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Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's Cousin Arrested for Ties to Death Squads

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The political scandal linking top Colombian lawmakers to paramilitary death-squad leaders moved even closer to President Alvaro Uribe in April, when his cousin was arrested for allegedly seeking paramilitary help to get cheap land and political favors. Another arrested lawmaker alleged that Uribe supporters bribed her to vote in favor of changing the Colombian Constitution so the president could run for a second term in 2006 (see NotiSur, 2005-02-11 and 2005-10-28).

The ongoing political crisis has led to calls for Uribe's impeachment or a referendum to remove the current Congress, although opinion surveys show that Uribe enjoys very strong popular support among respondents.

'Parapolitica' scandal strikes even closer to Uribe

On April 22, Colombia's Fiscalia General ordered the arrest of Uribe's second cousin and close confidante, former Sen. Mario Uribe Escobar, for alleged links to the nation's largest paramilitary group, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC).

Hoping to flee from charges that he sought AUC support to obtain cheap land and political support in the northern departments of Sucre and Cordoba, Mario Uribe requested asylum from the government of Costa Rica. Costa Rica's government turned down the asylum request, and he was jailed without the right to post bail. A Fiscalia press release said, "Uribe [Escobar] is under investigation for meetings he held with former paramilitary chief Salvatore Mancuso before the elections of March 10, 2002, and with Jairo Castillo Peralta, alias Pitirri, in November 1998."

Prosecutors said ex-Sen. Uribe would be prosecuted for "conspiracy to commit criminal offenses through agreements to promote illegal armed groups." The parapolitica scandal the dense thicket of allegations that lawmakers made deals with the right-wing militias responsible for the majority of atrocities in the country's decades-old conflict has brought down dozens of top politicians and allies of President Uribe.

Mario Uribe's arrest brought the number of Colombian congressmembers behind bars to 33. In 2007, top officials in Uribe's Cabinet his finance minister and foreign relations minister had to resign because of allegations of links to the "paras" (see NotiSur, 2007-03-02 and 2007-05-04). A total of 63 congressmembers are under investigation by the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), with 54 of them belonging to parties in the pro-Uribe coalition that controls Congress. All of them supported the president's re-election effort in 2006.

Mario Uribe resigned from the Congress in October as the Fiscalia's allegations developed, but his replacement, Sen. Ricardo Elcure Chacon, also handed himself over to prosecutors in April to face
charges of "aggravated criminal conspiracy." The key witness in the Mario Uribe case and in several other prosecutions, Castillo Peralta, claimed on April 26 that he was facing threats to his life.

Castillo, now living outside Colombia, told the press he had been warned of a planned attempt on his life. He said he received a call and faxed letter from Colombia's witness-protection program on April 21 cautioning that two assailants posing as tourists had been dispatched to kill him. The letter, a copy of which was published online April 26 by Colombia's leading newspaper El Tiempo, said "intelligence" uncovered the plot and advised Castillo to boost his security.

An official in the chief prosecutor's office confirmed the authenticity of the letter. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to disclose the information. The threats probably come from jailed former congressmembers and/or paramilitary leaders still at large, Castillo told the Associated Press in a phone interview from Canada. He has claimed that politicians benefited personally and at the ballot box from ties with paramilitary warlords. Castillo's testimony was key in convicting at least two politicians from his home department of Sucre. "We're going for the part that no one likes people to touch the finances," he said. "Because I am going to insist on that part, they try to threaten me."

Castillo, 40, says he has intimate knowledge of meetings between politicians and paramilitaries in which politicians asked for help obtaining ranches cheaply. Beginning in the mid-1990s, paramilitaries killed thousands of people and drove tens of thousands more from their land as they rid most of Colombia's Caribbean coast of leftist rebels, who extorted and kidnapped ranchers.

Uribe Escobar has denied the allegations and called Castillo a liar. His lawyer Jose del Carmen Ortega called any suggestion that he could be involved in a plot to kill Castillo "false and crazy." Charges that Uribe team bribed lawmaker to allow re-election Also in late April, Colombia's chief federal prosecutor opened an investigation into charges that President Uribe offered illegal favors to a congresswoman for her support of an amendment allowing him to seek re-election. In an interview that aired April 20, ex-senator Yidis Medina said Uribe promised she could name supporters to several government posts if she voted for a constitutional amendment allowing him to seek another term.

Medina said she gave Noticias Uno permission to air the 2004 interview because the promises were never kept. In the interview recorded nearly four years ago, Medina said she switched her vote on the bill that ultimately allowed Uribe to run for re-election in 2006. She was the swing vote on the measure, which passed 18 to 16. She said Uribe called her afterward to thank her and to confirm that "what was agreed upon would be done."

Chief federal prosecutor Mario Iguaran said in a one-sentence statement on April 21 that he was investigating "a possible crime of bribery and other illegal actions related to Medina's statements."

On April 26, the CSJ ordered the arrest of Medina. She surrendered April 27, saying she would plead guilty to bribery and implicate the president and three close aides. During the April 19-20 weekend before the video was broadcast, Uribe issued a statement saying he had done nothing improper. He
said the video had been created to blackmail him. Uribe said Medina's last-minute decision to back his re-election bid was her own. "The government persuades, it doesn't pressure or buy people's consciences," he said in the statement. "It does not tolerate corruption."

Uribe's government has said it "has nothing to hide." It accuses journalist Daniel Coronell of manipulating the Aug. 8, 2004, interview and has asked prosecutors to investigate. In the broadcast, Medina said two top Uribe allies, including former interior minister Sabas Pretelt, offered three regional positions and a diplomatic post for her associates. Pretelt, who is Colombia's ambassador in Italy, denies the accusation. Coronell said he had reached an agreement with Medina when the interview was recorded that he wouldn't broadcast it unless something happened to her or if the government was not "serious in its promises."

In an April 19 magazine column, Coronell said he decided to make the video public after Medina told him that the Uribe administration had not held up its part of the deal. Uribe still popular even as congressional crisis intensifies While the developing congressional and presidential scandals got coverage in Colombia, they were largely overshadowed in the international press by ongoing diplomatic tensions between Ecuador and Colombia.

The conflict stems from a March 1 attack Colombia made (see NotiSur, 2008-03-07 and 2008-05-09), with support from the US, on an encampment inside Ecuador that killed several members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). During the six years of Uribe's presidency, his opinion-poll approval has fluctuated around 70%, making him one of the most popular leaders in Latin America.

But, after the attack on Ecuadoran territory, his approval shot up even further to 84%. Pollsters tend to attribute the high numbers to the public perception that the Uribe administration has reduced violent crime and struck hard against rebel and paramilitary groups. The second-most-approved Latin American president is Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa with a rating of 62%, a recent five-point jump from prior surveys, suggesting that both leaders might be enjoying a post-conflict bump in nationalistic sentiment as they square off against each other. The survey numbers come from Mexican research firm Mitofsky.

While the parapolitica scandals roil the Colombian political scene, Uribe has managed to turn back challenges to his presidency. Some press outlets like Venezuela-based, left-wing news network TeleSUR have reported that Uribe allies are seeking to again change Colombian law to allow him to run for a third term. Opposition lawmakers are calling for Uribe’s impeachment based on the charges that aides offered political favors for votes, with 10 opposition figures calling for impeachment on April 29. In the US, Democrats are blocking White House attempts to approve a free-trade agreement (FTA) with Colombia because of the Uribe government’s human rights record (see NotiSur, 2008-04-18).

But Uribe's political strength appears to remain solid. "It's almost as if he's a person with supernatural powers that let him do whatever he likes," said leading newspaper columnist Maria Jimena Duzan. Uribe's closest political adviser, Jose Obdulio Gaviria, said the president's popularity
was a reward for his dedication and for vigorously battling crime on all fronts, bringing down murder and kidnapping rates. "Jesus Christ was also condemned to death, and I understand that his historical popularity remains intact," Gaviria told the Associated Press.

Uribe, in addition to reportedly demobilizing paramilitaries and scoring a number of military victories against the FARC, has been successful in killing or capturing drug lords, including twin brothers who the defense minister said controlled roughly half the country's armed gangs. One was slain April 29, the other arrested two days later. "The promise that he's going to defeat the FARC is fundamental to his popularity," said political analyst Leon Valencia. "If you are living in a city or on a main road and that's about 80% of the people you are feeling a whole lot safer," said Adam Isacson, an analyst with the liberal Washington-based Center for International Policy (CIP).

Ex-president calls for referendum to remove Congress

Ex-President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) proposed in early May that there be a referendum that would unseat the sitting Congress. In statements from the city of Valledupar in the department of Cesar, Samper also called on the government to reach an agreement with the FARC that would allow a "humanitarian exchange" of FARC prisoners for hostages the rebel army is holding (see NotiSur, 2008-02-01).

Samper claimed that Article 398 of the Constitution permits a popular vote to recall Congress and renew it with newly elected members for five years. Samper said the move would restore credibility to the institution, a third of whose members are currently under investigation or in jail. "With a Congress like this, it is difficult to think that there may continue to be a legislative strategy or that we may maintain the balance of powers that must exist among the Congress, the judicial branch, and the executive branch," said Samper.

El Tiempo reported that opinions in Congress were divided on the Samper proposal, with some of his fellow members of the Partido Liberal (PL) supporting it and other lawmakers seeking different reform proposals. A number of opposition and official party members quoted in the newspaper alleged that the same conditions that corrupted the current Congress would likely do the same in a new round of elections. Peace Commissioner and Uribe Cabinet member Luis Carlos Restrepo said on May 5 that the president did not have to answer questions about the parapolítica scandal but that the Uribista coalition parties implicated in the scandal should be dissolved. "There is a strong executive and a functioning Congress but some collapsed parties," said Restrepo.

Uribista party representatives from groups like the Partido Conservador (PC) and Partido de la U angrily rejected Restrepo's proposal. Paramilitary members extradited to US The Colombian government has extradited 14 paramilitary leaders to the US for trial on drug charges. The unprecedented move came as Uribe and the White House seek to win congressional approval of the controversial Colombian FTA. US Democrats have held up the agreement partly because of human rights concerns.

Uribe is also trying to defuse allegations of his ties to Colombian paramilitaries. The extraditions have drawn criticism because they will allow the 14 leaders to avoid charges for murders and other human rights abuses. They will be tried in the US on drug charges at a time when the
administration of US President George W. Bush has shown a willingness to reduce sentences in return for cooperation.

Jose Miguel Vivanco of US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) said, "These men are not going to be held accountable for the human rights violations they committed. Victims in Colombia will not be able to confront their tormentors and receive the reparations they deserve." Uribe's demobilization law that has reportedly taken some 15,000 militia fighters out of the battlefields frequently gets criticism from human rights groups for allowing impunity for criminals allegedly guilty of atrocities (see NotiSur, 2005-06-17, 2006-06-16 and 2006-09-08).

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