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President Uribe and Opponents Prepare Campaigns

by LADB Staff
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The possibility of presidential re-election has been passed by the Colombian Congress, potentially paving the road to a second term for President Alvaro Uribe, if he wins the 2006 race. The Corte Constitucional has been analyzing complaints regarding re-election, but the reform has received repeated congressional support. Although re-election has yet to pass the final hurdle, which is the Corte Constitucional, Congress members have said they will ensure the possibility of presidential re-election even if the court finds the constitutional amendment invalid. Court members began reviewing complaints against the amendment in December.

Opposition in crisis

Opposition political groups in Colombia seem to have small chance to defeat the Uribe juggernaut in a 2006 race, although various leaders are making efforts to consolidate their power base. Opposition forces also said in late 2004 that they planned to take their complaints regarding re-election to the Organization of American States (OAS).

President of the left-wing Polo Democratico Independiente (PDI) Gustavo Petro told journalists that OAS members should apply the Inter-American Democratic Charter to those parties that would be harmed by the reform. "Re-election, as it is proposed, is a severe blow against democracy because it takes our candidates away, it doesn't give us guarantees of participation and there is no control over the handling of public money," said Petro.

Observers characterize the Colombian opposition as "in a severe crisis" because of the passage of re-election. The Partido Liberal, which has been the main political force in Colombia since 1930, is now at the mercy of its most popular apostate, Alvaro Uribe. Currently, no one as popular as the president is on hand to oppose him in 2006.

In late September, Uribe supporters launched their Patria Nueva movement in favor of re-electing Uribe. Partido Liberal ex-President Julio Cesar Turbay Ayala (1978-1982) and Colombian businessman Hernan Echavarria will head the group. Turbay’s breaking party discipline and support of Uribe further weakened the Liberals.

Uribe popular, but support eroding

Uribe, a hard-line conservative supported by the US, was elected in 2002 in a landslide victory on promises to wipe out leftist guerrilla groups that have waged war on the government for 40 years. The president’s backers, claiming he needs more than one four-year term to end the war, began a campaign last year to amend the Constitution banning presidents from seeking a second term. The US ambassador has made similar statements. The re-election legislation survived eight separate votes in Congress.
A Gallup poll that surveyed 1,000 adults in September 2004 showed Uribe's approval rating at 72%, one of the highest among Latin American heads of state. President Uribe has, however, experienced a decline in his popularity numbers, despite being well-liked among those surveyed. Analysts predict that his star will continue to fall in 2005. A survey by the firm Yanhaas found in November that his approval had fallen 5.6% in comparison with previous polls. Asked if they would vote for Uribe if elections were held that day, only 48.6% of respondents said yes.

Leftist mayor of Bogota Luis Eduardo Garzon made slight gains with a 12.1% approval. Other national political figures got only single-digit approval in the poll. Analyst for RCN radio Jaime Castro said the drop was "logical" because of the "wear and tear on the current government, because the honeymoon is ending." Colombians had generally been pleased with a decline in kidnappings and violent crime around the country.

Uribe may lose further popularity if the conflict with armed groups like the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) intensifies. The military suffered its largest loss during the Uribe administration on Feb. 1 when FARC rocket attacks on army barracks left at least 15 soldiers dead and 25 wounded. Uribe attributed the incident to "military errors."

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