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LADB Staff

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Uribe Inaugurated For Second Term As President

by LADB Staff

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On Aug. 7 Alvaro Uribe was inaugurated for a second four-year term as president of Colombia after winning the May election by a landslide (see NotiSur, 2006-06-09). He became the first Colombian executive to gain a second term in many decades, thanks to a constitutional change from a friendly Congress and judicial system (see NotiSur, 2005-02-11, 2005-10-28 and 2005-12-02). Increasing attacks by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) marked the days leading up to and following Uribe's second swearing-in ceremony, even as Uribe said he would open the possibility of negotiating with the rebel group. In the weeks following his swearing-in, the president announced privatization initiatives in the state-owned petroleum company and the national social security system.

Violence marks days preceding inauguration

While Uribe can look forward to a friendly majority in the Congress (see NotiSur, 2006-03-31), the FARC appeared to ramp up hostilities against Colombia's military in the days ending Uribe's first term. Attacks in Bogota, Catatumbo, and Narino prior to Aug. 1 left 18 military personnel and one civilian dead, with Bogota daily newspaper El Tiempo saying that the attacks reflected the FARC's intent to aim at military targets. This is a historical pattern for the rebel group, argue journalists, pointing to the destruction of a military base in Uribe, Meta, and an anti-narcotics base in Miraflores, Guaviare, before the swearing-in of ex-President Andres Pastrana (1998-2002) in August 1998 (see NotiSur, 1998-08-14).

On Aug. 7, 2002, before Uribe's first inauguration, rockets were fired at the presidential palace Casa de Narino, the Congress, and a military base, killing at least 20 people (see NotiSur, 2002-08-30 and 2002-09-20). The period also saw an increase in kidnappings as a strategy to increase the number of "exchangeables," hostages the FARC hoped to trade for imprisoned rebels. The FARC sought to prove that a four-year offensive by Uribe's troops had not diminished their numbers or their resolve to overthrow the government, said Alejo Vargas, a political science professor at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogota.

"Historically, rebels have carried out attacks leading up to and during presidential inaugurations," said Vargas. "It's their way of saying, 'You've lost your time trying to defeat us.'" El Tiempo compared the July and August attacks on military targets with attacks that took place in May, when the new Congress was about to take over. Then the victims were primarily civilian.

Analyst Alfredo Rangel said, "What the FARC might be planning, paradoxically, is a violent repositioning with a view toward an eventual restarting of dialogue with the government." Reading the tactical tea leaves, Colombian analysts conjectured that the focus on military targets reflected the pre-Pastrana attacks of 1998 when the possibility of peace talks was also in the air.

Jorge Restrepo of the Centro de Recursos para el Analisis de Conflictos (CERAC) said the rebels were still able to inflict casualties on troops being transported, although they were unable to concentrate large numbers of combatants without exposing themselves to military disaster, a shift from the previous decade. The week of violence before the ceremony saw six people killed when a car bomb exploded outside a police station in the western provincial capital of Cali.

Uribe wants peace, makes promises

President Uribe began his unprecedented second term Aug. 7 with heavy security and no significant incidents of violence reported. He promised to seek an elusive peace with leftist rebels while maintaining the hard-line security policies that he credits with a sharp drop in murder and kidnappings. In a ceremony attended by 11 heads of state and US Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson but marked by the absence of presidents from regional heavyweights Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela, Uribe said he would devote "all of my energies" to pursuing a peaceful end to the nation's four-decade-old civil war.

"I'm not afraid of negotiating peace. I confess what worries me more is falling short of that goal and instead seeing our gains in security eroded," the 54-year-old Uribe said after retaking the oath of office. But his inaugural speech to a Congress stacked with loyal supporters was short on specifics. Despite his record as a free-market conservative and Washington's closest ally in Latin America, Uribe at times sounded similar to the left-leaning social democrats elected in recent years in neighboring countries like Peru, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Uruguay. "We are against a fiscally tight macroeconomic policy that leaves economic growth to the luck of supply and demand. The state must be devoted in equal parts to growth and equality," said Uribe. But Uribe made no bold proposals for improving the lot of the 50% of Colombians who live under the poverty line on less than US\$3 a day even as the rich benefit from the increased foreign investment that improved security has brought.

Also absent was any mention of how he hoped to stamp out drug trafficking in light of new evidence showing that record amounts of aerial fumigation of coca has done little to reduce the crop that is the base ingredient of cocaine. As Washington's frontline country in the war on drugs, Colombia, the world's largest producer of cocaine, has received more than US\$4 billion in mostly military aid since 2000.

The bulk of Uribe's speech, and the key to his overwhelming popularity, was devoted to touting the achievements of his "democratic security" policy fortifying the military and ordering it out of the barracks and into the streets. He regularly links the policy with bringing down one of the world's highest murder and kidnapping rates. The emphasis on security found substance with the presence of snipers standing atop tanks and 30,000 troops who formed a two-block perimeter around the Congress accessible only to journalists and dignitaries. The Colombian government deployed 10,000 extra troops to Bogota streets to protect against rebel attacks during the ceremony.

"Seeing all the soldiers and police gives us more confidence," said Dora Gomez, a sales clerk, who was eating her lunch in a restaurant on the deserted streets of downtown Bogota. Tactical

inaccessibility and televised projections to the public were key features in Uribe's 2002 campaign and inauguration after a number of assassination attempts against him failed.

Colombia ambassador to US resigns after Uribe picks rival

Controversy also marked the days leading up to Uribe's second inauguration, after Colombia's ambassador to the US resigned in anger over the president's selection of a disgraced former leader as ambassador to France prompting a high-level feud on July 12. Former President and current US Ambassador Andres Pastrana said Uribe's appointment of ex-President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998), whose US visa was revoked because of alleged ties to drug traffickers (see NotiSur, 2002-11-15), as ambassador to France left him "with no choice but to resign." As ambassador, Pastrana was the main spokesperson in Washington for Colombia's cooperation in the US-funded drug war. "This changes Colombia's policy and it changes it radically," said Pastrana, after more than six hours of closed-door meetings with officials in Bogota on July 11. In a radio interview, Samper accused Pastrana of attempting to blackmail the president, saying Pastrana has "turned a local problem into an international crisis."

But opponents of Uribe said the entire government was to blame.

The two statesmen are longtime political rivals

Samper narrowly defeated Pastrana for the presidency in 1994. "This episode is a good illustration of how politics is conducted in Colombia: with no dignity or coherence," said Carlos Gaviria of the leftist Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA), which finished a distant second to Uribe in May. In a swift, impromptu shuffling of the nation's top diplomats, Uribe named Foreign Minister Carolina Barco as the new ambassador to Washington. Samper was nearly impeached because of allegations that his campaign accepted US\$5 million in contributions from the Cali cocaine cartel. He was cleared by Colombia's legislature of wrongdoing, but his visa to the US was stripped and his top aides were sent to jail.

Myles Frechette, a former US ambassador to Colombia during Samper's presidency, called Uribe's appointment of Samper an "incredibly maladroit" move that could prompt the US Congress to curtail its support for the country's counternarcotics efforts. Barco indicated that Samper was a key element in rebuilding diplomatic relations with France, relations that have deteriorated during the prolonged captivity of ex-presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who has both French and Colombian nationality. The FARC kidnapped her during the 2002 presidential campaign, and many French activists and politicians blame Uribe's hard-line refusal to negotiate a hostage swap for the failure to obtain her release.

Military posts shaken up

There were also changes in the top levels of the defense sector of the government. Uribe named a new head of the armed forces and retained a loyal Army chief despite recent scandals that prompted speculation he would be fired. In a widely anticipated military shake-up, Gen. Freddy Padilla was named as chairman of Colombia's Joint Chiefs of Staff under the new Uribe administration,

replacing Gen. Carlos Ospina, Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said during a military ceremony Aug. 15. Gen. Jorge Ballesteros and Adm. Guillermo Barrera were tapped to head up Colombia's Air Force and Navy, respectively. But Uribe left in place Army chief Gen. Mario Montoya, who has come under fire for not doing enough to root out corruption and for recent scandals implicating troops in killings civilians after just six months in the office. Montoya, for years a close military adviser to Uribe, became head of the Army in February. His predecessor was forced to resign after a magazine published gruesome photos of cadets allegedly tortured by their superiors (see NotiSur, 2005-07-22 and 2006-03-10). Since then, the Army's image has fallen even further.

The UN and human rights groups have warned of an increase in extrajudicial killings by Colombian soldiers in recent months. Authorities in Antioquia province are investigating the killings of 29 people the Army claims were rebels. Montoya also was criticized for his handling of a May incident in which soldiers killed 10 members of an elite anti-drug unit in southern Colombia. The general at first blamed the incident on friendly fire, but prosecutors later concluded the troops ambushed the unit at the behest of drug traffickers.

Speculation mounted that the scandal could soon claim Montoya's job despite his ties to the president, which date back to Uribe's days as governor of Antioquia. Since taking office in 2002, Uribe has spent heavily to increase the military's ranks by more than 30% and put them into heavy action on the streets as part of his democratic security model. The shake-ups in military and diplomatic personnel seem for now to be only minor tempests for the administration, since the president commands a congressional majority and strong popularity.

Uribe pursues oil and social security privatization

While left-leaning rhetoric was part of Uribe's inauguration speech, some subsequent economic decisions showed a classical economic tilt toward privatization. Uribe plans to send a bill to the Congress in September to authorize the sale of a 20% stake in the state oil company Ecopetrol SA. National Hydrocarbon Agency president Armando Zamora said the offering would be the biggest state sale ever in Colombia. "With Ecopetrol's reserves and the type of infrastructure it has, one could talk about between US\$2 billion and US\$5 billion" for the stake, Zamora said in an Aug. 22 interview at an oil conference in Stavanger, Norway.

The government aims to complete the sale within a year. Uribe is seeking to sell the stake in Ecopetrol to labor unions and investors to help fund an increase in oil output that would ensure that Colombia remains a net oil exporter. The government owns a 100% stake in Ecopetrol, which has about 1.09 billion barrels of proven oil reserves. "Ecopetrol is a cash cow for the government but is at risk of not remaining one, so selling the 20% will force discipline," said Roger Tissot, an analyst with Washington-based PFC Energy. Ecopetrol workers, concerned that the 20%-stake sale is a first step toward the sale of a controlling stake in the company, held a one-day work stoppage on Aug. 3 to protest the government's plans. Some 2,800 workers at Ecopetrol refineries and production centers throughout the country took part.

Union leaders also opposed Uribe's announcement that there would be a liquidation of the Instituto de Seguro Social (ISS), saying it could affect 10 million people. "We are going to equitably liquidate

the current social security [system] as has happened with different state entities," said Uribe. "Pensioners, those about to be pensioned, every one should be calm." The president said that public institutions must be efficient to continue functioning. The government has completely liquidated the national postal system Adpostal, it will sell the Corporacion Electrica de la Costa Atlantica (CORELCA), and it handed over operations of the nation's main airport to a Swiss consortium that will manage it for 25 years.

ISS union president Saul Pena said, "I believe the president intends to generate economic panic." Pena said the Penal Code states that "no one is authorized to announce the liquidation of an entity that has to serve more than 10 million people." ISS union vice president Alberto Pardo said the government would take an easy solution by handing the pensions system to the private sector, which would harm people in lower social strata. Uribe plans to increase spending by 11% next year to improve health care, defense, and transportation in a token nod toward his inauguration promises.

The government submitted a plan to Congress on July 28 to increase next year's budget to 117.6 trillion pesos (US\$48.4 billion) from 105.7 trillion pesos this year, Finance Minister Alberto Carrasquilla said. The budget proposal earmarks a 15% rise in investment to 21 billion pesos, according to the Finance Ministry. "We need to invest in human resources, in infrastructure, and the effort we are making in this respect is little by little, with prudence," Carrasquilla said.

Uribe pledged to increase social spending by making loans available for poor people to set up businesses and to provide health care to all Colombians. The government also plans to increase spending on defense, as the war against rebels helped boost consumer and business confidence, leading the economy to expand last year at its fastest pace in a decade. Colombia expects its budget deficit to widen to 1.7% of GDP in 2007, from the 1.5% of GDP target this year. The country had a balanced budget in 2005. A tax bill was sent to Congress, which seeks to maintain tax revenue at 15.8% of GDP, would increase the number of goods subject to value-added tax (VAT).

Yet minority groups in the Congress argue Uribe's structural tax reforms will hurt the poor. "This is a very tough tax reform that could only be presented by an administration like Uribe's given the support he has. It favors big capital, while expanding the tax base, and considerably increases taxes on a family basket of goods for the lowest-income social sectors," said Sen. Jorge Robledo of the left-wing PDA.

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