

>> **Political tendencies polarization:
A look into Colombian
pre-electoral scenario**

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Immersed in the peace process advanced with the FARC guerrilla in Havana (Cuba), Colombian political panorama predicts a re-election of current President of the Republic, Juan Manuel Santos. However, initial popularity of President Santos has been undermined by the National Government difficulties when facing several sectors strikes as well as former president Álvaro Uribe's attacks, called to play a fundamental role in 2014 political arena.

It is worth highlighting that in this scenario, national discontent led several economic and social actors to demonstrations and protests that up to date have cost the country 900,000 million pesos, which, according ANIF, the Asociación Nacional de Instituciones Financieras (National Association of Financial Entities) is equivalent to 0.8 % national GDP of 2013 first quarter.

The main Government opponents have taken advantage of this situation to win the affections of a public opinion divided between the continuity of former government policies of democratic security and the structural transformation promoted, with some partial success, by Juan Manuel Santos's administration.

In spite of the fact that Colombians will elect the next President of the Republic on May 25, 2014 and election campaigns can only start on January 25 the same year —according to

Act 996 from 2005—, these have begun in advance with a pretty uncertain electoral panorama and the participation of several political sectors that aspire to arrive to Nariño House.

Conservatives play their presidential ambitions with Martha Lucía Ramírez, former Foreign Commerce Minister, Ambassador in France, the only woman to occupy the Ministry of Defence —during the first Uribe's government— and former Senator of the Republic; Liberals constitute President Santos' political party at this moment and are expecting unification with Cambio Radical; U's Party is right now between continuity and the possibility of becoming a disposable political force. Opposing and minorities parties risk their continuity after coming into force the 3% threshold imposed by 2010 Political Reform, which establishes the need to obtain minimum 3% of the votes at the next Senate elections, in March 2014, to keep active.

But in such heterogeneous range of possibilities it is worth to wonder if Unidad Nacional —that guarantees a bureaucratic share for all the parties supporting Santos' government, with their economic and social advances— or the rupture of the same in favour of the private interests of every group facing 2014 electoral fight will prevail.

Current President loss of popularity has brought to light the lack of adaptation of Colombian people to a technical model of government and its historic inclination towards clientelism, typical of regional chieftains. This social tendency, doubtlessly a structural problem, has made the President to get close to citizens and to choose populist strategies in order to improve his image in the opinion polls measuring the opinion climate.

This way, Santos' re-election is not easy and the path to be reached seems more Golgotha's journey rather than the bed of roses the Colombians' leader was used to walk on.

Before this scenario it is mandatory that Unidad Nacional is kept as the coalition of Government able to keep bills going with the support of the politic leaders from the regions adhered to the Government Plan, which promises "Prosperity for All". But the special interests of the group menace the President's re-electionist ambitions, being 2014 an opportunity when no politician would like to be a supporting actor.



Now, it is worth saying that President Santos has an advantage over the rest of his competitors, he is clearly the President of Peace—even his brother Enrique Santos Calderón dared to say that Peace depended on re-election—and he has achieved that the submission of the parties that have joined Unidad Nacional is a political manoeuvre to attract more followers to the santista cause.

It cannot be unknown that beyond political strategy, Juan Manuel Santos's Government preserves a technocratic point, being this one of the cards he will have to show at the time of giving explanations in favour of his re-election hopes. These cards will be, for sure, these: the improvement of international relations and the positioning of Colombia at a determining main role in the globalized world, the consolidation of the public-private alliances in order to improve competitiveness, the improvement of agriculture figures, the advancement of the new technologies like development driving forces and the advances in infrastructure as basis of competitiveness and continuity of the investors' confidence placed by the previous Government.

However, not everything has to be pragmatism and having the instinct of a poker's player in politics. It is necessary to know the substantial elements that make up public opinion and that, at the end of the road, by means of people, it will be determined who will be the bearer of the presidential band during the following four-year period. It is evident that protests against Government and the attacks of the opposition political forces have put the president on the ropes and they constitute blows of opinion that will have a strong impact at the time of voting, because social and economic volatility have always been factors that cast doubt on the leaders' governability.

THE TENDENCIES POLARIZATION IN THE POLLS RACE

At this moment, we could say that each political force is organizing its groups while counting their possible votes, but we have to be honest. The true electoral dispute has gotten polarized between those that back up Juan Manuel Santos's re-election and those who have the Messianic hope of Álvaro Uribe's return to the political arena, *stricto sensu*.

Besides we should bear in mind that many minorities' parties have been imposed by 2010's Political Reform a higher level that would oblige them to duplicate the votes obtained in former elections with the aim of keeping their legal personalities. With this problem on their shoulders, fight against Santos is disproportionate because, as the common saying goes, "He that too much embraces holds little" and before this panorama it seems more viable backing up santismo in their crusade than to disappear totally from the political scene.

It is evident that the majority political forces will not back up the idea of freezing the threshold during these elections, but definitely it will be a strategy to reduce the legislative competency and to follow the almost- single-party tendency that created Unidad Nacional.

President Santos bets undoubtedly on liberal re- unification and Germán Vargas Lleras, former senator of the Republic and former Home and Houses Minister of this Government,

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does not find it absurd. Nevertheless, in the implied announcement of his re-election, Santos assured that his former star-minister would remain as an important figure in the job of getting the votes required to enlarge his term of office four years more. Although the intention of removing Cambio Radical, current Vargas Lleras's party, does not sound well to all its members, they bear in mind that they would lose the whole independence and identity they have forged since the party was created.

The country struggles between the uribismo and santismo moves, as it is impossible that the left wing is welcomed at a national level and the limits of the minor parties to enlarge their scopes of action. This electoral fight where all of them are looking for their share has been limited to two political actors, who will be the centres of 2014's election campaign.

Now, the announcement of former President Uribe that he will not be heading the list for the Senate of the Republic displeases those who look for the resurgence of the uribismo through Centro Democrático. It is well known that the votes he could win are not endorsable; that is the reason why Óscar Iván Zuluaga's ambitions, who was Senator of the Republic, cofounder of the U's Party and Finances Minister during Uribe Vélez's or Francisco Santos's, Colombia's Vice-president until 2006, seem to begin to run out of fuel in front of the machinery Santos by means of the Conservative, Liberals, the U's Party remains and Green Party, is preparing.

The political-electoral scene would seem complicated before the international observers' eyes and the analysts that have seen in Latin America the living remains of a crisis that devastates the Western world. But we can affirm that the electoral scenario has been reduced to the polarization of two political tendencies that consolidate several interests. It is worth to highlight that President Juan Manuel Santos and Unidad Nacional seem to be the leaders before former President Uribe's indeterminacy, without ignoring Santos' lack of charisma and his assurance when the time comes to look for votes.

Political parties will have to fight against the threshold threatening, which puts in danger 1991's Constitution, as it puts at risk political plurality, and at the end it predicts a game of alliances that will probably favour candidate President.

In 1986, former president Alfonso López Michelsen, regarding the elections that would be won by liberal Virgilio Barco said: "If it is not Barco, then, who?" In this pre-electoral context, to parody the former liberal mandatory does not seem so absurd: "If it is not Santos, then, who?"



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