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Tension Mounts in Colombia During Electoral Campaign, Peace Talks

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Colombians, including President Juan Manuel Santos, live in a climate of tension, moving from one shock to the next. Between Feb. 4 and Feb. 23—in the midst of an electoral campaign which will culminate when voters will go to the polls March 9 to elect 102 senators and 166 deputies and again on May 25 to elect a president—disturbing allegations have been revealed about political destabilization and various cases of violence that include spying, military corruption, threats to political and social leaders, and attacks against progressive candidates participating in both upcoming elections (NotiSur Sept 6, 2013, and Jan 17, 2014).

This tense situation unfolds in the context of 15 months of conversations between the government and guerrillas aimed at putting an end to the internal war that has gripped the country for more than half a century. The situation is confusing because of conflicting information. Polls indicate that, while 65% to 67% of Colombians hope the government and the rebels will sign a peace accord, 61% also say they will vote for former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) for senator on March 9. Uribe and his ultraright party are enemies of the peace talks (NotiSur Oct 12, 2012, March 15, 2013, April 26, 2013, June 28, 2013, and Dec. 6, 2013).

Chronologically, recent events rocking the country began Feb. 4 when Semana—a prestigious magazine whose editor-in-chief is Alejandro Santos, the president’s nephew—released a detailed investigation denouncing a military intelligence plot that directly attacks the government. It also targets well-known progressive figures such as Sen. Iván Cepeda and former Sen. Piedad Córdoba. The magazine’s revelations allowed political analysts to make two observations of particular concern to the government.

The first is that, coinciding with the government and guerrilla forces of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) preparing for peace talks, the Army set up the infrastructure to capture thousands of telephone and electronic communications. The importance of this development became clearer once the magazine revealed that the three main targets of the spying were the top members of President Santos’ team sent to Havana, Cuba, for the talks.

The second observation was that Uribe has been able to consistently anticipate the negotiators’ main announcements. The former president even had previous knowledge the FARC would add new members to its negotiating delegation, knowledge available only at the highest level of intelligence since such transfers requiring intricate logistics must be done clandestinely even though government planes are used.

In addition to spying on high-profile public figures such as Cepeda and Córdoba, military espionage has targeted national and international journalists covering the Havana dialogue, as well as Army officials and 50 mayors and other legislators. The most striking revelation was that the list of targets included members of the official negotiating delegation: former vice president Humberto de la Calle, chief of the mission in Havana and one of the people Santos consults with; Sergio Jaramillo,
high commissioner for peace and plenipotentiary member of the roundtable; and Alejandro Éder, chief government advisor and director of the Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (ACR). The ACR is essential to the peace process as it will be in charge of coordinating civilian, police, and military tasks aimed at ensuring the safety of the guerrillas when a peace accord is signed and FARC’s members return to legal political activity.

"It is very clear," Cepeda said, "that, with the espionage, the Army has launched a missile at the waterline of the dialogue." Other leaders and analysts have echoed this thought.

Amid the exhausting ebb and flow of additional media reports coming on the heels of Semana’s revelations—made even more confusing by an active rumor mill—the weekly magazine revealed more news: a web of corruption in the Army involving several generals and other high-ranking officers who have allegedly collected bribes from contractors—for awarding contracts for fuel, goggles, and other specialized equipment for paratroopers and helicopter pilots—totaling nearly US$7 million.

Semana transcribed a series of telephone conversations in which parties discussed "mordidas" (bribes for obtaining contracts) and disparaged judges and prosecutors who did not lend themselves to corruption or favor military defendants. One conversation was between Col. Robinson González—jailed for allegedly killing two campesinos he claimed were guerrillas who were killed in combat—and Gen. Leonardo Barrero, Colombia’s chief of the armed forces. Barrero was forced to resign.

The worst thing for the government is that Semana’s information came from members of the Comisión de Acusación del Congreso, the congressional group investigating military corruption. Even though the commission is made up mostly of legislators from the ruling party, such sensitive information had never reached the president’s ears.

Candidate escapes assassination; ELN rebels apologize for mistake

The same day that Semana denounced the spying on members of the official delegation in Havana, presidential candidate Aída Avella of the Unión Patriótica (UP) and the lawyers group Colectivo de Abogados de Bogotá (CAB) denounced death threats against political leaders running for Congress by paramilitary groups Los Rastrojos and Águilas Negras. They showed pamphlets in which the paramilitary groups offered a US$25,000 reward for "doing justice to members of UP and the Marcha Patriótica," a movement founded by Piedad Córdoba. Simultaneously, Sen. Félix Valera of the progressive Alianza Verde reported that his vehicle had been machine gunned during his campaign in the northern department of Cesar. The news about espionage overshadowed the charges levied by UP, Valera, and the CAB.

Twenty days later, Avella escaped an assassination attempt unharmed when her campaign entourage was attacked in the eastern state of Arauca. Avella, one of the founders of the UP in the 1980s, lived 21 years in exile in Switzerland after the right launched what became known as "the genocide of the UP," which counted among its victims nearly 4,000 party members, including the 1987 presidential candidate Jaime Parto Leal and Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, who ran for president in 1990, eight national legislators, 13 regional deputies, 11 mayors, and 70 city councilpersons.

"What happens is that society is numbed, and today no one remembers that 19 days ago we warned that they were issuing death threats against us," Avella said. "The government can’t turn away when it pays lip service to democracy. It’s evident that the only thing Santos wants is to be re-elected on May 25."
On Feb. 23, Spanish news agency EFE distributed a political analysis about the attack on the UP candidate that voiced an opinion shared by many in Colombian politics: "The attack revives the fear of a new extermination plan."

Late Thursday, Feb. 27, however, political and military leaders of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) issued a communiqué taking responsibility for the attack on Avella, saying it was carried out by mistake. They apologized to the candidate and to Colombian society. The surprising announcement did not minimize Avella’s complaint nor contradict the EFE analysis but did discredit the ELN, the second rebel group operating in Colombia, and confirmed anything is possible in a violent Colombia. The statement, just six lines long, seemed to consider the matter closed.

**Protection privatized**

On Feb. 24, in the last in the series in February of what Córdoba called "terror reports," the nongovernmental organization Programa Somos Defensores (PSD) presented chilling statistics on violence against human rights activists. In 2013, 78 activists were assassinated—about one every four days—and another 209 were either victims of assassination attempts or had received death threats. The PSD reported that "the only government response to this massacre was to privatize protection of threatened citizens" and call for bids from the private sector for vehicles, escorts, weapons, communication equipment, databases, and information-tracking systems. Protección 33, Esquemas de Protección Siglo XXI, and Servicol–Superior, firms owned by retired military officials, won contracts valued at more than US$165 million.

The PSD said that "76.7% of the protection system is now in private hands. The three companies will now have to provide security to the 7,487 Colombians protected by the state with armed bodyguards and armored vehicles."

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