

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Narco coup brewing in Colombia

Will the narcos' anti-communist 'common front' fool the nation into backing their drive for total power?

Colombia's powerful drug-trafficking clans are using the spiral of violence in the country, which they created, to catapult themselves into power. Kidnapings of businessmen, murders of priests, massacres of peasants, and ambushes of police and military patrols, in most cases carried out either by drug-addicted street criminals or narco-terrorist armies in the countryside, have created a panicked environment into which the narcos and their political allies have stepped, draped in their best anti-communist rhetoric.

On May 26, the drug mafia's not-so-secret partners in the political world gathered to offer themselves as a "common front for national salvation." Leading the pack was Liberal Party senator Ernesto Lucena Quevedo, the man who made his reputation as the mob front-man who tried to frame the late Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla for corruption in 1983. The frame did not stick, however, and when Lara changed the rules of the game, and began to name the names of people and companies "above suspicion," the mob killed him.

Lucena Quevedo is also the right-hand man of Liberal Party executive member Alberto Santofimio Botero, the Tolima-based gangster whose political machine elected cocaine czar Pablo Escobar, now a fugitive from justice, to the Colombian Congress. Santofimio triggered a scandal in early June, when he issued a public challenge to the Barco government to end its anti-drug war and spend the money instead on eradicating "absolute poverty."

Santofimio went on to demand that the ruling Liberal Party take a stand against that nemesis of the drug-traffickers, the U.S.-Colombia Extradition Treaty, which he termed a violation of national sovereignty and crass propitiation of the United States.

The senator's unabashed public sentiment in favor of the drug traffickers, while identical to that of the Liberal national executive (DNL), nonetheless provoked a hasty disavowal from that body of mafiosi. Following a lengthy meeting with presidential adviser Carlos Ossa Escobar, the DNL publicly declared that the opinions of individual members on national or international policy did not commit the DNL as a whole. Clearly, the heavy hand of the presidency had squelched that particular bid by the mob to "go public."

However, that heavy hand has not come down nearly often enough. Not a peep was heard when Santofimio's man Lucena Quevedo addressed a May Day rally by calling for an end to the extradition treaty. Nor has a single protest been uttered at the mob's latest creation, its "common front" against communism. Lucena Quevedo's opening remarks to the May 26 gathering of mafiosi odds-and-ends blamed the country's ills on the Soviet Union, and urged the creation of a common front based "not on resignation, but on action." Also addressing the gathering was Lucena's Quevedo newest partner, Marcelo Torres, a leader of the maoist MOIR.

Yet another attending Lucena Quevedo's fest was José Raymundo Zambrano, the head of the Federation

of Cattle Growers (Fedegan). Just a month earlier, public charges had surfaced that cattle growers across the country were selling their ranches—at phenomenal profit—to drug-traffickers anxious to launder their narcodollars and possess growing chunks of Colombian territory. And in good company with Lucena Quevedo and Fedegan was a clique of labor leaders, headed by UTC federation president Victor Acosta, who have been accused of working jointly for Project Democracy's American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), and for the mob.

The surfacing of the mafia's anti-communist crusade is timed to coincide with a number of major political attacks on the Colombian armed forces, assaults designed to drive military elements horrified by the spreading bloodshed into a new version of the mafia-sponsored paramilitary death squad known as the MAS (*Muerte a Secuestradores*, or Death to Kidnapers). Aiding such a scheme which—should it succeed—will ultimately carry the drug mob into power, is the Barco government's own unwillingness to unleash its armed forces in a full-scale military war on drugs.

Especially discouraging to anti-drug forces within the military, was the government's disgraceful treatment of its most successful anti-drug director, police Col. Jaime Ramírez. Ramírez had been scheduled for promotion to brigadier general when he was assassinated by mafia hit-men in 1986. His posthumous promotion was denied and, in response to protests from his widow, the defense ministry replied that the anti-drug hero had not died in combat! If fighting Dope, Inc. is no longer defined as combat in Colombia, then Santofimio and Co. will have no trouble riding into the presidency on the next wave of "anti-communist" *violencia*.