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Colombia Has Changed: Uribe at Six Months

Phillip McLean

OVERVIEW

- **Colombia's new president, Alvaro Uribe, believes his effort to overcome domestic violence is part of the global war on terrorism and thus deserves international support.**
- **Uribe is adopting tough measures but, as the tragic, February 7, 2003 attack on a prestigious social club in Bogotá demonstrated, the power of violent groups is enormous. Some fear disappointment if his get-tough policies do not get quick results.**
- **Uribe's security strategy is: (1) provide more resources for the military and the police with the expectation that they will be more aggressive; (2) reestablish a government presence throughout the nation; (3) involve citizens in their own protection; and (4) weaken the guerrillas by encouraging defections and capturing leaders.**
- **Uribe believes that guerrillas and paramilitaries are outlaws, not legitimate political actors. He fully backs the U.S.-financed anti-narcotics programs because the subversives rely on drug money.**
- **Uribe will use a campaign for a "political-reform" referendum to maintain popular support.**

Six months after the inauguration of President Alvaro Uribe, Colombia is moving in new directions—directions that his violent opponents in guerrilla movements and the narcotics trade are determined to defeat. On February 7, 2003, the six-month anniversary of Uribe's inauguration, a car bomb tore apart the prestigious Club Nogal, a sports complex and social hub for the country's entrepreneurs and foreign investors. Thirty-four people died, including six children, and some 200 were injured. The attack may dim a bit of the optimistic spirit induced by Uribe's energetic beginning, but it and other recent terror incidents seem to be galvanizing rather than discouraging support for his security initiatives. Recent polls give him a 66 percent favorable rating.

Although Uribe is clearly riding a wave of popular revulsion against the country's widespread lawlessness, he can take personal credit for much of dramatic turnaround in Colombian attitudes. His impressive first-round victory in the elections last May was due in no small part to his having identified, long before his rivals, how to turn people's feelings of insecurity into support for uncharacteristically (for Colombia) tough measures. Once in office, Uribe adopted a set of policies he called "democratic security." The package is intended to encourage citizens to cooperate with the armed forces and the police and to accept the need for larger budgets to fund the more aggressive effort to control violent groups. Uribe's popularity is helped by the perception that he has his own plan and that the United States supports it. Until the Club Nogal attack, there were even some members of the usually disheartened elite who began to believe that peace might indeed be in the offing.

The sad truth is that uncertainties and problems abound. Uribe certainly is pushing his country in new directions, but most of the old obstacles facing his predecessors remain. It may be useful to see how Uribe sees old problems in new ways.

Righting the Economy. On taking office in August, Uribe found that he faced an economic squeeze even more daunting than anticipated during the presidential campaign. By inauguration day, it was already clear that the country was going to miss targets established in previous agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Then it turned out that earlier estimates had

significantly downplayed the size of the consolidated fiscal deficit. Undeterred by that bleak financial picture, Uribe pushed ahead in the first months of his presidency with proposals to get more resources into the hands of the armed forces and the police. To fill the financing gap, he has raised taxes risking popular resentment and depressed demand. But, contrary to those concerns, consumer confidence rose apparently with the hope that improved security will encourage investment. On January 15, 2003, the IMF approved a $2.1 billion standby arrangement which, in effect, is an endorsement of Uribe's approach. The IMF accepts that his package of tax hikes, government reforms, and cuts in non-security expenditures will put Colombia back on the track to stability and growth. Nonetheless, the success of Uribe's policies is not guaranteed. Public debt remains high. A recent analysis by the Inter-American Development Bank rated Colombia in the mid-range of countries "vulnerable" to external shock. One such shock is already in the making. Colombia's important exports to Venezuela are estimated to drop 17 per cent this year.

Managing the Conflict. When outsiders look at Colombia they tend to see a forty-year-long civil war that looks a lot like the guerrilla wars of Central America. That leads to proposals for peace processes and the exchange of captured insurgents for kidnapped civilians. But Uribe had a different view. His statements make clear that he considers guerrillas and paramilitaries alike as outlaws and, while remaining open to contacts, he insists that the Colombian state must maintain the upper hand in any talks with dissidents. He has, for example, rejected exchanging kidnapped civilians for captured guerrillas. This has brought great pressure from the families of those now in guerrilla hands, including his successor as governor of Antioquia and presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. (The French government has put its weight behind doing something special for Bittencourt.) Uribe's government has also resisted initiatives promoted by non-governmental organization (NGO) and Colombia-based United Nation's official that the government believes favor criminal groups. Just recently, Uribe ministers vetoed a proposal by the UN human rights representative who sought to convene a regional dialogue in the violent frontier department of Arauca, with the central government sitting as just one of the participants around the table with local officials and civilian groups, the church, and the guerrillas. Keeping the Colombian state strong is the cornerstone of Uribe's approach.

A danger is that Uribe may be putting too much faith in his hard-line approach and underestimating the size and complexity of the challenge he faces. One well-connected analyst alleges that just as Uribe's predecessor Andres Pastrana believed peace negotiations with the largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), would quickly lead to peace, now Uribe is looking for quick results from tough, confrontational policies. The story may not be quite as stark as that brief analysis suggests. Pastrana began to increase the military's capability and Uribe's government says it is preparing for the long haul.

Yet, the power of the violent opposition remains enormous. Although the second large-t guerrilla network, the National Liberation Army (ELN) is somewhat weaker, it still has an estimated 4,000 soldiers in the field. And although the paramilitaries are now known to be less united than previously believed, they still have violent potential with more than 10,000 armed followers. Their offer to lay down their arms is not likely to lead to an early or quick pacification of the zones they now dominate. At best, prolonged negotiations will lead to a partial yet costly disarmament. The growth in the capability of the armed forces has made the FARC less ready for major set-piece battles, but no one suggests tha FARC's leaders have lost their will to fight. With 15,000 generally well-trained insurgents, the FARC is still the government's most formidable foe. It is experimenting with urban warfare techniques, probably learned from the Irish Republican Army, and with the kind of threatening tactics used by the narcotics kingpins in the past. Indeed, the Club Nogal massacre raises the possibility that the narcotics traffickers and guerrillas may have reached a new level of symbiosis.

Defining a Strategy. Uribe came to office with what seemed to be more of a slogan than a fully articulated security policy. His call for democratic security did force critics to admit that the protection of people is a proper democratic value, though human rights organizations are still skittish about encouraging private citizens to bear arms and act as informants, even if it is for their own security. A Defense Ministry's draft security-policy document appeared in conferences in Bogotá, but the government has not yet had it published. The outline of what Uribe wanted and what his policy will be is clear nonetheless.

Uribe has offered the security forces more resources (not just material but, significantly, a doubling of the police and military combat troops). In exchange, he is demanding a more aggressive posture by all service branches. A departure for a Colombian civilian leader, he telephones subordinate commanders urging action but also offering praise for successful operations. So far this cheerleading is more visible and evidently more successful with urban operations and important kidnapping cases than with motivating major confrontations in the field with guerrilla formations.

The new president is prioritizing the reinsertion of a government presence in parts of the country now dominated by the contending outlaw groups. Some 10 percent of all rural municipalities are said to have no government presence. Perhaps more critical are zones, such as much of the department of Arauca, where guerrillas and paramilitaries are the major forces in the economy and local government. The government plans to establish a police and judicial presence even in the most remote municipalities. In order to impose government control over more populated but conflicted parts of the country, it has already set up three special "rehabilitation zones," which are being governed by retired military officers.

Uribe promised during the presidential campaign to involve common citizens in the government's security efforts. The proposal sparked criticism from those who feared it would lead to a new proliferation of paramilitary groups with the attendant abuses of neighbors informing on neighbors or of revengeful bloodshed. In practice—at least thus far—the results have been benign. The minister of defense claims that an informant network is now widely deployed and helping to improve the government's intelligence capability, one of her priority goals. And peasants are now serving in new army reserve units in their own communities. The government insists the new recruits are and will remain under the strict orders of regular military commanders. Some question the effectiveness of these programs, but they do seem to have had some success at breaking down the alienation between citizens and authorities that has hurt earlier security efforts.

Above all, Uribe's strategic objective clearly is to weaken and defeat the insurgents. Although the Uribe government still sees the carrot of negotiations as a valid tool for ending conflict, its principal emphasis is on making its stick more credible. It is training additional mobile units (to be equipped with helicopters purchased by the previous administration) and promises to use the additional budget resources it is raising to equip and employ more. While that buildup goes on, the government is giving more attention to targeting the guerrilla groups directly by encouraging defections and identifying and capturing their leaders. The first seizure of a well-known guerrilla personality will be a major morale booster.

Supporting Drug Control. Many expected the new president to be as cautious about drug control matters as his predecessors, especially given the loud domestic and international protests against aerial spraying of narcotics crops. Uribe confounded observers by, on the contrary, fully endorsing and backing the U.S.-financed antinarcotics campaign. He and his associates have an almost magical faith in what can be done. Interior Minister Londono was recently quoted—perhaps understood to be an exaggeration—as saying "narcotics trafficking will end in a year!" Uribe and his key advisers have a strong belief that they can fatally weaken subversive bands by drying up the profits extracted from the drug trade. Most of the massive U.S. contribution promised three years ago by President Bill Clinton to President Pastrana's Plan Colombia has now arrived, and the aircraft and helicopters make an impressive sight lined up on refurbished airstrips in the eastern Colombian plains. Counter narcotics operations are now able to go forward at full speed with full Colombian government support. The spraying of 200,000 hectares in twelve months will be the most extensive narcotics eradication effort ever undertaken in any country. The Colombian administration has also agreed to an unprecedented degree of law-enforcement cooperation. In just these first months, it has extradited 34 accused drug traffickers to the United States. The Colombians seem content to use this Plan Colombia aid for anti-narcotics purposes, but since President George W. Bush changed the rules last summer they can now ask that units trained for antinarcotics and their helicopters be diverted to counter guerrilla work in some circumstances.

Reforming Government. Although Alvaro Uribe won the presidency on a law and order platform, he also campaigned as a good government candidate. Government reform is good politics in a Colombia that is not only disgusted with multiple examples of public corruption but that also has at hand some important examples of how good management of public goods can improve the general welfare. No one can fail to be impressed with the way the city of Bogotá turned around in recent years because of the leadership of a series of hard-working mayors. The young president spends most weekends traveling around the country participating in town meetings where—to the embarrassment of local officials—he often shows himself to be the best-informed person present. He appointed a cabinet more technically qualified than politically important. And even though that meant that he passed up important opportunities for political patronage, he managed to succeed pushing the major items on his legislative agenda (reforms of labor, pensions, taxes, and government reorganization) through the first session of a fragmented Congress. Perhaps, from Uribe's point of view, his major achievement was getting Congress to agree on the referendum that he promised during the election last year.

The referendum gives Uribe a vehicle for rallying public support. His original proposal was to get public approval for a major political reform. Now the 18 substantive

points of the version adopted by Congress cover the gamut from freezing government pensions and salaries to criminalizing personal doses of marijuana, to eliminating regional public auditors (suspected of cooperating in the misdirection of central government funds to local politicians). The political reforms remaining from the initial draft are said by insiders to have lost much substance and become largely symbolic. Two oft-cited examples are measures to reduce the size of Congress (only after the next election) and ban two practices supposedly barred by an earlier constitutional reform (i.e., *auxilios,* the special pork-barrel provisions traditionally set aside for individual members of Congress, and *suplentes,* the rotation of congressional seats among favored politicians). The Constitutional Court has until March to review the proposed referendum and may make changes before sending it to the voters as early as late April and as late as early June. The real contest will likely not be over individual provisions of the referendum but rather whether voters turn out in large enough numbers to make the referendum results valid (more than 6 million needed). The referendum will then have become, in effect, a plebiscite on Uribe's government—a chance that Uribe, the able politician, certainly knew he was taking.

At this point, the risk does not seem to be all that great. The president's popularity ratings have fallen but still hold at an impressive 66 percent after reaching a sky high 75 percent late last year. Although there have been rumors of dissatisfaction with some of the minor ministers, Uribe's government on the whole seems to be performing smoothly. Even the controversial Interior and Justice Minister Fernando Londoño appears to be more of a team player than newspaper reports predicted. Perhaps because it is more technical than political, the face of the cabinet appears even more elitist than the usual gathering of Colombian leaders. Uribe seems aware of the need to put a kinder look to his government and recently announced a "social reactivation program," a package of spending measures directed at the growing poverty-stricken share of the population. (Sadly, its author, the talented minister of health and labor Juan Luis Londoño died in the crash of a small aircraft on February 6, 2003.) When the referendum vote finally comes—perhaps as late as June or July—Uribe is likely to be judged more on whether his economic and security programs are generating jobs and making people feel safer.

Dealing with Alliance Frustrations. Colombia is one corner of the world where the United States is becoming more popular. Colombians can identify easily with the U.S. focus on anti-terrorism and appreciate signs that the United States is making impressively large deliveries on past aid promises. They even accept counternarcotics justification for the largest part of U.S. assistance—perhaps even more than many Americans do. Some friction does seem inevitable. Although the large official U.S. presence has not stirred resentment, at least to this point, incidents will no doubt occur. A tragic loss of life would be particularly stressful. To make clear its principled stance on human rights, the United States has just cut off aid to one Colombian air force unit that it decided was not cooperating in the investigation of a bombing that resulted in the death of numerous civilians in a remote village two years ago. For Colombians, a vexing frustration is the U.S. failure, despite high-level promises, to restart the intelligence sharing and operational coordination needed to intercept trafficker aircraft. This so-called air-bridge interdiction was halted two years ago when an accident in a similar program in Peru resulted in the shoot down of a U.S. missionary plane and not revived because of understandable working-level concerns about personal liability. Uribe and his justice minister see air interdiction as the fastest way of sucking the profits from the narcotics business and the flow of funds to the other outlaw groups.

Uribe's recent statements confirm that he is anxious to see quick results and is disappointed that Colombia's fight against terrorism does not receive the attention of the coming Middle East engagement. His term lasts only four years and he can never be reelected. Thus, Uribe's frustrations will mount if his close relations with the United States do not seem to be getting results.

About the Author

Phillip McLean is a senior associate in the CSIS Americas Program. A retired Foreign Service officer, McLean is former deputy assistant secretary of state for South America. He has served in Europe and four countries in Latin America including Colombia.

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