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Politics as Organized Crime in Colombia?

by Forrest Hylton

As the rest of Latin America continues its seismic political shift to the left, Colombia moves starkly in the opposite direction. In the March 12 congressional elections, 22 of the country's 32 departments swung to the right, and now that President Álvaro Uribe Vélez has re-engineered the 1991 Constitution, he is widely expected to win a second term in the May 28 elections.

Uribe's re-election bid and the paramilitary entry into official politics have split the Liberal Party, and the parliamentary duopoly—shared by the Liberals and the Conservative Party—that endured for more than 150 years appears to have ended. The Conservative Party, which put forth candidates with paramilitary ties and is merely one of a handful of parties in the pro-Uribe camp, has been losing ground to the Liberal Party since the 1940s. But in the recent elections, the Conservatives made their first significant gains against the Liberals since 1930.

The congressional election had several other significant features: the abstention rate of 60% was typically high; the Liberal Party suffered a historic setback with the defection of many of its *caciques* (political bosses) to pro-Uribe parties, which ended up winning 70% of the seats in the House and Senate; and the remarkable showing—by Colombian standards—of a united electoral left led by professor and jurist Carlos Gaviria. The results highlight the growing degree of political polarization under Uribe and the overwhelming dominance of the pro-Uribe right. Perhaps most revealing of the country's current political conjuncture and its future directions was the extent to which the elections confirmed the paramilitaries' increasing reach into Colombia's official political landscape.

Paramilitarism began in Colombia as a counterinsurgency strategy against the expansion of a durable left insurgency that exercised sovereignty, levied taxes and challenged private property rights in huge swaths of Colombia's territory. In the 1980s and 1990s, with the support of landowners, sectors of the Colombian police, military and intelligence, and the two main political parties, the right-wing counterinsurgency went from operating locally and regionally to operating nationally. Paramilitaries quickly moved beyond the designs of their creators to become the country's largest, most powerful landlords and cocaine exporters, with regional power bases that translated into electoral gains.

In the hothouse of the narcotics trade, paramilitary activities also became a business enterprise premised on the violent concentration of land as well as the promotion of large-scale agribusiness, mining, transport and infrastructure projects. As human rights groups have documented, paramilitaries are responsible for an estimated 80% of all human rights violations in Colombia, helping to create the second-largest internally displaced population in the world; two million have been dispossessed in the first five years of this century, second only to Sudan. This massive displacement facilitated the expropriation of land, which provided the paramilitaries and their allies one way to launder fortunes acquired mainly through drug trafficking.

One of Uribe's first acts upon coming to power in 2002 was to declare a "peace process" with the paramilitaries. But it is not a peace process in the accepted sense of the term, since paramilitaries have always claimed to be fighting in support of the Colombian government in its war against left insurgencies—a factor that partially explains why the demobilization process continued even though paramilitaries doubled their attacks from 2004 to 2005. Half of paramilitary commanders are wanted for extradition to the United States on cocaine trafficking charges, but the Colombian government would be hard-pressed to fight the paramilitaries and left insurgencies at the same time. So in March the U.S. government request-

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ed the extradition of commanders from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) on trafficking charges, sending a clear signal of impunity to paramilitaries. But in delegating repression to right-wing paramilitary forces, the Colombian state has weakened an already fragile legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. President Uribe appears to recognize this, and has sought to integrate the paramilitaries into public life via demobilization under the terms of the "Justice and Peace Law."

LUIS URREGO/LATINPHOTO.ORG

President Álvaro Uribe greets military commanders of the Army's Fourth Brigade in Medellin.

Rafael Pardo, who lost the presidential nomination as the Liberal Party candidate, used the phrase "a political model based on organized crime" to describe the implications of the "Justice and Peace Law" passed by the Colombian Congress in June 2005. The law gives a team of 20 prosecutors a maximum of 60 days to investigate all paramilitary crimes, and it provides the legal framework regulating the "demobilization" of 30 paramilitary blocs composed of 28,000 fighters. Colombian Senator Jimmy Chamorro aptly described it as "a law of immunity and impunity." And a surprisingly frank *New York Times* editorial argued that it should have been called the "Impunity for Mass Murderers, Terrorists and Major Cocaine Traffickers' Law."

The law makes no provisions for official reparations to victims and provides only minimal investigation of paramilitary crimes. If the demobilized commanders serve jail time in Colombia—as one of the most powerful is now doing at the prison of his choice—they would only do a maximum of five and a half years, after which they could claim double jeopardy in the face of U.S. government extradition requests. Numerous human rights organizations have documented that commanders of the regional paramilitary blocs have not "demobilized" their private armies, except for photo-ops during official ceremonies. Paramilitary armies, landed empires, investments, bank accounts, transport corridors, political connections and the dominance of cocaine exports are likely to remain intact.

Through the pomp and ceremony of demobilization, paramilitaries have disappeared through official fiat, but their power is suspected to be greater now than it was before the demobilization ceremonies began. In February, the U.S. government pressured President Uribe's cousin, Senator Mario Uribe, to remove two openly paramilitary candidates from the list of congressional candidates of the one of the most powerful party backing the President's re-election bid—the Democratic Colombia party. In a strikingly uncharacteristic response, President Uribe demanded that Washington stay out of Colombia's internal affairs. The candidates barred from Mario Uribe's party quietly passed into the ranks of another pro-government party, Citizen Convergence, led by Luis Alberto Gil. Pressed by a journalist about his connections to paramilitaries, Gil replied, "Me? A paramilitary? But paramilitarism is over in Colombia…. And it's not me saying this, it's our President, Álvaro Uribe Vélez." Gil was one of the top 10 congressional vote-getters, and his party picked up 14 seats. Amid widespread criticism in the run-up to the elections, nine paramilitary candidates were purged from the congressional lists of the two strongest pro-Uribe parties: the National Unity Party—commonly known as "La U" and led by former Liberal *caciques*—and the Radical Change party. But four of those candidates still won seats by getting on the ballots of other, lower-profile pro-Uribe parties, especially in the northern coast. Yet paramilitaries dumped two of their staunchest congressional supporters, both women, after the U.S. Embassy demanded their expulsion from the lists of La U.

It is in Colombia's northern Caribbean region straddling the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta—namely, the departments of Magdalena, Cesar and La Guajira—that the growing paramilitary reach over politics and the economy has been strongest. Hernán Giraldo and Rodrigo Tovar (a.k.a. "Jorge 40"), who demobilized in February and March 2006 respectively, control the department of Magdalena. In 2003, their candidate for governor won the race after running unopposed (the other candidates had resigned citing paramilitary threats). They also secured victory for three senators and three representatives to the national legislature. And in late 2002, when one opposition candidate braved threats from the AUC and insisted on running for mayor in the municipality of

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Concordia, he was assassinated. Fourteen of thirty mayors in the department ran unopposed in the 2003 local elections.

In La Guajira, a Caribbean department along the Venezuelan border, the mayor and 10 city council members were arrested in the capital, Riohacha, in September 2004 for funneling healthcare block grants to Jorge 40. In Santa Marta, the capital of Magdalena, everyone from street vendors to store owners pay taxes levied by paramilitary groups. As elsewhere, in Magdalena and La Guajira, Giraldo and Jorge 40 control intelligence, gambling, prostitution, private security, protection rackets, contraband, money laundering and much of the cocaine business.

Jorge 40's strategy of enlisting candidates with backgrounds in traditional politics, rather than recruiting newcomers with direct and overt paramilitary association, proved successful in the congressional elections. All but one of the four candidates expelled from other pro-Uribe parties ended up winning in Jorge 40's fiefdom, along with traditional *caciques*. For the time being, the paramilitaries have shown a clear preference for politicians not publicly associated with them, choosing influence over direct representation, but they re-elected congressmen and senators on the coast. In the wake of demobilization, paramilitaries have become a mafia state within the state, but their future ultimately rests on Uribe's willingness to refuse U.S. government requests for their extradition. Warriors like Jorge 40 have said that only re-election can guarantee their "peace," which requires, in the words of one of the last of the paramilitary Castaño dynasty, nothing less than "judicial bulletproofing." ■

Reviews: Books & More

The Globalizers: Development Workers in Action by Jeffrey T. Jackson, 2005, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 392 pages,

THE COLONIZED PARTS OF THE PLANET bear the ironic marks of a brutal history. Honduras' capital, Tegucigalpa, takes its name from the Nahuatl language, and means "Silver Mountain." There was a time when the city was the capital of the mining operations of the Spanish colonial regime in Central America. By the mid 1950s, the great silver mine firm, the Honduran Rosario Mining Company, ended its magnificent run in the seams. Silver production peaked, and then entered a slow decline. World Bank economic statistics for Honduras are miserable: over half the population lives below the official poverty line, close to a third suffer from chronic unemployment, and the income differentials between the immensely wealthy and the immiserated is grotesquely high. As the poet Roberto Sosa wrote in 1969, "*Los pobres son muchos y por eso/ es imposible olvidarlos*" ("The poor are many and that's why/ it is impossible to forget them").

By anthropologist Jeffrey Jackson's reckoning, the rich never forget the poor. They simply re-brand them as "customers" of "aid," using this sleight of hand to reproduce colonial levels of exploitation while appearing magnanimous. There is now an enormous literature that questions the ideological stratagems of the globalization industry as propelled by the claims of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Writing in English, Laura MacDonald, Alan Fowler, Anthony Bebbington, Sonia Alvarez, James Petras and others have provided ample testimony on the dubious role also played by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the social development of Central and South America. Jackson goes deeper than these accounts. He takes for granted that the "aid industry" is part and parcel of the technique to undermine the sovereignty of nation-states and, more, to enfeeble democratic processes. What he illuminates is the mechanism by which this democratic powerlessness is produced, one in which consent rather than coercion is the dominant lever. How indeed are the "globalizers"—the hundreds of transnational institutions and their staffs working in recipient countries—able to draw in a coalition among civil society within the former Third World to participate in their own continued dependency? And why did Hondurans, in this case, allow themselves to be so entangled?

Early in *The Globalizers*, Jackson offers a revealing socio-geography of the institutions of "aid" and "development." Whereas the constitutional government of Honduras is located in the Comayagüela section of Tegucigalpa and around the downtown Parque Central, the institutions of global government are almost all in the Colonia Palmira neighborhood. The former is a bustle, with family-owned shops and street vendors selling goods at Honduran prices; embassies and expatriate households dominate the latter, where fancy cars traverse bare streets and shops sell goods at dollar prices. "What this institutional geography reveals," Jackson concludes, "is the tremendous wealth disparity between the foreign development agencies and the Honduran government institu-