drugs was traded from Mexico to the US last year – the violence and the fighting to control the trade is reaching calamity proportions. Since Mexican president Felipe Calderon declared war on drugs in December 2006, it is estimated that almost twenty thousand people have died.

The relative decline of the power of the drug cartels in Colombia, the rise of their equivalents in Mexico in the last four years, the involvement of Americans as main suppliers of the weapons that allow the street battles to continue, and the total failure of the US war on drugs, have combined to bring the drugs problem much closer to the US frontier, making the Mexican-American drug trade one of the crucial issues of the early twenty-first century. Given this context, Mexico’s loss is Colombia’s gain.

With his relative success and popularity at home, Uribe allowed rumours to spread that he would seek a third term, which was not allowed by the constitution. In the end, he attempted to engineer a constitutional change, allowing him to stand for a second re-election, which he most certainly would have won. The Constitutional Court, however, vetoed the manoeuvre, which opened the contest for a number of new candidates.

Juan Manuel Santos, from the Partido de la U, Uribe’s Defence Minister for the last three years and a key figure in the fight against the insurgents and the cartels, is leading the polls. Close to Uribe and to Washington, in the last survey conducted at the end of March, Santos got 36 percent of voters’ support.

The second most popular candidate, with seventeen percent, is Noemi Sanin, of the Partido Conservador, a recent Colombian Ambassador to London and also close to Uribe. The late March polls showed that together, the two contenders associated with Uribe have more than fifty percent of voters’ support, confirming his high overall public popularity. Given these numbers, a second ballot, on June 20, is likely in order to choose Uribe’s successor.

DAUNTING CHALLENGES

The country the successful candidate will inherit will certainly be less violent and liable to political turmoil than when Uribe took over eight years ago. Nevertheless, the new government still faces daunting challenges: around four million displaced people; a great number of very well-qualified migrants who left Colombia fleeing endemic violence; many parts of the country still no-go areas for normal activities, either controlled by insurgents or by drug cartels; unacceptable levels of poverty and inequality, particularly among the vast masses of small farmers; high unemployment in urban areas; impunity, disrespect for human rights and a judicial system that is too politicised and biased against the disenfranchised. And then there are complex issues regarding the role of right-wing paramilitary organisations.

In foreign relations, Colombia needs to end its isolation and strengthen relations with neighbours. The close alliance with the US, understandable given the circumstances the country had to face, took its toll, raising suspicions throughout South America about Colombian and US intentions for the region.


After Bogota signed an agreement with Washington last August, giving Americans access to at least seven air bases to monitor rebels and drug traffickers, most of the neighbours protested, especially because none of them had been consulted or officially informed.

SOURCE OF WORRY

But the main foreign problem for Colombia is the relationship with a most vocal and unstable neighbour, which has been trying very hard to destabilise Colombia: President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela has been a constant source of worry. After the Colombian armed forces invaded the territory of Ecuador in March 2008, to capture and kill the second most important FARC rebel leader, a number of confiscated computers appeared to prove that Venezuela's territory was being used as a safe haven for the insurgents.

There is also mounting evidence, mostly provided by US surveillance, that, under Chavez, Venezuela became a much more active route for drugs leaving Colombia to supply the US.

Many Colombian farmers depend heavily on the Venezuelan market to sell their products. Colombia is a main supplier of goods to Venezuela, and more than once during the last couple of years, bilateral trade has been affected by political wrangling between Chavez and Uribe.

Now, Colombia has, at least, the opportunity to start a new era as a relatively normal country. The challenges ahead are enormous and there is no simple route to resolve the perennial issues of high inequality, poverty and unemployment. But in supporting Uribe and most probably electing one of his associates to succeed him, the electorate is giving a clear signal that it wishes to become a less violent, and more viable country. 

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