

COUNTRY FACT SHEET

COLOMBIA

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Research Directorate
Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

2. POLITICAL BACKGROUND

3. POLITICAL PARTIES

4. ARMED GROUPS AND OTHER NON-STATE ACTORS

ENDNOTES

REFERENCES

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

Official name

Republic of Colombia.

Geography

Colombia is located at the northern point of South America and shares borders with Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil and Venezuela. Colombia has a total of 3,208 km of coastline on the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. The total area is 1,038,700 km². The coast has a tropical climate, the interior plateaux are temperate and some Andean areas have snow year-round.

Population and density

Population: 43,593,035 (July 2006 estimate).

Density: 39.7 persons per km².

Principal cities and populations (2005 estimate)

Bogota (political capital) 8,350,000; Medellin 3,450,000; Cali 2,700,000; Barranquilla 1,925,000; Cartagena 1,075,000.

Languages

Spanish (official).

Religions

Catholic 90%.

Ethnic groups

Mestizo 58%, white 20%, mulatto 14%, black 4%, mixed black-Amerindian 3%, Amerindian 1%. Approximately 75 % of Colombians are of mixed-blood.

Demographics

Population growth rate: 1.46% (2006 estimate).

Infant mortality rate: 20.35 deaths/1,000 live births.

Life expectancy at birth: 72.6 (2004).

Fertility rate: 2.54 children born/woman (2006 estimate).

Literacy: 92.8% of people aged 15 and older can read and write (2004).

Currency

Colombian Peso (COP).

COP 1,890.36 = CAD 1.00.¹

National holidays

2007: 1 January (New Year's Day), 6 January (Epiphany), 19 March (St-Joseph's Day), 5 April (Maundy Thursday), 6 April (Good Friday), 1 May (Labour Day), 17 May (Ascension Day), 7 June (Corpus Christi), 18 June (Sacred Heart of Jesus), 29 June (SS Peter and Paul), 20 July (Independence), 7 August (Battle of Boyaca), 15 August

(Assumption), 12 October (Discovery of the Americas), 1 November (All Saints' Day), 11 November (Independence of Cartagena), 8 December (Immaculate Conception), 25 December (Christmas Day).

Head of state and government

Alvaro Uribe Velez (independent) has been president since 7 August 2002. He was re-elected on 28 May 2006. The president is the chief of state and head of government.

Form of government

Colombia has a republican government whose most recent constitution dates to 5 July 1991. The president is supported by a cabinet in the exercise of executive power. A bicameral congress exercises legislative power. The cabinet is composed of ministers from the parties who supported the candidacy of Alvaro Uribe Velez and some independents (see Section 3).

Legislative structure

The Colombian congress is bi-cameral, made up of a Senate (Senado de la Republica) and a Chamber of Representatives (Camara de Representantes). The Chamber of Representatives has 166 members elected for four-year terms. The Senate has 102 members, also elected for four-year terms. Two representatives are appointed to represent indigenous communities and each department has a minimum of two senators and two representatives.

Composition of the Senate after the 12 March 2006 election (next election in March 2010): Social Party of National Unity (20), Colombian Conservative Party (18), Colombian Liberal Party (17), Radical Change (15), Alternative Democratic Pole (11), Citizen Convergence (7), the Wings-Team Colombia Movement (5), Democratic Colombia Party (3), Mira Movement (2), Viva Colombia Movement (2), indigenous groups (2).

Composition of the Chamber of Representatives after the 12 March 2006 election (next election in March 2010): Colombian Liberal Party (36), Colombian Conservative Party (30), Social Party of National Unity (29), Radical Change (20), Alternative Democratic Pole (9), Citizen Convergence (8), the Wings-Team Colombia Movement (7), Liberal Opening (5), Regional Integration Movement (4), Democratic Colombia Party (2), Huila New and Liberalism (2), National Movement (2), United People's Movement (2), For the Country of Our Dreams (1), Mira Movement (1), National Salvation Movement (1), People's Participation Movement (1), Progressive National Movement (1), Renovation Movement Labor Action (1), Social Action Party (1).

Administrative divisions

Colombia has 32 departments and one capital district (Distrito Capital), Bogota. Departments: Amazonas, Antioquia, Arauca, Atlantico, Bolivar, Boyaca, Caldas, Caqueta, Casanare, Cauca, Cesar, Choco, Cordoba, Cundinamarca, Guainia, Guaviare, Huila, La Guajira, Magdalena, Meta, Narino, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Quindio,

Risaralda, San Andres y Providencia, Santander, Sucre, Tolima, Valle del Cauca, Vaupes, and Vichada.

Judicial system

Colombia has a Supreme Court of Justice (highest court of criminal law); a Council of State (highest court of administrative law); a Constitutional Court (constitutionality of laws, amendments to constitution and international treaties); and a Superior Judicial Council (jurisdiction conflicts between other courts and administration of the judiciary).

Elections

The president and congress are elected by universal adult suffrage for four-year terms.

All Colombians over 18 years of age can vote, except active armed forces personnel and people who have been deprived of their political rights. The presidential elections of 28 May 2006 produced the following results: Alvaro Uribe Velez 62%, Carlos Gaviria Diaz 22%, Horacio Serpa Uribe 12%, other 4%.

For legislative results, see "Legislative structure" above.

Defence

Every male (except students) of 18 years of age has to report for military service. The service lasts between one and two years.

As of August 2005: Army: 178,000 personnel; Navy: 22,000; Airforce: 7,000; Reserve: 60,700. Paramilitary police forces: approx. 129,000.

The 2004 budget allocated COP 7.4 trillion [CAD 3.9 billion²] to defence expenditures.

Media

Dailies published in Bogota: *El Tiempo*, *El Espacio*, *El Nuevo Siglo*, *La Republica*.

Published elsewhere: *El Colombiano* [Medellin], *El Heraldo* [Barranquilla], *El Pais* [Cali], *La Patria* [Cali].

Colprensa is the national news agency.

There are 11 major radio networks, including Radiodifusora Nacional, which is owned by the government (with more than 500 stations). Three national television channels are controlled by the National Institute for Radio and Television (Instituto Nacional de Radio y Television).

In 2003, Colombia had approximately 12.6 million television sets, 2.3 million computers and between 2.7 million and 4.739 million Internet users.

United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) and Country Rankⁱ

Value: 0.790/1 (2004).

Rank: 70 out of 177 countries.

United Nations Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and Country Rankⁱⁱ

Value: 0.787/1.

Rank: 56 out of 177 countries.

Population below the national poverty line

64%.

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)ⁱⁱⁱ

Score: 3.9/10.

Rank: 59 out of 163 countries surveyed.

Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer (GCB)^{iv}

Police 3.5, legal system/judiciary 3.4, tax revenue 3.5, business/private sector 3.3, medical services 3.1, media 2.9, education system 2.8, utilities 3.3, registry and permit services 2.9, military 3.2, non-governmental organizations 2.9 and religious bodies 2.6.

[Information compiled from: *The Europa World Year Book 2006 2006*, 1266-1290; *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, 256-263; *Political Parties of the World 2006*, 129-133; *TI 7 Dec. 2006*; *ibid.* 6 Nov. 2006; UN 2006; US 8 Feb. 2007].

2. POLITICAL BACKGROUND

On 28 May 2006, Alvaro Uribe Velez was re-elected to a second term as president, receiving 62 percent of the popular vote.³

When he took office in 2002, Uribe Velez vowed to strengthen the government's efforts to fight illegal armed groups.⁴ He is credited with taking "a tough stance" with both leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries.⁵

The level of violence attributed to illegal armed groups has decreased since 2002.⁶ In fact, the reduction in the number of abductions and murders, along with the favourable

ⁱ The HDI is a composite measurement of human development in a country, based on life expectancy, levels of literacy and education, and standard of living. Values are: 0.800 and higher (high human development), 0.500-0.799 (medium human development) and 0.500 and under (low development index). Countries are ranked in descending order by their HDI value.

ⁱⁱ The GDI adjusts the rating of the HDI to reflect inequalities between men and women.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Transparency International CPI is based on composite survey data from 16 polls and 10 independent institutions. The data reflect the perceptions of resident and non-resident business people and country analysts. Scores range from 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (highly clean). According to their score, countries are ranked in order from least corrupt (1) to most corrupt (163).

^{iv} The Transparency International GCB is a public opinion survey used to gauge people's perceptions of corruption within their own state.

state of the economy, is said to have played a role in the re-election of Uribe Velez.⁷ Before the 2006 election, he enjoyed an approval rating above the 70 percent mark.⁸

At the beginning of 2006, negotiations began with the National Liberation Army (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional, ELN) in Havana, Cuba.⁹ The issue of a prisoners' exchange with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) remained unresolved.¹⁰ Following an increase in insurgent violence in 2005, FARC announced in January 2006 that an exchange would not happen as long as Uribe Velez remains president.¹¹

The demobilization of paramilitary groups started in 2002; however, their commitment to ending illegal activities remains uncertain.¹² In June 2005, the Peace and Justice Law (*Ley de Justicia y Paz*) was adopted, which allowed for reduced sentences for demobilized paramilitaries.¹³

Adding to political violence, drug-related violence has increased, becoming the second most common cause of death after cancer.¹⁴ The cocaine trade "fuels the conflict"¹⁵ and armed actors fight over control of the drug trade.¹⁶ The United States (US) government allocated USD 550 million in aid for Colombia in 2006 to support initiatives such as the eradication of drug crops.¹⁷

3. POLITICAL PARTIES

There are 15 parties in Colombia that have received the minimum electoral support needed for official recognition, as well as many smaller parties.¹⁸

Leading parties in congress:

Alternative Democratic Pole (Polo Democratico Alternativo, PDA)

This left of center group was created in 2005 when the Independent Democratic Pole (Polo Democratico Independiente, PDI) merged with the Democratic Alternative (Alternativa Democratica, AD).¹⁹ Its presidential candidate in 2006 was Cesar Gaviria Diaz and its current president is Samuel Moreno Rojas.²⁰

Colombian Conservative Party (Partido Conservador Colombiano, PCC)

The PCC was founded in 1849.²¹ Its secretary-general is Alvaro Guillermo Rendon Lopez.²² It is a traditional party that formerly had its base in the agrarian aristocracy.²³ The party is known to stand for law and order, as well as traditional religious values.²⁴

Liberal Party (Partido Liberal Colombiano, PL)

Founded in the 1840s,²⁵ this party is led by its 1998, 2002 and 2006 presidential candidate, Horacio Serpa Uribe, and secretary general, Juan Carlos Posada Garcia-Peña.²⁶ This progressive centrist party is known for its defence of privatization, support

of free enterprise, and goal of improving the standard of living, as well as its opposition to drug-trafficking.²⁷

Radical Change (Cambio Radical, CR)

Founded in 1997, this party is mostly composed of dissident former members of the PL.²⁸ It supported Uribe Velez's candidacy in 2002 and 2006.²⁹ Its leaders are president German Vargas Lleras, general secretary Antonio Alvarez Lleras and supervisor Federico Echavarria Olarte.³⁰

Social Party of National Unity (Partido Social de Unidad Nacional, PSUN)

This new party is also referred to as Party of the U (Partido de la U), and its leaders are party president Oscar Ivan Zuluaga and coordinator Juan Manuel Santos.³¹ It was formed by ex-members of the PL and members of other small parties and it supported Alvaro Uribe Velez's candidacy for the presidency.³²

Other parties with legislative representation following the 2006 elections:³³

Citizen Convergence (Convergencia Ciudadana, CC); Democratic Colombia Party (Partido Colombia Democrata, PCD); For the Country of Our Dreams (Por el Pais que Sonamos, PePqS); Huila New and Liberalism (Huila Nueva y Liberalismo, HNL); Indigenous Authorities of Colombia Movement (Movimiento Autoridades Indigenas de Colombia, AICO); Liberal Opening (Apertura Liberal, AL); Mira Movement (Movimiento Mira, MM); Movement Social Indigenous Alliance (Movimiento Alianza Social Indigena [or Indigena'as], MASI); National Movement (Movimiento Nacional, MN); People's Participation Movement (Movimiento de Participacion Popular, MPP); Progressive National Movement (Movimiento Nacional Progresista, MNP); Regional Integration Movement (Movimiento Integracion Regional, MIR); Renovation Movement Labor Action (Movimiento Renovacion Accion Laboral, MRAL); Social Action Party (Partido Accion Social, PAS); United People's Movement (Movimiento Popular Unido, MPU); Viva Colombia Movement (Movimiento Colombia Viva, MCV); Wings-Team Colombia Movement (Movimiento Alas-Equipo Colombia, MAEC).

Other parties:³⁴

Christian Democratic Party (Partido Democrata Cristiano, PDC); Coalition (Coalicion, C); Colombia for Ever (Colombia Siempre, CS); Colombian Communal and Community Political Movement (Movimiento Politico Comunal y Comunidad Colombiano, MPCCC); Communist Party of Colombia (Partido Comunista de Colombia, PCC); Democratic Alliance/April 19 Movement (Alianza Democratica/Movimiento 19 de Abril, AD/M-19); Democratic Progress (Progresismo Democratico, MPD); Democratic Socialism Party (Partido del Socialismo Democratico); Firmes; United People's Front (Frente por la Unidad del Pueblo, FUP); Green Oxygen Party (Partido Verde Oxigeno); Hope, Peace and Liberty (Esperanza, Paz y Libertad, EPL); Independent Conservative Movement (Movimiento Conservatismo Independiente, MCI); Independent

Revolutionary Workers' Movement (Movimiento Obrero Independiente Revolucionario, MOIR); Independents Front of Hope (Independientes Fente de Esperanza, FE); Lets Go Colombia (Partido Vanguardia Moral y Social - Vamos Colombia, VC); Metapolitical Unitarian Movement (Movimiento Unitario Metapolitico, MUP); Movement C4 (Comp. Civ. Cristiano Com. Movimiento C4, MC4); National Christian Party (Partido Nacional Cristiano, PNC); National Conservative Movement (Movimiento Nacional Conservador, MNC); National Restoration Movement (Movimiento de Restoracion Nacional, Morena); National Salvation Movement (Movimiento de Salvacion Nacional, MSN); New Democratic Force (Nueva Fuerza Democratica, NFD); New Liberalism (Nuevo Liberalismo, NL); Patriotic Union (Union Patriotica, UP); Popular Civic Convergence (Convergencia Popular Civica, CPC); Popular Integration Movement (Movimiento Integracion Popular, MIP); Popular Will Movement (Movimiento Voluntad Popular, MVP); Progressive Force (Fuerza Progresista, FP); Republican Movement (Movimiento Republicana, MR); Social and Political Front (Frente Social y Politico, FSP); Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores, PST); Unionist Movement (Movimiento Unionista, MU); Women for Democracy (Mujeres para la Democracia, MD)

4. ARMED GROUPS AND OTHER NON-STATE ACTORS

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC)

Founded in 1964, this armed group was originally the military wing of the communist party.³⁵ It is composed of 39 fronts and approximately 17,000 armed personnel.³⁶ Pedro Antonio Marin (also known as Manuel Marulanda Velez or "Tirofijo") is the commander-in-chief.³⁷ Its urban wing is known as the Bolivarian Militias.³⁸

National Liberation Army (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional, ELN)

Founded in 1964, this armed group is inspired by Cuba's Fidel Castro and is composed of approximately 3,500 members.³⁹ Its leader is Nicolas Rogriguez Bautista.⁴⁰ It is known for its repeated attacks on oil industry infrastructure.⁴¹

United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC)

The AUC is a right-wing paramilitary organization that is undergoing a demobilization process that started in November 2004.⁴² It has approximately 10,000 members and its leader is Julian Bolivar.⁴³ Since 1996, it regroups 20 smaller paramilitary organizations.⁴⁴ Leader Salvatore Mancuso accepted the demobilization of the AUC and was replaced by Ramon Isaza.⁴⁵ Mancuso has remained the principal negotiator with the government.⁴⁶

Other groups:⁴⁷

Death to Kidnappers (Muerte a Secuestradores, MAS); Disaffected Youths of Colombia (Juventudes Inconformes de Colombia, JIC); Free Homeland (Patria Libre); New Revolutionary Popular Front (Nuevo Frente Revolucionario del Pueblo); Peasant Self-Defence Groups of Cordoba and Uraba (Autodefensas Campesinas de Cordoba y Uraba,

ACCU); Popular Front of National Liberation (Frente Popular de Liberacion Nacional, FPLN); Student Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario Estudiantil, MRE); White Eagles Legion (Legion Aguilas Blancas); Workers' Self-Defence Movement (Movimiento de Autodefensa Obrera, MAO).

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ENDNOTES

¹ Canada. 6 March 2007.

² XE.com. 6 March 2007.

³ US 8 Feb. 2007.

⁴ *The Europa World Year Book 2006* 10 June 2006, 1270.

⁵ BBC 3 March 2007; *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 258.

⁶ US 8 Feb. 2007.

⁷ *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 259; see also BBC 3 March 2007.

⁸ *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 259.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *The Europa World Year Book 2006* 10 June 2006, 1271.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² US 8 Feb. 2007.

¹³ *The Europa World Year Book 2006* 10 June 2006, 1271.

¹⁴ BBC 3 March 2007.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 259; US 8 Feb. 2007.

¹⁷ *The Europa World Year Book 2006* 10 June 2006, 1271.

¹⁸ US 8 Feb. 2007.

¹⁹ *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 260.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 131.

²² *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 260.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 131.

²⁵ *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 130.

²⁶ *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 260.

²⁷ *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 130.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Compiled from: *ibid.*; *The Europa World Year Book 2006* 10 June 2006, 1279; Colombia March 2007; *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 130-133.

³⁴ Compiled from: *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 260-261; *The Europa World Year Book 2006* 10 June 2006, 1279-1280; *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 131-133.

³⁵ *The Europa World Year Book 2006* 10 June 2006, 1280.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 262.

³⁹ *The Europa World Year Book 2006* 10 June 2006, 1280.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 262.

⁴² *The Europa World Year Book 2006* 10 June 2006, 1280.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *PHW 2007* Oct. 2006, 262.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Compiled from: *ibid.*; *The Europa World Year Book 2006* 10 June 2006, 1280.