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At daybreak on the morning of May 26—just hours after electoral authorities made it official that Colombia’s presidential contest would go to a runoff between President Juan Manuel Santos, a conservative, and Óscar Iván Zuluaga, who is even further to the right—Bogotá and other cities around the country were already plastered with curious new campaign propaganda. The posters contained images of Iván Márquez, second-in-command in the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrilla army, and President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, along with a message: "They want Santos to win. How about you?"

Although nothing written on the signs indicated their origin, it is safe to assume they were produced by campaigners with the Centro Democrático (CD), the party backing Zuluaga. The images were also an early indicator that the next stretch of the campaign—which runs until June 15, the day of the second round—will be as dirty as the first, when evidence emerged pointing to the involvement of a murky underworld of marketing advisers, spies, and hackers whose sole purpose was to draw votes to the candidate who paid best for their services. "For the Colombian far right, Márquez and Maduro are the living image of the devil," analyst Federico Larsen, in Bogotá for the elections, wrote in the Argentine daily Tiempo.

The mysterious Márquez-Maduro posters not only highlight the depths to which campaigners are willing to stoop; they are also a reminder that, from here on, the presidential race will be dominated by a single issue: peace. After months of negotiations, Santos and the FARC appear on the verge of an agreement that could end Colombia’s half-century-old internal war (NotiSur, Dec. 6, 2013). To complete that process, however, the president will need to defeat Zuluaga, who opposes the peace talks and believes the only way to properly pacify the country is by crushing and humiliating the FARC with the thunder of weapons. A Zuluaga victory could cause the conflict to reignite, a possibility that has huge political and economic implications for Colombia, one of South America’s most prosperous nations and a member, along with Chile, Mexico and Peru, of the Alianza Pacífica (Pacific Alliance) trade bloc (NotiSur, April 5, 2013).

Deteriorating democracy?
The Santos-Zuluaga runoff will cap an election season that many observers say has weakened the country’s democracy. Analysts—from across the political spectrum—have used terms like "democracy deficit" or "low-intensity democracy" to describe the current situation in Colombia, where legislators and other elected officials are less and less representative.

Only 57% (19 million) of the country’s 33 million eligible voters participated in recent legislative elections on March 9. In addition, 69 of the 268 senators and deputies elected that day are under investigation for possible ties to paramilitary and drug-trafficking operations (NotiSur, May 16, 2014). Turnout was even worse for the first-round presidential vote: only 40% of eligible voters participated.
Colombia’s democratic system was also weakened, say analysts, by the ousting late last year of the mayor of Bogotá, the country’s second-most-important elected official in numbers of votes cast. The mayor, Gustavo Petro, a progressive, was removed by the inspector general, a nonelected government official who owes his post to backroom political dealings (NotiSur, Jan. 17, 2014).

Together, the various incidents and indicators spell trouble not just for the present but for the future as well, both domestically and in Colombia’s international position. "The hatred unleashed by the campaign isn’t going to go away easily," Michael Shifter, president of the Washington-based think tank Inter-American Dialogue, told the Associated Press.

Dirty dealings

In the final three weeks leading up to the May 25 vote, the weekly magazine Semana and the daily newspaper El Espectador made a series of shocking campaign-related revelations. The first concerned Santos media advisor Juan José Rendón, who allegedly engaged in secret negotiations with high-level drug traffickers. One of those traffickers was Javier Antonio Calle Serna, who was later extradited to the US. Calle Serna claims Rendón charged him and several other mafia bosses US$12 million to lobby, on their behalf, for a hush-hush deal with President Santos, who would supposedly help them avoid extradition in exchange for information regarding their supply routes and an agreement, from the traffickers, that they close their operations.

In a May 4 article in Semana, influential journalist Daniel Coronell shared details about conversations he had with both Calle Serna and Rendón. The latter, when asked about Calle Serna’s claims, told Coronell that he had "three meetings with lawyers assigned by the drug traffickers and that, in 2011, he delivered to the president a letter and video from the [mafia] bosses." Regarding the US$12 million, Rendón said he never demanded the payment. Instead he delegated the task to another government official, who passed the job along to a third person, and so on, and so on. The person who actually received the money, he said, was an ex-guerrilla who may or may not still be alive. Coronell also contacted President Santos, who acknowledged that he received the mafia bosses’ letter and video "from the hands of Rendón" but said the proposed deal "has been shelved ever since." Two days after the Semana article appeared, Rendón resigned from his position on Santos’ campaign team. He hasn’t been heard from since.

The public barely had time to come to grips with the Rendón scandal when it was presented with another stunning revelation, this time involving Santos’ main rival, Zuluaga. Colombia’s Attorney General Eduardo Montealegre reported that authorities raided an office north of Bogotá used by a group of hackers to intercept communications between the president’s office and delegates in Havana, Cuba, where the government and FARC have been conducting their peace talks. The hackers were allegedly employed by a computer engineer named Andrés Sepúlveda, who claims he worked for Zuluaga and was instructed to collect information that might negatively influence the Havana negotiations. "I can put an end to this peace process. I’ve got the information to do it," the computer engineer said when he was interrogated by a judge.

Zuluaga originally denied that he ever employed Sepúlveda. But after the emergence of a scathing video, in which the two men are seen discussing the intercepted Bogotá-Havana communications, the candidate was forced to admit that, yes, he had hired the computer engineer. Zuluaga had to admit as well that Sepúlveda’s wife (actress Lina Luna), uncle, and a brother were also involved in the campaign. Their job, apparently, was to post Facebook and Twitter messages. Unlike Rendón, who was able to resign and "disappear," Sepúlveda ended up in a Bogotá prison.
Santos was far more outspoken on the Zuluaga communications-hacking scandal than he was regarding Rendón’s alleged influence peddling. Trying to sabotage the peace process "isn’t a dirty [campaign] trick," he said in a radio interview. "It’s a crime, for which the person responsible ought to rot in jail." Although he was careful not to name names, the president was clearly referring to Zuluaga. Three weeks later, Zuluaga is not only a free man; he is also—thanks to a first-place finish in the May 25 election—in a position to possibly replace Santos as president.

"Unworthy and disgusting"

Rendón’s resignation and Sepúlveda’s arrest exposed an underworld in which love and hatred are interspersed and in which characters who are currently competing against each other used to—in a different time and place—share adventures and expense accounts. As recently as last December, just a month before she joined Zuluaga’s campaign team, Lina Luna worked as Rendón’s number two on the Santos campaign. Rendón and Sepúlveda, it turns out, are old acquaintances as well. The two worked together on the campaigns that earned Enrique Peña Nieto (Mexico) and Juan Orlando Hernández Alvarado (Dominican Republic) the presidencies in their respective countries.

In the midst of all this drama, on May 15, the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP), an institute run by Colombian Jesuit priests, revealed 48 top-level figures in the left-wing Marcha Patriótica (MP) movement have been killed in the past two years. CINEP referred to the killings as "genocide." The violence occurs, the organization explained, because the MP has been stigmatized for its supposed proximity to the FARC.

The guerrilla group has been taking advantage of the situation to position itself as an ethical and moral alternative to the mainstream political scene. "The campaign is unworthy and disgusting," the FARC’s Iván Márquez wrote in an article republished May 15 by the EFE news agency.

"The people wanted [the candidates] to unfurl banners that spoke of projects and programs. But all they’ve seen are the banners of ruin and political misery," Márquez wrote. "There is slop here, slop there, from one plutocratic minority to the other, while the perplexed Colombian people contemplate the political degradation and the shameful and disrespectful attitudes of a group of criminal elites who seized the state for their own personal benefit, all against the backdrop of a discredited electoral system."

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