

Understanding Colombia Series

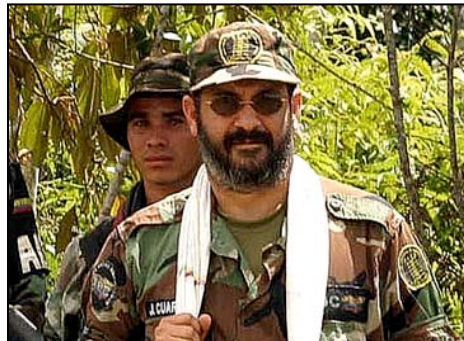
PARA-POLITICS SCANDAL

In Brief

- The “Pact of Ralito”—a secret cooperation agreement between the AUC and more than 50 politicians.
- In June 2005, Clara Lopez Obregón condemned connections between some congressmen and the AUC before the Supreme Court.
- “Jorge 40”'s laptop, which provided details of the *para*-political connection was confiscated.
- Various branches of the government have been implicated in the scandal—the Congress, the Colombian Intelligence and Security Service, and the Judicial Branch.
- Allegations have revolved around Uribe’s party members, thus putting his administration on the defensive.
- The US should monitor the situation to see how the millions it gives to the Colombian government has played a role.

Background

The relationship between government officials, security forces, politicians, and the paramilitary groups fighting in the armed conflict in Colombia have seemingly grown closer over the years, finally culminating in the infiltration of the paramilitaries into the government. In fact, paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso bragged in 2002 that at least 35% of Congress supported his organization. This so-called connection has now been confirmed by growing evidence and testimonials. The *para*-politics scandal refers to the political scandal in which several congressmen and politicians have been indicted for conspiring or collaborating with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and other paramilitary groups.



Jorge 40, a paramilitary leader and principal player in the cocaine trade, is alleged to have had strong connections with the leaders of Colombia’s DAS.

(Web Photo)

Important Facts

Origins of the scandal: The *para*-politics scandal has roots in June of 2005 when Clara Lopez Obregón, a member of the Alternative Democratic Pole party officially condemned the connections between the paramilitary organizations and some congressmen before the Supreme Court of Colombia. Current investigations, however, reveal that the ties began long before. It has been revealed that in 2001, at least 11 congressmen, 2 governors, 3 mayors, and other local government officials signed a secret document called “the Pact of Ralito” in Santa Fe de Ralito in 2001. In the pact, the lawmakers allegedly agreed to collude with the paramilitaries.

Jorge 40: Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, also known as “Jorge 40,” was the leader of the northern bloc of the AUC. Along with two thousand of his combatants, Tovar demobilized on March 10, 2006 in La Mesa in the Department of Cesar. Shortly thereafter, Jorge 40’s right-hand man—Edgar Ignacio Fierro or “Don Antonio”—was arrested and a laptop belonging to Tovar was confiscated. The laptop fueled the *para*-politics scandal because it contained detailed information on over 550 murders committed by the AUC and also lists connections with several authorities in the Congress, the Colombian intelligence agencies, and the judicial branch.

Congress: The Colombian Congress has been maligned by the *para*-politics scandal, as the list of congressmen implicated continues to grow. The first three arrests made as a result of the scandal were senators Alvaro Garcia and Jairo Merlano and Representative Erick Morris—all from the Sucre department and members of Uribe’s party. The Supreme Court opened the case on October 18th 2006 and soon after, it issued arrest warrants for conspiracy to collaborate in illegal activities with the paramilitaries. On February 15, 2007, the Court ordered the arrest of six more members of Congress: Alvaro Araujo, Mauricio Pimiento, Dieb Maloof, Luis Eduardo Vives, Alfonso Campo and Jorge Caballero—all Uribe supporters linked to “Jorge 40.”

State security apparatus: The *para*-politics scandal also hit the Colombian Intelligence and Security Service (DAS) in February of 2007, when Jorge Noguera – who headed the organization until the end of 2005 – was arrested. He is set to face trial on accusations that he worked very closely with leaders from paramilitary organizations as well as narco-traffickers from his official post at the DAS. Moreover, it is alleged that Noguera went so far as to provide the AUC with lists of human-rights and labor-rights activists to target.

Judicial branch: The Colombian judiciary has also been implicated in the on-going scandal. José Alfredo Escobar Araújo, the former president of the Superior Council of the Judicature, admitted to having a close relationship with Italian mob boss Giorgio Sale, but denied being aware that Sale was deeply involved with narco-trafficking in Colombia. Sale has been linked to AUC leader Salvatore Mancuso. On November 30, 2006, Escobar resigned the presidency of the Council, but remained on board as a magistrate of the body. There is also growing evidence that various courts throughout the country have shown leniency towards the paramilitaries or have cooperated with the organization in some way.

Links to President Uribe: Senator Gustavo Petro held a congressional hearing on paramilitary-government links in 2005 in Antioquia – the department that Uribe previously represented as a Senator and later served as governor. Rooted in depositions by former AUC combatants and official governmental documents, Petro claims that combatants regularly met on Uribe's Guacharacas farm and his brother Santiago's ranches. In addition, new allegations arising in June 2007 of campaign contributions by paramilitaries to support Uribe's candidacy have further put the Uribe administration on the defensive.

Victims of violence speak out: In November 2006, the Colombian Senate's Human Rights Commission held a public hearing along with the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes in the department of Sucre. The objective of the meeting was to hear the testimonies of the victims of paramilitary violence and also to expose the connections between the regional lawmakers in Sucre and the AUC. Prior to the event, many attempts were made to silence victims at the meeting. On October 31, the Victims Movement reported that paramilitaries are circulating a "death list" that contains the names of 26 persons including members of the Victims Movement from Sucre and Bolívar. Nine of the persons on this list were assassinated.

Why the US should be concerned: The US spends millions annually on Colombia. In fact, it is estimated that between 2000 and 2007, the US will have spent \$5.4 billion. The recent *para*-politics scandal and emergence of new or re-armed paramilitary groups should inspire debate in the new Congress about the composition and success of the US aid package to Colombia.

There are "growing concerns about the serious allegations of connections between illegal paramilitary forces and a number of high-ranking Colombian officials. It is essential that the Colombian government investigate and prosecute such officials, including those at high levels."

- Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House

For More Information

Center for International Policy
www.ciponline.org
Washington Office on Latin America
www.wola.org

Take Action!

Write a letter or call your US Congressmen/women asking them to support the careful monitoring of the *para*-politics scandal in order to ensure that US funding is used efficiently and that it does not contribute to the strengthening or trying to conceal these connections. To find the address and phone number of your senators and representatives, please visit www.congress.org

U.S. Office on Colombia
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