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Santos Takes Charge in Colombia: New Leader for an Old Friend

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On August 7, 2010, there will be a historic change of presidential leadership in Colombia. Executive power will pass from Alvaro Uribe—the strong, dynamic president who led the country for eight transformative years and is revered by many Colombians as the savior of a nation—to a very experienced, equally popular, yet different leader, Juan Manuel Santos.

In June, Santos won a presidential run-off, garnering 69 percent of the vote, more (over 9 million) than any previous candidate. He will govern with a congress and senate in which two-thirds of the members are his political allies.

The 58-year-old Santos brings to office a wealth of academic, journalistic, and administrative experience. Educated in the U.S. and the U.K, Santos served as a trade, finance, and defense minister in several Colombian cabinets. As defense minister (2006–2009), Santos helped to deliver a series of crushing blows to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Despite his close association with President Uribe, Santos is a self-described “team-player” rather than “micro-manager.” While Uribe was the master of security and FARC’s primary nemesis, Santos aims to become the master of Colombia’s economic flowering and an architect of lasting peace.

Not Uribe III. In an attempt to tar Santos with responsibility for illegalities that occurred during the Uribe Administration, members of the liberal and Left-wing press are portraying Santos as Uribe’s hand-picked successor. Yet, Santos promises to

chart his own course with a pragmatic, non-confrontational style of governance. The Colombian press has already highlighted alleged friction between Uribe and Santos as a result of cabinet selections and approaches to President Chávez of Venezuela. Clearly, Santos will establish a separate identity, preserving what worked under Uribe while jettisoning policies that did not.

A Nation of Laws. Santos promises to make human-rights protection a central component of his administration. He has already indicated that he is prepared to discuss issues of land reform with former rival on the Left, Gustavo Petro. The appointment of former presidential contender Germán Vargas Lleras, leader of Radical Change, as minister of justice and interior is another indication of Santos’ readiness to break free from Uribe’s influence. The new president appears committed to avoiding clashes with Colombia’s fiercely independent judiciary, the body that played the decisive role in vetoing a third term for Uribe.

Democratic Prosperity. During the Uribe Administration, GDP more than doubled while foreign direct investment tripled. Nonetheless, socio-economic challenges will occupy a high place on Santos’ agenda. He is concerned about troubling

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indicators that include 45 percent of the population below the poverty line, the second-highest unemployment rate in Latin America, and a budget deficit of nearly 4.5 percent. Santos promises to tackle tax evasion, improve government efficiencies without raising taxes, and formalize previously “informal” employment. He hopes to make gains by expanding employment and social mobility and advancing social cohesion among marginalized groups like internal refugees and Afro-Colombians. Santos has set his sights on an economic growth rate superior to 5 percent. He also promises to target agricultural opportunities, infrastructure development, and housing.

Democratic Security. Santos promises to “deepen” the democratic security policies of President Uribe and tackle the sources responsible for criminal violence and narcotics trafficking. This goal will require strengthening state institutions, especially the judicial sector.

Santos’ primary concern will be to prevent FARC from regrouping like it did prior to 2002. The Santos team states that negotiations with FARC are possible but has already laid down stiff preconditions that would require the insurgents to release their hostages, cease use of land mines, free forced child recruits, and end acts of terrorism before entering a dialogue.

Managing Colombian–Venezuelan Relations. There is no easy reset button for Santos to push when dealing with Hugo Chávez. Relations nosedived when Colombia offered fresh evidence of FARC base camps in Venezuela before the Organization of American States (OAS) on July 22. During that OAS session, Venezuela broke relations with the organization and accused the Uribe government of plotting a war of aggression.

Denying Venezuelan territory as a safe haven for FARC will remain a precondition for ending the conflict with FARC. Santos must also address the ongoing impact of Venezuela’s punitive trade embargo which has resulted in a 70 percent decline in Colombian exports to Venezuela—a drop that cost as much as \$4 billion last year—and in the loss of as many as 500,000 jobs in Colombia.

Santos has selected Maria Angela Holguin, a former ambassador to Venezuela, as his foreign

minister to develop new policy directions. In order to keep Venezuela’s erratic and dangerous behavior in check, Santos and Holguin will need to be creative and use all policy instruments at their disposal, from personal diplomacy with other Latin American presidents to working with both regional bodies like the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the greater international community.

U.S.–Colombian Relationship. Santos will pursue trade and investment links with Colombia’s neighbors, as well as its strategic competitors, like China and the European Union. He wants Colombia to “escape the inferiority complex it has been trapped in for the last 40 years” and become a world player.

The Obama Administration has recognized Colombia as “an essential partner,” solidified security ties with last year’s Defense Cooperation Agreement, and proposed to provide \$464 million in economic, military, and law enforcement assistance in FY 2011. Yet, the Administration continues to disappoint the Colombian people by failing to deliver ratification of the Free Trade Agreement signed in 2006. Despite encouraging words, neither the White House nor the Democratic-dominated Congress have taken action, thus costing U.S. firms jobs and market share.

The Obama Administration needs to move forward quickly to solidify ties with Santos and his team. Such actions should include:

- *An early White House visit.* A strong demonstration of White House support for Santos is essential;
- *A timetable for trade action.* The Administration must show that it is committed to more than making promises and is able to make a case for approval;
- *Active diplomacy to close down FARC bases.* Peace in Colombia hinges on ending FARC sanctuary status in Venezuela. The Obama Administration can help rally international pressure for closing down FARC camps and curbing support for drug-related and political terrorism in Venezuela; and
- *Cooperative regional action.* The Administration should explore new ways to use Colombian expertise in the regional fight against the drug trade.

The U.S.–Colombian relationship is a strategic pillar in U.S.–Latin American relations. President Santos brings experience, dedication, and the readiness to forge even stronger ties with the U.S. The Obama Administration and Congress must recognize this opportunity and take action.

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