1-22-2010

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Colombia: Presidential Elections Still Shrouded In Uncertainty

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Colombia
Published: Friday, January 22, 2010

With just over four months before the presidential elections and less than two months before the legislative elections, Colombians still do not know when or if there will be a prior referendum on whether to allow President Alvaro Uribe to run for a second re-election, that is, for a third-consecutive term. They do not even know whether Uribe has decided to make use of the option if it is allowed. However, of all the unknowns, the only thing really in doubt if whether the Corte Constitucional (CC), the highest authority in this matter, will approve holding a referendum. As for the rest, so far everything indicates that, if it is possible, and despite his mystical musing that his future "depends on our Lord God," Uribe will push the deadlines and constitutional requirements to their limits and aspire to a new term. "Regardless of what he may say, there is no doubt that Uribe wants another re-election and is already very close to being a dictator," Organization of American States (OAS) ex-secretary general and former President Cesar Gaviria Trujillo (1994-2004) told the Spanish daily La Vanguardia. Neither Uribe nor his supporters confirm or deny that he wants a third term. They could easily deny it by simply adhering to the Constitution. But they are all behaving as if his running were a given. And they do so with all the advantages. "Four months before the elections, Uribe continues giving out subsidies and enjoying the advantage of having the right to appear in the media by virtue of his office," said the Bogota weekly news magazine Semana. The opposition points out that Uribe carries out some government functions that are nothing more than campaigning and gives numerous interviews with media from around the county. By law, candidates are required to observe a ban on campaigning, which does not apply to a president carrying out official duties, for 60 days before elections, scheduled for May 30. In the first few months of 2009, Uribe's supporters campaigned to collect the signatures of 10% of registered voters, the requirement for calling a referendum, which would ask Colombians whether they want Uribe to run for a third term. In September, and after a difficult legislative process, which the opposition refused to participate in, Congress approved the call for a consultation but did not set a date, since signature verification was still going on. In a surprise move in November, the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) invalidated the process because of violations of spending regulations. The law sets a limit of 3.3 million pesos (about US$1,670) for any person or business contributing to an electoral event, but promoters of the referendum admitted receiving individual donations in excess of that amount, some for as much as 150 million pesos (US$76,000). Uribe's political future in hands of Constitutional Court The final decision regarding an Uribe run rests with the CC, and everything indicates that it will make its decision between the end of February and mid-March, the absolute deadline because the referendum would need to be held before the presidential election and, depending on the outcome, only then could the candidate-registration process begin. This would seem impossible because, with elections scheduled for May 30, constitutionally all candidates must be registered by March 12. The November CNE ruling did not rule on the substance of the issue (the second re-election) but instead on procedure (the financing of the signature-gathering campaign). And its decision was categorical. This is particularly important because it is precisely the CC that must rule on the form and not on the substance. The judges said, as on other occasions,
that the issue of financing was not just routine. The Bogota magazine Cambio reprinted part of the CNE decision, which said, "The Constitution, far from assuming that those who have more should be listened to more, establishes conditions so that those who have more and those who have less can participate equally in the political debate." Uribe is not just your average South American leader; he is the number-one US ally so much so that he did not hesitate to confront all the presidents of the region when he gave the US Defense Department the right to use seven strategic Navy, Air Force, and Army bases. Consequently, everything he does or does not do has significance abroad. The international press holds him up as "an alternative to Chavismo," referring to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's project for "21st century socialism." It touts, although with increasing objections, Uribe's "democratic-security" policy against armed guerrilla groups, but does not conceal that the model based on repression has run its course and that any achievements it might have had were thanks to systematic human rights violations. The same media is now demanding that he step aside and not insist on a third term. Press beginning to question Uribe's "caudillismo" President Uribe has the obligation to strengthen democracy rather than seek re-election, said a Dec. 15 editorial in The Washington Post. "Nations that have tried to leave that history [of caudillos and coups] behind have an obligation to establish a clear alternative model based on rule by the people, not a series of strongmen. That is why it is so important that the man who in many says embodies the alternative to Chavismo, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, firmly commit himself against seeking a third term in next year's presidential election," said the editorial. "Whatever the case, one of Colombia's most successful presidents is endangering his legacy, as well as the cause of liberal democracy in the region. It's time for Mr. Uribe to do his country one last great service by ruling out a third consecutive term." Two weeks later, on Jan. 1, 2010, the Spanish daily La Vanguardia reprinted an editorial from the British publication The Economist's first issue of the year. Both quoted the same phrase from The Economist: "Uribe is sliding toward autocracy." La Vanguardia complemented the statement from The Economist with the words of well-known Colombian journalist and former director of the daily El Tiempo, Enrique Santos Calderon: "In considering himself indispensable and irreplaceable, Uribe reveals an egotism that can turn into a hard-to-swallow and harmful caudillismo." Internal-opposition sources say other influential foreign media have made similar judgments about Uribe. They repeatedly quote The Financial Times of London, US publications The New York Times, Los Angeles Time, The Miami Herald, Newsweek, The Christian Science Monitor, and The Wall Street Journal, as well as Spain's El Pais and El Mundo. While it discloses Uribe's "autocratic" sense or his supposed "egotism," the international press goes back to setting its sights on the Colombian government's human rights policy. "Increasingly, even those who recognize the achievements of the democratic-security model affirm that it has run its course," said a lengthy report published Dec. 22, 2009, by Radio Nederland. The state-run Dutch broadcasting service said final 2009 statistics would show that, just the city of Medellin, with 2.5 million inhabitants, had close to 2,000 homicides, double the number for the previous year. "With the guerrilla expelled from Bogota," continued Radio Nederland, "the paramilitaries control five of 20 localities where 7.5 million people live. Just one labor federation, the Federacion Colombiana de Educadores (FCE), said that 19 of its members were murdered this year [2009] and 37 had to flee from their homes because of threats. In the countryside, forced-displacement indices persist that have made Colombia the country with the largest number of internal refugees in the world, and the Organizacion Nacional Indigena (ONI) said that, between January and November 2009, 117 members of their communities were killed by armed groups, 11 more than in 2008." On Jan. 2, Barcelona's La Vanguardia published a report criticizing Colombia's human rights policy. The newspaper described Uribe as the "Caudillo of
Colombia" a clear parallel with dictator Francisco Franco (1936-1975), whom Spaniards called "El Caudillo, and it said that "more than one-third of [Colombian] legislators are in prison or under investigation for their collaboration with bands of exterminators." La Vanguardia expressed surprise at the attitude of Colombians. "They seem anesthetized to charges that the Army has directly or indirectly committed 2,000 assassinations, instigated by Uribe's democratic-security policy. The president's high popularity "did not drop after a report was released from UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston regarding the 2,000 state-sponsored crimes by the military. If as many assassinations by state security had occurred in Bolivarian Venezuela, President Chavez would certainly be decried as an assassin. Uribe, however, is presented as a standard bearer of democracy."

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