

Colombian scandal shows all sides

As political allies come forward with evidence of cooperation with paramilitaries, the strengths of democratic institutions is revealed, but so is the president's weakening position.

By Samuel Logan

As more Colombian politicians come forward with personal accounts of back room dealings with the country's paramilitary forces, questions concerning the depth of corruption in politics commingle with concern that the Colombian military might somehow be involved in the scandal.

Close ties between the Colombian military and paramilitary leaders have long been suspected by human rights groups and other NGOs working in Colombia. Within Colombia, these links have been universally accepted yet categorically denied.

Meanwhile, the country's media and Supreme Court press forward in seeking the truth behind the connections between the political class and paramilitary leaders. As the Supreme Court calls witness after witness, it is building a critical mass of evidence against corrupt politicians. At the same time, others are leaking tips about certain individuals to the Colombian press, which could point out new leads for federal prosecutors. The result is a massive process of rooting-out corruption that may extend beyond the political class into the upper ranks of military commanders.

This so-called "political cleansing" has forced Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to walk a thin line between political destruction and survival.

Uribe had previously promised to deconstruct Colombia's traditional political class, saying that more transparency was needed. He also wanted to democratize politics in Colombia, which was limited to individuals with land holdings or social clout. Until now, many were not sure how the president would achieve those goals. The political cleansing, however, may end the careers of many politicians and help Uribe to fulfill an important campaign promise.

The military question

Reports from human rights organizations such as Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) decry direct ties between the Colombian military and Colombia's paramilitary organizations.

In February of 2000, an HRW publication entitled "The Ties That Bind: Colombia and Military-Paramilitary Links" documented direct connections between the Third Brigade of the Colombian Army and a paramilitary group called the Calima Block, which had formed in the country's southwest.

Many informants, who presumably would have good knowledge of such connections, were interviewed for the report. Six years later, other reports have corroborated this information, even after the Calima Block has disarmed with little to no recognition of close ties between this paramilitary group and the Colombian military.

This HRW publication and others have documented a history of close relationships between Colombia's military commanders and the leaders of paramilitary units. From the mid-1990s until just a few years ago, paramilitary violence was clearly out of control, largely because there was very little resistance to the paramilitary commanders' reign over their turf. Once the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) had been pushed out of a region, the Colombian military did little to secure the area - an arrangement many believe was made between mid-level military commanders and paramilitary leaders.

Many of the mid-level commanders who allegedly colluded with paramilitary leaders in the mid-90s have since been promoted. As commanders of Colombia's military forces, the possibility that they have colluded with an organization the US government considers a terrorist group casts a shadow over the future of US military aid to Colombia.

"These guys were in the field and were critical to what was going on as the paramilitaries became the only anti-guerrilla strategy that was working," Adam Isacson, Director of Programs with the Center for International Policy, told ISN Security Watch in a recent phone call.

"A big question we should be asking now is: where were the current heads of the Colombian armed forces working

in the second half of the 90s when the paramilitaries were [rapidly] taking over new territories with the help of drug traffickers?" he said.

The political fallout

The process of political cleansing currently being pushed forward by Colombia's Supreme Court and media has created a nationwide sensation.

"This is probably the most serious crisis that President Uribe has faced," Michael Shifter, Vice President of Policy with the Inter-American Dialogue, told ISN Security Watch.

"It is crucial to take control, take the initiative and clean out the political system," he argued. Shifter pointed out that Uribe has to get in front of the scandal and move past a reactive stance.

"So far he's been reactive and defensive, and ultimately, if it continues this way it will undermine his authority, which has been his greatest strength," Shifter said.

Links between paramilitary figures and politicians are unacceptable for Colombians and the international community. As Colombia's Supreme Court continues its investigation, it is likely the judicial body will continue to uncover evidence that if made public could severely undermine Uribe's presidency.

Publicizing damning evidence separates the Colombian press from many other media in the rest of Latin America. Leaks to the press, published on the front page of Colombian daily *El Tiempo*, often create follow-ups in full view of the public.

The current scandal began to gather momentum after evidence found on the laptop and in the database of paramilitary leader Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, also known as Jorge 40, delivered proof of direct ties between the paramilitary leader and Colombian politicians who had met with him for political support.

Another laptop, one used by a paramilitary leader known as Adolfo Paz, or Don Berna, has also been seized. So far, evidence on this computer has not been made public. But many find it hard to believe there is not a long list of military leaders and politicians very close to Uribe yet to be brought to light for paramilitary collusion.

Time will tell

For over four decades, Colombians have lived the reality of an ongoing civil war between the FARC and the country's armed forces. At times, the conflict has been one of low intensity, at other times it has been extremely violent. From the 1960s, when the FARC began operations, until the mid-1990s, there was little progress in subduing the violence short of the brutal effectiveness of paramilitary groups. However, their brutality led to international infamy, forcing anyone who had colluded with paramilitary leaders to deny any involvement.

The denial of politicians' and military commanders' involvement with paramilitary groups notorious for human rights atrocities and drug trafficking has lasted for many years. For this reason alone, many claim, Colombia's current political scandal is good for the country, even if it is painful.

"If you are doing things that are illegal, incorrect morally or even inconvenient politically, you have to deny all that," Jorge Restrepo, Director with Colombia's Conflict Analysis Resource Center, told ISN Security Watch.

"What [we're seeing] now is the extent of the participation of society in a conflict we didn't want to label as a civil war," he added.

"It is opening up in front of our eyes. From 1997 until 2002 it was truly a situation of serious war. It was not a low-intensity conflict, and we [Colombians] were the first ones trying to deny that it existed," Restrepo said.

He also pointed out that the perseverance of Colombia's institutions, particularly the judicial system, was fundamental to the current process as well as where it would take Colombians into the future.

Colombia's paramilitary groups appeared in 1997 as bands of men formed together to defend themselves from what many perceived at the time as a growing problem with the FARC. Nearly a decade later, paramilitary groups have evolved beyond groups of armed individuals into astute political actors, mafia-like warlords and cunning drug traffickers.

Colombia's political scandal has shown a high level of integration between paramilitaries and the country's political class. Time will tell if the same level of integration can be proven beyond a reasonable doubt between paramilitaries and the Colombian military.

Yet two points are already clear, experts agree. First, Colombia's democratic institutions, despite years of civil war, still function. This fact should keep well with anyone worried about the future of Colombia's democracy. Second, president Uribe has lost a significant amount of credibility and authority. His ability to deal with this situation, moving into 2007, will be a test.

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