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Conflict Intensifies Between Colombia’s President Juan Manuel Santos and Ex-President Álvaro Uribe

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The relationship between Colombia's former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and his successor and political heir President Juan Manuel Santos is now in crisis, and both political figures, who for years have dominated the political scene, seem to have set out on a path of no return.

Since Santos took office in August 2010, leading analysts have agreed that "cohabitation" was practically impossible. "Santos is no François Mitterrand and Uribe is no Jacques Chirac, who each knew his proper limits," said a commentator on Cadena Radial Colombiana (Caracol), reviving the phrase "cohabitation" coined by the French in 1986, when the Socialist Mitterrand suffered a defeat in legislative elections and had to share power with a prime minister (Chirac) from the opposition.

The rupture between Santos and Uribe came just one day after the Oct. 30 departmental and municipal elections, in which Uribe was the big loser and Santos, without having risked anything, emerged strengthened. On Oct. 31, when the final election results indicated that five of the six candidates backed by Uribe in the principal cities of the country had been trounced, the former president unexpectedly burst into the media spotlight to vilify his successor—even calling him a "shallow person…filled with rancor," provoke quarrels in the Cabinet, and order his followers in Congress to withdraw their essential legislative support from the government.

The magazine Semana wrote that Uribe's anger—"the loss of his bearings"—has a unique cause: the electoral defeat could mark the beginning of his political decline, the end of his ambition to return to the presidency in 2014.

Many local governments infiltrated by illegal groups

If Uribe had not assumed such a prominent role, these elections would have been simply another event on the electoral calendar. The departmental capitals, with the exception of Bogotá, the national capital, and Medellín, have no political clout. Furthermore, any importance they have is decidedly not political. In recent decades, it has become evident that many departmental and municipal governments, which manage significant resources, have been deeply infiltrated by the drug-trafficking mafias and paramilitary groups.

It was to avoid being implicated in some future scandal that Santos opted to not participate directly in the Oct. 30 elections. Uribe, however, was heavily involved throughout the country and campaigned town by town. His candidates won in a large percentage of the 1,102 municipalities but lost in five of the seven departments in which he backed a candidate. Among the losses were the mayoralties in Bogotá and Medellín, his hometown.

In an interview with the BBC, political analyst Mauricio Romero recalled that historically one of the major challenges to Colombian democracy has been to prevent illegal groups from infiltrating the country's institutions. Romero explained that Colombia is a highly decentralized country, meaning that local authorities have real power and control significant resources.
Official figures show that transfers of oil and mining royalties amount to US$5 billion, and central government funds to subsidize public health account for another US$17 billion. "That's US$22 billion. I'm not saying that it is all at the disposal of criminals, but it provides an impressive haul of resources, so much so that it equals almost half of all Colombian exports in a year," said Romero.

Uribe's anger seems to have a solid foundation; he suffered a stinging defeat. But, why were his attacks aimed at Santos? The public was becoming aware of the friction between the two leaders of the Partido Social de Unidad Nacional, known as the Partido de la U—with the "U" standing for Uribe—in the weeks before the election. Semana reported that the ex-president was working quietly to take over the party structure, by hemming in and putting conditions on Santos.

The objective would be twofold: to stop the continued improvement of Santos' presidential image and to play down the government's program to the point of interfering with its implementation so as to arrive at 2014 with the presidential figure eroded. In this strategy, given such a reality, the Partido de la U would be able to return to its roots and bring forward the former president as its candidate.

Both men have clear and strong ambitions. Uribe admits it openly. Santos insists that re-election is not part of his plans, but few believe him. He says that he would not aspire to a second term if he is able to fulfill most of the 70 basic points of his 2010 electoral platform during his first term. So far, he has fulfilled two.

Santos administration criticizes FTA terms, dissolves security agency

Perhaps the "Santista" attitude that most irritated Uribe was expressed on Oct. 10, when, on the eve of a vote in the US Congress to approve a free-trade agreement (FTA) with Colombia, Agriculture Minister Camilo Restrepo had harsh words for the main articles of the bilateral agreement. Uribe signed the treaty in 2006 (NotiSur, March 10, 2006) and waited for the US response during the entire four years of his second term (NotiSur, April 18, 2008).

"We are not ready, we have a long way to go before we can benefit from that treaty," said Restrepo. The minister said that he doubted the FTA's effectiveness and added that Uribe had not prepared the country to confront the competitive barrage that this type of agreement would bring. It was almost an accusation.

Restrepo predicted a difficult future for most agriculture sectors, referring specifically to small and medium-sized dairy producers. "We're talking about 350,000 families that most likely will not be able to withstand the impact of the direct competition from the US," he said. Then he used an illustration that could convert those 350,000 families—and those tied to rice production and to other agriculture sectors—into Uribe's enemies. "One must help those people so that the cold shower that is going to come with the FTA does not cause pneumonia," he said. "We must all admit that the agreement was badly negotiated. I am not going to say that there were irregularities, because I don't know, but there was much naivety when the agreement's agriculture chapters were negotiated."

While Restrepo's comments—backed by labor organizations, producers, and the Autoridad Nacional del Gobierno Indígena (ONIC)—were harsh toward the former president, the strongest blow was delivered by Santos on Oct. 31. Just minutes after the official results showed that the Uribista candidate for mayor of Bogotá had been soundly defeated by leftist candidate Gustavo Petro, the government announced the dissolution of the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS), the intelligence service that had a privileged position during Uribe's eight years in office (NotiSur, Nov. 4, 2011).
Since 2002, but especially from 2006 to 2010, the DAS was submerged in ongoing scandals following denunciations and proof that its agents spied on opposition political leaders, humanitarian activists, journalists, judges, and even foreign diplomats accredited in the country. With each incident, Uribe —by law the DAS reported directly to the president—responded by supporting the DAS leadership.

Santos' announcement that "this is not a reform, it is the definitive liquidation of the DAS" ends any executive assistance for agents and leaders who might be implicated in any of those important cases. To date, 13 former high-ranking officials have been prosecuted or sentenced for their responsibility in the spying.

The last case was that of Jorge Noguera, former DAS director general, who was sentenced in September to 25 years in prison. His successor, María del Pilar Hurtado, fled the country and received political asylum in Panama, which put Uribe in the unusual position of expressing to Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli "my utmost gratitude for your generosity."

On Nov. 1, the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) quoted an analysis by Iván Cepeda on the end of the DAS and the Uribe-Santos "fight" in which he said, "It cannot be denied that the strongest reason for the dissolution of the DAS was the tie between various Uribista officials of the agency and paramilitary groups during Uribe's two terms."

Perhaps that could be the key to understanding the former president's immediate reaction in breaking violently with Santos. When he said that Santos' government was "inactive," Uribe made no mention of the DAS or of Restrepo's criticisms of the FTA terms. He opted to question his stability and provoke discord within the administration. (When Santos appointed Rafael Pardo of the Partido Liberal as labor minister, Uribe called the appointment "an act of hostility" and said that Santos privately had "always had contempt for him.")

That is the only way to understand why Uribe ordered legislators loyal to him to not vote for bills coming from the executive. "Be independent," he counseled them.

Santos reacted as if he were an elder statesman. On Nov. 3, before dozens of editors of newspapers and magazines who were celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Asociación Nacional de Diarios (Andiarios), the president received an ovation when he said, "I can assure you in all sincerity that nothing and no one—not even my very admired predecessor—will get me to criticize his performance or turn me into his enemy or detractor."

Perhaps that has been one of the hardest blows that Uribe has received in his political career.

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