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LADB Staff

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by LADB Staff

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Massive marches against Colombian President Alvaro Uribe paralyzed Bogota in mid-October, as demonstrators expressed opposition to a free-trade treaty currently under negotiation with the US, to Uribe's desire to change the Constitution to allow him to run for re-election, and to new tax regimes under consideration. The marches, which also occurred in smaller form in other major Colombian cities, were part of a national strike and came on the heels of a three-week truckers' strike that led to millions of dollars in losses for various industries.

As many as 300,000 in Bogota oppose re-election, US free-trade treaty

A coalition of unions, students, indigenous and campesino groups, and other Uribe opponents organized mass demonstrations during the week of Oct. 12. Judicial employees joined the work stoppage and an estimated 1.4 million state employees participated nationwide, according to the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Colombia (CUT).

Marches also took place in Colombia's other major cities: Barranquilla, Cali, Cucuta, and Medellin. In those cities, reporters heard cries against the free-trade treaty that Colombia, along with Peru and Ecuador, is attempting to negotiate with the US (see NotiSur, 2004-04-02), as well as against the president's push to change the Constitution so he can seek a second term in office, a move the US supports (see NotiSur, 2004-02-13), and against tax reforms the president is pushing in Congress.

While Bogota newspaper El Tiempo called the number of marchers in Bogota incalculable," other estimates settled on 300,000 as the number of marchers converging on the capital's streets. CUT organizers said they estimated that 800,000 to 1 million marchers were out around the country. In hospitals, only emergency services were available, while classes were suspended in many public schools and most courts remained closed in Bogota.

On Oct. 11, protestors took over three Roman Catholic churches, including Bogota's oldest, demanding help for the poor and more respect for human rights, according to church officials. Scores of indigenous people, students, campesinos, and workers peacefully entered the three downtown churches in the capital, said Rev. Dario Echeverri. The occupiers left the churches after an agreement between government spokespeople and the demonstrators.

Julio Roberto Gomez, president of the Confederacion General de Trabajo (CGT), said, "The motivations [for the strike] lie in the very high jobless rate and the impoverishment of the Colombian campesinos." He added, "This is a strike against the free-trade agreement (FTA)" and Uribe's quest for re-election. Although the Colombian economy grew 4.12% in the past six months, unemployment remains high, with a 13.1% rate in August and 60% of the population of 44 million living in poverty.
The government's Minister of Social Protection Diego Palacios said, "The national government does respect the strike, but we ask the workers to respect constitutional norms." Palacios said the strike had "political" motivations. "The government respects but does not share the explanations that have been given by different forces that called for the strike," he said. About 2,000 police officers guarded the protests, and they reported "minor incidents" like confrontations with demonstrators and street blockades.

A regional director for CUT, Martha Cecilia Diaz, avoided a kidnap attempt at the hands of an armed commando group, said a CUT spokesperson. The CUT said Diaz's comrades resisted the armed group and prevented them from forcing her into a car. The kidnappers opted to escape and left Diaz, an important organizer of the strike against Uribe and a prominent leader in the department of Norte de Santander, free.

Groups like the Convergencia Nacional Campesina (CNC), Negra e Indigena (CNI), and the opposition group Alternativa Democratica (AD), which brings together leftist and independent political groups like the Polo Democratico Independiente (PDI), came together to be a part of the strike.

In public statements, guerrilla army groups Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) expressed their support for the strike. The CGT's Gomez went on to call the strike a "total success." He said the protests "were massive and demonstrated the discontent of Colombians."

**Truckers' strike lasts three weeks, 67 arrested**

The national strike came one week after a three-week shutdown of the country's trucking system that teamsters conducted in September and October. The Asociacion de Camioneros Colombianos (ACC), which has about 120,000 members, called the strike to protest costs they faced and security conditions for drivers, to define the truckers' role within an FTA, and to work on regulations affecting truck fleets.

After government and ACC representatives established a timetable to negotiate those issues, the ACC called off the strike on Oct. 5. Estimates of the strike's cost to the economy ranged from about US$70 million to US$200 million in losses. Prior to the strike, the Ministry of Transportation estimated that about 6.5 million tons of merchandise per month moved across the country's highways.

The government made arrangements with about 7,000 truckers to supply different regions with food, and strikers negotiated a truce to allow food shipments to travel. Police reported that they had arrested 67 people during the strike as of Oct. 4, the majority of them in the southwest part of the country.

Police officials said strikers were throwing stones at trucks transporting goods and seeking to block roads. The two protest movements the trucking strike and the national strike followed a
nonviolent September march by tens of thousands of indigenous people and their sympathizers in the southwestern department of Valle de Cauca. The multiday march against violence on indigenous communities and the US-Colombia FTA was called the largest indigenous gathering in Colombian history (see NotiSur, 2004-09-24).

**Uribe sees first serious drop in popularity ratings**

A poll released between the trucking strike and the large-scale marches against Uribe revealed that Uribe had experienced the first drop in his popularity since taking office two years ago. Favorable opinion toward the president went down from 75% to 67% while approval of his handling of the presidency fell from 78% to 72%, according to the latest trimestral poll by Invamer-Gallup. The poll, taking opinions from 1,000 people in Bogota, Cali, Medellin, and Barranquilla between Sept. 27-29 and contracted by El Tiempo newspaper, showed also that, of the respondents, 39% believed that the situation in the country was improving, while 38% thought it was worsening.

Jorge Londono, manager of Invamer-Gallup, said two factors explained the drop in numbers: the economic situation and the presidential re-election. "In the first year of Uribe's government, 7% of households felt economic benefits, in the second, about 3%, and at the beginning of the third the number is very close to 0%," said Londono.

Regarding re-election, Londono said that people felt the issue had politicized Uribe's presidential management, "and that, for those without a party, is very harmful." The pollster didn't think Uribe would regain his high mark of 79% approval, a number he enjoyed at the end of the previous year.

Of those surveyed, 60% disapprove of the way the government is fighting unemployment, and 42% do not approve of what it is doing regarding the quality and coverage provided by public services. While 65% approved the way the government was fighting guerrilla groups, opinion was divided on its economic policy: 47% were in favor and 47% were not. Another tie of 48% approved and disapproved of fumigating illicit crops; 74% approved the government's negotiations with paramilitary groups; and 65% agreed with the possibility of electing Uribe for another four years. The results also reflect disillusion with the continuing conflict in Colombia.

Uribe boasted that kidnappings and violent crime had dropped sharply under his administration, but the failure to make large advances in the peace process with rebels or cut further into national instability has disappointed some portions of the Colombian population. The government said in July that the number of kidnappings in Colombia had almost halved in the first half of 2004. It said 966 people were abducted in the first six months of this year, compared with 1,906 in the same period last year.

A study by the Department of National Planning also estimated that kidnapping has cost Colombian society some US$260 million during the past eight years. An average of 3,000 people were kidnapped each year between 1996 and 2003, totaling 21,000. The government also reported a 13.2% drop in the number of homicides in the country during the first nine months of this year, according to a study by the Ministry of Defense.
The study said the number of murders was down 2,373, with 15,608 homicides taking place between January and September. They also reported a 43.5% drop in mass murders, registering 39 killings of that type this year compared with the 69 that took place in the first nine months of 2003.

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