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President Alvaro Colom Says He Needs A Decade

by LADB Staff

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The administration of President Alvaro Colom in Guatemala has just passed the six-month mark. Friends and foes alike are not pleased with what this president who promised so much has delivered. The friends have not seen the government "with Maya face, the smell of corn tamal, and a social democracy in the interest of the poorest and most forgotten communities." The opposition has not seen institutional housecleaning but rather complains of indications of "political instability" and incompetence in repeated Cabinet shifts. The still-confident government chided the critics, reminding them that Colom's vision is a set of long-term projects not something that can be delivered in the first half of his first year in office.

Much has been made of the fact that it took Colom just seven minutes on national television to present an accounting of his accomplishments to date. He spoke of an overall "positive balance," mostly emphasizing the work of social programs under the direction of first lady Sandra de Colom. The programs, Mi Familia Progresiva and the Bolsa Solidaria, operate with the support of the Army to deliver basic necessities to needy families, to keep them together during increasingly difficult economic times, and to keep children in school despite relentlessly rising costs of doing so. Colom evoked the economic environment to justify the slow pace of progress. He said he took office "in the most difficult moment in the history of the country." He took over "an indebted state, in disorder, and without resources," but was able, nevertheless, to get some important initiatives started. He enumerated access to drinking water, health, and education projects in Huehuetenango, Chiquimula, and the Verapaces. Critics have noted that these accomplishments are rural and for that reason not well-known or understood in the urban centers where most of the critics live.

The economic downturn of its US trading partner, together with unsustainable energy and food costs (see NotiCen, 2008-05-22), have forced Colom to confront problems with dwindling resources. Yet, the government contends it has managed the macro-economy better than have previous governments, delivering services despite shortages and cutting back on government waste, saving millions in travel pay, telephone costs, and nonessential spending. The administration's points are no doubt true, but they failed to satisfy an expectant population. In a Vox Latina poll commissioned by national newspaper Prensa Libre and released on July 14, nearly 70% of the people responding disapprove of Colom's government, and 87% think Guatemala is headed in a wrong direction.

Counseling patience

As unimpressed as the people are with Colom's accomplishments to date, he is equally unmoved by their reprobation. He insists that these first months "have been a birth labor of social democracy," a new political system that "has begun to bear fruit on behalf of the poorest." He stresses that the country has never in its history experienced a social democratic form of government, a government for which "we are working to achieve fundamental solutions." Because there has never been a government of this kind, Colom went on, "this is a government totally independent of pressure or

economically powerful groups." It is a government that speaks to all sectors of society and whose core value is poverty reduction.

He charged that the media and opposition groups "do not recognize our work because we are working for the poorest of the country" and because the benefits of this administration "are reaching mainly places so poor that nobody ever goes there to ask if the people are living or dying." Colom argued that his critics did not understand the new regime because they had never seen its like before. He said he does not so much administrate as he does guide the country, and traditional power blocs would have to get used to the new way of doing things. He held up his new energy policy (see NotiCen, 2008-05-29, 2008-07-10), based on a plan to change to mix of power sources in the country away from oil dependency, as an example of a new way of doing things "never before seen in this sector," which would eventually "generate more than 42,000 jobs."

Despite widespread criticism of the crime situation, Colom said it has actually improved during his brief government. He said crime in general is down 1.41% over last year, and the homicide rate has declined from 17 a day during the administration of ex-President Oscar Berger (2004-2008) to 13 a day now. In connection with these statistics, Colom pointed to progress in restructuring and cleaning up the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC).

From here on, the government will continue to emphasize people and places traditionally hidden from popular view. Colom said the next major initiative would be a national rural-development policy, whose centerpiece would be integrated rural-development legislation. "It will be a historic initiative," said the president, "because the government and the campesino sector have never sat down to create a rural-development plan that guarantees political stability, state support of the campesino sector, and combating poverty." Colom acknowledged the various economic setbacks that have slowed his pace, but he credited himself with managing a tough situation "with total moderation [and] without committing any lunacies or fanaticisms."

He said he wished he had had the resources to double salaries and distribute food in the streets, but the lack has imposed disciplines he considers valuable. His administration has been forced to come up with creative ways to deal with the crisis, and, he said, "we have decided on fifteen measures with which to confront the crisis, and after dealing with the legal issues, I expect in the coming days they will start benefiting the citizens." Even with the constraints, Colom has managed to spend about US\$185 million on the social programs.

The critics have at him

The birthing process, Colom said, is still not over and likely will not be until 2009. He speaks with confidence that he will continue to progress, but others, including those in a position to be familiar with what he has done in less-accessible areas, are not so sure. The co-ops and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are, as a group, unimpressed. Helmer Velasquez of the umbrella group Coordinacion de Cooperativas (CONGCOOP) told the media that Colom "has failed" in these six months, mostly by omission, to solve agrarian conflicts, adopt anti-crime public policy, and reduce poverty in any meaningful way.

Not only has the president not put a "Mayan face" on the government but campesinos and indigenous people who have occupied lands for survival have been repressed by authorities. Sociologist Fernando Solis said what the government has done so far does not go beyond palliation, because the policies in which Colom has invested so much money "are of a populist nature and don't get to the root of the problem." Neither food security, nor education, nor health issues have seen any real improvement, Solis insisted.

Another analyst seeking solutions at the root, indigenous political scientist Alvaro Pop, looked at Colom's problems as structural. He cited institutional weakness and entrenched clientelism as the major impediments. "The population is in a state of uncertainty and does not trust that government could resolve economic and security problems even if it were disposed to do so," he said. Helen Mack of the Myrna Mack Foundation, which advocates for security and criminal-justice issues, agrees with the hypothesis of institutional weakness. She sees good intentions but not backed up with budgetary and political support. "No matter how much they insist, the Army continues to be the [institution with] the most budget, the most training for its people, they get the most, and it is they who are turned to as the supposed savior in security matters." On the closely related issue of drug trafficking, Mack noted, "The battle that Mexico and Colombia are having is affecting us a great deal, and we do not have a police structure or a specialized unit to confront it."

On the economic front, analyst Miguel Gutierrez sees major difficulties ahead because the government has not dealt with, and may lack the means to deal with, one of the region's highest inflation rates at 13.56% annualized and an undercapitalized financial system. He called these "very dangerous elements." The government is counting on these observers gradually coming around to a longer-term way of looking at progress in Guatemala.

Vice President Rafael Espada responded to these criticisms in the press with assurances that the country is on the right path. "Despite their attacking us for security problems, the indicators show a reduction in violence," he said. "What is happening is that some days are more violent than others." As for the people wanting in six months what will take years to accomplish, Espada offered, "We are going to set the basis so that within ten or 15 years the country would have a correct direction."

Instability or normal restructuring?

In addition to fending off critics, Colom is having trouble getting his own team in order. On July 16, he fired his Health Minister Eusebio Del Cid and his Agriculture Minister Raul Robles. The president tossed this off as "normal" restructuring, but it is the third time he has had to do this in his brief tenure, and he has had to counter charges of political instability because of it. Robles had been criticized for mishandling his budget and for having botched the distribution of fertilizers. Del Cid has been charged with inefficiencies and with irregularities in handling donations. The opposition Partido Patriotica (PP) especially wants to know what Del Cid did with 70 donations to HIV programs.

In May, Economy Minister Jose Carlos Garcia Macal resigned and was replaced by Romulo Caballeros, a former ambassador to Mexico. Macal was said to have resigned for health reasons. In early July, Colom appointed Francisco Jimenez security minister after Vinicio Gomez, his

predecessor, died in a helicopter crash. These events were not necessarily Colom's fault, but they contributed to an overall impression of instability. Each time a minister is changed, a new course must be charted for that particular agency or activity, and it seems to critics that there is no underlying course. Said Alejandro Urizar of Accion Ciudadana, "The lack of an agenda has not allowed the government to show results in agreement with the plan they presented during the electoral campaign. Despite there having been efforts, the results are still insufficient."

Luis Linares of the Asociacion de Investigacion y Estudios Sociales (ASIES) agreed, linking the Cabinet shakeups with the apparent lack of a plan now. He said the original team was very solid, and the original outlook for governing was well-structured. Linares also finds the current economic outlook unnerving. He said economic conditions during the campaign were more favorable than they are now. Economist Lisandro Bolanos of the Centro de Investigaciones Economicas Nacionales (CIEN) agreed. "The international situation this government faces is much more complicated than that faced by the last government, and this has generated less positive expectations in many different sectors," he said. The economic problem and the Cabinet changes have given way to a perception of governmental rudderlessness, added Bolanos. "During these six months, the government changed its mind with regard to different policies that it was trying to promote, that it announced, and then stepped back from."

Colom and his critics seem to be waving at each other from a distance. They are drifting past each other on two different time frames. Six months are sufficient to start getting traction on concrete problems, say the scolds, while the president speaks of governmental changes so profound that the unit of measure of effectiveness should be the decade, not the month.

Picking up where democracy left off

All this suggests that Colom has not convinced enough of the important players in the various sectors of Guatemalan society that where he is going is where they ought to be. He pointed the way in his inauguration speech when he told the country, "I thank God that for the first time in 50 years the time has come for Guatemala to change toward a social democratic government, a government with a social focus. His reference to 50 years suggests his wish to pick up where the 1944 revolution left off. His reference to the presidencies of Juan Jose Arevalo (1945-1951) and Jacobo Arbenz (1951-1954) leave no room for mistake. "We didn't witness the democratic spring of [19]44, but we still have the great social advances of Juan Jose Arevalo," he said.

Many look back on the decade that ended with the US-inspired overthrow of the government as the only truly democratic period in Guatemala's history. A recently economically and diplomatically chastened US is no longer the threat it was in its Cold War heyday, opening a window of opportunity for the return of social democracy to Guatemala.

In March, the Nicaraguan magazine Envio featured an article explaining what Colom might mean by a social democratic government. It began noting that social democracy was a movement that began at the end of the 19th century, headed by Edward Bernstein, who had broken with the Marxist movement and its parties. This was a workers' movement that emphasized coming to power through free election rather than by revolution. It was reformist in nature, seeking change, including

fair wages, through institutional reforms and favored interclass solidarity rather than exclusionary class interests.

In scope, social democracy was rooted in the national consciousness rather than internationalist as was Marxism. Social democracy contemplated a positive tension between capitalism and strong workers' organizations. Envio singled out Costa Rica as the country closest to what Latin American social democracy ought to look like, "the country with the most effective social democratic party." The magazine comments, "The union movement that built it even managed to put the brakes on its social decline by firmly opposing the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) with the United States in 2007."

Alvaro Colom is no newcomer to the social and political movement he espouses. His uncle, Manuel Colom Argueta, called by Envio "a great social democratic leader," was elected mayor of Guatemala City twice. Weeks after his party was legally registered, Manuel Colom was assassinated. This was in 1979, at the height of the brutal repression of the regime of Gen. Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia (1978-1982). Manuel Colom was just one of many progressive leaders killed during this period. Another was Alberto Fuentes Mohr, a founder of the social democratic party, killed just before Colom. Now President Alvaro Colom has named Juan Alberto Fuentes Knight, the son of Fuentes Mohr, to the position of finance minister.

So, for this Colom, six months is not long for a democratic recovery now more than a half-century in the making. He said of Colom Argueta and Fuentes Mohr at his inauguration, "They gave their lives for this moment. They died to water a fertile field. I know that Juan Alberto Fuentes, Alberto's son, doesn't feel himself to be his father's heir; I feel the same about Manuel. We'll earn that over the next four years."

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