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Paramilitary Connections Causes Congressional Scandal

by LADB Staff

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Colombia's general elections have undergone a severe shake-up after it was revealed that several candidates for Congress, allied with President Alvaro Uribe, were allegedly financially linked to illegal paramilitary groups. The president also denounced one of his competitors in the presidential race as having connections to leftist guerrillas but had to later retract the accusation and issue an apology to Partido Liberal candidate Rafael Pardo.

Five Congress candidates dropped from Uribe party ticket

The president said on Jan. 18 that he supported the expulsion of five candidates who supported him from party lists. The groups Cambio Radical and Partido de la U, which bring together parliamentarians allied with the popular president, announced the previous day that they would remove candidates seeking seats in the Senate and House of Representatives in the March vote. Uribe, an extreme favorite in opinion surveys, has separated from his Partido Conservador and is seeking re-election through his new Uribista party structure (see NotiSur, 2005-12-02).

"The national Government is the responsible one in the electoral debate," said the president's office. "The success of the Colombian democracy necessitates that this process be transparent, respectful, and austere." The administration told reporters that it had made "all the decisions that would guarantee the electoral debate" and that "illicit money, purchasing or intimidating leaders or voters, or the participation of violent groups in political campaigns cannot be permitted."

Those excluded from party lists were Dieb Maloof, Habib Merheg, and Luis Eduardo Vives of the Partido de la U and Jorge Castro and Jorge Caballero of Cambio Radical. They are seeking re-election and deny any relation with paramilitary groups. They also denied being expelled and claimed the decision was theirs.

"Uribista cannibalism has been unleashed," said Merheg in response to his expulsion. He warned that the purge would decrease the electoral potential of the ruling party. In weeks prior to the expulsion, there were public denunciations that there was money of dubious origin and from paramilitaries funding the political campaigns of some party groups. That led Uribe to ask the federal prosecutor's office to investigate the funds in question.

Senator Mario Uribe, a cousin of the president and former president of the Congress, invited the expelled candidates to be part of his political faction, but later withdrew the invitation after speaking with the president. The candidates are now attempting to set up their own bloc from which to run. The chief executive rejected the possibility that they "would enter in other lists of congressional aspirants."

Other politicians said that parties cannot be judges and recalled that President Uribe has been accused ever since his candidacy of having had relations with paramilitaries, since he has been an advocate of a hard line against the guerrillas.

The shakeup also embroiled the Liberals, with the expulsion of Sen. Vicente Blel, implicated in investigations in drug trafficking to the US. Ultra-rightist paramilitary groups are undergoing a "demobilization" process where irregulars ceremoniously turn in weapons and agree to no longer participate in illegal activities. The process has come under criticism for allowing impunity for human rights abusers and for having lax enforcement (see NotiSur, 2004-06-04, 2004-12-17, 2005-06-17, 2005-07-22).

Salvatore Mancuso, leader of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) the largest paramilitary umbrella group in Colombia bragged last year that his organization had the support and control of 35% of the Congress.

"These accusations of infiltration and paramilitary co-action in politics is nothing new, but each time they are more public, more precise, and, to the political leaders, including the president, it costs more to ignore them," said political analyst Claudia Lopez.

Colombians will vote to fill all 166 seats in the lower house and 102 seats in the Senate on March 12. The Partido Liberal, Colombia's largest opposition party, is leading in polls ahead of the election with 22% of voter support, compared with 10% for La U, one of the biggest parties that backs Uribe, according to a poll by Napoleon Franco & Cia. that was published in *Semana* magazine on Jan. 29. The presidential election will take place two and a half months after the congressional vote.

Pardo accused, then apologized to

On Jan. 20, the president's office asked prosecutors to investigate Rafael Pardo, a senator and possible Uribe rival for the presidency, saying it had information that Pardo contacted leftist guerrillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) to carry out "a political action against the president." The claim was that Pardo had allied with the FARC to defeat Uribe. Pardo called the claims against him "infamous" and said the official party sought to "silence" him. Uribe later backed away from the allegations, making a rare public apology to Pardo. Pardo, who in 1992 became the first minister of civil defense in 40 years and fought the FARC, said the accusations were false.

Partido de la U director Huan Manuel Santos had said that he had information that Sen. Pardo had an opposition campaign coordinated with the FARC. FARC representatives also denied the accusation. Opposition figures have said Uribe was waging a dirty war to disqualify them from the electoral campaign, with leftist Sen. Carlos Gaviria of the Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA) saying the government was making serious accusations without proof. "What is being unleashed is a dirty war, mutual disqualifications, disqualifications with very serious charges against determined persons," said Gaviria.

Uribe delays campaign launch

President Uribe postponed the launch of his re-election bid, campaign organizers said Jan. 25, after a particularly difficult week. Uribe "is putting off the beginning of his campaign, and he will do it when he feels the time is right," said Sen. Carlos Holguin, leader of Colombia's powerful Partido Conservador, still closely linked to Uribe. "He called me to let me know that he wanted to devote more time to governing rather than campaigning."

Uribe is considered the favorite to win a second term in the May 28 presidential elections, although his popularity slipped from a majority to 48% in a recent poll. Officials at the presidential palace were not available for comment. The delay came days after Uribe found himself on the defensive after the expulsion of the five legislators and the Pardo incident. But Uribe has been accused of using his presidential post to campaign, a violation of campaign rules set by Congress and the Corte Constitucional (see NotiSur, 2005-10-28 and 2005-12-02).

Opponents were critical when station owners of subscription cable television ran Uribe footage for 11 hours, bringing accusations that Uribe was trying to get around the electoral-guarantees law that regulates his appearances and attempts to separate his functions as president from his electoral campaign. It is not illegal for him to appear on private television, but opponents said he was trying to manipulate the system.

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