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# TIME



Colombian President **Juan Manuel Santos** is South America's leader to watch

## THE COLOMBIAN COMEBACK

From nearly failed state to emerging global player—in less than a decade

By **Tim Padgett** and **John Otis**



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*John Kennedy and Dwight Eisenhower meet at Camp David a few days after the Bay of Pigs invasion. Photograph by Paul Schutzer*

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*Syria: Photograph by Peter Hapak for TIME; Colombia: Photograph by Christopher Morris—VII for TIME*

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WORLD

# COLOMBIA RISING

Once the home of drug traffickers, Marxist guerrillas and broken government, Colombia has transformed itself into one of the region's most vibrant players

BY TIM PADGETT AND JOHN OTIS

**J**UAN MANUEL SANTOS, A LEADER known for a shrewd sense of political timing, is checking his watch as he sits down with *TIME* journalists at the Casa de Nariño palace in Bogotá. Colombia's President isn't being rude; it's just that any minute now, 250 km to the south, Marxist guerrillas will release their last 10 military and police hostages. Santos knows the images—like the stirring picture of army sergeant Luis Alfredo Moreno, wrapped in a Colombian flag and pumping his fist skyward after being held 14 years in the jungle—will speak more powerfully than he can about the hopeful new course Colombia is taking. “This,” Santos tells his guests, “is a happy coincidence.”

More than that, Santos is convinced that this is Colombia's hour. For the past 48 years, the government has been locked in a bloody conflict with the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces, known as the FARC, a guerrilla insurgency fueled by drug trafficking and kidnapping ransoms. The FARC's April 2 hostage release, part of an effort to initiate peace talks, was just the symbolism Santos needed before he hosts U.S. President Barack Obama and 31 other western-hemisphere heads of state at the Summit of the Americas in the Caribbean city of Cartagena on April 14 and 15. Like Moreno, Colombia and its 47 million people are emerging from a long, dark night of violence and isolation into what Santos tells *TIME* is a “changed reality completely out of anyone's imagination.” Not just a recovered nation, he insists, but the new economic and diplomatic player on the Latin American *calle*, or street.

That claim might reflect Santos' outsize confidence more than it does reality, especially since many of Colombia's outsize problems—not just the guerrilla war but also the epic wealth disparities and human-rights abuses that originally provoked the rebels to take up arms—still loom like the country's 15 active volcanoes. “As positive as we feel, we don't know yet if Santos can really neutralize the many mafias that try to run this country,” says Gerardo Vega, head of the human-rights NGO Forjando Futuros (Forging Futures). Colombia is the U.S.'s closest ally in South America, but it still wrestles with every sinister stereotype on the continent: left-wing guerrillas and right-wing militias, murderous drug lords and brutal feudal lords, intractable poverty and corruptible politicians. Hollywood,

especially crime shows like *CSI: Miami*, keeps looking to Colombia as a go-to source of exotic foul play.

Even so, the center-right Santos, who after 20 months as President enjoys an approval rating close to 80%, can legitimately declare Colombia the region's comeback kid. In the past decade, a revived military, which he led as Defense Minister from 2006 to '09, has decapitated the FARC's leadership and reduced the rebels' ranks from almost 20,000 to 8,000 today. The infamous drug-trafficking cartels that once strangled cities like Medellín—which 20 years ago had a murder rate almost twice that of the world's new homicide capital, Juárez, Mexico—have been dismantled, thanks largely to police and judicial modernization that narco-plagued neighbors in Central America now look to as a model.

The equally terrifying scourge of criminal and rebel kidnappings has dropped from 3,572 in 2000 to fewer than 300 last year.

Foreign direct investment has risen almost tenfold since 2003, to \$13.2 billion in 2011. While the economy grew a robust 6% last year—it is now South America's third largest and is closing in on Argentina at No. 2—the country secured a free-trade agreement with the U.S. and may soon be pumping a million barrels of oil per day. At the same time, Santos has pushed through land reform and human-rights laws, directing aid to the 4 million citizens displaced by half a century of mayhem in the neglected provinces. “We were for many decades signaled as a nonviable state,” Santos admits to *TIME*. “But what I know is that when you ask people in the U.S., Europe and Japan today if they think





**Failing no longer** In Bogotá's La Candelaria district and the Santo Domingo area of Medellín, Colombians enjoy a new vitality and sense of security after years of violent crime and a Marxist insurgency

Lula's successor, Dilma Rousseff, can perhaps make a claim. But Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's firebrand cachet had shrunk well before he began fighting cancer last year; Argentine President Cristina Fernández seems intent on spending her diplomatic capital on a row with Britain over the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands; and Mexico's drug-war crisis has made it a shadow of the hemispheric agent it once was.

At the Cartagena summit, Santos tells *TIME*, he's poised to reiterate the bold call he made late last year to take a hard look at the world's largely failed drug-war strategy—and to start a discussion on legalizing or decriminalizing drugs as a way to sap the titanic finances of cartels (which still afflict Colombia, the No. 2 cocaine producer, behind Peru). "I want the world to discuss if we are doing the correct thing or if there are possible alternatives that are less costly" in terms of lives and interdiction resources, he says. And Santos, like most Latin American leaders, feels the U.S.—which rejects legalization even though Obama says it's a "legitimate topic"—is obliged to join that conversation, given its voracious drug consumption.

Santos also intends to talk about another inter-American elephant in the room: Cuba. The communist island was barred from the five previous Summits of the Americas, and Santos, in a bow to the U.S., did not invite President Raúl Castro to this one. But last month he visited Castro in Havana and pledged to find ways at Cartagena to include Cuba in the next summit. It illustrated Colombia's rapprochement with the Latin American left, especially the anti-U.S. Chávez. But it also reflects Santos' desire to make Colombia the elusive "bridge" between the U.S. and the world across the Caribbean at a time when the former's influence in the latter has never been lower—and when that of China (now Colombia's No. 2 trading partner after the U.S.) is mushrooming.

Washington conservatives, in fact, find Santos' shift away from Uribe's reliably pro-U.S. and anti-Chávez stances unsettling—as does Uribe, who has become one of Santos' most vocal critics. But Santos insists that he and Obama share "a good chemistry." (They even had a friendly

their kids will have a better future, they say no. In Colombia they're saying yes."

### The Region's New Leader?

SANTOS, 60, WHOSE REGIONAL LEADERSHIP ambitions are as hard to miss as the myriad emerald shops in downtown Bogotá, complements that domestic optimism with a more assertive foreign policy. His popular right-wing predecessor, Alvaro Uribe, "didn't really care what the rest of the world thought of him," says Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, D.C. "But Santos sees himself with a global constituency." Indeed, now that former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has left office, the question is whether any other Latin American leader besides Santos is filling the role of regional standard bearer.

**'I'll be the first to recognize that we are winning [the war against the FARC], but we have not won yet. But the worst thing I could do is be in a hurry.'**

—JUAN MANUEL SANTOS, PRESIDENT OF COLOMBIA

PREVIOUS PAGES: VII; THESE PAGES: TOP LEFT, BOTTOM RIGHT: CHRISTOPHER MORRIS—VII FOR TIME (2); BOTTOM LEFT, TOP RIGHT: CHRISTOPHER MORRIS—VII (2)

bet on whether Santos' U.S. alma mater, the University of Kansas, would make it to the Final Four of last month's national basketball tourney. It did.) Obama's senior Latin America adviser, Dan Restrepo, tells TIME, "We welcome President Santos' approach and Colombia's emergence as an increasingly capable partner... in the region and on the global stage." As for the growing sense of alienation between America and Latin America, Santos says simply, "The more they look south again, the more we'll look north again."

As the gateway to South America and the continent's only country with port access to both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, Colombia seemed a logical hemispheric bridge from the moment it became Latin America's first democracy in 1819. But it served instead as a showcase of the region's dysfunction. Chronic Liberal-vs.-Conservative fighting morphed into the current conflict—which in the 1990s, with the FARC dominating much of southern Colombia, threatened national partition. Meanwhile, drug lords like Medellín cartel boss Pablo Escobar (killed in 1993) terrorized cities and assassinated politicians. "At that point," says Shifter, "the country itself was on the line."

In 1999, Bogotá invited an alarmed U.S. to step in with Plan Colombia, a \$5 billion aid project to strengthen Colombia's feeble military. Santos acknowledges it as "probably the most successful bipartisan foreign policy initiative in the recent history of the U.S." But a game changer was the 2002 election of Uribe, the prickly, hard-nosed former governor of the northern Antioquia department whose rancher father had been killed by the FARC. Uribe dealt the guerrillas one body blow after another, especially after handing the defense post to Santos—who, "modesty aside," calls himself "the most successful Defense Minister this country has had in its last 50 years." He upgraded intelligence and ordered strikes that either killed or captured just about every top FARC commander—and in 2008 tricked the rebels into freeing 15 high-profile hostages, including three U.S. defense contractors and former Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt.

### Resisting Reforms

WITH URIBE LIMITED TO TWO TERMS, HIS obvious successor was Santos, who won the 2010 election in a landslide. He was, it

seems, born to Casa de Nariño. A scion of one of Colombia's most prominent clans—his great-uncle was President from 1938 to '42 and his family owned the country's top newspaper, *El Tiempo*, until 2007—Santos groomed himself from an early age for statesmanship. (Literally: friends say as a younger man, he shaved his beard upon realizing that few world leaders wore them anymore.) As a student at the London School of Economics, he was a voracious reader of political biographies like Winston Churchill's.

But because Santos' successes were so tied to Uribe's presidency, there was a mistaken impression inside and outside Colombia that he was as conservative as his old boss. Santos insists he was always a moderate; in 1999 he'd written a book with the help of then British Prime Minister Tony Blair titled *The Third Way*. Much of Santos' presidency is bent on showing the Latin American right that it can reconcile capitalism and socialism to the same fruitful effect that Lula and much of the Latin left have done. "This," Santos tells TIME, "is the best approach for Latin America," where "third way" countries like Brazil and Chile are escaping third-world status.

It may also be the best way to break the cycle of violence in Colombia, where the poverty rate still stands at 45%—and where cattle-ranching barons control more than a third of the country's agricultural land, double what experts say they need.

(In fact, according to the U.N., just 1.15% of Colombia's population owns 52% of the total land.) "Uribe improved security, but he didn't want to acknowledge the root reasons for the insecurity," says León Valencia, director of the pro-democracy NGO Nuevo Arco Iris (New Rainbow) that consults the Santos government.

As a result, even leftists applaud Santos' Victims and Land Restitution Law, designed to get reparations to people like the victims of Colombia's now disbanded right-wing paramilitary armies. Those militias marauded through the country for decades fighting the FARC—and serving as enforcers for the military and the business owners who financed them, according to new testimony given by some of those moguls to authorities. (The U.S. Congress demanded improved human-rights conditions in Colombia in return for the free-trade pact.)

Those entrenched interests are resisting Santos' reform measures, especially



as new land tribunals set up shop in regions like Antioquia this month. Santos backers accuse landowners of employing fresh gangs, *bandas criminales*, many led by former paramilitary members. One, the Aguilas Negras (Black Eagles), is suspected in the recent murders of Antioquia campesino leaders and has made death threats against reform activists.

If pundits have a criticism of the President, it's that he has a "tendency to over-extend himself," says Shifter. Many fret that if he doesn't implement measures like the Victims Law carefully enough, his adversaries will be able to block them, a distinct possibility given the opposition of Uribe and his followers (although several high-profile "Uribistas" have recently been convicted in scandals, often involving links to the militias). "One has to congratulate Santos" for taking on the land issue, says José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director for Human Rights Watch in Washington. "But my fear is that this could turn into another wasted opportunity."



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**Bogotá bounceback**  
Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos oversees the country's revival from his official residence

## Unfinished War

YET FOR ALL THE PRO- AND ANTIREFORM tension in places like Medellín, that city is perhaps the exemplar of Colombia's renaissance. Workers this month are putting the final touches on 380-m outdoor escalators in Comuna 13, a steep hillside slum. Like the recently installed cable-car system benefiting other Medellín barrios, the escalators give marginalized residents faster and more secure access to jobs, schools, clinics and commerce, and are complemented by new public libraries teaching computer skills. Officials say violent crime is already down in Comuna 13 since people started using the escalators in December. "I don't wear out so many shoes now," says Olga Cecilia Holguín, 48, a 30-year Comuna 13 resident with four children. "No one ever used to think of things like this for barrios like ours."

That innovative spirit is turning corporate heads. Giants like U.S. computer maker Hewlett-Packard, which last year opened a regional service hub employing 1,000 workers, say they're being lured to

Medellín in no small part by improved education and high-tech development—and ironically, says Andrew Lewis, an HP senior strategic-location executive, by the city's new "sense of security."

Still, Colombia needs vast improvements in areas like infrastructure. (It can take longer to ferry a container by land from Bogotá to Cartagena than it does to ship it from Colombia to China.) And its sense of security won't be complete until the nation ends the guerrilla conflict, which began in 1964 and has killed more than 70,000 people since the 1980s. Santos' approval ratings, in fact, have dipped in recent months because of a widespread feeling that security is backsliding as the FARC regroup— it has recently stepped up its attacks on military and civilian targets, especially oil pipelines—and *bandas criminales* expand.

Despite the FARC's recent hostage gestures, including its February pledge to stop kidnapping for ransom, it has hardly proved an honest negotiator in the past. Santos as a result insists that FARC reb-

els still have a number of conditions to meet—including de-mining the countryside and halting the recruitment of child soldiers—before the government agrees to peace talks. "I'll be the first to recognize that we are winning, but we have not won yet," Santos, perhaps aware of the warnings about overreach, tells *TIME*. "But the worst thing I could do is be in a hurry. I have to wait for the correct circumstances to be present."

Waiting may have advantages. Sibylla Brodzinsky, a co-editor of *Throwing Stones at the Moon*, a forthcoming collection of narratives by Colombians displaced by the war, notes that if Santos can pull off his social reforms, it "takes all legitimate arguments away from the FARC to keep fighting." But 2014, the year Santos presumably seeks re-election, marks the conflict's 50th anniversary—a distressing psychological milestone. Santos is right to be prudent, but chances are he's too shrewd a judge of political symbolism—and timing—to let that hour pass on his watch. ■