
Colombia

Medellín Cartel pals capture Liberal Party

by Valerie Rush

On Feb. 15, Colombia's former President Alfonso López Michelsen urged the Barco government to begin negotiations with the infamous Medellín Cartel of drug traffickers. Said López, "The Liberal Party, as both the majority and the ruling party, is obliged to take up the banner of peace with a liberal criterion; it must seek novel political solutions and not merely resort to repression as a means of dealing with the rupture of our social community. . . . We must be aware of the formidable challenge it means to reincorporate into civilian life not only the guerrillas but also the drug traffickers hardened by years of running risks. . . . We must defeat the enemy, and then negotiate. . . ."

López's proposal, little more than a variation on his 1984 call for negotiating an amnesty for the drug traffickers in exchange for their payment of the country's foreign debt, was made in the context of an ongoing Liberal Party convention, meeting to choose a new party leadership for the last two years of Liberal rule under President Barco. The five-man directorate chosen by that convention did not hesitate to publicly endorse the López proposal; no accident, given that the majority of them are not only longstanding followers of López Michelsen but, like him, intimately linked to the fortunes of the Medellín Cartel.

This mafia takeover of the Liberal Party presents an open declaration of war to the national institutions of Colombia, starting with the presidency itself. As the more picturesque criminal elements—like recently captured cocaine czar Carlos Lehder—fall to President Barco's anti-drug efforts, Dope, Inc.'s individuals and institutions "above suspicion" now appear determined to legitimize the narcotics "industry," in a final bid for power—from within.

Drawing the battle lines

While the war against the drug mafia has not yet been won in Colombia, at least the battle lines are now clearly drawn. The editors of the Liberal-affiliated newspaper *El Espectador*, whose director Guillermo Cano was killed by the mafia last December, expressed their horror at the fall of

the ruling political party into the hands of a corrupt elite. The paper's lead editorial Feb. 17 declared, "What we feared has happened; the vote owners consulted none but their own tiny electoral interests and voted themselves directors of a party and its doctrine."

El Espectador's editors pointed to the election of such known mafiosi as Alberto Santofimio Botero and Eduardo Mestre Sarmiento, and lamented that the party had fallen into the camp of "tactlessness, lack of moral conviction, unexplained links to crime, and intellectual abandonment. . . . On Mr. Santofimio, we already published our dossier last Sunday. . . . Mr. Mestre owes a clear explanation to the country of his links to a powerful chieftain of the drug trade."

In the case of Santofimio, the man whose political faction within the Liberal Party elected cocaine czar Pablo Escobar to the Colombian Congress in the early 1980s, his criminal background and gangster methods are a secret to no one inside Colombia. *El Espectador's* comment about Mestre is a reference to the fact that the man's business association with jailed drug trafficker and Medellín Cartel partner Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela surfaced in the public eye during last year's contest for the job of *designado* (vice-president) when López's sponsorship failed to procure the coveted post for the tainted Mestre.

The Samper Pizano dossier

The new Liberal Party director most compromised with the drug mafia is, however, Ernesto Samper Pizano, the man whose name is synonymous with "drug legalization" in both Colombia and the United States. A protégé of López Michelsen and likely candidate for the 1990 presidency, Samper has been a close collaborator of the U.S.-based National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) since at least 1975, when he went public with his campaign to "solve" the problem of the drug trade by legalizing it.

For years, Samper was president of the National Association of Financial Institutes (ANIF), the think tank of the powerful Grupo Grancolombiano financial group created by now-fugitive banker Jaime Michelsen Uribe. Michelsen, hiding in Panama from a Colombian arrest warrant, is the first cousin of López. Samper went on to become the campaign manager and treasurer of López's 1982 reelection campaign, and scandalized the country by admitting to claims by the drug trafficker Carlos Lehder that Samper had accepted campaign contributions of 20 million pesos from the Medellín Cartel, in exchange for promises of drug legalization under a López presidency.

Immediately after his election to the Liberal Party directorate, Samper forced a postponement of the traditional meeting between the new party leaders and the nominal chief of the party, President Virgilio Barco, due to his abrupt departure for Cuba on a "prior engagement" with Fidel Castro. The wire services made no mention of whether Castro's guest, Robert Vesco, was on Samper's "must see" list.