

11-14-2003

President Uribe's Cabinet Hit by Resignations

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "President Uribe's Cabinet Hit by Resignations." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13207>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

President Uribe's Cabinet Hit by Resignations

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 2003-11-14

After voters rejected his referendum, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe was hit with a political crisis as several Cabinet ministers and high-level military resigned or were asked to leave.

When he took office, Uribe said his ministers would serve the full four years of his administration and that the fight against corruption was the top priority. After just over a year of government, five ministers have gone and corruption seems more prevalent than ever. Uribe suffered a major political defeat on Oct. 25 when less than the required minimum 6.3 million people voted on his referendum's economic reforms, which were meant to save US\$7 billion over seven years (see NotiSur, 2003-10-31). Final official results of the voting are still not in.

Analysts say the political situation has changed in Colombia following the referendum and the municipal elections Oct. 26 in which the left won important victories. "The government is weaker, it has less legitimacy, and...it does seem like there will be some rearrangements and shifts among the political and military elites," said Luis Carlos Valencia, head of the political science department at Universidad Javeriana, following the elections.

"Perhaps the president has not lost popularity, but he has lost some of his institutional solidity. Today Uribe is in a situation that many were unable to even imagine on the eve of the referendum," said Pedro Medellin, director of the Fundacion Ortega y Gasset. The defeat "created an unnecessary crisis, not so much because of its fiasco at the polls, but because of the attitude the Uribe administration has taken, and the way the results have been handled."

Uribe now pushing legislative measures

To compensate for the loss of the referendum measures, Uribe said on Oct. 29 he would ask Congress to approve tax hikes and would limit increases in public salaries. His proposed legislative package includes a 20% tax on pensions and an increase in the IVA (impuesto al valor agregado) from 16% to 18%. He said the government would also seek a portion of oil royalties, now benefiting provinces and municipalities. But the unions have said they would not support Uribe's fiscal measures and proposed instead a national effort to redesign the nation's economic policy.

Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) leader Carlos Rodriguez said the government was trying to get Congress to approve what the voters rejected. He said the measures proposed by Uribe were part of an agreement last year with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Rodriguez said the unions would reject Uribe's "Plan B" because it would affect the buying power of Colombians and because it was a response to demands of the IMF.

On Nov. 4, Uribe asked Congress to take up his proposals with urgency. For the tax measures to be effective during the next fiscal year, Congress has to approve them before the Christmas recess.

Londono quits

Although Minister of Justice and Interior Fernando Londono Hoyos accepted responsibility for the referendum's defeat and offered his resignation, it appeared that he might weather the storm. But then he set off a new controversy by saying that, if Congress failed to pass the president's fiscal package, Uribe might call early elections. "The president is not going to stay in the Casa de Narino [presidential palace], simply to survive [in power] for two or three years, if he cannot do anything for the country," said Londono.

Legislators angrily accused Londono of bullying Congress and demanded an investigation. Almost immediately, the minister had to go back to the microphones and say his words "were taken out of context."

Presidential spokesperson Ricardo Galan said the president had not considered leaving his post. "It is not true that the president is contemplating the possibility of resigning or convoking early elections," said Galan.

In a speech the next day, Uribe also emphasized that he intended to complete his four-year term. The following day, Nov. 6, Londono said he was resigning. Critics saw the minister as arrogant and inflexible, and many lawmakers had been calling for his ouster.

German Vargas, president of the Senate and head of the bloc of pro-Uribe lawmakers, called for Londono's removal two days after the unofficial results of the referendum were known, saying the minister had "completed his cycle." Londono was strongly criticized for asking election authorities to purge the electoral register after the results of the referendum and the municipal elections were in. A "cleanup" of the voter lists would have reduced the minimum number of votes necessary to make the referendum valid, thus making it possible for some of the proposals to pass.

Uribe named Sabas Pretelt de la Vega, head of the Federacion Nacional de Comerciantes (Fenalco) to replace Londono. The new minister, with little experience in public administration, has been a university professor, has authored several books, and for the past 14 years has headed the business organization.

Defense Minister also resigns

Martha Lucia Ramirez, Colombia's first woman defense minister, who openly feuded with the military brass, abruptly stepped down Nov. 9. Pressure for her removal had come from high-ranking generals who did not like her management style and her efforts to root out corruption, government officials and political analysts said. She read a statement describing how security in the country improved under her command but gave no explanation for her sudden departure. Uribe's office also gave no reason, but government officials said privately that she was forced out.

Under Ramirez's stewardship, homicides nationwide were down 22% and kidnappings were down 35%. The results helped make her one of Colombia's most popular public figures. The most

recent confrontation between Ramirez and the generals concerned a US\$3 million contract for military rations. Ramirez approved a contract with a private firm rather than the previous internal military supplier, angering Gen. Jorge Enrique Mora, commander in chief of the armed forces. Her decision to take control of military budgets and unify spending under one central administration was widely resented. She also angered military officers with public suggestions of corruption within the military.

Earlier this year, Ramirez accused the head of the police of deliberately withholding information from her about the disappearance of three tons of seized cocaine. Local media speculated that Ramirez was also a scapegoat following an incident with Ecuador regarding Uribe's public allegations that corrupt Ecuadoran military officials were selling weapons to Colombian rebels, including a rocket launcher used in an attack in Bogota last month.

Uribe accepted Ramirez's resignation and appointed Jorge Uribe Echavarria, a US-educated businessman with no military experience, to replace her. The new minister, a close friend but not a relative of the president, headed the insurance company Seguros DeLima. He has a degree in economics from Georgetown University.

More changes raise questions of Uribe's leadership

On Nov. 11, Cecilia Rodriguez resigned as environment minister, giving no reason for her decision. She was replaced by Sandra Suarez who has been in charge of Plan Colombia. The same day, Uribe accepted the resignation of Gen. Teodoro Campo, head of the Policia Nacional, and four of his deputies following allegations of corruption in the institution. Campo was replaced by Gen. Jorge Daniel Castro.

Also ousted was Leonardo Gallego, head of the Medellin police, following press reports that various members of the department dined in exclusive restaurants, bought expensive jewelry, and staged lavish parties all on government money.

On Nov. 12, Gen. Mora stepped down, saying he was retiring. When Ramirez resigned, many analysts assumed that the military commanders had triumphed over her, but Mora's departure called that into doubt.

Humberto de la Calle, a political commentator who served as interior minister and as vice president in the mid-1990s, said Uribe has mishandled the leadership changes. "What should have been a favorable presentation of a rejuvenated Cabinet full of the possibility of improving the government...has become a crisis," de la Calle said.

-- End --