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Tensions Continue between Colombia's Past, Present Presidents
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The distance between Colombia’s former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and current President Juan Manuel Santos is now glaring and raises a large question about the future behavior of the two most powerful men in the political life of the South American country. Legal investigations into a series of events linked to the creation of the feared paramilitary commandos, responsible for thousands of deaths, and the fraudulent constitutional amendment that allowed Uribe's re-election in 2006 increasingly taint the former president. However, Uribe continues to receive strong poll numbers among the electorate.

Convinced that Santos is behind the investigations—in an effort to destroy him politically to remove his major competitor in the contest to lead to right—Uribe has stepped up his criticisms of the president until, in late April, he directly called Santos a traitor. Santos, who wants to inherit Uribe's electoral support and have all the political capital of the governing Partido Social de Unidad Nacional (known as the Partido de la U), publically laments his predecessor's outbursts and, despite the attacks, continues praising him.

On April 11, the Sala Penal of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) sentenced Javier Cáceres Leal, former president of Congress during the last two years of Uribe's second term, to nine years in prison, on charges of "association to promote illegal armed groups" (paramilitary organizations).

It is noteworthy that the evidence that led to Cáceres Leal's trial was provided by three former leaders of the umbrella Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the illegal groups that traffic drugs, serve as private armies, participate covertly in regular armed forces operations, and finance the electoral campaigns of many politicians in rural areas where they operate.

The three ultraright former commando leaders said that they had met with Cáceres Leal on several occasions and had paid his campaign expenses when he was re-elected to the Senate for a third term in 2010. Two of the former paramilitary leaders—Salvatore Mancuso and Rodrigo Tovar Pupo—testified before the judges from the US, where they were extradited. Cáceres Leal's conviction showed continuity in the relations between Congress and the AUC throughout Uribe's two terms in office. Three other former presidents of the legislature are serving jail terms for the same crime (NotiSur, May 16, 2008): Miguel Pinedo (nine years); Luis Humberto Gómez (nine years); and Mario de Jesús Uribe, a cousin of the former president (six years, five months).

Uribe's actions in paramilitary demobilization subject of investigation

Two weeks later, on April 25, the investigators turned their attention directly to Uribe. A special congressional commission warned that it might initiate legal action against Uribe for including a drug-trafficking leader (Juan Carlos Sierra) in a group of paramilitaries that, between 2003 and 2006, made an agreement with the government to demobilize (NotiSur, May 20, 2011). Sierra tried to benefit from a law initiated by the former president to encourage the ultraright commandos to
disarm. The law guaranteed that paramilitary leaders would receive sentences of no more than eight years in prison and that mid- and lower-level paramilitaries would be released.

The evidence sent by the Fiscalía General de la Nación to the congressional Comisión de Acusación once again included testimony of a former AUC leader, who said that Sierra never belonged to the organization but "paid a lot of money to let him be passed as one of us." The most serious is that, according to the statement the Fiscalía accepted as true, the person who received the money was "someone very high up" in the Alto Comisionado para la Paz, Luis Carlos Restrepo, who directed the demobilization effort and who only answered to Uribe.

The former paramilitary leader went much further in his accusations against Restrepo and Uribe. He said that that the demobilization campaign "was a farce that involved huge sums of money" and that it "only served to legalize the drug-trafficking situation and that of criminal bands." The Uribe administration claimed that nearly 32,000 paramilitaries were demobilized, but the former AUC leader said that "the authorities at that time will have to explain the numbers because we were no more than 16,000."

While the legislative commission's sword hangs over Uribe's head, the former president is also being investigated in a case of internal espionage against CSJ justices, judges, opposition political leaders, journalists, and human rights activists. The shady dealings between senior administration and congressional officials and the paramilitaries led to the coining of a slang term describing the phenomenon—parapolitico (NotiSur, March 2, 2007, and May 4, 2007).

In the investigation into the roots and the actions of the parapoliticos, the CSJ opened cases against more than 200 leaders who were legislators between 2002 and 2010, almost all of whom belonged to coalition parties that backed Uribe. Of that group, 20 were sentenced to prison.

One of the most recent parapolitico incidents became known on May 11, when Salvatore Mancuso (NotiSur, Nov. 4, 2011) had a telephone interview with the private Cadena Radial Colombiana (Caracol) and gave details of three very serious events: 1) in 2006 he met with Uribe personally and made "a sizeable monetary contribution" to his electoral campaign; 2) María del Pilar Hurtado, former head of Colombian spies during the Uribe administration, had close ties with the AUC; 3) in 2008, "they [he does not say who] put us in contract with Venezuelan politicians to form a bloc to work for the overthrow of [Venezuelan President Hugo] Chávez."

The latest episode took place on May 14, when the Fiscalía announced arrest orders for another 50 parapoliticos, 32 of whom are still at large.

On May 3, a week before Mancuso's public statements, the Fiscalía General ratified the initiation of legal proceedings against two high officials of the first Uribe administration, accused of bribery. They are alleged to have offered payoffs to a group of deputies in 2006 to vote for a constitutional amendment to allow Uribe’s re-election (NotiSur, Aug. 8, 2008). The case, which became known when one of the legislators repented, has already landed three deputies in jail who voted for the amendment. The then interior minister Sabas Pretelt was spared doing jail time but was barred from holding public office for 12 years.

**Uribe’s attacks unprovoked and personal**

On April 25, the same day that Congress announced the possibility of taking legal action against Uribe, Santos responded to the former president, who had harshly criticized him for supporting a
law to restore lands to campesinos displaced by the war and for announcing a plan to build 100,000 houses for the poorest sectors of Colombian society (NotiSur, July 8, 2011). "If one is a traitor, as he says, for giving campesinos who have been displaced by the violence their tiny bit of land, I am a traitor. If one is a populist for focusing on public policies so that the poorest of the poor can have the benefit of a house, then I am a populist," said Santos.

Given that Uribe's image does not seem to suffer despite everything against him, Santos defends himself but consistently makes it clear that he is not the one pushing the definitive break with his former mentor, whom he served as defense minister from 2006 to 2009. On the contrary, he continues expressing his "admiration" for the former president, whom he still calls "the president," although indirectly he lets it be known that the break between the two is imminent.

In a long commentary in the April 22 edition of the Spanish daily El País, and widely reprinted by Colombian papers, Santos wrote:

"My older brother Enrique never supported me or praised me in his articles and editorials [the Santos family owns the daily El Tiempo, the nation's largest-circulation paper], but now he recognizes that he made a mistake. Let's hope President Uribe also recognizes his mistake. I do not understand his attitude toward me, I have been faithful to his legacy, which I show in many ways and emphatically: democratic security, investor confidence, social cohesion, what he called the three eggs that had to be protected. I have done so for the past two years, and the results have been spectacular. So I do not understand his position, which has become a criticism of the human and the divine. Nothing the government does seems good to him, he recognizes none of our successes....A friend of his said to me that what is happening is that he has still not accepted that he is no longer in power. Well, for his good and for mine and the country's, I hope that he accepts it soon, although I am now immune. At first, all this affected me, but after 30 tweets daily [messages against Santos that Uribe posts on his Twitter account], I have become immune, I pay little attention, there are more important things to deal with."

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