

Colombian elections witness comeback by narcotics mafia

by Valerie Rush

Just-concluded legislative elections in Colombia provided the stage for a sweeping comeback of the dope mob into positions of influence in that country. The March 9 elections gave the "official" wing of the Liberal Party, under the leadership of former Presidents Alfonso López Michelsen and Julio Cesar Turbay Ayala, a powerful majority in both houses of the Colombian Congress, and the *oficialistas*, as they are known, are already salivating over the prospects awaiting them in the presidential election May 25.

According to the latest official reports, the López/Turbay forces took nearly 49% (3.2 million) of the vote, with the ruling Conservative Party of President Belisario Betancur taking 37.5% (2.4 million) and the dissident New Liberalism wing of the Liberal Party garnering a pathetic 6.9% (440,000 votes). Abstention was more than 50%.

And yet the percentages are not nearly as frightening as the story behind them. In case after case, the most blatantly pro-drug, mafia-allied forces of the Liberal Party were elected, re-elected, or strengthened in their congressional positions.

Exemplary is the case of Jairo Ortega Ramírez, who was reelected to the Chamber of Representatives for Antioquia province. Ortega Ramírez is the congressman whose 1982 electoral campaign was funded by cocaine king Pablo Escobar Gaviria in exchange for picking Escobar as his "alternate," and thereby providing the drug trafficker with parliamentary immunity. Escobar, his immunity finally lifted by a vote of Congress last year, is now a fugitive from justice, wanted for his role in the April 1984 slaying of former Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. Ortega Ramírez was also an announced enemy of Lara Bonilla.

Reelected to the Senate was Alberto Santofimio Botero, from Tolima province. Santofimio Botero has repeatedly been accused, tried, and found guilty of a range of fraud and other shady dealings, but the Colombian government has never been able to keep him behind bars. Members of his faction within the Liberal Party include some of Colombia's most notorious drug criminals, such as Pablo Escobar. This faction was repeatedly denounced by Lara Bonilla as a haven for the mafia. Not only has Santofimio's "base" in Tolima managed

to put him in the Senate for yet another term, but the fat, greasy-haired, effeminate Santofimio has bought himself another machine, this time a city council seat in the capital city of Bogota, as a stepping-stone to a future presidency.

Drug lobby advances

Ernesto Samper Pizano, formerly campaign manager for López Michelsen's 1982 presidential bid and chief lobbyist for a project to legalize the production and export of marijuana, reportedly strengthened his own political prospects by "turning out the vote" for Barco in the capital city of Bogota, a former stronghold of New Liberalism. Samper, who publicly admitted to taking money from self-confessed Nazi cocaine trafficker Carlos Lehder in 1982 as a down-payment for drug legalization under a new López administration, won his bid for a Senate seat and is expected to be offered a ministry in a Barco administration. He is also rumored to be the next presidential hopeful of the "official" Liberal Party.

The list goes on. Ernesto Lucena Quevedo, who joined with known mafiosi in a smear campaign against Lara Bonilla shortly after the anti-drug fighter took office as Justice Minister, was reelected to the Chamber as representative from Cundinamarca (Bogota) province. Alfonso Gómez Méndez, the defense lawyer of fugitive narco-financer Jaime Michelsen Uribe, was elected to the Chamber from Santofimio's home turf of Tolima. Rafael Forero Fetcua, the frontman who took over the stocks of imprisoned drug trafficker Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela in the Colombian Workers Bank, a money-laundry, when things got too hot for Rodríguez inside the country, was elected to the Bogota city council. Guillermo Plazas Alcid, one of the bitterest enemies of Lara Bonilla in his home province of Huila, won election to the Senate.

Outside of the "official" Liberal Party itself, the self-proclaimed witch Regina II—whose success in manipulating the cultural pessimism of the Colombian population was won her a mass-based "Metapolitics" movement—got herself elected to the Chamber of Representatives as well.

The drug mob and its political front-men had been dealt a number of devastating blows during the Betancur admin-

istration, due in large part to the courageous anti-drug battle waged by Rodrigo Lara Bonilla during his short nine months as justice minister. Lara Bonilla's brutal murder at the hands of mafia assassins spurred President Betancur into intensifying that battle, despite threats and blackmail from the international bankers whose financial institutions are centered on usury and laundering the proceeds of the drug trade.

And yet, the drug-linked oligarchic forces in both his own and the opposition Liberal Party joined forces to make certain another "maverick" like Betancur would never again attain the Colombian presidency. Former President López Michelsen imposed the oligarchic puppet Virgilio Barco as Liberal Party candidate, and Alvaro Gómez Hurtado—son of the despised former dictator, Laureano "the Monster" Gómez—by calling in his chips among the various Conservative Party factions to take that party's presidential nomination.

López and Gómez were universally known as *la tenaza* ("the pincers") during the 1974-78 López administration, for their not-so-secret alliance which handed the country over to the drug mob in return for the so-called "marijuana bonanza" that boosted Colombia's foreign reserves . . . and "creditor confidence."

The third party option

The dissident candidacy of New Liberalism's Luis Carlos Galán was the natural successor to the "supra-party" national movement that swept Betancur into office in 1982. New Liberalism was founded as an explicitly anti-López political tendency within the Liberal Party, and became a genuine force to be reckoned with at the point that López's overtly treasonous alliance with the dope mob triggered a wave of disgust within the Liberal Party's mass base.

Lara Bonilla had been a prominent force in the New Liberalism faction, and had represented the best of the anti-drug patriots who had gravitated to that movement. New Liberalism made a strong showing during the 1984 congressional elections, especially in the capital city of Bogotá, and the basis clearly existed for turning his movement into an anti-oligarchic third party with a shot at keeping the presidency in the hands of nationalists.

However, abandoning the path forged by his slain colleague Lara Bonilla, Galán ran a tepid campaign with lots of moralizing but little content. His critique of the Ibero-American debt crisis never went farther than vague attacks on "imperialism," and the critical issue of drugs and drug-related corruption was put on the back burner. Worse still, he joined with Lara Bonilla's worst enemies in denouncing President Betancur's courageous and principled handling of the narco-terrorist siege of the Justice Palace last November, in which over 100 people were killed and the nation's legal archives destroyed.

Had Galán but chosen to do so, he would have found the

ideal model for his "campaign of moral renovation" in the Alan García presidency of neighboring Peru, where drugs, corruption, and international usury have become the burning, personal concern of every honest Peruvian, thanks to García's leadership.

Yet, having waged a lackluster and "symbolic" protest campaign, Galán's New Liberalism was predictably smashed at the polls. Responding to the official results, Galán called a press conference at which he lamented that "the nation has chosen a different path from that proposed by New Liberalism," and announced the withdrawal of his candidacy for the presidency, leaving the field to Barco and Gómez.

A triumphant López Michelsen rubbed salt in the nation's wound by claiming that Galán's defeat was the result of "an excess of morality for political ends" and that the Colombian population was only demonstrating its "fatigue with the Messianism practiced by New Liberalism."

The other half of "the pincer," Alvaro Gómez Hurtado, responded to the news of Galán's withdrawal from the race with crocodile tears, offering to take up Galán's mantle: "It would be a pity if the banners of renovation and modernization of politics were abandoned. As I have always been beyond the parties, I propose to defend these banners."

International ramifications

When Betancur steps down from the presidency this August, it will matter little whether it is Barco or Gómez who succeeds him. Under either presidency, Betancur's hard-fought commitment to a "non-aligned" foreign policy will be abandoned posthaste. The Contadora Group, inspired by Betancur in his desire to promote an *Ibero-American* solution to the Central American conflict, has been repeatedly denounced by the "official" Liberals and by Betancur's enemies within the Conservative Party as "moribund," "inadequate," and "inappropriate."

Needless to say, Betancur's anti-drug offensive will be quickly reversed. The drug mafia's 1984 offer to repatriate their ill-gotten gains in return for a formal "amnesty"—unequivocally rejected by President Betancur—will no doubt come up for reconsideration under the next administration. The project to legalize drug production and export, promoted for years by López Michelsen's "number-one boy" and Liberal Party presidential hopeful Ernesto Samper Pizano, will doubtless be revived as well, with devastating implications for the entire continent which has only lately begun to fight back against the drug mob.

Finally, the important, if behind-the-scenes, backing that the Betancur government has been able to give to Peru's Alan García in his vanguard battle with the international debt collectors and their junior partners in the dope mob, will vanish with a Barco or Gómez administration in Colombia. Without García and with a drug-backed Barco or Gómez ruling in Colombia, prospects for the region would be grim indeed.