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Third Term Closer for Colombian President Alvaro Uribe

by LADB Staff

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After nearly two years in which much of Colombia's internal politics has focused on changing the Constitution to allow President Alvaro Uribe to run for a third consecutive term, on Sept. 1, the Congress took a decisive step in support of the president's ambitions. With the approval of a law calling for a referendum on the issue, the only step remaining is for the Corte Constitucional (CC), the electoral authority, to validate the controversial law and set a date for the referendum, in which Colombians will say whether they agree to the constitutional change allowing Uribe to run again in the May 2010 elections.

The final debate took place amid renewed denunciations of corruption, the imprisonment of legislators accused of taking money from drug trafficking and paramilitary groups, and the legal investigation of party leaders among them Tomas Uribe, son of the president, and ex-Presidents Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) and Andres Pastrana (1998-2002) and other senators and deputies accused of selling their vote in 2006 to make up the needed majority to pass the amendment allowing Uribe's first re-election.

All this amid very tense relations with neighboring countries because of the government's granting the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) use of seven air, sea, and land bases (see NotiSur, 2009-07-31). Uribe keeps intentions under wraps During that entire time, and until Sept. 9, when the law was signed and sent to the CC for consideration, Uribe never admitted that he was thinking about running again.

The idea of another constitutional reform surfaced in late 2007 when the president had completed 18 months of his second four-year term in office and was spearheaded by prominent leaders of the pro-government Partido de la U (named in obvious reference to Uribe). To achieve their objective, they collected signatures of citizens supporting the constitutional change (see NotiSur, 2008-06-27).

While Uribe's real ambitions were unknown and time to effect a change seemed to be running out, frustrating the hopes of the reformers, both governing-coalition parties and those of the opposition launched intensive public relations campaigns. In the Partido de la U, three hopefuls to succeed Uribe emerged, among them the powerful Juan Manuel Santos, former defense minister and Uribe's right arm, who had left the Cabinet months earlier to be able to run "if the president does not agree to run again."

Within the weak and fragmented opposition, no fewer than 10 leaders showed an interest in running for president. At that time, the political life of the country was centered in Congress, which was deciding the fate of the referendum. "Now, everything shifted to focus on the figure of Uribe, who to some extent discouraged the political activity and opened up a period of uncertainty," wrote a columnist in the Bogota daily El Espectador.

Now that the measure has been passed by both houses of Congress and signed by the president, the CC must rule on its constitutionality within 90 days, that is, by December.

The opposition has objected because, among other things, the 3 million signatures allowing congressional consideration were not verified by the competent agency the Registraduria Nacional de Estado Civil, which is responsible for organizing and carrying out the referendum. The agency has said that it would need until March 2010, two months before the general elections, to prepare.

For now, it is not enough for Uribe to have moved the referendum process forward; he also has to convince at least 7.35 million citizens (25% of eligible voters) to turn out and half plus one of them to vote yes. Uribe has never reached those numbers in any election. "We have to be on the alert, because it is likely that the government will grease the machinery to reach that 25% of the electorate," said Gustavo Petro, senator of the opposition Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA).

Petro said that "among the Uribe machine's tricks that we might expect is a purge of the registry to drastically reduce the number of eligible voters." Various experts consulted by BBC Mundo agreed with the senator and added a significant detail the time requested by the Registraduria would mean that, strangely enough, the referendum would coincide with legislative elections, which would increase turnout, a clear advantage for Uribe.

Corruption, scandals could pose problem

Besides the trial of Uribe's son, in recent months the judiciary has investigated an alarming number of corruption cases in which the government is implicated. "In Congress, a good part of those who decide have been financed by criminals and drug traffickers," a spokesperson of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Viva la Ciudadania told Radio Nederland.

At least 68 legislators, 30 of whom are detained, are being investigated. Auxiliary magistrates of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) raided the house of governing-coalition Sen. Alirio Villamizar and found documents tying him to acts of corruption and, to the surprise of investigators, various packets containing US\$500,000 in cash. On Aug. 30, nine Cambio Radical (CR) legislators resigned from the party but not from their seats and announced that they would vote for the referendum law. Their colleagues said, "They left because the government bought their votes."

On Aug. 31, only one day later, three of the nine were detained as part of the "parapolitica" investigation (see NotiSur, 2007-05-04, 2008-09-12), accused of financing their electoral campaigns with money from the drug cartels. These events, however, do not seem to have marred Uribe's image. In polls during August, voter intention in favor of the president was 54.5%, 7.6 points higher than in July.

In this climate, a new political actor, comprising a wide spectrum of NGOs, appeared on the scene. The group met at a Cumbre de Organizaciones Sociales for the purpose of "capitalizing on Colombians' hidden discontent." In its final statement, the Cumbre denounced "issues that afflict ordinary citizens and are not on the agenda in traditional electoral campaigns."

Radio Nederland, which gave the gathering ample coverage, referred to what the Cumbre called the "four Colombian tragedies." They are: "The economic tragedy of inequality and excessive concentration of wealth and land; the social tragedy of increased poverty, unemployment, loss of worker rights, and the gradual disappearance of the right to retirement; the humanitarian tragedy resulting from the internal war, which in the last decade left more than 4 million displaced, thousands of victims of state terrorism, forced disappearances, kidnappings, assassinations, and massive and arbitrary detentions; and finally, the political tragedy seen in the takeover of the state and the parties by paramilitaries and drug-trafficking mafias."

That type of political rebirth that came when it appeared that the referendum law would not be passed opened the way for journalists and political analysts. "That the referendum is alive and kicking," wrote weekly news magazine *Cambio*, "implies a move backward to the uncertain political atmosphere that marked the end of last year and the beginning of this. The anticipated burial of the initiative set off intense activity, both among those who back the president and those in the opposition.

The prospect of not counting on Uribe as a candidate enhanced the aspirations of several in the Partido de la U, and among the opposition there was also a period of freedom without the president's shadow taking away points in the polls. This brief pause promoted the favoritism of some independent candidates and even generated interest in the future primaries in which the Partido Liberal (PL) and the Polo Democratico will choose their candidates. In the opinion polls, the shaky scenario Without Uribe was changed to the predictive result With Uribe."

Political analysts quoted by various media agree that discussion regarding re-election will monopolize political debate and the opposition will have few opportunities to present alternative arguments that could excite the electorate. The campaign, they say, will center on Uribe. They warn, however, that this interval, until the fate of the referendum law is defined, is risky for the Uribista project's continuation, especially if the outcome is approval of the referendum but failure of the president to garner the minimum participation threshold for it to be valid. If the Uribista re-election option were rejected, there would be little time for a replacement candidate to mount a campaign. And the panorama will be gloomy because, beyond that analysis, the doubt remains about whether the opposition is prepared to become an option for power.

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