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Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Flirts with Running Again

by LADB Staff

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A few months after his supporters began a drive to promote a second re-election by collecting millions of signatures, President Alvaro Uribe seems headed toward obtaining another constitutional amendment whose sole aim is to allow him to run for another term. The Camara de Diputados passed a measure last December calling for a plebiscite to change electoral regulations in the Constitution again, and on May 19 the Senate began the debate on the possibility of holding a referendum in the coming months.

With an opposition in disarray and some enviable internal opinion polls, Uribe could become the first Colombian president to serve for three consecutive terms. Yet, he is besieged by national and international accusations that his government is guilty of the most aberrant human rights violations, and many believe that, with US President Barack Obama in the White House, Colombia might no longer be a privileged US ally.

Nevertheless, Uribe seems impervious to new opposition charges that, to obtain the necessary votes to convoke the constitutional referendum, his allies resorted to unethical tactics such as buying support and offering gifts to senators to join the re-election push. Many obstacles on path to third term. The task is not simple, however. Presidential elections are scheduled for the last Sunday in May 2010.

The Constitution and the Ley de Garantias approved in 2006, enabling Uribe's first re-election, require candidates to announce their decision to run six months before the election in this case, no later than Nov. 30, 2009.

Constitutional experts say there is not enough time to complete the required steps to convoke and carry out the plebiscite. "The president cannot make that announcement within the legal deadlines because as of now he is not eligible for a second re-election; he cannot throw his hat in the ring for a third term because constitutionally that possibility does not exist," said former president and former secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS) Cesar Gaviria, leader of the Partido Liberal (PL).

"Gaviria is right, but who would venture to imagine that Uribe wouldn't run roughshod over the Constitution as he has done so many other times," said German Navas, leader of the Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA) and, in these circumstances, an ally of the Liberales in opposing the president. In any event, comments made until now are still just speculation.

Although his closest collaborators insist that Uribe will run for a third term, the president, at 57 one of the youngest major political leaders in the country, has still not said what his decision is. On May

22, when asked about another run, Uribe said, "It seems inconvenient to run again." But he added that he has a "huge responsibility" to Colombians, which is causing "a dilemma for my soul." But there are other obstacles.

The bill approved in the lower house in December is not the same as the Senate bill. The "reconciliation committees," legislative groups charged with working out the differences between bills that are roughly the same, must now go to work. The differences in the bills are not minor. The deputies approved re-election, but as of 2014, while the Senate set the date at 2010, that is, for the next presidential election.

After a compromise is reached, the Procuraduria General must rule on the constitutionality of the plebiscite. It then goes to the Corte Constitucional (CC) where not all the judges are sympathetic to Uribe which has three months to make a ruling. Then the Registraduria has another four months to weigh in, and, finally, the proposal goes to the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE), the agency that formulates the question that will go to voters and handles the balloting. "I insist, there can be legal obstacles, but what we're talking about here are political matters, and in that arena Uribe knows all the tricks," said Navas.

Uribe's approval remains high

If, after all the legislative, political, and administrative steps, the consultation is held, the amendment must be approved by 25% of the electorate, some 7.2 million of the almost 29 million eligible voters. Those who collected the signatures to put the plan before the deputies last year say that more than 5 million people expressed their desire for Uribe to continue heading the government.

When he was re-elected in 2006, Uribe received more than 7.5 million votes. Today, a year before his second term expires and seven years after he took office, the head of state can boast of poll numbers that few presidents can match. According to multinational InVamer Gallup, after reaching an 85% approval rating in July 2008, in early May 2009, Uribe still had a positive image for 68% of respondents.

On May 30, 2010, in addition to electing a president, Colombians will vote yes or no on two crucial plebiscite questions: whether to incorporate a clause into the Constitution prohibiting water privatization and whether to add an article to the Penal Code allowing convicted rapists to be sentenced to life in prison. In the coming months, the political climate in Colombia will be tense. Although the president has not said what they want to hear, his followers already sense victory.

All the opposition voices agree that the May 2010 elections "will be contaminated," spoiled by the presence of a presidential candidate who "does not hesitate to trample on the Constitution to satisfy his hunger for power," as Gaviria said. The phantom of fraud, not charged in previous elections, is beginning to hover after what was happened in the Senate session that approved the call for a plebiscite. The PL and the PDA said that, on the day of the vote, the minister of interior and justice "walked unimpeded through the halls of Congress offering bureaucratic positions and other gifts to senators who showed any reluctance to vote for the bill."

Government continues to violate human rights

Despite the rarified atmosphere created by the latest re-election offensive, even the issue's importance cannot hide what has now become a constant in the life of Colombians: denunciations of systematic human rights violations. Organizations such as the Coordinacion Colombia Europa Estados Unidos (CCEEU) joined UN and OAS rapporteurs and groups such as Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) to charge that assassinations and forced disappearances increased under the Uribe government. Recently, maximum paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso, extradited to the US in 2008, said in Washington that crematoriums had been set up in Santander department on the Venezuelan border to erase evidence of crimes by Army commandos.

The Fiscalia General is now investigating 1,666 cases of "false positives" innocent people, often unemployed, marginalized, or disabled whom the Army presented as guerrillas killed in combat. In military jargon, a "positive" is a criminal captured or killed in a supposedly legal confrontation. In the cases investigated by Attorney General Mario Iguaran, the victims were not criminals. Iguaran said, "We are looking at something that could be defined as genocide."

The humanitarian agencies said that aberrant practices such as this have always existed, but they have become more widespread since the government organized a system of incentives, rewards, and commendations for soldiers who kill members of guerrilla groups (the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC, and the Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional, ELN). The objective: to convince the public that the government's security policies are working.

In the most recent case, made known May 17, an unemployed and disabled young man was taken from a Bogota slum to a conflict zone in the north of the country and murdered. His body was dressed in guerrilla clothing and shown to the press. His killers, three officers and three soldiers, were given medals, a special grade in their service records, and four days extra vacation.

Besieged by accusations, President Uribe came out in defense of the military, saying they "are victims of a systematic campaign to discredit them." In an Associated Press story that did not identify which humanitarian groups Uribe was referring to, the president said on May 8 that he felt "obliged to denounce that there is a bunch of lawyers, paid by international organizations, who have ideological biases that prevent them from impartially comparing behaviors with the legal system and who do their work with hatred and with an ideological bent."

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