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Colombia: The Uribe Administration and Congressional Concerns

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Colombia: The Uribe Administration and Congressional Concerns

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Summary

On August 7, 2002, President-elect, Alvaro Uribe Velez, age 49, is scheduled to take office amid an intensifying conflict. Uribe's election has been widely attributed to his law-and-order campaign promises to pursue the guerrillas vigorously by increasing Colombia's military budget, doubling the size of the military to 100,000, and creating a one-million man civilian militia to aid the Colombian military, as well as to the worsening security situation in Colombia. Nevertheless, Uribe's campaign slogan, "Firm Hand, Big Heart," also reflected the social concerns that have marked his 20-plus year career in local, regional, and national government. In the United States, the election of a president with a reputation as a "hardliner" poses new questions for Members of the Congress, especially as Congress considers whether to broaden the scope of U.S. aid to Colombia to provide funding for actions against Colombia's leftist guerrilla and rightist paramilitary forces.

Uribe's Background

The son of a businessman and rancher, Uribe was born on July 4, 1952, received a law degree in 1977 from the University of Antioquia, and has served in local, regional, and national government posts since 1976. In 1993, he received a certificate in Administration and Management from Harvard University, with course work in conflict resolution, and in 1998 he received a scholarship from the British government to research social policy and education at St. Anthony's College at Oxford University as a Senior Associate Member.¹ He and his wife, Lina Moreno, have two sons.

¹ Andrew Buncombe and Toby Follett. UK Study-Grant for Colombian Caught in Human Rights Row. *The Independent* (London) May 18, 1998. p 8. The article reports that despite protests at Oxford against the admittance of Uribe, who had just finished a controversial term as governor of Antioquia (see below), the warden of St. Anthony's said he wouldn't have been admitted "if we thought he was involved in human rights abuse."

A native of the department of Antioquia, Uribe has built much of his public career there. Antioquia has the second largest population in Colombia, after the federal district of Bogotá. It is noted for a distinct entrepreneurial spirit, business acumen, and social mobility that made it a leader in coffee production, commerce, manufacturing, and finance,² and, some would suggest, contributed to the rise in the 1980s of the cocaine-trafficking cartel centered in Medellín, the department capital.³

Uribe began his career in appointed posts, serving first as an administrator in a Medellín city office dealing with public works (1976). He then moved to Bogotá when he was appointed general secretary at the Labor Ministry (1977-1978), and served in a second national post as Director of Civilian Aeronautics (1980-1982). He returned to Antioquia, when he was appointed the Mayor of Medellín, in 1982.⁴ (In 1983, his father was killed, allegedly by members of the leftist guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) during an attempted kidnapping.) Noted as a “crime buster” while mayor,⁵ Uribe subsequently served from 1984-1986 on the Medellín town council. He was next elected to two four-year terms as a national Senator (1986-1994), and then to a three-year term as governor of Antioquia province, serving from Jan. 1, 1995- December 31, 1997. During his years as senator and governor, according to one news report, he established a reputation “for fiscal skill and honesty-but also for having a prickly authoritarian streak.”⁶

In the course of his career, Uribe has been viewed as both a social reformer and a law-and-order politician. While governor, he explained this duality: “as a student, I thought all the problems were caused by social inequalities. Now I realize that if we don’t fight crime, we cannot improve the standard of living. And so I made a decision to strengthen the state and the social structure.”⁷ Thus, during his term as senator, Uribe was one of the primary proponents of national health legislation, and as governor he emphasized education, providing subsidies to encourage school attendance, according to two Colombian analysts. He also achieved “successes in carrying out public works projects and new social spending,” according to a newspaper report.⁸

² David Bushnell. *The Making of Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. pp 176-177.

³ In *Political Economy and Illegal Drugs in Colombia* (Boulder, Co., Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), Francisco E. Thoumi cites several hypotheses concerning the growth of the drug industry in Colombia, among them economic factors, a long tradition of contraband, and “Antioqueño values that measured an individuals’ social worth by his or her wealth regardless of his origin....” p 168.

⁴ Colombia changed to a system of elected mayors with the adoption of the 1991 Constitution.

⁵ Tim Padgett and Ruth Morris, *The Technocrat of Steel*. Time Magazine, June 10, 2002, p 35.

⁶ Time Magazine, *ibid*.

⁷ M.A. O’Grady. *A Colombian Governor Who Makes Things Happen*. The Wall Street Journal. March 7, 1997. p A15.

⁸ Scott Wilson. *Colombia Elects A Hard-Liner on Fighting Rebels*. The Washington Post. May 27, 2002. p A1.

Uribe gained a reputation as a “hardliner” during his term as governor, which coincided with a period of increasing warfare, in particular an increase in activities of the privately-funded “self-defense” or “paramilitary” groups, within that department.⁹ As governor, Uribe promoted the establishment in Antioquia of state-sponsored “*Convivir*” civilian rural defense organizations which were intended to provide intelligence to local police and military commanders and were authorized by national law in 1994. Uribe strongly defended them. In July 1997 testimony before the U.N. Human Rights Commission, he stated they were “a legal manifestation of the civilian population’s legitimate right to self-defense in the face of rising guerrilla violence.”¹⁰ By that time, the *Convivir* groups had become controversial nationwide (and were dismantled in the late 1990s) because of human rights abuses, a reputation of secrecy, and a perceived unaccountability to civilian authorities, and because some were believed to have served as fronts for or were otherwise linked with the illegal paramilitary groups. (At least four *Convivir* groups in Antioquia province are cited by Human Rights Watch for massacres or murders during the period that Uribe was governor; Uribe shut down one of them.)¹¹

Uribe also was willing to try other ways to end the conflict in his department. He invited a team from the Harvard Negotiation Project to Antioquia to train peasants in conflict resolution techniques. He also asked the national government to invite the United Nations to send U.N. “blue helmet” peacekeepers to Antioquia, to intervene in the conflict (which the national government rejected). Such experimental approaches were admired by some analysts, but considered quixotic or naive by others.

The May 26, 2002 Elections

A dissident member of Colombia’s Liberal Party, Uribe ran as an independent on the “Colombia First” ticket in the May 26 elections. He obtained just over 53% of the vote in an eleven-candidate field, after surviving three attempts on his life by the FARC in the six months before his victory. Some analysts believe that his victory was due in part to the ruptures within Colombia’s two traditional parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, one of whose candidates has won every Colombian elections since 1958. The Conservative Party did not run an official candidate, with many members reportedly supporting Uribe.

⁹ According to the State Department’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1996, an escalation in paramilitary killings in Antioquia and other regions “reflects the intensified competition between paramilitary and guerrilla organizations for control across a broad sweep of territory.... The victims of paramilitary killings, however, were overwhelmingly unarmed, noncombatant civilians whose summary murders the paramilitary forces rationalized as punishment for possible ties to the guerrillas.” Section on Colombia, p 393.

¹⁰ According to the State Department’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1997, The report also states that “The [Colombian] Ombudsman’s 1997 report to Congress, however, reiterated his office’s opposition to the *Convivir* program...[because] it involved citizens in the armed conflict, stripped them of their protected status, and converted them into legitimate targets of attack.” Colombia section, p 462.

¹¹ Telephone conversation with Robin Kirk of Human Rights Watch, June 12, 2002. Human Rights Watch documented two of the cases in *War Without Quarter: Colombia and International Humanitarian Law*, October 1998. This book also discusses the *Convivir* concept and debate at length, and cites abuses by *Convivir* groups in other departments. See pp 85-99.

Uribe's one-round majority victory was the first since Colombia introduced a two-round run-off system with the 1991 constitution. Uribe bested two candidates who had lost to President Pastrana in the 1998 election. Serpa, the official candidate of the Liberal Party, gained 32% of the vote (about 3% less than in the first round of elections in 1998). Noemi Sanin, a dissident member of the Conservative party running as an independent, gained about 6% of the vote (some 21% less than her take in the 1998 first round). A surprise to some analysts was the 6% of the vote won by the candidate of a new democratic-left party, Luis Eduardo Garzon, a former labor leader.

During the campaign, Uribe was generally perceived, according to one analysis, as emphasizing "citizen security and state authority, political reform and the fight against corruption," in contrast to his major opponents' emphasis on social equity, political reform, economic recovery and reform, and a negotiated or political end to the armed conflict.¹² The most widely reported elements of Uribe's campaign message were his promises to increase Colombia's military budget, approximately double the size of the military to 100,000 (at which point he would eliminate obligatory military service for all males), and create a one-million man civilian militia to aid the Colombian military. (There has been conflicting information as to whether this militia would be armed or not.)

Nevertheless, Uribe's 100-point program contains a broad social, political, and economic agenda.¹³ His proposal starts by outlining his vision for a new Colombia, where instead of 60% of the population living in poverty, most would be counted as middle class. He envisions a country of political and economic democracy with "legitimate [government] authority" and "zero power" for those who foment violence, a "Colombia without guerrillas and without paramilitaries." His Colombia would be inhabited by citizens who enjoy opportunity for all, and who respect the environment. His 100-point program explicitly rejects some aspects of the classical neoliberal economic model, which, he says "leaves social welfare to chance market forces, while increasing misery and social injustice." (Elsewhere, however, he has assured businessmen that his administration would strive to put in place "a clear and correct macroeconomic policy, public order and a stable business environment designed to make Colombia attractive to foreign and domestic investors alike."¹⁴) He also proposes a series of government reforms to reduce the size of the state and bureaucracy, including the elimination of one of Colombia's two legislative chambers, in order to cut government spending.

During his campaign, one of Uribe's opponents, Liberal Party candidate Horacio Serpa, and others, accused Uribe of supporting the paramilitaries, and others rumored that

¹² International Crisis Group. *The Stakes in the President Election in Colombia*. ICG Latin America Briefing, 22 May 2002, p 7. The ICG reports that after Uribe pulled ahead in the polls, the three candidates who pulled the most votes after Uribe "began to focus on a number of Uribe's issues, in particular strengthening of the state against the insurgent and paramilitary forces, the abolition of obligatory military service and corruption." p. 7. According to this ICG report, Uribe also insinuated that Serpa had a "connection to the drug-money scandal involving President Samper," whom he served as Interior Minister. p 9.

¹³ This program is reproduced in full, in Spanish, at [http://www.alvarouribevelez.com.co/que_propone/manifiesto.htm].

¹⁴ Mercedes Bermejo. *Colombia Presidential Hopeful Focuses on Security, Stability*. *The Financial Times*. April 4, 2002.

he had ties to drug traffickers. Uribe denies such accusations, and none has been substantiated, although they continue to taint perceptions of Uribe and his future presidency. Part of the allegations of ties to drug traffickers sprang from his father's friendship with Fabio Ochoa, head of a cocaine-trafficking family, a friendship which Uribe's defenders stated was based on a mutual interest in horses. The allegations of sympathies towards paramilitary groups may stem in part from longstanding differences between Uribe and Serpa on the *Convivir* groups, and the links of some of those groups with paramilitary forces.¹⁵ Some analysts also claim that the accusations have persisted, despite the lack of evidence, because of suspicions about some of Uribe's friends and associates.¹⁶ In addition, paramilitary groups were viewed as supporting his candidacy.

Challenges Facing Uribe and Congressional Concerns

Uribe's election comes at a time of ever intensifying conflict in Colombia. FARC is increasingly carrying the conflict into Bogotá and other urban areas, with sabotage of infrastructure and bombings. It holds hostage many Colombian government officials, including the current governor of Antioquia and six national legislators, and since the elections it has threatened the lives of mayors in towns which voted for Uribe. For U.S. policymakers, Uribe's election and inauguration come in the midst of Congressional debate over whether to provide U.S. military assistance to Colombia for purposes other than counternarcotics. From the perspective of current U.S. policy,¹⁷ Uribe faces three major challenges. One is to curb drug production in Colombia, including making more efficient the "Plan Colombia" counternarcotics programs. A second is to stabilize and improve the economy. A third is to strengthen the state in order to curb the violence perpetuated by leftist guerrillas and the rightist paramilitaries.

Reflecting the divergence of opinion between the United States and Colombia as to the relative urgency of problems facing Colombia, counternarcotics was not a topic addressed by Uribe's campaign. There is little on the public record on Uribe's planned counternarcotics policy. His 100 point program calls for the elimination of drugs, and the improvement of the Plan Colombia program. Some analysts state that Uribe endorses the concept at the heart of U.S. counternarcotics policy, which is that one fundamental means to combat the guerrillas is to deprive them of the profits they earn from illegal drugs. One news report indicated that he views "a commitment from the U.S. to provide Colombia with the technical and financial assistance it needs to fight drug trafficking" as "central" to his plans for governing, and wants the United States to resume sharing radar-surveillance information with Colombia for the interdiction of drug-trafficking aircraft.¹⁸

¹⁵ Serpa expressed opposition to the concept, even though, as Minister of the Interior during the Samper Administration (1994-1998), he was part of the government that instituted them.

¹⁶ A BBC dispatch alleges that "there is evidence that some of his [Uribe's] friends have been involved" in drug trafficking, "but nothing has ever stuck to him." BBC News. Analysis: Uribe's Challenge, by Jeremy McDermott. May 27, 2002.

¹⁷ For information on current U.S. policy toward Colombia, see RL31383, *The Andean Regional Initiative (ARI): FY2002 Supplemental and FY2003 Assistance for Colombia and Neighbors*.

¹⁸ Marc Lifsher. *Colombia's New Leader Vows to Vanquish Guerrillas*. The Wall Street Journal. May 28, 2002. p A14.

Some analysts also expect him to insist on placing more emphasis than in the past on providing social support to those involved in coca cultivation.

Uribe's campaign stress on fiscal conservatism, and his choices for his economics team, suggest that his yet-to-be-delineated economic policy will not be problematic to U.S. policymakers.¹⁹ Some analysts question, however, Uribe's ability to fund all his goals. In particular, some wonder where he will get the money to provide for an expanded army and to increase social welfare programs. Despite news articles that Uribe will succeed in forming a working coalition in Congress, some wonder whether Uribe will be able to secure the support necessary to pass economic reforms.

One problematic issue for U.S. policymakers has been Uribe's alleged sympathies for the "self-defense" paramilitary forces. Although these allegations may in part be attributed to campaign rhetoric, Mary Robinson, head of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, has stated that Uribe is "tolerant toward paramilitary groups."²⁰ U.S. policy has regarded the rightist paramilitary forces as just as problematic for Colombian security as the leftist guerrillas, viewing their extensive human rights abuse and their self-acknowledged involvement in drug production as undermining the legitimacy of the state. The FY2000 supplemental "Plan Colombia" legislation (P.L. 106-246) and the FY2002 Andean Regional Initiative (P.L. 107-115) legislation have placed conditions on U.S. assistance to Colombia designed to encourage the arrest and prosecution of members of the paramilitary groups, and to cut ties between them and members of the Colombian security forces.

Thus far, Uribe has indicated that he intends to treat the rightist paramilitary groups on a par with the leftist guerrillas, although in doing so he has departed to some extent from the Pastrana policy. In his victory speech on May 26, Uribe stated that he would seek a dialogue with those groups operating outside the law, on the condition that they give up "terrorism" and agree to a cease-fire. Although the Pastrana Administration engaged in negotiations with the two major leftist guerrilla groups (breaking off negotiations with the FARC in February 2002, and with the National Liberation Army (ELN) in May 2002), Pastrana has not been willing to enter into negotiations with the paramilitaries. Uribe has also indicated his intention to request that the United Nations play a role in new conflict reduction and resolution measures in Colombia.

Another topic many U.S. analysts find troubling is Uribe's million-man militia proposal. Some analysts object that it draws civilians into the conflict, putting them in harm's way. Some express concern that Uribe has yet to demonstrate that he understands the serious problems raised by the *Convivir* experience, particularly the lack of state control, or that he has developed ideas for mechanisms to prevent their reoccurrence.

¹⁹ One of Uribe's primary economic advisors, Rudolf Hommes, was Finance Minister from 1990-1994, carrying out the Gaviria administration's market liberalization policies. For Finance Minister, Uribe has selected Roberto Junguito, currently the Colombian representative to the International Monetary Fund, who has previously served as finance minister. For National Planning Director, Uribe has chosen Santiago Montenegro, a former dean of the economics faculty of the University of Los Andes, and currently President of the National Association of Financial Institutions.

²⁰ *Taxi Drivers to Join Uribe's New Army of Informers*. El Pais - English Edition. May 30, 2002.