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Uribe's Supporters Push for Colombian President to Seek Third Term

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Supporters of Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe are attempting to push changes to Colombian law to allow him to run for a third presidential term. While Uribe has not publicly joined the push for the legal change, he has also not ruled out running for another four-year term in 2010. Party allies of Uribe have initiated a massive petition drive to allow a legal change to permit a second re-election, which was the first step they took previously when seeking constitutional changes to allow him to run for a second term in 2006 (see NotiSur, 2005-10-28 and 2005-12-02).

Uribe offers ambiguous response

Uribe, who has used the public-relations phrase "democratic security" to describe his militarist and neoliberal economic policies, enjoys greater popularity in opinion surveys than any other president in the Americas (see NotiSur, 2008-05-16).

Increases in economic growth and foreign investment have helped with the public perception of Uribe as a business-oriented leader, while reductions of rebel guerrilla attacks and kidnappings in major urban areas along with significant blows to the strength of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the country's largest rebel force, have given Uribe the sheen of military success (see NotiSur, 2008-06-06).

Reuters reported on June 4 that Uribe refused to rule out running for a third term. "We seek to ensure the re-election of democratic security and investor confidence," Uribe told local radio when asked if he would like to run again, declining to endorse allies such as Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos and other possible candidates.

Colombia, in the grips of a four-decade guerrilla insurgency funded by the cocaine trade, is home to regular political violence against trade unionists and others suspected of pro-rebel sympathies.

Human rights groups often accuse Uribe of doing too little or even fueling violence against those sectors of Colombian society (see NotiSur, 2006-09-29). Uribe characterized left-leaning opposition politicians such as former presidential candidate Carlos Gaviria as having links with the FARC, which is also notorious for killing civilians. "They want to move backward and turn the country over to the FARC, which we are not going to permit," the 55-year-old Uribe said.

Rights groups say such statements by the government put opposition figures at risk of violence by right-wing paramilitary groups. Uribe is a Wall Street favorite but many investors and analysts say a third term by the bespectacled conservative would threaten the independence of Colombian institutions, such as the courts and the central bank.
Goldman Sachs blasted Uribe on June 4 for his habit of pressuring the central bank to lower interest rates, calling it "unfortunate from an institutional standpoint and also unwarranted from an economic perspective." The US Congress has blocked a Colombian trade deal saying Uribe has failed to crack down on right-wing violence amid a wide-ranging scandal linking many of his allies to the paramilitaries (see NotiSur, 2008-04-18). His congressional allies, members of his Cabinet, and members of his family have been implicated in the "parapolitica" scandal, where politicians have faced charges for making deals with paramilitary groups responsible for a majority of atrocities in the conflict (see NotiSur, 2008-05-16).

But Uribe remains a hero to many at home for pushing the FARC out of urban areas and back into the jungles with the help of billions of dollars in US military aid. This has attracted foreign direct investment (FDI) and prompted 7.5% economic growth last year.

The president's strongest supporters called Furibistas in Spanish, or furious Uribe followers are collecting signatures in favor of a referendum to ask voters if they want to allow Uribe to run again in two years. The Partido de la U, one of the primary small parties allied with him, said in May it had collected more than a quarter of a million signatures in favor of the referendum.

In the June 4 radio interview, Uribe claimed his policies did not require his presence in office. "The country went through 40 years suffering this problem [rebel warfare] and we have confronted it. I am simply defending these policies, not their executor, they [the policies] may be re-elected, and I do not believe that would be bad for the country. Or is there no right to defend that?" he asked, responding to questions.

Uribe said his democratic-security policy was not his own but rather "the people's." He said the policy resulted in the arrival of investors "so that there would be social prosperity. Policies need adjustments and they must be improved every day, but let them continue, don't put them down."

**Congresswoman sentenced for taking bribe to allow re-election**

The process that led to the constitutional change that allowed Uribe's first run for re-election has come under renewed scrutiny with the arrest and sentencing of a congressmember who says she took a bribe to allow it. Colombia's Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) sentenced Yidis Medina to three years and four months of house arrest. She had faced a maximum sentence of eight years in jail. She had been held without bail in Bogota since April.

Medina admitted she had accepted the bribe in return for her support in Congress for the constitutional change that made Uribe's run for a second term possible (see NotiSur, 2005-02-11). Uribe and other high-ranking members of his government have denied offering her any inducements for her vote. A number of politicians are under investigation regarding bribery claims. The bribery allegations dated to 2004, when the constitutional change approved by Congress allowed Uribe to stand for a second term.

Medina told the court she had been offered political favors by government officials, with the knowledge of Uribe, in return for changing her vote to support the amendment, El Tiempo newspaper reported. A key question in the push for a second re-election is whether the current
scandals will complicate the Uribistas' efforts. With Medina sentenced, the process to make legal changes within the Congress will likely face significant scrutiny. Also, approximately one quarter of all senators and representatives are either in jail or facing investigations. The legislative crisis raises the question of whether the body will have credibility to make major legal changes.

Prosecutors are seeking to investigate Sabas Pretelt, Uribe's interior and justice minister at the time of Medina's vote change and currently ambassador to Italy, in relation to his alleged involvement with the scheme to induce Medina to switch her vote. Opposition tries to make plans for single candidacy Opposition party figures are trying to gather their forces for 2010, with former Bogota mayor and star of the Colombian left Luis Eduardo Garzon trying to build an accord that would name a single opposition-coalition candidate.

Garzon and the Partido Liberal (PL) are making an effort to hold a referendum that would name the candidate, with the idea of "forming a great coalition of pre-candidates from the parties, to conduct a referendum in the second half of next year," said Garzon. Garzon is a member of the Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA), but he has clashed with the party over a number of issues.

Garzon said he was going with the referendum "with or without the Polo. And I submit myself to whatever happens. What I propose is that the Partido Liberal provide the umbrella organization for the cooperative effort," said Garzon, responding to a reporter's question about what would happen if the Liberals accepted the vote but the PDA rejected it. Nonetheless, he said, "I am not going to be a militant in the Partido Liberal. Here we have to sum up many leaderships to look for four things: first, the mechanism; second, common objectives; third, launch a strong candidacy; and fourth, get out of this routine."

Garzon, known by the nickname Lucho, added that, opposing a second re-election for Uribe, as he does, did not imply a total rejection of the president’s policies. "We must recognize that with Alvaro Uribe [there have been] positive things: recovery of self-esteem, decrease in extortion, decrease in kidnappings, investment, regained confidence. But the Constitution cannot be changed every time he wants it to for the furthering of his private interest." The many parties allied to Uribe (see NotiSur, 2006-03-31 and 2007-11-09) are also looking into consolidating so that they will not "disappear" once their popular figurehead no longer holds office.

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