

Has Incoming Colombian President Santos Inherited a "Captured State"?

By Coletta Youngers, August 6, 2010, Foreign Policy in Focus

On Saturday August 7, 2010, former defense minister Juan Manuel Santos will be sworn in as Colombia's next president, surrounded by an estimated 380,000 members of the police and military and an array of foreign dignitaries. If all goes according to plan, one of those dignitaries will be Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa. However, Santos' initial efforts at rapprochement with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, also invited to the inauguration, were nipped in the bud by sitting president Alvaro Uribe, whose dramatic

- The second highest number of internally displaced persons in the world (the Sudan is first) with ethnic minorities disproportionately affected and with over 40 displaced leaders killed in recent years for advocating for their rights.
- A total of one – just one – paramilitary leader convicted as a result of the Justice and Peace Law.
- A scandal that Washington-based human rights groups call “**Worse than Watergate**,” in which the notorious DAS security agency was spying on everyone from the children of human rights activists to Constitutional Court judges – and eavesdropping in on the Court’s confidential sessions and sabotaging their activities, including by trying to link them to terrorist groups.
- A complete lack of respect of judicial autonomy and full support for continued impunity for human rights violators.
- Increased inequality, poverty, and unemployment.

Moreover, the more than one-hundred local, regional and national politicians under investigation for links to paramilitaries (commonly known as the “*para-politicos* scandal”) has revealed the extent to which the

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movement away from the hard-line, authoritarian practices of the Uribe government is welcome. For its part, the Obama administration should take advantage of the change in government to broaden bilateral relations beyond the nearly myopic focus on drugs and security. Most importantly, it should put promoting human rights in Colombia at the center of its policies toward that country until measurable improvements are made, first and foremost in confronting the countries' legacy of impunity that will be passed from one president to the next on Saturday.