
I. GENERAL

Colombia covers an area of 1 141 748 km² and is situated southeast of Panama. It has a coastline on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean and borders Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru. The country is divided by mountains into the Andean region, the coastal areas, the plains (Llanos) and the Amazon region. Over 90 per cent of the population is concentrated mainly in the more temperate regions of the Andes and on the flat lands of the north coast.

History and Government

The 300-year-old Spanish colony of Nueva Granada on the South American continent established its independence under the leadership of Simon Bolivar after a series of battles with Spain during the period 1810 to 1819. In 1819, the Republic of Gran Colombia, which included present-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama, was established with Bogotá as its capital. Ecuador, Venezuela and Panama seceded by 1830.

The early part of the twentieth century was stable in Colombia compared with the turbulent decades of civil war and insurrection in the previous century. From the late 1940s to 1957, however, Colombia was wracked by la Violencia, an undeclared civil war between the Liberals and the Conservatives in which 300 000 people were killed. Finally in 1958, the two factions agreed to form a coalition government under the terms of which the presidency alternated between the two parties every four years. Key executive positions, including Cabinet posts and elected legislative seats, were by agreement divided between the two parties.

Open elections were reinstituted in 1974. The Liberals won two four-year presidential terms but lost power to the Conservative administration in August 1982. However, power returned to the Liberals in 1986, and the current government is headed by President Virgilio Barco.

Colombia enjoys a relatively stable presidential democracy. Several institutional features are analogous to the governmental system of the United States, including a separation of powers among the executive, the legislative and the judicial branches; a bicameral Congress, consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives; and a strong two-party system.