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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

9 March 1988

Colombia: Losing Electoral Gamble

Summary

We believe Colombia's 13 March mayoral elections will generally promote the insurgents' political aims and accelerate the erosion of President Barco's authority. Moderate political parties stand to lose ground to the Patriotic Union, the party representing the insurgents, which probably will win in about 8 to 10 percent of the country's municipalities. Such gains will help to legitimize the insurgents' power in rural Colombia and bolster their international image. The strengthening of the insurgents' political base will also further weaken the Barco government's ability to address US antinarcotics and counterinsurgency concerns. [redacted]

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Rebels Exploit Political Reforms

The mayoral elections scheduled to take place on 13 March 1988 are part of a broad package of political reforms enacted under former President Betancur between 1983 and 1986. Until now, municipal officials have been appointed by departmental governors, resulting in an ineffective system of local government based on corruption and party patronage. Bogota has traditionally provided few funds for local services, and the

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major political parties have paid scant attention to grassroots politics. Municipal officials have been answerable only to departmental and national authorities, an arrangement that has led to widespread corruption and administrative abuses by local bosses. Disaffection with this system has grown in recent years, contributing to frequent civic strikes and enhancing recruitment efforts by the country's increasingly aggressive leftist insurgent groups. Former President Betancur saw direct mayoral elections as a means of curbing local disaffection by drawing all Colombians--including the insurgents--into the legitimate political system. [redacted]

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In our view, however, the reforms are likely to backfire against their intended goal of encouraging the insurgents to participate in the established political system and abandon the armed struggle. [redacted] a vast array of open literature indicate that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and its political and military allies are firmly committed to the radical overturn of the democratic system in Colombia and to its replacement by a Marxist-Leninist regime. In our view, FARC's participation in legitimate politics and its acceptance of a truce are tactical moves to gain credibility, neutralize Bogota's counterinsurgency efforts, and build insurgent military capabilities for an eventual confrontation with the government. [redacted]

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We judge that Bogota's effort at local political reform, like the 1984 truce agreement with FARC--which allowed the rebels to form a legal political front--will bring political benefits to the rebels. Since 1984, FARC, the largest insurgent group, and its political front, the Patriotic Union, have seized the opportunity to build extensive grassroots political support among the disaffected rural and urban poor. Although the Patriotic Union won less than 5 percent of the popular vote in 1986, it gained representation in both houses of Congress, establishing a foothold as a legitimate political force. The formation of the so-called Simon Bolivar alliance last October, in which FARC established its leadership position over all Colombian insurgent groups, has bolstered the Patriotic Union's credibility and resulted in more widespread rebel election campaigning. [redacted]

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As a result, Patriotic Union candidates are well situated to make a strong showing in several regions on 13 March.

- The US Embassy, predicting impressive electoral gains by Patriotic Union candidates in large FARC-controlled areas of southern and eastern Colombia, believes the party stands to win 80 to 100 of the country's 1,000-plus municipalities.

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[REDACTED]

While we view these estimates as conservative, the results almost certainly will establish the Patriotic Union--and, by extension, FARC's Marxist insurgency--as an increasingly influential actor on the Colombian political scene. [REDACTED]

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The vigorous electoral efforts of the Patriotic Union, with its effective local party organization and strong leadership, stand in marked contrast to the tepid responses to the mayoral campaign demonstrated by the government and the traditional political parties. The government has made little attempt to counter insurgent electioneering with its own voter education campaign. Leaders of both major parties--the Liberals and the Social Conservatives--have deplored the lack of their own grassroots political organization, according to the US Embassy, but neither party has made serious campaign efforts in rural areas. Moreover, the President's own Liberal Party is seriously weakened by internal splits, and some US Embassy sources predict it stands to lose in 12 of Colombia's 23 department capitals, including Bogota. [REDACTED]

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Gains for the Insurgents

The most important gain for the insurgents, particularly FARC, will be the legitimization factor. We believe the Patriotic Union will emerge from the 13 March elections with more extensive political control, greater domestic and international credibility, and a stronger base of local support. Electoral victories in FARC-controlled territory will help to legalize the insurgents' de facto control over large areas of rural Colombia and will lend weight, both in Colombia and abroad, to claims that FARC and its political front represent a viable political opposition to the government. [REDACTED]

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Moreover, the strengthening of the rebels' political base may help to erode popular confidence in the Barco administration. Predicted gains by the opposition Social Conservative Party will add to doubts that Barco has the political strength to build a national consensus, aimed at strengthening his government's authority to handle the narcotics and insurgent challenges, in time for a proposed plebiscite scheduled for next October. To this end, he has named several political leaders to head a multipartisan commission charged with identifying constitutional reforms that could shore up the ailing political structure. Patriotic Union leaders have agreed to participate in this commission, but we believe the party--strengthened by its electoral gains--will resist any proposed reforms that would bolster the Barco government's authority. [REDACTED]

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Even if Barco is able to establish a workable political consensus for constitutional changes, the consolidation of the

Patriotic Union's local political gains will likely render the insurgent challenge even more difficult.

- Several provisions of the 1983-86 Betancur reforms will give elected mayors greater authority than their appointed predecessors had in several key areas, including more control over finances, access to increased funds, and immunity to arbitrary dismissal by the central government, according to the US Embassy.
- Direct control of municipal budgets and police assets will enable leftist mayors to channel government funds to FARC's activities, including arms purchases, recruitment, and guerrilla training.
- Legitimization of the rebels' political power will also facilitate continued exploitation of the truce by FARC and complicate any effort by Bogota to initiate broader military actions against the insurgents or to renounce the truce. [REDACTED]

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Implications for the United States

We believe the likely insurgent political gains from the elections will add yet another burden onto a government already facing a strong challenge to its authority from narcotics traffickers. This buildup of pressures will make it more difficult for Colombia to respond to US concerns on a range of security issues, including establishing an effective counterinsurgency strategy, improving border security with neighboring countries, and undertaking additional counterterrorist initiatives. [REDACTED]

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In particular, consolidation of insurgent control in rural areas will likely undermine further the government's ability to address US antinarcotics concerns. Leftist officials will almost certainly use their newly acquired legal powers to block new antinarcotics initiatives by government security forces in their jurisdictions. Indeed, zones under FARC control in southern and eastern Colombia, where many large cocaine laboratories are located, may become off-limits to US-backed government drug interdiction efforts. [REDACTED]

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