

## URIBE FOREVER OR 'SOUL PERSUASION' ? COLOMBIA IN THE YEAR BEFORE THE ELECTION

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In the run-up to the parliamentary and presidential elections that are scheduled to take place successively in the spring of 2010, there is one question which agitates all Colombia: how will president Uribe secure his candidature for yet another time? The political parties feel uncertain because they lack this information, which is crucial for their campaign. A word from the president's palace would be enough, but the head of state observes strict silence.

It was only last year that signatures were being collected to initiate a referendum that would pave the way for Alvaro Uribe's immediate reelection. A presidential decree, hurriedly issued, was the only way in which the process could be carried over to the next parliamentary session that began in March 2009. In the first six months of that year, Mr Uribe announced that he would be prepared to withdraw his candidature for a third term if he could be sure that his policy of 'democratic security' would be continued by a strong candidate jointly appointed by the government coalition. There were even rumours that a new party might be created for Mr Uribe to use an effective tool during the next government's term of office.

However, the referendum did not succeed in jumping the parliamentary hurdle in the first legislative period of 2009. Conflicts about the date from which reelection should be admissible made it necessary to initiate a *conciliación*, i.e. to convene a committee to arbitrate between the senate and the house of representatives. However, the project did not make any headway: many parliamentarians refused to take part in the negotiations, public resistance against yet another candidature of the officiating president was growing, and even in Mr Uribe's own camp, those who approved the project were by no means in the majority. Meanwhile the front between *Uribistas* and *Anti-Uribistas* has hardened. Observers judge that the parliamentary process will probably break down if the referendum is not completed by mid-August.

However, even if congress should approve the referendum there will be further hurdles to jump. For one, the Constitutional Court would have to conduct a preliminary review to confirm the relevant act. The constitution of 1991 did not provide for any reelection of the president. The option of reelecting the president without interval was only created by a reform that was approved by the Constitutional Court in 2004. However, what the Court will have to say about a second immediate reelection remains an open question. Secondly, even if the referendum were to master both the parliamentary and the constitutional hurdles, one quarter of the electorate would have to turn out for it, and half of all the votes cast would have to be in favour of a sec-

ond reelection. To be sure, a large part of the Colombian population is not opposed to the president standing yet again, but the question is whether this attitude will be enough to secure the requisite turn-out for the referendum. Because of these problems, the idea of changing the constitution once again has been floated by a number of Uribe-friendly parliamentarians, but it is questionable whether this approach is any less complex in formal terms than the referendum.

Among the ruling parties, it is probably that of Mr Uribe, the Partido Social de la Unidad Nacional (PSUN), popularly known as 'Partido de la U', which is least troubled by the question mentioned above. Should Mr Uribe stand again, the PSUN would probably be his party of choice. Should he not do so, it would probably be the turn of Manuel Santos, who resigned as minister of defence in May and is highly esteemed for his success in the fight against the FARC. Mr Santos, who is said to be receptive to issues that lie beyond the field of *seguridad nacional*, would probably endeavour to bring about a consensus on the candidate question within the government camp.

The Cambio Radical (CR) also supports Mr Uribe, although its chairman, Germán Vargas Lleras, does not approve of Mr Uribe's ambition to be re-elected. He is the CR's only preliminary candidate so far, although one cannot be certain whether he would receive the unqualified support of his party should Mr Uribe stand again. If he should not, a conceivable alternative would be for the candidate nominated by the Partido Liberal (PL), Mr Vargas Lleras' political home, and Mr Lleras himself to arrive at a *consulta intrapartidista*, an agreement to support a common candidate. The appointment of a candidate by the CR as well as the conclusion of an agreement between the CR and the PL appears more likely at present than yet another involvement of Mr Vargas Lleras in a coalition led by Mr Uribe.

The position of the Partido Conservador Colombiano (PCC), a party which has been supporting Mr Uribe since 2002, is anything but easy. Thus, the immediate past president, Andrés Pastrana, criticized Mr Uribe sharply a short while ago. At present, the PCC is said to have four preliminary candidates. The former minister of agriculture, Andrés Felipe Arias, also known as 'Uribito' because of his faithful service to Mr Uribe, currently leads the polls although he has stirred up hostility with his hardline opposition to any dialogue with the guerrillas and his emotional behaviour within his own party. Next to Mr Arias, who has already said that he would give up his candidature if Mr Uribe should stand again, the PCC has so far fielded its former chief, Mr Holguín, the former foreign minister, Mr Araujo, and a former preliminary candidate, José Galat.

Meanwhile, forces have been emerging within the PCC which reject yet another candidature of Mr Uribe and want the conservatives to sharpen their

profile. Consequently, the party found it hard to agree on a common line about reelection. An open letter written by twelve of 18 conservative senators, demanding that the referendum be supported unambiguously and that the PCC should field its own candidate only if Mr Uribe should stand down, was followed by a letter signed by 22 of 30 PCC MPs demanding that the party should stick to its current policy. While some observers think that the senators' venture was stage-managed by Mr Uribe, others assume that Mrs Noemí Sanín, a candidate highly esteemed by many, is to be given a chance should Mr Uribe not stand again.

Among the opposition parties, the Partido Liberal (PL) suffered a number of heavy setbacks after 2002. In the congressional elections of 2002 and 2006, for example, the traditional party came in third after Mr Uribe's party and the PCC. In the presidential elections of 2006, it made a bad third again. It is true that the Liberals do have MPs and senators who are popular and generally appreciated. Yet the party itself does not cut a very good figure precisely because it is dominated by individual personages. All in all, there are seven preliminary candidates competing for the office of president, among which Rafael Pardo, a former minister of defence, appears to be enjoying the brightest prospects at the moment.

The Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA), a pool of diverse left-wing groups, won a meagre 6.2 percent of the vote in 2002, when its name was Polo Democrático Independiente (PDI) and its top candidate was Luis 'Lucho' Garzón. In 2006, when its candidate was Carlos Gaviria, a former president of the Constitutional Court, it did much better at 31.1 percent. Mr Gaviria will probably once again win the day within the party, all the more so as his opponent, the former guerillero and senator Gustavo Petro, is unacceptable to the dogmatists within the PDA. Luis Garzón, who has left the Polo in the meanwhile, is currently sounding out his chances as a candidate outside the party.

Finally, a group of five politicians has banded together as 'independents': three former mayors of Bogotá, Antanas Morkus, Lucho Garzón and Enrique Peñalosa; the ex-mayor of Medellín, Sergio Fajardo; and senator Marta Lucía Ramírez, a former member of Mr Uribe's party. United mainly by their critical attitude towards the political reform act, they have no political platform of their own, and it is highly probable that they will not field a presidential candidate. It is true that Mr Garzón aspires to stand, but Mrs. Ramírez and Mr Fajardo have also declared their interest, although it is only the latter that might have what it takes to create a surprise in the presidential campaign.

It is unlikely that the reelection referendum will be approved by a majority in congress. The initiatives about changing the constitution yet another time or convening a constituent assembly are too unrealistic. At the same time, any

forecast should be handled with care, for predictability has never been a salient characteristic of Colombia's party politics.

Alvaro Uribe will have until the end of November to declare his candidature. In the next four months, the political debate in the country may well go on revolving around the reelection issue at the expense of often more substantial subjects. At that, there is no dearth of matters to exercise society, including the impact of the global economic crisis in Colombia, the budget deficit, unfinished political reforms, the ailing social system, the question of land use, and public education. Lastly, there has been no debate so far about what will happen to the policy of *seguridad democrática* in the future.

To be sure, the Uribe government has considerable achievements to point at: the security situation has improved crucially, and the foundations for further political and economic development have been laid. What is needed now, however, are mutually complementary policies that address the social question first and foremost. It may also be necessary to repair the collateral damage done by the controversy about the whether and how of Mr Uribe's reelection. In short, what is at stake is the core of Mr Uribe's line and the transformation of *seguridad democrática* into a *política de gobierno*. If this policy were to be abandoned in the event of the Uribe era coming to an end, this would be a dramatic hiatus for the country. The coming months will probably see a decision about Colombia's future policy.

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