

# opinión

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## NOW IT'S SANTOS: A New International Slot for Colombia?

**Anna Ayuso**

Research Fellow

After the ten years in power of President Álvaro Uribe, the 2010 presidential elections in Colombia were viewed in successional terms. No aspirant with any possibilities questioned the legacy of *uribismo*, of a president who was deemed positive for the country by a majority of Colombians. Indeed, the electoral campaign was not launched until doubts over the possibility of attempting a third Uribe term were dispelled by the Constitutional Court. Once the starting shot was fired, Juan Manuel Santos headed out as favourite. His work as Minister of Foreign Trade with the liberal president, Cesar Gaviria, as Minister of Finance with the conservative Andrés Pastrana, and as Minister of Defence with Uribe, attested to his management abilities and commitment to what has been dubbed “democratic security policy”.

However, in his campaign, Santos sustained that his presidency was not going to be a case of mere continuity. Neither did the initial surprising ascent of the green coalition headed by the former Mayor of Bogotá, Antanas Mockus, with a discourse of change and transparency, manage to unnerve Santos, who refused to concede to his opponent any monopoly of the banner of moral integrity. Although he had occupied senior government positions, Santos was able to keep a distance from practices of the authoritarian ilk and confrontational tone inside and outside the country, which had characterised Uribe. Neither have accusations of human rights violations made much of an impression on the average citizen.

Although Uribe and Santos started out in the Liberal Party, they do not coincide either in terms of origins or in the course of their careers. Uribe, a deeply-religious jurist, represents the rural Colombia of the landowners of conservative, traditional Antioquía, topped off with a welfare-style discourse. Juan Manuel Santos, an economist trained among the cream of the international crop, represents the capital city oligarchies and belongs to an influential dynasty of journalists whose ranks he too joined as a professional. Differences apart, Uribe and Santos have worked closely together and both leaders are identified with

the anti-guerrilla hard line (although at some points both were in support of negotiating with armed groups). Both have been victims of terrorist violence, although more directly in Uribe's case, and both have sidestepped scandals relating them with parapolitics and the "false positives" extrajudicial killings of civilians (dressed in rebel uniform and presented as guerrillas killed in combat) by members of the army.

Santos is attributed with a pragmatism that enables him to engage with interlocutors across the political board and to survive internecine struggles with his winner's political acumen. Yet his ability to connect with the citizens is a long way from Uribe's straight talking. During the electoral campaign, Santos focused on domestic matters: taking the democratic security policy for granted, his electoral promises accented social deficits such as unemployment and the informal sector, lack of infrastructure, restitution of land to displaced peasant farmers, the housing shortage, food security and obligatory health plans, without overlooking tax cuts for the middle class brought about by reforms reducing fiscal privileges. In a buoyant economic context due to rising prices in mining commodities, Santos seems at present to enjoy the backing of the National Unity parliamentary assembly and unusual popularity ratings of 64%. Nevertheless, he faces a resurgence of the country's entrenched violence as well as demands that he assigns liabilities and cleans up corruption, all of which affects politicians and military and paramilitary personnel accused of serious human rights violations with consequences both within and outside the country.

The first weeks of Santos' presidency have shown how Colombia's new leader is attempting to build bridges with neighbours and diversify the country's international presence. He is a free-trade advocate, favours economic integration and was an active participant in negotiations for the Andean Community Common External Tariff, Colombia's entry into the GATT and other bilateral and regional agreements. However, getting round human-rights-related difficulties in ratifying the free trade agreement in the United States and the European Union requires a revamping of Colombia's international image. Santos is also well aware of the economic losses his country has sustained with the closure of borders with Venezuela and Ecuador as a result of the armed conflict.

In his European tour before taking up his post, Santos met with Angela Merkel, José Luís Zapatero and Nicolas Sarkozy whose support he sought for bringing in Colombia as the third Latin American member of the OECD, in the footsteps of Mexico and Chile. The latter has been singled out by Santos as an example to be followed in its trade policy and opening up to the Asian market. After taking office, Santos met with Rafael Correa, President of Ecuador, who had broken off diplomatic relations following a Colombian army attack on a FARC camp within Ecuadorian territory. Moreover, he handed over two hard drives seized in the operation that he had ordered as Defence Minister. The meeting with Chávez also defused the escalation of tension and severing of relations with Venezuela as a result of Uribe's threats in the closing days of his mandate to file complaints before the OAS and the International Criminal Court over Venezuela's former's alleged harbouring of FARC guerrillas. The announcement of the reactivation of bilateral cooperation with both countries is good news. In his search for allies in the region, Santos chose Brazil for his first official visit, a country with which relations were strained in the wake of notification of Colombia's agreement with the United States permitting the use of the country's bases by the US Army.

The traditional alliance with the United States making Colombia the foremost regional recipient of US funds, these being earmarked for Plan Colombia in order to stamp down on drug trafficking, has led to confrontation with neighbouring countries. The declaration of the unconstitutionality of the military

agreement with the United States will not put an end to the suspicions of some and the pressure of others. Neither is the guerrilla war going to let up, as was demonstrated with a series of attacks launched after the president was sworn in. The recent agreement on military cooperation signed with China and Santos' meetings with the Secretary-General of UNASUR would seem to be seeking to belie the tag of yes-man of the empire imputed to him by stalwarts of the Bolivarian Revolution. Yet it is difficult to imagine a new regional and international niche for Colombia without significant changes in the strategy of democratic security aimed at incorporating greater regional cooperation. Otherwise, the margin of confidence Santos currently enjoys has a use-by date.