

# Ch. 10: COLOMBIA



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# Introduction

Colombia (pronounced /kəl mbiə/), officially the Republic of Colombia (Spanish: *República de Colombia*, pronounced [repuβlika ðe kolombja]), is a constitutional republic in northwestern South America. Colombia is bordered to the east by Venezuela<sup>[7]</sup> and Brazil,<sup>[8]</sup> to the south by Ecuador and Peru;<sup>[9]</sup> to the north by the Caribbean Sea; to the northwest by Panama; and to the west by the Pacific Ocean. Colombia also shares maritime borders with Jamaica, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.<sup>[10][11]</sup> With a population of nearly 45 million people, Colombia has the 29th largest population in the world and the second largest in South America, after Brazil. Colombia has the third largest Spanish-speaking population in the world after Mexico and Spain.

The territory of what is now Colombia was originally inhabited by indigenous nations including the Muisca, Quimbaya, and Tairona. The Spanish arrived in 1499 and initiated a period of conquest and colonization killing or taking as slaves almost 90% of that native population, and then creating the Viceroyalty of New Granada (comprising modern-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, the northwest region of Brazil and Panama) with its capital in Bogotá.<sup>[12]</sup> Independence from Spain was won in 1819, but by 1830 “Gran Colombia” had collapsed with the secession of Venezuela and Ecuador. What is now Colombia and Panama emerged as the Republic of New Granada. The new nation experimented with federalism as the Granadine Confederation (1858), and then the United States of Colombia (1863), before the Republic of Colombia finally declared in 1886.<sup>[12]</sup>

Panama seceded in 1903 under pressure to fulfill financial responsibilities towards the United States government to build the Panama Canal.

Colombia has a long tradition of constitutional government. The Liberal and Conservative parties, founded in 1848 and 1849 respectively, are two of the oldest surviving political parties in the Americas. However, two have frequently

most notably in the Thousand Days War (1899–1902) and *La Violencia*, beginning in 1948. Since the 1960s, government forces, left-wing insurgents and right-wing paramilitaries have been engaged in the continent’s longest-running armed conflict. Fuelled by the cocaine trade, this escalated dramatically in the 1980s. However, the insurgents lack the military or popular support necessary to overthrow the government, and in the recent decade (2000s) the violence has decreased significantly as a result of accurate political leadership, increased international investments and a considerable raise in military funding (also called democratic security policy) created to fortify military presence and intelligence in the rural Colombia. Many paramilitary groups have demobilized as part of a controversial peace process with the government, and the guerrillas have lost control in many areas where they once dominated.<sup>[2]</sup> Meanwhile Colombia’s homicide rate, for many years one of the highest in Latin America, has almost halved since 2002.<sup>[13]</sup>

Colombia is a standing middle power<sup>[14]</sup> with the fourth largest economy in South America and a major impact of poverty. It is very ethnically diverse, and the interaction between descendants of the original native inhabitants, Spanish colonists, Africans brought as slaves and twentieth-century immigrants from Europe and the Middle East has produced a rich cultural heritage. This has also been influenced by Colombia’s varied geography. The majority of the urban centres are located in the highlands of the Andes mountains, but Colombian territory also encompasses Amazon rainforest, tropical grassland and both Caribbean and Pacific coastlines. Ecologically, Colombia is one of the world’s 18 megadiverse countries (the most biodiverse per unit area).<sup>[15]</sup>

## Etymology

The word “Colombia” comes from Christopher Columbus (Spanish: *Cristóbal Colón*). It was conceived by the Venezuelan revolutionary Francisco de Miranda as a reference to all the New World, but especially to those territories and colonies under Spanish and Portuguese rule. The name was later adopted by the Republic of Colombia of 1819, formed out of the territories of the old Viceroyalty of New Granada (modern-day Colombia, Panama, Venezuela and Ecuador).<sup>[16]</sup>

In 1830, when Venezuela and Ecuador broke away, the Cundinamarca region that remained became a new country — the Republic of New Granada. In 1858 New Granada officially changed its name to the Grenadine Confederation, then in 1863 the United States of Colombia, before finally adopting its present name — the Republic of Colombia — in 1886.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Geography

Colombia is bordered to the east by Venezuela and Brazil; to the south by Ecuador and Peru; to the north by Panama and the Caribbean Sea; and to the west by the Pacific Ocean. Colombia is the only country in South America to touch both Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, a region of the world subject to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, Colombia is dominated by the Andes mountains. Beyond the Colombian Massif (in the south-western departments of Cauca and Nariño) these are divided into three branches known as cordilleras (from the Spanish for “rope”): the Cordillera Occidental, running adjacent to the Pacific coast and including the city of Cali; the Cordillera Central, running between the Cauca and Magdalena river valleys (to the west and east respectively) and including the cities of Medellín, Manizales, Pereira and Armenia, Quindío; and the Cordillera Oriental, extending north east to the Guajira Peninsula and including Bogotá, Bucaramanga and Cúcuta. Peaks in the Cordillera Occidental exceed 13,000 ft (4,000 m), and in the Cordillera Central and Cordillera Oriental they reach 18,000 ft (5,500 m).<sup>[17]</sup> At 8,500 ft (2,600 m), Bogotá is the highest city of its size in the world.

East of the Andes lies the savanna of the Llanos, part of the Orinoco River basin, and, in the far south east, the jungle of the Amazon rainforest. Together these lowlands comprise over half Colombia’s territory, but they contain less than 3% of the population. To the north the Caribbean coast, home to 20% of the population and the location of the major port cities of Barranquilla and Cartagena, generally consists of low-lying plains, but it also contains the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountain range, which includes the country’s tallest peaks (Pico Cristóbal Colón and Pico Simón Bolívar), and the Guajira Desert. By contrast the narrow and discontinuous Pacific coastal lowlands, backed by the Serranía de Baudó mountains, are covered in dense vegetation and sparsely populated. The principal Pacific port is Buenaventura.

Colombian territory also includes a number of Caribbean and Pacific islands.

## Climate

The climate of Colombia is perfect for agriculture, enjoying typical weather patterns for near-equator regions, with tropical and isothermal climate predominating. Other influences are the trade winds and the effect of the Intertropical Convergence Zone on precipitation. Colombia is also affected by the El Niño and La Niña phenomena.

Temperatures generally decrease about 3.5°F (2°C) for

every 1,000-ft (300-m) increase in altitude above sea level, presenting perpetual snowy peaks to hot river valleys and basins. Rainfall is concentrated in two wet seasons (roughly corresponding to the spring and autumn of temperate latitudes) but varies considerably by location. Colombia’s Pacific coast has one of the highest levels of rainfall in the world, with the south east often drenched by more than 200 in (510 cm) of rain per year. On the other hand rainfall in parts of the Guajira Peninsula seldom exceeds 30 in (76 cm) per year. Rainfall in the rest of the country runs between these two extremes.

The hot and humid Colombian Pacific coast, one of the rainiest regions in the world.

Altitude not only affects temperature but is also one of the most important influences on vegetation patterns. The mountainous parts of the country can be divided into several vegetation zones according to altitude, although the altitude limits of each zone may vary somewhat depending on the latitude. Below 3,300 ft (1,000 m) are the tropical crops of the *tierra caliente* (hot land). The most productive land and the majority of the population can be found in the *tierra templada* (temperate land, 3,300–6,600 ft or 1,000–2,000 m), which provide the best conditions for the country’s coffee growers, and the *tierra fría* (cold land, 6,600–10,500 ft/2,000–3,200 m), where wheat and potatoes dominate. Beyond this lie the alpine conditions of the *zona forestada* (forested zone), 10,500–12,800 ft/3,200–3,900 m) and then the treeless grasslands of the *paramos* (12,800–15,100 ft/3,900–4,600 m). Above 15,100 ft (4,600 m), where temperatures are below freezing, is the *nieves perpetuas*, a zone of permanent snow and ice.

Colombian flora and fauna also interact with climate zone patterns. Scrub woodland of scattered trees and bushes dominates the semi-arid north-eastern steppe and tropical desert. To the south, savanna (tropical grassland) vegetation covers the eastern plains, the Colombian portion of the Llanos. The rainy areas in the south east are blanketed by tropical rainforest. In the mountains, the spotty patterns of precipitation in alpine areas complicate vegetation patterns. The rainy side of a mountain may be lush and green, while the other side, in the rain shadow, may be parched. As a result Colombia is one of the world’s 18 megadiverse countries.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Environmental issues

The environmental challenges faced by Colombia are caused by both natural hazards and human hazards. Many natural hazards result from Colombia’s position along the Pacific Ring of Fire and the consequent geological insta-



bility. Colombia has 15 major volcanoes, the eruptions of which have on occasion resulted in substantial loss of life, such as at Armero in 1985, and geological faults that have caused numerous devastating earthquakes, such as the 1999 Armenia earthquake. Heavy floods both in mountainous areas and in low-lying watersheds and coastal regions regularly cause deaths and considerable damage to property during the rainy seasons. Rainfall intensities vary with the El Niño-Southern Oscillation which occurs in unpredictable cycles, at times causing especially severe flooding.

Human induced deforestation has substantially changed the Andean landscape and has started to creep into the rainforests of Amazonia and the Pacific coast. Deforestation is also linked to the conversion of lowland tropical forests to oil palm plantations. However, compared to neighbouring countries rates of deforestation in Colombia are still relatively low.<sup>[19]</sup> In urban areas industry, the use of fossil fuels, and other human produced waste have contaminated the local environment. Demand from rapidly expanding cities has placed increasing stress on the water supply as watersheds are affected and ground water tables fall. Nonetheless, Colombia has large reserves of freshwater and is the fourth country in the world by magnitude of total freshwater supply.<sup>[20]</sup>

Participants in the country's armed conflict have also contributed to the pollution of the environment. Illegal armed groups have deforested large areas of land to plant illegal crops, with an estimated 99,000 hectares used for the cultivation of coca in 2007,<sup>[21]</sup> while in response the government has fumigated these crops using hazardous chemicals. Insurgents have also destroyed oil pipelines creating major ecological disasters.

## History

### Pre-Colombian era

Approximately 10,000 BC, hunter-gatherer societies existed near present-day Bogotá (at “El Abra” and “Tequendama”) which traded with one another and with cultures living in the Magdalena River Valley.<sup>[22]</sup> Beginning in the first millennium BC, groups of Amerindians developed the political system of “cacicazgos” with a pyramidal structure of power headed by caciques. Within Colombia, the two cultures with the most complex cacicazgo systems were the Tayronas in the Caribbean Region, and the Muiscas in the highlands around Bogotá, both of which were of the Chibcha language family. The Muisca people are considered to have had one of the most developed political systems in South America, after the Incas.<sup>[23]</sup>



### Spanish discovery, conquest, and colonization

Spanish explorers made the first exploration of the Caribbean littoral in 1499 led by Rodrigo de Bastidas. Christopher Columbus navigated near the Caribbean in 1502. In 1508, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa started the conquest of the territory through the region of Urabá. In 1513, he was the first European to discover the Pacific Ocean which he called Mar del Sur (or “Sea of the South”) and which in fact would bring the Spaniards to Peru and Chile.

The territory's main population was made up of hundreds of tribes of the Chibchan and Carib, currently known as the Caribbean people, whom the Spaniards conquered through warfare and alliances, while resulting disease such as smallpox, and the conquest and ethnic cleansing itself caused a demographic reduction among the indigenous.<sup>[24]</sup> In the sixteenth century, Europeans began to bring slaves from Africa.

### Independence from Spain

Since the beginning of the periods of Conquest and Colonization, there were several rebel movements under Spanish rule, most of them either being crushed or

remaining too weak to change the overall situation. The last one which sought outright independence from Spain sprang up around 1810, following the independence of St. Domingue in 1804 (present-day Haiti), who provided a non-negligible degree of support to the eventual leaders of this rebellion: Simón Bolívar and Francisco de Paula Santander.

In a movement initiated by Antonio Nariño who was against the Spanish centralism and which led the opposition against the viceroyalty. After the independence of Cartagena in November 1811, it formed two independent governments that ended in a Civil War period was called as La Patria Boba. The following year he proclaimed the United Provinces of New Granada, headed by Camilo Torres Tenorio. Despite the successes of the rebellion, the emergence of two distinct ideological currents among the liberators (federalism and centralism) gave rise to an internal clash between these two, thus contributing to the reconquest of territory by the Spanish, allowing restoration of the viceroyalty under the command of Juan de Samano, whose regime punished those who participated in the uprisings. This further radicalized the desire for independence among the population, which coupled with diminished economic and military situation in Spain, favored triumph of the campaign to liberate New Granada, led by Simón Bolívar, who finally proclaimed independence in 1819. The realistic resistance was finally defeated in 1822 on the present territory of Colombia and in 1823 around the Viceroyalty of time.

The Congress of Cucuta in 1821 adopted a constitution, whose main goal was to create the Republic of Colombia, now known as Gran Colombia. However the new republic composed a highly volatile union between the current Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama mainly, culminating in the rupture of Venezuela in 1829, followed by Ecuador, in 1830.

The Venezuelan Simón Bolívar had become the first President of Colombia, and Francisco de Paula Santander was Vice President; when Simón Bolívar stepped down, Santander became the second President of Colombia. The rebellion finally succeeded in 1819 when the territory of the Viceroyalty of New Granada became the Republic of Colombia organized as a union of Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela (Panama was then an integral part of Colombia).

### Post-independence and republicanism

Internal political and territorial divisions led to the secession of Venezuela and Quito (today's Ecuador) in 1830.

The so-called “Department of Cundinamarca” adopted the name “Nueva Granada”, which it kept until 1856 when it became the “Confederación Granadina” (Grenadine Confederation). After a two-year civil war in 1863, the “United States of Colombia” was created, lasting until 1886, when the country finally became known as the Republic of Colombia. Internal divisions remained between the bipartisan political forces, occasionally igniting very bloody civil wars, the most significant being the Thousand Days civil war (1899–1902).

This, together with the United States of America's intentions to influence the area (especially the Panama Canal construction and control) led to the separation of the Department of Panama in 1903 and the establishment of it as a nation. The United States paid Colombia \$25,000,000 in 1921, seven years after completion of the canal, for redress of President Roosevelt's role in the creation of Panama, and Colombia recognized Panama under the terms of the Thomson-Urrutia Treaty. Colombia was engulfed in the Year-Long War with Peru over a territorial dispute involving the Amazonas Department and its capital Leticia.

Soon after, Colombia achieved a relative degree of political stability, which was interrupted by a bloody conflict that took place between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, a period known as La Violencia (“The Violence”). Its cause was mainly mounting tensions between the two leading political parties, which subsequently ignited after the assassination of the Liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948. This assassination caused riots in Bogotá and became known as El Bogotazo. The violence from these riots spread throughout the country and claimed the lives of at least 180,000 Colombians. From 1953 to 1964 the violence between the two political parties decreased first when Gustavo Rojas deposed the President of Colombia in a coup d'état and negotiated with the guerrillas, and then under the military junta of General Gabriel París Gordillo.

After Rojas' deposition the two political parties Colombian Conservative Party and Colombian Liberal Party agreed to the creation of a “National Front”, whereby the Liberal and Conservative parties would govern jointly. The presidency would be determined by an alternating conservative and liberal president every 4 years for 16 years; the two parties would have parity in all other elective offices. The National Front ended “La Violencia”, and National Front administrations attempted to institute far-reaching social and economic reforms in cooperation with the Alliance for Progress. In the end, the contradictions between each successive Liberal and Conservative administration made the results decidedly mixed. Despite the progress in certain sectors, many social and political problems con-



tinued, and guerrilla groups were formally created such as the FARC, ELN and M-19 to fight the government and political apparatus. These guerrilla groups were dominated by Marxist doctrines.

Emerging in the late 1970s, powerful and violent drug cartels further developed during the 1980s and 1990s. The Medellín Cartel under Pablo Escobar and the Cali Cartel, in particular, exerted political, economic and social influence in Colombia during this period. These cartels also financed and influenced different illegal armed groups throughout the political spectrum. Some enemies of these allied with the guerrillas and created or influenced paramilitary groups.

The new Colombian Constitution of 1991 was ratified after being drafted by the Constituent Assembly of Colombia. The constitution included key provisions on political, ethnic, human and gender rights. The new constitution initially prohibited the extradition of Colombian nationals, causing accusations that drug cartels had lobbied for the provision; extradition was allowed again in 1996 when the provision was repealed. The cartels had previously promoted a violent campaign against extradition, leading to many terrorist attacks and mafia-style executions. They also tried to influence the government and political structure of Colombia through corruption, as in the case of the 8000 Process scandal.

In recent years, the country has continued to be plagued by the effects of the drug trade, guerrilla terrorist insurgencies like FARC, and paramilitary groups such as the AUC (later demobilized, though paramilitarism remains active), which along with other minor factions have engaged in a bloody internal armed conflict. President Andrés Pastrana and the FARC attempted to negotiate a solution to the conflict between 1998 and 2002 in which the government, more or less like Pakistan negotiations with the Taliban, believed the state could not fight forever and agreed to handle huge quantity of land in return for peace. Pastrana began to implement the Plan Colombia initiative, with the dual goal of ending the armed conflict and promoting a strong anti-narcotic strategy. This strategy entailed setting a huge quantity of land as “demilitarized” zones where no soldiers from either side could reside, but as attacks from the drug cartels persisted in those zones, the government established the negotiations were ineffectual.

During the presidency of Álvaro Uribe, the government applied more military pressure on the FARC and other outlawed groups, under the stance that nearly half a century of negotiations with no results was a sign that “some entities just cannot be negotiated with.” Mostly

through military pressure and increased military hardware from the US most security indicators improved, showing a steep decrease in reported kidnappings (from 3,700 in the year 2000 to 172 in 2009 (Jan.-Oct.)) and a 54% decrease in homicides (from 28,837 in 2002 to 13,346 in 2009 (Jan.-Oct.)). Guerrillas have been reduced from 16,900 insurgents to 8,900 insurgents.

While some in the UN argue Colombia is violating human rights to achieve peace, most do not argue that increase military pressure has had considerable improvements that have favored economic growth and tourism.<sup>[25]</sup> The 2006–2007 Colombian parapolitics scandal emerged from the revelations and judicial implications of past and present links between paramilitary groups, mainly the AUC, and some government officials and many politicians, most of them allied to the governing administration.<sup>[26]</sup>

## Government

The government of Colombia takes place within the framework of a presidential representative democratic republic as established in the Constitution of 1991. In accordance with the principle of separation of powers, government is divided into three branches: the control institutions (the offices of the Inspector General of Colombia and the Comptroller General of Colombia) and electoral institutions.

The President of Colombia serves as both head of state and head of government, followed by the Vice President and the Council of Ministers. The president is elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms and is currently limited to a maximum of two such terms (increased from one in 2005). At the provincial level executive power is vested in department governors, municipal mayors and local administrators for smaller administrative subdivisions, such as corregidores for corregimientos.

The legislative branch of government is composed by the Senate and the House of Representatives. The 102-seat Senate is elected nationally and the Representatives are elected by every region and minority groups.<sup>[27]</sup> Members of both houses are elected two months before the president, also by popular vote and to serve four-year terms. At the provincial level the legislative branch is represented by department assemblies and municipal councils. All regional elections are held one year and five months after the presidential election.

The judicial branch is headed by the Supreme Court, consisting of 23 judges divided into three chambers (Penal, Civil and Agrarian, and Labour). The judicial branch also

includes the Council of State, which has special responsibility for administrative law and also provides legal advice to the executive, the Constitutional Court, responsible for assuring the integrity of the Colombian constitution, and the Superior Council of Judicature, responsible for auditing the judicial branch. Colombia operates a system of civil law, which since 2005 has been applied through an adversarial system.

## Administrative divisions

Colombia is divided into 32 departments and one capital district, which is treated as a department (Bogotá also serves as the capital of the department of Cundinamarca). Departments are subdivided into municipalities, each of which is assigned a municipal seat, and municipalities are in turn subdivided into corregimientos. Each department has a local government with a governor and assembly directly elected to four-year terms. Each municipality is headed by a mayor and council, and each *corregimiento* by an elected *corregidor*, or local leader.

In addition to the capital nine other cities have been designated districts (in effect special municipalities), on the basis of special distinguishing features. These are Barraquilla, Cartagena, Santa Marta, Cúcuta, Popayán, Tunja, Turbo, Buenaventura and Tumaco. Some departments have local administrative subdivisions, where towns have a large concentration of population and municipalities are near each other (for example in Antioquia and Cundinamarca). Where departments have a low population and there are security problems (for example Amazonas, Vaupés and Vichada), special administrative divisions are employed, such as “department *corregimientos*”, which are a hybrid of a municipality and a *corregimiento*.

## Foreign affairs

The foreign affairs of Colombia are headed by the President of Colombia and managed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Colombia has diplomatic missions in all continents and is also represented in multilateral organizations at the following locations:

**Brussels** (Mission to the European Union)

**Geneva** (Permanent Missions to the United Nations and other international organizations)

**Montevideo** (Permanent Missions to the Latin American Integration Association and Mercosur)

**Nairobi** (Permanent Missions to the United Nations and

other international organizations)

**New York** (Permanent Mission to the United Nations)

**Paris** (Permanent Mission to UNESCO)

**Rome** (Permanent Mission to the Food and Agriculture Organization)

**Washington, D.C.** (Permanent Mission to the Organization of American States)

The foreign relations of Colombia are mostly concentrated on combating the illegal drug trade, the fight against terrorism, improving Colombia’s image in the international community, expanding the international market for Colombian products, and environmental issues. Colombia receives special military and commercial co-operation and support in its fight against internal armed groups from the United States, mainly through Plan Colombia, as well as special financial preferences from the European Union in certain products.

Colombia was one of the 12 countries that joined the UNASUR when it was created. UNASUR is supposed to be modeled like the European Union having free trade agreements with the members, free movement of people, a common currency, and also a common passport. Colombia as well as all the other members of UNASUR have had some problems with the integration due to the 2008 Andean diplomatic crisis.

Colombia is a member of the Andean Community of Nations and the Union of South American Nations.

Colombians need tourist visa for 180 countries and do not need tourist visa for 15 countries.

## Defense

The executive branch of government has responsibility for managing the defense of Colombia, with the President commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

The Colombian military is divided into three branches: the National Army of Colombia; the Colombian Air Force; and the Colombian National Armada. The National Police functions as a gendarmerie, operating independently from the military as the law enforcement agency for the entire country. Each of these operates with their own intelligence apparatus separate from the national intelligence agency, the Administrative Department of Security.

The National Army is formed by divisions, regiments and special units; the National Armada by the Colombi-

an Naval Infantry, the Naval Force of the Caribbean, the Naval Force of the Pacific, the Naval Force of the South, Colombia Coast Guards, Naval Aviation and the Specific Command of San Andres y Providencia; and the Air Force by 13 air units. The National Police has a presence in all municipalities.

## Politics

For over a century Colombian politics were monopolized by the Liberal Party (founded in 1848 on an anti-clerical, broadly economically liberal and federalist platform), and the Conservative Party (founded in 1849 espousing Catholicism, protectionism, and centralism). This culminated in the formation of the National Front (1958–1974), which formalized arrangements for an alternation of power between the two parties and excluded non-establishment alternatives (thereby fueling the nascent armed conflict).

By the time of the dissolution of the National Front, traditional political alignments had begun to fragment.

This process has continued since, and the consequences of this are exemplified by the results of the last presidential election, held on 28 May 2006, which was won with 62% of the vote by the incumbent, Álvaro Uribe. President Uribe is from a Liberal background but he campaigned as part of the Colombia First movement with the support of the Conservative Party, and his hard line on security issues and liberal economics place him on the right of the modern political spectrum.

In second place with 22% was Carlos Gaviria of the Alternative Democratic Pole, a newly formed social democratic alliance which includes elements of the former M-19 guerrilla movement. Horacio Serpa of the Liberal Party achieved third place with 12%. Meanwhile in the congressional elections held earlier that year the two traditional parties secured only 93 out of 268 seats available.

Despite a number of controversies, most notably the ongoing parapolitics scandal, dramatic improvements in security and continued strong economic performance have ensured that President Uribe remains extremely popular



among the Colombian people, with his approval rating peaking at 85% in July 2008.<sup>[28]</sup> However, having served two terms, he will be constitutionally barred from seeking re-election in 2010, though his party is currently promoting a referendum to allow him to continue as president.

## Economy

In spite of the difficulties presented by serious internal armed conflict, Colombia's economy grew steadily in the latter part of the twentieth century, with gross domestic product (GDP) increasing at an average rate of over 4% per year between 1970 and 1998. The country suffered a recession in 1999 (the first full year of negative growth since the Great Depression), and the recovery from that recession was long and painful. However, in recent years growth has been impressive, reaching 8.2% in 2007, one of the highest rates of growth in Latin America. Meanwhile the Colombian stock exchange climbed from 1,000 points at its creation in July 2001 to over 7,300 points by November 2008.<sup>[29]</sup>

According to International Monetary Fund estimates, in 2007 Colombia's nominal GDP was US\$202.6 billion (37th in the world and fourth in South America). Adjusted for purchasing power parity, GDP per capita stands at \$7,968, placing Colombia 82nd in the world. However, in practice this is relatively unevenly distributed among the population, and, in common with much of Latin America, Colombia scores poorly according to the Gini coefficient, with UN figures placing it 119th out of 126 countries. In 2003 the richest 20% of the population had a 62.7% share of income/consumption and the poorest 20% just 2.5%, and 17.8% of Colombians live on less than \$2 a day.<sup>[30]</sup>

Government spending is 37.9% of GDP.<sup>[2]</sup> Almost a quarter of this goes towards servicing the country's relatively high government debt, estimated at 52.8% of GDP in 2007.<sup>[2],[30]</sup> Other problems facing the economy include weak domestic and foreign demand, the funding of the country's pension system, and unemployment (10.8% in November 2008<sup>[29]</sup>). Inflation has remained relatively low in recent years, standing at 5.5% in 2007.<sup>[2]</sup>

Historically an agrarian economy, Colombia urbanised rapidly in the twentieth century, by the end of which just 22.7% of the workforce were employed in agriculture, generating just 11.5% of GDP. 18.7% of the workforce are employed in industry and 58.5% in services, responsible for 36% and 52.5% of GDP respectively.<sup>[2]</sup> Colombia is rich in natural resources, and its main exports include petroleum, coal, coffee and other agricultural produce, and gold.<sup>[31]</sup> Colombia is also known as the world's leading source of emeralds,<sup>[32]</sup> while over 70% of cut flowers imported by the

United States are Colombian.<sup>[33]</sup> Principal trading partners are the United States (a controversial free trade agreement with the United States is currently awaiting approval by the United States Congress), Venezuela and China.<sup>[2]</sup> All imports, exports, and the overall balance of trade are at record levels, and the inflow of export dollars has resulted in a substantial re-valuation of the Colombian peso.

Economic performance has been aided by liberal reforms introduced in the early 1990s and continued during the current presidency of Álvaro Uribe, whose policies include measures designed to bring the public sector deficit below 2.5% of GDP. In 2008, the Heritage Foundation assessed the Colombian economy to be 61.9% free, an increase of 2.3% since 2007, placing it 67th in the world and 15th out of 29 countries within the region.<sup>[34]</sup>

Meanwhile the improvements in security resulting from President Uribe's controversial "democratic security" strategy have engendered an increased sense of confidence in the economy. On 28 May 2007 the American magazine BusinessWeek published an article naming Colombia "the most extreme emerging market on Earth".<sup>[35]</sup> Colombia's economy has improved in recent years. Investment soared, from 15% of GDP in 2002 to 26% in 2008. private business has retooled. However unemployment at 12% and the poverty rate at 46% in 2009 are above the regional average.<sup>[36]</sup>

## Tourism

For many years serious internal armed conflict deterred tourists from visiting Colombia, with official travel advisories warning against travel to the country. However, in recent years numbers have risen sharply, thanks to improvements in security resulting from President Álvaro Uribe's "democratic security" strategy, which has included significant increases in military strength and police presence throughout the country and pushed rebel groups further away from the major cities, highways and tourist sites likely to attract international visitors. Foreign tourist visits were predicted to have risen from 0.5 million in 2003 to 1.3 million in 2007,<sup>[37]</sup> while Lonely Planet picked Colombia as one of their top ten world destinations for 2006.<sup>[38]</sup> The improvements in the country's security were recognised in November 2008 with a revision of the travel advice on Colombia issued by the British Foreign Office.<sup>[39]</sup>

Colombia Minister for Industry, Trade and Tourism Luis Guillermo Plata said his country had received 2,348,948 visitors in 2008. He is expecting 2,650,000 tourists for 2009.<sup>[40][41]</sup>



Popular tourist attractions include the historic Candelaria district of central Bogotá, the walled city and beaches of Cartagena, the colonial towns of Santa Fe de Antioquia, Popayan, Villa de Leyva and Santa Cruz de Mompox, and the Las Lajas Cathedral and the Salt Cathedral of Zipaquirá. Tourists are also drawn to Colombia's numerous festivals, including Medellín's Festival of the Flowers, the Barranquilla Carnival, the Carnival of Blacks and Whites in Pasto and the Ibero-American Theater Festival in Bogotá. Meanwhile, because of the improved security, Caribbean cruise ships now stop at Cartagena and Santa Marta.

The great variety in geography, flora and fauna across Colombia has also resulted in the development of an ecotourist industry, concentrated in the country's national parks. Popular ecotourist destinations include: along the Caribbean coast, the Tayrona National Natural Park in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountain range and Cabo de la Vela on the tip of the Guajira Peninsula; the Nevado del Ruiz volcano, the Cocora valley and the Tatacoa Desert in the central Andean region; Amacayacu National Park in the Amazon River basin; and the Pacific islands of Malpelo and Gorgona. Colombia is home to seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

## Transportation

Colombia has a network of national highways maintained by the Instituto Nacional de Vías or INVIAS (National Institute of Roadways) government agency under the Ministry of Transport. The Pan-American Highway travels through Colombia, connecting the country with Venezuela to the east and Ecuador to the south.

Colombia's principal airport is El Dorado International Airport in Bogotá. It is the busiest airport in Latin America by the number of flights and the weight of goods transported.<sup>[42]</sup> Several national airlines (Avianca, AeroRepública, AIRES, SATENA and EasyFly), and international airlines (such as Iberia, American Airlines, Varig, Copa, Continental, Delta, Air Canada, Air France, Aerolíneas Argentinas, Aerogal, TAME, TACA) operate from El Dorado. Because of its central location in Colombia and America, it is preferred by national land transportation providers, as well as national and international air transportation providers.

## Biofuels

Colombia is discussing current trends and challenges

as well as recent international developments in the biofuels sector with the intention of contributing to the development of a sustainable and competitive biofuels strategy for Colombia and the region.<sup>[43]</sup>

## Demographics

With an estimated 44.6 million people in 2008, Colombia is the third-most populous country in Latin America, after Brazil and Mexico. It is also home to the second-largest number of Spanish speakers in the world after Mexico, just ahead of Spain (which has a slightly larger population but includes a significant Catalan-speaking minority) and Argentina. The population increased at a rate of 1.9% between 1975 and 2005, predicted to drop to 1.2% over the next decade. Colombia is projected to have a population of 50.7 million by 2015. These trends are reflected in the country's age profile. In 2005 over 30% of the population was under 15 years old, compared to just 5.1% aged 65 and over.

The population is concentrated in the Andean highlands and along the Caribbean coast. The nine eastern lowland departments, comprising about 54% of Colombia's area, have less than 3% of the population and a density of less than one person per square kilometer (two persons per square mile). Traditionally a rural society, movement to urban areas was very heavy in the mid-twentieth century, and Colombia is now one of the most urbanized countries in Latin America. The urban population increased from 31% of the total in 1938 to 60% in 1975, and by 2005 the figure stood at 72.7%.<sup>[30][44]</sup> The population of Bogotá alone has increased from just over 300,000 in 1938 to approximately 7 million today. In total thirty cities now have populations of 100,000 or more. Colombia has one of the world's largest populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs), estimated up to 4.3 million people.<sup>[45]</sup>

Colombia is ranked sixth in the world in the Happy Planet Index.

## Ethnic groups

The census data in Colombia does not record ethnicity, other than that of those identifying themselves as members of particular minority ethnic groups, so overall percentages are essentially estimates from other sources and can vary from one to another.<sup>[46]</sup>

According to the CIA World Factbook, the majority of the population (58%) is mestizo, or of mixed European and Amerindian ancestry. 20% of the population is white (predominantly of Spanish, with some Italian, Portuguese

and German ancestry). However, some people think that Colombians have descended from the African ancestry, which has been proven to not be entirely correct. Approximately 4.4 million Colombians identify racially with the sub-saharan race, about 10.0 million if not more of the population with holds African ancestry to [to whatever degree]<sup>[citation needed]</sup>. Colombia is the third country outside of Africa to have the most African ancestry<sup>[citation needed]</sup>. Pure indigenous Amerindians comprise only 2% of the population.<sup>[2]</sup>

The overwhelming majority of Colombians speak Spanish (see also Colombian Spanish), but in total 101 languages are listed for Colombia in the Ethnologue database, of which 80 are spoken today as living languages. Most of these belong to the Chibchan, Arawak and Caribbean linguistic families. The Quechua language, spoken in the Andes region of the country, has also extended more northwards into Colombia, mainly in urban centers of major cities. There are currently about 500,000 speakers of indigenous languages.<sup>[47]</sup>

## Indigenous peoples

Before the Spanish colonization of what is now Colombia, the territory was home to a significant number of indigenous peoples. Many of these were absorbed into the mestizo population, but the remainder currently represents over eighty-five distinct cultures. 567 reserves (resguardos) established for indigenous peoples occupy 365,004 square kilometres (over 30% of the country's total) and are inhabited by more than 800,000 people in over 67,000 families.<sup>[49]</sup> The 1991 constitution established their native languages as official in their territories, and most of them have bilingual education (native and Spanish).

Some of the largest indigenous groups are the Wayuu,<sup>[48]</sup> the Arhuacos, the Muisca, the Kuna, the Paez, the Tucano and the Guahibo. Cauca, La Guajira and Guainia have the largest indigenous populations.

## Immigrant groups

The first and most substantial wave of modern immigration to Colombia consisted of Spanish colonists, following the arrival of Europeans in 1499. However a range of other Europeans (Dutch, Germans, Italians, Greek, French, Swiss, Belgians and Basques, also many North Americans) migrated to the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, in smaller numbers, Poles, Lithuanians, English, Irish and Croats during and after the Second World War. For example, former Mayor of Bogotá Antanas Mockus is the son of Lithuanian immi-





grants.

Many immigrant communities have settled on the Caribbean coast, in particular recent immigrants from the Middle East. Barranquilla (the largest city of the Colombian Caribbean) and other Caribbean cities have the largest populations of Lebanese and Arabs, Sephardi Jews, Roma, and people of Italian, German, and French descent. For example, the singer Shakira, a native of Barranquilla, has both Lebanese and Italian ancestry. There are also important communities of Chinese and Japanese.

Black Africans were brought as slaves, mostly to the coastal lowlands, beginning early in the sixteenth century and continuing into the nineteenth century. Large Afro-Colombian communities are found today on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts. The population of the department of Chocó, running along the northern portion of Colombia's Pacific coast, is over 80% black.<sup>[50]</sup>

### The impact of armed conflict on civilians

Around one third of the people in Colombia have been affected in some way by armed conflict there. Those with direct personal experience make up 10% of the population, and many others also report suffering a range of serious hardships. In total 31% have been affected in some way - either personally or due to the wider consequences of armed conflict.<sup>[51]</sup>

## Education

The educational experience of many Colombian children begins with attendance at a preschool academy until age 6 (*Educación preescolar*). Basic education (*Educación básica*) is compulsory by law.<sup>[52]</sup> It has two stages: Primary basic education (*Educación básica primaria*) which goes from 1st to 5th grade and usually it encompasses children from 6 to 10 years old, and Secondary basic education (*Educación básica secundaria*), which goes from 6th to 9th grade. Basic education is followed by Middle vocational education (*Educación media vocacional*) that comprehends 10th and 11th grade. It may have different vocational training modalities or specialties (academic, technical, business, etc.) according to the curriculum adopted by each school. However in many rural areas, teachers are poorly qualified, and only the five years of primary schooling are offered. The school year can extend from February to November or from August to June, and in many public schools attendance is split into morning and afternoon "shifts", in order to accommodate the large numbers of children.<sup>[53]</sup>

After the successful completion of all the basic and middle education years, a high-school diploma is granted. The high-school graduate is known as *bachiller*, because secondary basic school and middle education are traditionally considered together as a unit called *bachillerato* (6th to 11th grade). Students in their final year of middle education take the ICFES test in order to gain access to Superior education (*Educación superior*). This superior education includes undergraduate professional studies, technical, technological and intermediate professional education, and post-graduate studies.

*Bachilleres* (high-school graduates) may enter into a professional undergraduate career program offered by a university; these programs last up to 5 years (or less for technical, technological and intermediate professional education, and post-graduate studies), even up to 6–7 years for some careers, such as medicine. In Colombia, there is not an institution such as college; students go directly into a career program at a university or any other educational institution to obtain a professional, technical or technological title. Once graduated from the university, people are granted a (professional, technical or technological) diploma and licensed (if required) to practice the career they have chosen. For some professional career programs, students are required to take the ECAES test in their final year of undergraduate academic education.<sup>[54]</sup>

Public spending on education as a proportion of gross domestic product in 2006 was 4.7% — one of the highest rates in Latin America — as compared with 2.4% in 1991. This represented 14.2% of total government expenditure.<sup>[30][55]</sup> In 2006, the primary and secondary net enrollment rates stood at 88% and 65% respectively, slightly below the regional average. School life expectancy was 12.4 years.<sup>[55]</sup> A total of 92.3% of the population aged 15 and older were recorded as literate, including 97.9% of those aged 15–24, both figures slightly higher than the regional average.<sup>[55]</sup> However, literacy levels are considerably lower in rural areas.<sup>[56]</sup>

## Religion

The National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) does not collect religious statistics, and accurate reports are difficult to obtain. However, based on various studies, more than 95% of the population adheres to Christianity,<sup>[57]</sup> the vast majority of which (between 81% and 90%) are Roman Catholic. About 1% of Colombians adhere to indigenous religions and under 1% to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. However, despite high numbers of adherents, around 60% of respondents to a

poll by *El Tiempo* reported that they did not practice their faith actively.<sup>[58]</sup>

While Colombia remains an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country, the Colombian constitution guarantees freedom and equality of religion.<sup>[59]</sup> Religious groups are readily able to obtain recognition as organized associations, although some smaller ones have faced difficulty in obtaining the additional recognition required to offer chaplaincy services in public facilities and to perform legally recognised marriages.<sup>[58]</sup>

## Health

Life expectancy at birth in 2005 was 72.3; 2.1% would not reach the age of 5, 9.2% would not reach the age of 40.<sup>[30]</sup> Health standards in Colombia have improved greatly since the 1980s. A 1993 reform transformed the structure of public health-care funding by shifting the burden of subsidy from providers to users. As a result, employees have been obligated to pay into health plans to which employers also contribute. Although this new system has widened population coverage by the social and health security system from 21 percent (pre-1993) to 56 percent in 2004 and 66 percent in 2005, health disparities persist, with the poor con-



tinuing to suffer relatively high mortality rates. In 2002 Colombia had 58,761 physicians, 23,950 nurses, and 33,951 dentists; these numbers equated to 1.35 physicians, 0.55 nurses, and 0.78 dentists per 1,000 population, respectively. In 2005 Colombia was reported to have only 1.1 physicians per 1,000 population, as compared with a Latin American average of 1.5. The health sector reportedly is plagued by rampant corruption, including misallocation of funds and evasion of health-fund contributions.<sup>[60]</sup>

## Culture

Colombia lies at the crossroads of Latin America and the broader American continent, and as such has been marked by a wide range of cultural influences. Native American, Spanish and other European, African, American, Caribbean, and Middle Eastern influences, as well as other Latin American cultural influences, are all present in Colombia's modern culture. Urban migration, industrialization, globalization, and other political, social and economic changes have also left an impression.

Historically, the country's imposing landscape left its various regions largely isolated from one another, resulting in the development of very strong regional identities, in many cases stronger than the national. Modern transport links and means of communication have mitigated this and done much to foster a sense of nationhood, but social and political instability, and in particular fears of armed groups and bandits on intercity highways, have contributed to the maintenance of very clear regional differences. Accent, dress, music, food, politics and general attitude vary greatly between the Bogotanos and other residents of the central highlands, the paisas of Antioquia and the coffee region, the costeños of the Caribbean coast, the llaneros of the eastern plains, and the inhabitants of the Pacific coast and the vast Amazon region to the south east.

An inheritance from the colonial era, Colombia remains a deeply Roman Catholic country and maintains a large base of Catholic traditions which provide a point of unity for its multicultural society. Colombia has many celebrations and festivals throughout the year, and the majority are rooted in these Catholic religious traditions. However, many are also infused with a diverse range of other influences. Prominent examples of Colombia's festivals include the Barranquilla Carnival, the Carnival of Blacks and Whites, Medellín's Festival of the Flowers and Bogotá's Ibero-American Theater

## Festival

The mixing of various different ethnic traditions is reflected in Colombia's music and dance. The most well-known Colombian genres are cumbia and vallenato, the latter now strongly influenced by global pop culture. A powerful and unifying cultural medium in Colombia is television. Most famously, the telenovela Betty La Fea has gained international success through localized versions in the United States, Mexico, and elsewhere. Television has also played a role in the development of the local film industry.

As in many Latin American countries, Colombians have a passion for football. The Colombian national football team is seen as a symbol of unity and national pride, though local clubs also inspire fierce loyalty and sometimes-violent rivalries. Colombia has "exported" many famous players, such as Freddy Rincon, Carlos Valderrama, Iván Ramiro Córdoba, and Faustino Asprilla. Other Colombian athletes have also achieved success, including Formula 1 Racing's Juan Pablo Montoya, Major League Baseball's Edgar Rentería and Orlando Cabrera, and the PGA Tour's Camilo Villegas.

Other famous Colombians include the Nobel Prize winning author Gabriel García Márquez, the artist Fernando Botero, the writers Fernando Vallejo, Laura Restrepo,

Álvaro Mutis and James Cañón,  
the musicians



Shakira, Juanes, Carlos Vives and Juan Garcia-Herreros, and the actors Catalina Sandino Moreno, John Leguizamo, Catherine Siachoque and Sofia Vergara.

The cuisine of Colombia developed mainly from the food traditions of European countries. Spanish, Italian and French culinary influences can all be seen in Colombian cooking. The cuisine of neighboring Latin American countries, Mexico, the United States and the Caribbean, as well as the cooking traditions of the country's indigenous inhabitants, have all influenced Colombian food. For example, cuy or guinea pig, which is an indigenous cuisine, is eaten in the Andes region of south-western Colombia.

Many national symbols, both objects and themes, have arisen from Colombia's diverse cultural traditions and aim to represent what Colombia, and the Colombian people, have in common. Cultural expressions in Colombia are promoted by the government through the Ministry of Culture.

## **Colombia in popular culture**

The depiction of **Colombia in popular culture**, especially the portrayal of Colombian people in film and fiction, has been asserted by Colombian organizations<sup>[61]</sup> and government to be largely negative and has raised concerns that it reinforces, or even engenders, societal prejudice and discrimination due to association with narco-trafficking, terrorism, illegal immigration and other criminal elements, poverty and welfare.<sup>[64]</sup> These stereotypes are considered unfair by many Colombians.<sup>[65][66][67]</sup> The Colombian government-funded Colombia es Pasión advertisement campaign as an attempt to improve Colombia's image abroad, with mixed results.<sup>[68][69]</sup>

## **Cuisine of Colombia**

Colombia's cuisine, influenced heavily by the Spanish and Indigenous populations, is not as widely known as other Latin American cuisines such as Peruvian or Brazilian, but to the adventurous traveler there is plenty of delectable dishes to try, not to mention bizarre fruits, rum, and of course, Colombian coffee.