

Alvaro Uribe: The Most Dangerous Man in Colombian Politics

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No other political figure is as polarizing in Colombia as ex-president Alvaro Uribe. President from 2002 to 2010, Uribe used U.S. aid under Plan Colombia to strengthen Colombia's state capacity. He utilized the military's newfound strength to push the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) out of towns and cities and back into the jungle.ⁱ By the end of Uribe's presidency, the number of FARC combatants had declined from 20,000 to 8,000 and the National Liberation Army's (ELN) numbers had halved from 3,500 to 1,500. Because of this success, many Colombians saw Uribe as a national hero, with many claiming he was the best president Colombia has ever had.ⁱⁱ For many, Uribe brought stability and normality back to Colombia. The increased security boosted the economy, attracting foreign direct investment and encouraging economic development. Upon leaving office, Uribe enjoyed an approval rating of 75 percent and would have easily won a third term if the Supreme Court had allowed it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet, such achievements and admiration have blinded many Colombians to Uribe's shortcomings. His administration was riddled with secret wiretapping, corruption, blatant support of right-wing paramilitaries and severe human rights abuses.

Under Uribe's leadership, the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS), a national security branch of the government, became a political tool through which the president conducted secret wiretaps to spy on opponents.^{iv} In 2015, two of his former aides were sentenced to prison for intercepting calls on judges, members of the opposition, and journalists from 2007 to 2009.^v Even more importantly, his former chief of staff was sentenced to eight years in prison, while the head of the Colombian intelligence agency was sentenced to 14 years on charges of wiretapping.^{vi} The corruption of DAS ran so deep that its practices are still being investigated and in September 2017, Jorge Noguera Cotes, the ex-director of DAS, was sentenced to jail for conducting secret wiretaps from 2002 to 2005.^{vii} Still, Uribe claims that his only crime was defending Colombia from attacks by leftist terrorists.^{viii}

Aside from this, several of Uribe's ministers have been sentenced on charges of corruption. His former interior and social protection ministers were sentenced to more than six years for bribing lawmakers to support re-election.^{ix} Andres Felipe Arias,

Uribe's agriculture minister, was arrested in 2011 on similar charges.^x With the Odebrecht scandal in early 2017, where a Brazilian construction company was discovered to have used political bribery to secure over 100 projects in 12 countries, Uribe's minister of transport was found guilty of corruption and is now in prison. Another prominent scandal involved the Agro Ingreso Seguro Fund. While supposedly created to provide funds to labor workers in order to stimulate the small scale farming, it acted as an embezzlement scheme through which millions of dollars were instead allocated to wealthy landowning families.^{xi}

Arguably, an even more serious concern about Uribe's actions is his administration's ties to the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), a right-wing paramilitary coalition with the primary goal of fighting against the leftist insurgency groups in Colombia and a designated terrorist group by the U.S. government as of 2001. This group is responsible for the largest number of human rights abuses in the conflict, including kidnapping, extortion, murder, and rape, even when considering the abuses committed by FARC and ELN.^{xii}

Many of Uribe's own close relatives have been imprisoned on charges for supporting paramilitaries, including Uribe's own brother. In 2016, Santiago Uribe was arrested for establishing a paramilitary group called the Twelve Apostles in the 1990s. Though Alvaro Uribe has not been implicated himself, the fact that many of the group's meetings occurred at their family ranch and that Alvaro Uribe was governor of the region at the time makes it unlikely that he was uninvolved in the group. Another troubling connection to paramilitaries was the 2002 counterinsurgency push in Medellin, led by Mario Montoya, Uribe's defence minister at the time. According to a CIA report, this operation relied heavily on the AUC and Montoya planned the operation with AUC commander Fabio Jaramillo.^{xiii} The paramilitaries' connection to the Uribe administration is deep as well; over 150 members of congress were investigated for collusion with paramilitaries, and many of those convicted were members of Uribe's political coalition.^{xiv}

Furthermore, Uribe was the architect of Colombia's Justice and Peace law, which aimed to demobilize paramilitary groups and to hold them accountable for their actions. The law was highly criticized by international human rights experts because in practice, it granted paramilitaries with de facto amnesty.^{xv} The failure of the law to outline a substantive transition and judicial system for paramilitaries led to the emergence of BACRIM, large drug trafficking organizations that are mainly led by ex-AUC members. The presence of these groups still constitutes one of the biggest threats to Colombia's security.^{xvi}

In addition to the corruption, Colombia suffered some of its most egregious human rights abuses during Uribe's presidency. Among these abuses were the extrajudicial killings of thousands of FARC combatants, as well as the "false positives" scandal in which Colombia's military forces killed at least 5,000 civilians, dressed them as guerrillas, and gained bonuses from the government.^{xvii} The extreme militarization of

the country, supported by the U.S. government, led to the displacement of millions of people from vulnerable communities. This escalation of violence and militarization of the country also led to the murder of hundreds of trade unionists, journalists, and human rights defenders at the hands of government forces, paramilitaries, and FARC.^{xviii}

More specifically, this militarization also had particularly severe impacts on Colombia's most marginalized communities. Women suffered from increased rates of sexual violence, exploitation, and abuse.^{xix} Indigenous groups and Afro Colombians, the most marginalized communities in Colombian society, suffered the worst effects of the conflict, many of them being forcibly displaced from their lands and then further subjected to violence and discrimination. All of this shows that even though Uribe's policies ultimately led to the greater stability of the Colombia, this stability came at a great cost to Colombia's most vulnerable people.

Uribe left office in 2010 and by 2012, his successor; President Juan Manuel Santos had already begun secret negotiations with FARC. This is when Uribe inserted himself back into Colombian politics, openly opposing the negotiations and refusing to attend the peace talks after repeated invitations, asserting that FARC should not be talked to since they are narco-terrorists, not insurgents.^{xxxxi}

When the peace deal agreement was signed in 2016, Uribe continued to oppose it, effectively leading the “No” campaign on the referendum, which won with a 50.2% majority. Though the victory does represent the stark polarization in Colombian politics, the “No” campaign's win can be partially attributed to misinterpretations, rumours, and lies propelled by Uribe and his team. Some interpretations and scare tactics involved the belief that Colombia would become the new Venezuela, that pensioners would have to give up a percentage of their pensions to help the demobilization, and that there would be absolute amnesty for all crimes committed by FARC.^{xxii} Uribe himself argued that once the ex-guerrillas entered politics, Colombia would end up with a left-wing dictatorship, and that FARC would be allowed to keep their illicit profits.^{xxiii}

After defeating the peace agreement, Uribe agreed to attend the renegotiations. This new agreement was passed by congress in late 2016 and is in its early stages of implementation despite many delays and persistent mistrust between most Colombians and FARC. Still, President Uribe and his supporters in congress continue to oppose the deal outright. On the eve of Pope Francis' visit to Colombia during which he sought to build support for the continuation of the peace process, Uribe drafted a letter to the Pope in which he continued to express his disdain regarding the political participation by FARC, the transitional justice system/reduced sentences, and “impunity for atrocious crimes.”

Uribe's persistent opposition to the peace process represents his identity as a military hard-liner who would prefer to pursue an unconditional surrender rather than a negotiated peace. His claims that the agreement grants impunity and a free pass to war

criminals are unfounded and hypocritical, especially since Uribe's own Peace and Justice Law actually did grant impunity to war criminals. Unlike the Justice and Peace Law, the peace agreement establishes a transitional justice system, explicitly outlining the terms through which some ex-combatants can receive amnesty for minor crimes. Those guilty of crimes against humanity, sexual violence, and other serious crimes will receive appropriate punishments, ranging from restricted liberty to 20 years in prison. These terms were very controversial among the Colombian public, and after the failure of the referendum, these punishments were further tightened.

Despite the continued controversy surrounding these punishments, Uribe's claims that the peace agreement grant impunity and lack justice for victims are not valid. Given that the peace agreement is widely supported by the International Criminal Court, the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, the OAS, and many more NGOs, Uribe's claims have even less legitimacy. The above groups represent the ideas of the staunchest defenders of human rights and justice in the world and they consider the Colombian peace agreement to be one of the most progressive ever negotiated. If Uribe's claims had any truth, then there would be more international opposition to the agreement.

Instead, Uribe's opposition to the agreement likely lies in more personal and political reasons. Uribe comes from a large landowning family whose holdings have historically been threatened by FARC. They killed his father in a kidnapping attempt in 1983, and he himself was almost assassinated by them at his inauguration in 2002. His personal hatred of them, his interests as a landowner, and his political ambitions influenced him to commit and be associated with very serious atrocities in the name of counter terrorism and counter narcotics. As a result, many of Uribe's close family members and ministers have been jailed on charges of corruption and collusion with paramilitaries. In this context, Uribe has good reason to oppose the agreement. As a member of the conservative oligarch class, Uribe would not be interested in seeing any kind of land reform program, including the rather modest one proposed by the peace agreement. Politically, the influx of leftist ex-guerrillas in government and in the voting base weakens his own party base, especially when considering the hatred that members of FARC have towards Uribe. Exploiting the reservations of many Colombians towards the peace agreement by inciting fear and ignorance also places him and his party in a favourable position ahead of the upcoming presidential election.

More seriously, the testimonies of paramilitaries, ex-guerrillas, and members of the military under the transitional justice system would lead to more scrutiny of Uribe.^{xxiv} This, coupled with public speculation that Uribe should stand trial at the Hague for crimes against humanity would put Uribe in a precarious position and would further threaten his legacy. Uribe seems to be cognisant of this fact, and by extension opposes the measure to include members of the military in the transitional justice system, justifying their actions by stating, "We consider it unfair to submit them [the military] to the FARC justice, equalling them with the members of this group and exposing them to

recognize crimes not committed to avoid jail time. Colombia has had a democracy affected by narco terrorism, not a dictatorship confronted by armed civilians.”

In sum, while President Uribe is credited with the stability and security of Colombia, this security came at a great cost to civilians and represented many gross violations of human rights and ethical governance. Uribe continues to be one of Colombia’s biggest obstacles to achieving peace, opposing the peace process under the cover of patriotism. In reality, his opposition is likely much more personally motivated and instead reflects the will of wealthy landowners and established elites.

With the elections coming up in 2018, understanding Uribe’s failures will be incredibly important. Between 12 and 22 percent of Colombians say they would vote for whatever candidate Uribe puts forward, and with the abysmal approval rating of the Santos Administration, Uribe and his new conservative coalition could very well decide the next president of Colombia.^{xxv} For this reason, it is important to understand that ex-president Alvaro Uribe is a dangerous leader for Colombia and for Latin America, and that his leadership could roll back years of Colombia’s progress.

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Additional editorial support provided by Cynthia McClintock, Senior Research Fellow, and Bjorn T. Kjelstad and R. O. Niederstrasser, Research Associates at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs

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