
COLOMBIA

An electoral defeat for the anglophiles

by Valerie Rush

In an event comparable to the U.S. electorate's mass turnout in 1980 to dump Trilateral puppet Jimmy Carter, Colombian voters turned out in unprecedented numbers on May 30 to reject the drugs, terrorism, and austerity policies of Liberal Party presidential contender and former president Alfonso López Michelsen. The depth of their repudiation of López's policies was indicated by the fact that, for the first time since 1946, a candidate of the minority Conservative Party was elected President in open elections, by a clear, wide margin of victory.

Colombia's new president, who takes office August 7, is Belisario Betancur Cuartas, a lawyer of working-class origins from the industrial department of Antioquia. Betancur's electoral campaign against the oligarch López and a dissident challenger from Liberal Party ranks, 39-year-old Luis Carlos Galán, was premised on an uneasy combination of solidarist "third-way" populism and hard-hitting attacks on the political and economic corruption that has brought Colombia's constitutional system to the brink of disaster.

Among the primary tasks facing him will be eliminating rampant terrorism and drug trafficking, and sponsoring an emergency industrialization program to salvage the bankrupt Colombian economy. One plus in his favor is that he has the country's three main institutions—labor, the military, and the church—backing him in what is guaranteed to be a bitter fight against the still powerful "lopista" machine in the Congress.

Policy toward British is key

A key litmus test for the Betancur administration will be on foreign policy. Betancur was the only one of the three major candidates to support Argentina's fight against Britain, and publicly charged the current Turbay government with "isolationism" for siding with the United States and against the rest of Latin America at the OAS. His campaign manager, Ramírez Ocampo, went even further, publicly denouncing the United States for having turned its back on Latin America and insisting that the Monroe Doctrine is still "the law of the land."

The Andean Labor Party in Colombia, a supporter of U.S. Democratic Party figure Lyndon LaRouche,

has greeted the Betancur victory with a mass leaflet explaining Sunday's elections as a vote against the Friedmanite austerity and drug policies of López and as a vote for Argentina. The leaflet calls on Betancur to fulfill his presidential mandate, starting with an immediate demand for a Colombian policy reversal on the Malvinas conflict.

Betancur devoted the bulk of his electoral polemics to vague promises of education, food, and housing for all, but garnered the bulk of his 3 million winning votes through his denunciations of López's disastrous 1974-78 administration. López opened the country up to the ravages of Friedmanite economics and the drug trade, which have nearly reduced Colombia to the status of a 19th-century British colony mortgaging its vast mineral wealth to pay its debts.

In his second of four nationally televised speeches, Betancur charged that "industry has been badly treated by the last governments. . . . I propose that all the mechanisms of economic management be channeled to serve national production. . . . We want a healthy and efficient industrial sector which can generate productive employment. . . ."

On the question of interest rates he warned, "On this I want to be categorical: either the government reduces the high interest rates, without ingenuously waiting for a market whose freedom is non-existent to do it a favor, or the high interest rates will ruin the general economy, production and consumption. . . . A policy of high interest rates is expropriatory and immoral."

Steering a new course

In addition to defining a concrete economic program which can reverse Colombia's serious economic decline, Betancur faces the challenge of steering a political course independent of the Conservative Party chieftains who backed his bid for power. The Conservative Party has ruled only three times in the past 50 years in Colombia—the first time through a coup d'état which plunged the country into one of the bloodiest civil wars in Latin American history, and the last two times in a "National Front" agreement with the Liberals which alternated the two parties in and out of power.

Its long history of affinity with fascist international movements, hostility toward social reform, and embrace of Thatcher-styled austerity regimens has not endeared the Conservative Party to the vast majority of Colombians. Betancur—representing a new "progressive" wing within the party—was fielded as a compromise candidate by the old-line Conservative faction leaders and bitter rivals Alvaro Gómez and Misael Pastrana. Both Gómez and Pastrana now claim ownership of the coveted presidential chair, but their intense rivalry may give Betancur a measure of flexibility with which to forge new and more positive political alliances.