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LADB Staff

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Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Sees Support Slide

by LADB Staff

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With more than a year left in his second term, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe is stepping up efforts to have Congress approve a constitutional amendment allowing him to run again for re-election and, if successful, to continue in office until 2014. Elected in 2002 for a four-year term, Uribe got Congress to authorize his run for a second term in 2006 (see NotiSur, 2006-06-09). His second term will end in August 2010. During most of his time in office, Uribe has enjoyed high approval ratings the highest among Latin American presidents, according to surveys by Chilean consulting firm Latinobarometro.

Recently, his ratings have been dropping, however, and he now has a less-favorable image than former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who was freed in 2008 after being held by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) for several years (see NotiSur, 2008-07-25). Betancourt has said that she has no intention of returning to politics.

Several factors have come together to work against the president's aspirations. The first is a succession of corruption scandals in which legislators from Uribe's governing coalition, close associates from the business community, high-ranking military officers, and prominent family members (brothers, cousins, and even children) have been implicated.

Second are the repeated local and international denunciations of human rights violations by police, military, and paramilitary groups. Third, Uribe has had disagreements that have escalated into diplomatic crises with three neighboring countries Venezuela, Ecuador, and Brazil.

Finally, economic and social indicators are declining, especially in employment and domestic prices. Official indices put the unemployment rate at 12.3%, but private estimates say the figure is around 16%. The government Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) said prices rose slightly more than 8% in 2008, but private calculations put the figure at 13%. Confidence of business leaders in the state of the economy fell abruptly in the final quarter of 2008, from 71.3% to 56.5%.

These factors, along with Uribe's apparent intention to run for a third term, have caused parties and well-known leaders from his coalition to distance themselves from his administration, expressing dissatisfaction with him. Corruption hits close to home. By mid-December, more than 30 legislators from Uribe's coalition were already in prison, and several others were under investigation, for corruption and, in particular, for ties to the drug cartels in a scandal known as *parapolitica* (see NotiSur, 2007-05-04, 2008-05-16, 2008-09-12).

About that time, one of the president's sons was arrested, seriously damaging the president's image. Twenty-five-year-old Jeronimo Uribe, owner of Salvarte, a company marketing handcrafted products, admitted "certain dealings" with economic groups that received benefits from the

government. More importantly, he also admitted having done business with accused swindler David Murcia Guzman and his associate Daniel Angel.

Before Jeronimo's confession, the Associated Press reported that the president had said that authorities would "go after, wherever they are, those running the businesses implicated in the huge pyramid-scheme fraud" in which Murcia Guzman was involved. The AP also quoted Uribista Sen. Carlos Ferro saying that the president "told various legislators that he has proof that at least one of the pyramid operations has ties to drug trafficking." Evidently the president was referring to Murcia Guzman, head of DMG, a company that took money from small investors with the promise of returns of between 30% and 50% in six months.

Murcia Guzman was detained in Panama and extradited to Colombia, where he has been charged with laundering money from drug traffickers through DMG. A few days later, on Dec. 20, a Gallup poll found that 55% of respondents supported a second re-election for Uribe compared with 74% support in a similar poll by the same firm in September.

Although the polling firm said the drop in support "is largely the result of the deterioration in the economic situation," and 57% of respondents said the economy was getting worse, Cambio magazine quoted various political analysts saying that the 19-point drop in just three months was a direct result of the parapolitica scandal and Jeronimo's confession.

Human rights abuses take their toll

The government's human rights policies remain one of the most problematic aspects of Uribe's presidency. In late December, the Fiscalía de la Nación ordered the dismissal of 16 Army officers for having participated in staging fake terrorist acts, and using false testimony about the alleged attacks, to receive government rewards for the information (see NotiSur, 2008-10-10). In January 2008, another scandal broke when the assassinations of dozens of civilians were discovered, forcing the dismantling of the 1,400-member Brigada Movil Antiguerrillera No. 15 and the dismissal of at least 10 officers who had been in leadership positions in the Batallon La Popa, both deployed on the border with Venezuela.

By October, 30 officers of the Brigada Movil had been discharged, including three generals and 10 colonels. Among the accusations was that the military killed 18 people and presented them as guerrillas killed in combat, an action for which they were given awards and compensation (see NotiSur, 2008-10-10).

Colombia, third-largest recipient of US military aid after Israel and Egypt, has been under intense scrutiny regarding those crimes. Inter Press Service reported that the incidents were cited in the 2008 US State Department report on human rights. The nongovernmental National Security Archives (NSA), a research institute at George Washington University, obtained formerly classified national-security documents showing that the Colombian government was aware of the killings carried out by military, paramilitary, and drug traffickers.

Adam Isacson of the Washington-based Center for International Policy (CIP) said that "there has been and still is frustration among many US officials over the repeated human rights scandals in

the [Colombian] armed forces." However, former President George W. Bush was not one of those frustrated with the situation in Colombia. He presented Uribe with the Medal of Freedom on Jan. 6.

"Today the United States honors all Colombians by honoring the man they have chosen to lead them," said Bush. "By refusing to allow the land he loves to be destroyed by an enemy within, by proving that terror can be opposed and defeated, President Uribe has reawakened the hopes of his countrymen and shown a model of leadership to a watching world."

Trouble with the neighbors

In recent weeks, the Colombian government has had problems with three of its neighbors. Uribe announced the creation of an elite military unit to patrol the border with Ecuador, a country with whom it has not had diplomatic relations since March 2008 when Colombian troops crossed into Ecuadoran territory and killed 26 people, among them three Mexican students and Raul Reyes, spokesperson and one of the top leaders of the FARC (see NotiSur, 2008-05-09). Ecuador immediately responded with a similar move.

The problems with Venezuela surfaced as a result of a supposed cattle-smuggling incident. But the most serious problem is the permanent stream of people from the Wayuu ethnic group seeking refuge in Venezuela. They claim they are being pursued by paramilitaries apparently intent on displacing them from their lands in Guajira, a desert region in northeast Colombia, to facilitate their drug and arms trafficking.

"In just two weeks, we have confirmed that 86 indigenous people have crossed into the Venezuelan department of Zulia, but it is possible that the number is much larger," said an official communique from the Venezuelan office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

With Brazil, the problems seem to be connected to confrontations among drug-trafficking groups trying to take over an area on the border with Peru. No official announcement yet. With this backdrop, Uribe has not said he will try for another term, but he signed a decree authorizing Congress to debate the terms of a constitutional amendment specifically allowing a third consecutive term.

To his close associates, Uribe has admitted that he would like another four years in office, and legislators from his political coalition confirm that sending the decree to Congress is a clear sign that the president wants to govern until 2014. However, his hints of wanting another term are costing him support. "Another re-election is not good for either Colombia or for democracy; it is an inadmissible demonstration of lust for power," said Sen. Gina Parody of the governing coalition after resigning from the legislature and from the Partido Social de la Unidad Nacional (Partido de la U) on Jan. 17.

In the following days, others made similar moves away from Uribe, giving similar reasons, including Interior Vice Minister Maria Isabel Nieto, Sens. Alfonso Valdivieso, Martha Lucia Ramirez, and Cecilia Lopez, and German Vargas Lleras, head of Cambio Radical, one of the parties in the governing alliance. In addition, hundreds of less-prominent coalition politicians have withdrawn their support or distanced themselves from re-election efforts. Congress will have to take up the

debate again in March. By then it is expected that Uribe will have publicly confirmed what everyone already believes that he wants to govern the country for another four years.

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