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Colombia, electing a President – and a way out of the war

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Bonn, 11 June 2014. Everybody knows that Venezuela had its Chávez. Less known is that, for much of the same time, Colombia had its Uribe. The two men sat at opposite ideological ends – Uribe was a pal of George Bush, Chávez his nemesis – but in many ways they were almost comically similar. They were both full of themselves, disciplined, straight-talkers, charismatic, controversial. Most of all, they were adored by their people: the defining political figures of their generation. Uribe, president from 2002 to 2008, did not have the oil to fund a massive social spending programme. Instead, he won over the country by unleashing an all-out war against FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), Colombia's oldest guerrilla group, after years of fruitless negotiations.

Uribe ramped up military spending and claimed back large parts of the territory from a retreating diminished guerrilla. Riding on his popularity, Uribe and his allies in congress amended the Constitution to allow him to run for a second term. Prevented from running a third time (as he wanted), Uribe went for the second-best option and backed his former Defense Minister and close ally Juan Manuel Santos. As a minister, Santos had hit FARC with some of the most damaging military defeats in their history. This was the man who could finish Uribe's job and get rid of the weakened guerrilla for good.

And then something unexpected happened: shortly after being elected in 2010, Santos restarted negotiations with FARC. The current round of peace talks is aimed squarely at ending the conflict and turning FARC into a political party – and it has gone further more than any previous negotiations. In this and other fronts, Santos has pursued a more progressive agenda than his predecessor. Where Uribe denied the very existence of a civil conflict in Colombia (he preferred the term "terrorist threat"), Santos signed a law recognizing and offering reparation to its victims. Where Uribe denounced Chávez as a harbinger of Cuban-style communism to South America, Santos enlisted the Venezuelan President as a broker of the peace negotiations which were to take place in Havana, Cuba, no less.

As Santos began to distance himself from the former President's ideological line, Uribe refused to stand aside and take the traditional role of the retired elder statesman. Frustrated by what he considered Santos's betrayal, the ex-President created his own political party and ran for Congress – a first in Colombian recent history – and was elected senator with the highest number of votes. Colombia thus finds

itself in the somewhat unusual situation of having a right wing government opposed not by the left but by the hard right.

All this background about the former Colombian president and his recent political doings is necessary to understand why the Presidential elections on 15 June 2014 matter so much. A runoff election will decide the winner between the two candidates who had the highest number of votes in the first round three weeks ago. One is the current President, Santos. The other is Oscar Iván Zuluaga, Uribe's man. With the ex-President's support, Zuluaga – who was also Uribe's former minister – has gone from being a relatively unknown figure to a nationally recognised leader who beats the sitting President in the first round of voting – all in just three months. While Santos sees the peace negotiations as the main accomplishment of his tenure, Zuluaga has vowed to put an end to the talks as we know them.

It would be hard to find many substantial policy differences between these two former cabinet colleagues. Both are business-friendly, fiscally conservative and friends of the USA. Both belong to the political establishment that has long governed Colombia, caught somewhere between competent technocracy and corrupt political machinery. Whoever gets elected will face the same challenges: unemployment, poor education and health standards, lagging infrastructure, an interminable agrarian crisis and high inequality.

If their response to these problems is likely to be similar, in their approach to FARC profound differences emerge. Zuluaga, like Uribe, sees no political legitimacy in the guerrilla, and would demand that they cease all violence and submit to justice as a precondition to continue the peace talks. Never mind that the fulfillment of these conditions would eliminate the need for talks; in reality what they want is an end to the negotiations. Santos has gained support from former enemies, including from the left, who think that Zuluaga's election will end this generation's prospect of a country in peace. But this is a tenuous coalition, and it's unclear whether such alliances will entice voters or put them off.

The recent polls suggest a very close race. This Presidential campaign – and Uribe's long shadow over it – shows that the country is deeply divided about the roots of the conflict and what to do about it. Even if Santos is re-elected and the negotiations succeed, these fractures will be a big obstacle for the implementation of any agreement, and for national reconciliation itself.