

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Legalization or excommunication

Colombia under Barco has reached a crossroads on the drug question: Will 'free enterprise' win out over morality?

The president of the Colombian government's Council of State, a high-level government advisory board on juridical and constitutional matters, has just called for the legalization of cocaine and marijuana traffic, during the same week that the Colombian Catholic Church has unanimously recommended the excommunication of drug traffickers.

These two events summarize the crossroads at which the government of Virgilio Barco presently stands. Under intense pressure from the dope mob and from international creditors to turn the "handicap" of the illegal drug trade into the "virtue" of legalized big bucks, Colombia's weak-kneed head of state has yielded vital ground in his first four months in office. The Church, under the leadership of Pope John Paul II, has been one of the few national institutions to draw an unambiguous line on the question of the drug trade, and the Nov. 29 decision of the Colombian Bishops' Conference to damn traffickers to "eternal perdition" through the weapon of excommunication was doubtless intended to call the question.

The response from Dope, Inc. was immediate. Magistrate Samuel Buitrago Hurtado of the Council of State appeared Dec. 1 on national television to blame the government's continued persecution of drug traffickers for the country's chaotic and violence-ridden state of affairs. Claiming to be speaking in his own name, Buitrago declared, "We have been playing the role of useful idiots, because we are conducting a campaign [against drugs]

with a high social cost, and what have we Colombians received in return? The threats are against very important Colombians, above all against those who administer justice."

Continuing to play on anti-U.S. feelings, Judge Buitrago argued the mafia line that extradition of Colombian nationals on trafficking charges was "unconstitutional," "repulsive," and "unpatriotic." He also insisted that legalization of cocaine and marijuana by the Colombian state would reduce mafia profits, and ultimately the mafia itself, while giving the government a huge boost through taxes collected on profits from the drug trade.

Lest one's sympathy for the beleaguered and terrified judges of Colombia fool one into thinking that Judge Buitrago himself is playing the role of "useful idiot" for the mob, it is worth noting the company the judge admits he keeps. In his television interview, he declares: "I once heard Dr. Ernesto Samper Pizano and believe me, I share his criteria, and a little while ago I read an article in *El Espectador* by Antonio Caballero . . . and I share these criteria based on the ideas of Mr. Friedman of the United States."

Samper Pizano, currently a Liberal Party senator in the Colombian Congress, has been the outspoken head of the drug legalization lobby in Colombia since the mid-1970s, and is considered the political heir to mafia "godfather" and former Liberal President Alfonso López Michelsen. "Journalist" Antonio Caballero is family-related to the former President. Drawing heavily on Milton

Friedman's "free enterprise" logic, López's 1974-78 administration opened up the Colombian economy to the drug bankers and traffickers who have gratefully financed López's electoral campaigns in return.

While López is part of the same "official" wing of the Liberal Party from which Barco was chosen as the party's presidential candidate, the "godfather" does not have the kind of influence over his successor he would like. Thus, López regularly ups the pressure on Barco, to remind him to toe the line.

In a radio and television interview broadcast nationally Nov. 19, López declared, "Disgracefully, the country is no longer in the hands of the President of the Republic. . . . The social situation has totally escaped the government's control, not to mention the political situation." López's warnings of lack of government control were echoed by Judge Buitrago, who nonetheless specified that it was management of the drug trade which had "escaped the hands of government."

The immediate response from certain members of the Barco cabinet has been encouraging. Justice Minister Eduardo Suescún rejected Judge Buitrago's proposal as "absolutely inadequate, because the state cannot dedicate itself to producing something which leads to the degeneration of the species." Following a meeting with U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Charles Gillespie, Attorney-General Carlos Mauro Hoyos insisted, "This is no way to end the drug trade."

Despite these hopeful signs, President Barco remains silent on this appeal for surrender to the mafia from one of his highest-level advisers. Unless Judge Buitrago resigns from the Council of State immediately, his "personal opinions" may well be seen as inseparable from the President's.