Ousting Of Bogotá Mayor Presents New Challenge To Colombia Peace Talks

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As Colombia’s next presidential election approaches, the far right has yet to come up with a candidate who appears capable of giving the incumbent, President Juan Manuel Santos, a run for his money. Barring a major turn of political events, there is no reason to believe Santos won’t win the May 25 contest and thus earn a second term in office, according to pollsters.

The one thing that could derail his chances, they say, would be a collapse of the peace talks, which the government and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerillas have been engaged in since November 2012 in Havana, Cuba (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012). The two sides have already reached certain pre-accords, raising hopes that an end to the bloody decades-long internal war could finally be near.

The far right is bent on dashing the Colombian public’s dreams of peace. Last November, in an attempt to ruin the peace talks and thus destroy Santos’ chances of re-election, the sector falsely accused the FARC of planning to assassinate former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010), the leader of the retrograde right, which benefits from the war (NotiSur, Dec. 6, 2013). The effort failed.

A month later, the uribistas again tried to put an end to the peace talks, this time by employing the services of Procurador General (Inspector General) Alejandro Ordóñez, a government official who owes his post to backroom political dealings. On Dec. 9, Ordóñez sacked the country’s second-most-important elected official, Bogotá Mayor Gustavo Petro. In addition, he banned Petro from holding public office for the next 15 years. In doing so, Ordóñez—a political appointee who is also an ultra-conservative Catholic and member of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X—effectively ended the political career of Colombia’s most promising progressive leader, Petro, 53, who was elected mayor of Bogotá in 2011 by a solid margin.

The move offered further proof that the sector will stop at nothing in its effort to retake control of the government, even if it means "generating an institutional crisis that could have enormous consequences and implications on the democracy," according to Attorney General Eduardo Montealegre.

**Family ties?**

Ordóñez accused the ousted mayor of renationalizing the capital city’s garbage-collection services. Petro defended himself by saying, tongue-in-cheek, that he had "deprivatized" the system.

The text of Ordóñez’s ruling reveals much about the far right’s political philosophy. In attempting to change the city’s trash-collection schema, the mayor committed "several serious offenses," the ruling states. "The mayor freely, consciously, and voluntarily ordered state-run companies with no experience to take over a task that, for years, had been carried out with absolute efficiency by private operators." Ordóñez went on to say that Petro, "by limiting the ability of private operators to perform a public service, violated the constitutional principles of free enterprise and competition."
On Dec. 13, in his column in the conservative Bogotá daily El Espectador, prestigious writer and analyst Julio César Londoño wrote that the people responsible for the attacks on Petro are "William Vélez and [brothers] Tomás and Jerónimo Uribe Moreno, who didn't want to give up their stake in a business that was turning an obscene 44% profit. Nor were they going to allow [public] trash collectors to deprive them of their precious waste."

The Uribe Moreno brothers are ex-President Uribe’s sons and only children. William Vélez, one of Colombia’s "garbage kings," is related to the Uribe family as well. He is also a major contributor to the former president’s campaigns.

Lacking guarantees

The sacking of Petro, a former guerilla who laid down his arms in 1990 to take up a career in formal politics, has direct implications on the peace talks in Havana because it raises serious questions about Colombia’s ability to guarantee that future demobilized fighters will be allowed to operate freely within the legal political structure.

Kevin Whitaker, US ambassador-designate to Colombia, voiced precisely that concern during a Dec. 11 appearance before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, saying Petro’s removal from office could "erode" the peace process. His comments were not well-received in Colombia, where Foreign Minister María Ángela Holguín, on Dec. 12, said Whitaker "will have to learn that in this country ambassadors don’t share their opinions regarding internal matters."

Whitaker is not, however, the only public figure to point out just how essential the issue of assurances is to the ongoing peace talks. Petro described the sanctions he received as "a huge obstacle in the road toward peace because it proves that, even if someone wins an election, there is no guarantee that person will be allowed to hold the position." Ordóñez’s decision "sends messages to Havana and to those parts of Latin America that are hoping for peace," he added. Part of that message is that accessing power by peaceful means is simply not possible.

"I was someone who laid down his arms and agreed to stop fighting with the objective of peacefully accessing power. We came up with the 1991 Constitution. We won those elections. But now we see how an administrative official with fascist notions tries to destroy the Constitution," Petro said.

Deputy Iván Cepeda of the leftist Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA) offered a similar assessment, saying, "Petro is the best example that, at least in Colombia, it isn’t possible to lay down one's arms in order to enter politics." Cepeda is the son of slain Sen. Manuel Cepeda, one of the leaders of the Unión Patriótica (UP), a political party formed in the 1980s as part of an attempt by the FARC to establish a formal presence in Colombian politics. Manuel Cepeda was one of more than 3,000 people linked to the UP who were exterminated by far-right paramilitary organizations.

Santos stays out of it

Petro says the far-right is also sending a message—to the country as a whole and to Colombia’s mayors in particular—"that attempting to reclaim public power is a crime, an offense, an irregularity." In addition, Petro questions Ordóñez’s authority to mete out "political justice" even though the Procuraduría is not in fact part of the judiciary. "How is it that an administrative figure who is not a member of the judicial system can remove someone who was elected by a popular vote?" he asked.
The mayor’s questions received an immediate response from Justice Minister Alfonso Gómez Méndez, who said there ought to be a review of the norm that allows the inspector general to remove elected officials. Petro is not the first such official to run afoul of Ordóñez’s political guillotine. Another Bogotá mayor, Samuel Moreno, was ousted in 2011. Partido Liberal Colombiano (PLC) Sen. Piedad Córdoba, whom Ordóñez accused of collaborating with the FARC, was sacked the year before.

President Santos, nevertheless, made a point of backing off from the issue. First he disavowed Gómez Méndez. Later, after being pressed by Attorney General Montealegre—who said "the president ought to make a bold decision, because this comes down to either him or the inspector general"—Santos said he could not interfere in decisions made by a government official. In effect, the president seems to be treating the Procuraduría as a fourth estate, allowing it to operate as independently as do the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.

An all-powerful "predator"

In late October, already under pressure because of an uribista-backed effort to revoke his mandate via a referendum, Petro turned to the Washington, DC-based Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) for help. Complaining of political persecution, the mayor filed a suit against the Colombian state. The document, prepared by Petro’s attorneys, argues that "the inspector general, the ineffable dinosaur Alejandro Ordóñez, is known for his intolerance, which stems from his extreme religious convictions." The FARC has been equally harsh in its assessment of Ordóñez, referring to him as "a spurious character with absolute power."

Ordóñez’s critics include just about everyone except members of the far-right. In an online analysis posted Dec. 9, the same day Petro was ousted, the news magazine Semana described the inspector general’s decision as "a new act of arrogance." The publication openly challenged the ruling, asking its readers: "Can an official chosen by Congress remove someone who was elected by popular vote?" Answering its own question, the article explained that Ordóñez was constitutionally within his rights to do so. That does not, however, mean that his actions were correct, particularly as they violated various international treaties signed by Colombia, according to Semana.

Ordóñez "has become all powerful," the article explained. "Just as Álvaro Uribe established himself as a kind of field marshal in the war, [Ordóñez] presents himself as a scorched-earth anti-corruption crusader." During his tenure in power, the inspector general has sanctioned 828 mayors, 622 city council members, and 49 governors. "That’s an average of four sackings a week, a total record. That makes him a real predator of democracy."

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