Campaign Consultants Dirty Latin American Campaigns

Andrés Gaudán

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The last stretch of an electoral campaign that culminated in a runoff victory for Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos on May 25 (NotiSur, July 4, 2014) revealed one of the darkest edges of Latin American institutional life today (NotiSur, Jan 17, 2014, and June 6, 2014). Several analysts noted the intertwining of political objectives and the interests of an underworld that generally appears linked to a legion of election consultants who seem bereft of ethical boundaries. Critics say the lack of ethics has connected consultants to the worst criminal activities such as drug trafficking (NotiSur, Oct. 21, 1994). Furthermore, the consultants change clients with surprising frequency, moving from one end of the political spectrum to the other, carrying accumulated confidential information between camps. All complaints allege great sums of money are at stake—money that comes from the drug cartels. The marketineros, as analysts derisively call the political consultants, rarely fight back, leaving the impression that these two worlds, which appear so separate, meet somewhere.

On May 4, the Colombian magazine Semana reported that Juan José Rendón, Santos’ chief campaign advisor, had received US$12 million from three drug traffickers who were ”buying” his services to open doors to politicians and to obtain a promise for lenient judicial treatment and protection against extradition to the US should they turn themselves in to the authorities. Rendón had to resign his campaign job and leave Colombia, just as he had previously been forced to flee his native Venezuela.

A few days later, the same magazine reported that opposition candidate Óscar Iván Zuluaga had been using the services of a computer spy, Andrés Sepúlveda, to abort peace talks between the government and the guerrillas. It was then learned that both men challenged in Colombia had worked together on the electoral campaigns of Presidents Enrique Peña Nieto in Mexico and Juan Orlando Hernández in Honduras. Sepúlveda didn’t fare as well as Rendón and ended up in prison.

As the story unraveled, it turned out that these and other consultants had participated in other presidential and legislative campaigns—some successful, others not—in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and several Central American countries. In general, the Colombian magazine said, the marketing experts had been trained at the Miami-based Centro Interamericano de Gerencia Política.

Former DEA agent says PRI in bed with cartels

Phil Jordan, a retired Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) official who had worked many years in Mexico, was the first to take a close look at the growing interrelation between politics and drug traffickers. He spoke first with the Univisión Spanish-language television network and then on Feb. 26 with Mexican journalist Carmen Aristegui. Speaking in Spanish on Aristegui’s program Redacción AN, Jordan expressed surprise at the recent arrest of drug trafficker Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán. He said he "never thought Mexico’s governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) would arrest Guzmán because he had put a lot of money into the Peña Nieto campaign."

The former DEA intelligence director said that he couldn’t disclose the evidence but repeated that the link between Guzmán and the Mexican government had appeared in US intelligence-services'
reports. He then added that the PRI had long maintained a close relationship with drug traffickers and that, if Guzmán remains behind bars in Mexico and is not extradited to the US, "they will allow him to escape." Jordan repeatedly said that the drug cartels give a lot of money to Mexican politicians so they will allow them to operate. "The PRI has always had a good relationship with the traffickers; in the past they were in bed with the cartels," he said.

In light of the complaint against Rendón and Jordan’s reference to the relationship between politics and drug trafficking, Argentine researcher Juan Manuel Karg said, "Everyone knows that the world of drug trafficking and the way it rapidly creates liquidity at low cost has led various politicians to get involved in this lawless wasteland. Some seem to prefer to pay the political cost that revelation of their connections would mean to have access to large amounts of money. The other party is guaranteed certain impunity to operate, generating a kind of cycle in which both parties enjoy short-term benefits. The problem is that, sooner or later, the truth will come out and have legal repercussions, ruining political careers or putting those involved in prison."

**Many elected officials in Colombia under investigation**

In Colombia, hundreds of political leaders live in fear that their connections might be discovered. In June 2010, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers Gabriela Carina Knaul de Albuquerque e Silva reported that "at least one-third of the 268 members of Congress (102 senators and 166 deputies) were or are being investigated by the judiciary. Ninety-three lawmakers have been charged with illicit ties to paramilitary organizations. … Summary proceedings have been opened against 13 deputies, 188 departmental governors and mayors, and 58 municipal councilors."

In the legislative elections in March, 69 senators and deputies were elected who are being investigated for possible connections with drug traffickers and paramilitary groups, two intimately interrelated mafias.

In most South American countries this topic is of interest to journalists and researchers who have created lists of election consultants, the countries where they have worked, and the candidates who have used them. The journalists and researchers can then observe circumstances in which some consultants reinforce the suspicions about the ties with drug traffickers and how practices that debase politics are approved in dirty campaigns that use lies to destroy a person’s honor.

Do the facts known in Colombia only involve Santos? Karg asked. "No way," he said, answering his own question. "They denigrate all the leaders who use their services, leaders who not coincidently share a conservative political-economic vision. Moreover, no relationship of this kind is created from one day to the next, and the premise that Rendón only recently started this type of activity is unlikely."

**Practice widespread in Latin America**

Those working in the region since the 1980s include Rendón, Ecuadoran Jaime Durán Barba, and, at one time, James Carville and Dick Morris from the US, as well as Argentinians Mauricio Jiatt and Rodrigo Lugones, and Brazilian Duda Mendonça.


In Argentina, ex-Presidents Carlos Menem (1989-1999), Fernando de la Rúa (1999-2001), and Eduardo Duhalde (2002-2003), candidate José Manuel de la Sota, and Deputy Francisco de Narváez (in this case there was proof of the connection between the right-wing candidate and the Mexican cartel led by Joaquín "Chapo" Guzmán, to whom one of his collaborators, now serving a 14-year prison sentence in Argentina, made 91 shipments of ephedrine). In Peru, former President Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006).

In Central America, ex-President Porfirio Lobo (2010-2014) and President Juan Orlando Hernández in Honduras, and candidate Norman Quijano in El Salvador.

In México, in addition to PRI former Presidents Luis Echeverría (1970-1976), Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), and Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), others who were advised by the same consultants were candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, from the Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD), and Federal District Deputy Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). In this case the consultant was Durán Barba, who from one day to the next jumped from the progressive PRD to the right-wing PAN, just as Duda Mendonça had previously switched from Brazil’s leftist Lula to the Argentine neoliberal Menem.

Ethical lapses are not the exclusive property of Durán Barba and Duda Mendonça with their spectacular leaps from one ideological extreme to the other, taking information that just hours had before belonged to the opposite candidate. Rendón and Sepúlveda apparently have been doing the same thing in Colombia. Rendón’s departure from Santos’ campaign team and Sepúlveda’s arrest left bare an underworld in which people are working in opposite camps today that had shared adventures under other skies yesterday. Rendón and Sepúlveda had worked together on the 2012 campaign committee that helped elect Peña Nieto in Mexico.

As investigations were closing the circle, it was learned that the spy Sepúlveda is the husband of actress and social media expert Lina Luna, who since last January worked for opposition candidate Zuluaga, but until December 2013, just a month earlier, had worked with Rendón in the Santos’ campaign offices. In both cases she headed the "dirty IT area" that saturated networks such as Facebook and Twitter with spam intended to damage other candidates.

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