

An Interview with Álvaro Uribe Vélez

When you assumed the presidency in 2002, what was the overall condition of Colombia? Was it a failing state?

Uribe: I never thought that Colombia was a failing state, but during my first month as president, I was surprised by many international analysts. For example, people from the World Bank and other multilateral agencies came to see me saying, “Be careful because Colombia is becoming a failing state.” Colombia has long been a democratic state. The failures of the 1980s and 1990s were not because of our state but because of the advancement of terrorist groups attempting to defeat our democratic institutions in many areas of the country. By the mid-20th century, Colombia’s traditional political parties—the Colombian Conservative Party and Colombian Liberal Party—came to terms, putting an end to their historic violent confrontation.

During that period, however, [Fidel] Castro’s revolutionary movement in Cuba succeeded, and it chose two countries in which to replicate its revolution: Colombia and Bolivia. The irreconcilable remnant of partisan guerillas in Colombia reinvented themselves as communist guerrillas. Colombia did not have a long period of peace. No sooner had the violent political confrontation ended than the new Marxist guerrillas opened fire. Later, communist violence resulted in the birth and growth of anticommunist self-defense groups.

Both the guerillas and self-defense groups were ultimately co-opted by narcotraffickers. The vast majority of them converted into narcotrafficking mercenaries.

What we found when we assumed the presidency was a country with almost 30,000 homicides per year and with more than 3,000 cases of kidnappings—a country with 56 percent of the population living in poverty, with 16 percent unemployment, and a very low investment rate. This is what we found. But we also found excellent people in Colombia with whom to work.

When you assumed office, approximately what percentage of Colombia was under the control of the insurgents?

Uribe: I would not say “under control of the insurgents,” but I would say “in anarchy” because of the advancement of violence: two-thirds. The other third was in danger of falling into anarchy.

What were the root causes of the conflict of the 1980s and 1990s?

Uribe: During that time, the dominant cause was narcotrafficking. I remember the political agitators used to say, “If Colombia widens its democracy, we are going to cease. We are going to stop our cause.” In 1988, our constitution adopted a popular direct election

Álvaro Uribe Vélez was the 58th President of Colombia (2002–2010).

of mayors, and later on, the 1991 constitution brought the popular direct election of governors.

In 1994, I was the second governor to be elected in my province of Antioquia. But the question is this: How well did Colombia succeed in widening democracy? Instead of dropping their guns, guerrillas began to threaten mayors, to coerce them, to penetrate mayors' offices and the political system, to rob their wallets. Pablo Escobar even became a member of Colombia's congress, though by the time of my election to the Senate, he had been chucked out by our armed forces.

It's sometimes said about people like Pablo Escobar and other drug kingpins and warlords that they provide social services for the people in their community—public safety, soccer teams, stadiums, and other things that the government doesn't provide. It is an excuse. It is not uncommon that criminals want to legitimize their actions. Many times they do what they think they need to do to win community support. But the vast majority of Colombians have never supported these criminals.

What was your first priority when you assumed the presidency?

Uribe: Because I was the first president elected with a platform based on establishing security, my pledge to my fellow Colombians was: "If I am elected I will fight day and night, every minute during 24 hours a day, to restore security, but security with democratic values and to promote investment as a source of the resources we need to advance social cohesion."

Did you attempt at first to negotiate with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC]? Or had you already made

a decision that there was no point in trying to negotiate with the FARC?

Uribe: No. When I was elected, Colombians were already fed up with failing negotiations. I said the only way for me to renew this process is if they would accept one condition: to cease any criminal activity. If they didn't accept this condition and cease all criminal activity, my government couldn't undertake negotiations with them.

What were the basic principles and objectives of the democratic security policy?

Uribe: In Latin America, there was an idea that any proposal to bolster security was a way to support dictatorships. In Colombia, many politicians were feeble on security. What I proposed was security with democratic values—I call it Democratic Security Policy. But not only security, but security in the company of two other elements: investment promotion and social cohesion. The first principle was security with democratic values. This is security for all Colombians: security without cracking down on freedoms, security with all the respect of a pluralistic society, security for those who support the government as well as those against our government.

Did you have a timeline?

Uribe: No. Many times I was asked about a timeline, and what I answered was: I cannot promise when we are going to solve this problem. My pledge was that I would devote all my energy day and night to lead this effort.

How did you reconcile the competing and sometimes conflicting imperatives of human rights and security?

Uribe: Security is a democratic value. There is a strong link between security, democratic institutions, and of course human rights. Security is a prerequisite for the development of resources. This is the link between security, investment, and social cohesion. Coming back to the relationship between security and human rights, I have always said that we need security as the long-term vision for Colombia. In a democratic society such as Colombia, the only way for people to support security in the long term is by making security credible. And credibility depends on effectiveness and transparency. Transparency needs order and respect for human rights. And we did our best to protect human rights and to not sanction any abuse of human rights.

What was the division of labor between the police and the military?

Uribe: This was quite difficult because the problems were as serious in rural areas as in cities. We couldn't apply a strict division. The original division was for the military to protect our borders and the police to secure our cities. We couldn't stick with this. We had to involve the military in the fight against narco-trafficking, and we had to involve the police in our fight against terrorist groups such as guerrillas and self-defense groups. Regarding the involvement of the military in the fight against narco-trafficking, there have been discussions in Colombia and in Mexico. I have two practical conclusions and one theoretical approach. The practical conclusion is that during the years before Colombia engaged the military, narco-traffickers expanded and finally penetrated some sectors of the military itself. Secondly, attacking the criminal power of narco-trafficking requires the involvement of the

military. My theoretical conclusion is that we were instilled with the belief that the military was created to protect national sovereignty and that the risks are coming from external threats. But the only risk for sovereignty was coming from terror threats—not from distant lands but a domestic threat in the rise of narcoterrorists. Narcoterrorism can be so powerful that it has the ability to undermine the state and to inflict huge damage to our democratic institutions. And when someone undermines the state and damages the institutions, it is the beginning of the destruction of sovereignty. It is important that we think of resorting to the military in order to protect sovereignty, not to think exclusively in terms of external threats. We must think of the necessity to confront domestic threats against sovereignty such as the threat of narco-trafficking, and this led to engaging the military in the war against narco-traffickers.

Is it fair to say you consider the collusion of narcotics networks with terrorist networks and insurgency networks to be not just a law enforcement problem, but an international security threat?

Uribe: Of course, of course! Weakening institutions could gradually eliminate the state. First, these networks eliminate the supreme power of the state. They then reduce the state to a formal state without the capacity to impose the law. And when you have the formal state without effective powers, the state begins to dissolve.

Did restoring the police presence throughout the country result in problems within the judicial system, such as having people arrested by the police but not being tried quickly and effectively by the judiciary?

Uribe: Sometimes there were complaints on these cases, but the general outcome of taking the police to every place in Colombia was that we began to restore security. And the more we advanced security, the more autonomy the judges could reestablish in every city, in every place. I have said that our policy got some intangible results and intangible outcomes. Let me mention two. We restored the monopoly of law enforcement to the state. There were self-defense groups that had been created to fight guerrillas. We recovered the state monopoly to fight the guerrillas, as well as self-defense groups—to fight any criminal. Second, we restored the monopoly of justice. Attorneys, judges, and prosecutors had been displaced in many parts of the country, and they had been replaced by eager guerrillas or self-defense groups. With the presence of the police throughout the country, we could restore this key element of the rule of law—the monopoly and administration of justice.

How did you deal with corruption when you found it in the government?

Uribe: We had a rule. When our government complied with this rule, things were going on fine. When our government did not comply with this rule, things were going on badly. What was the rule? I said: We in government should be the ones who detect corruption, denounce corruption, impose sanctions against corruption, and punish corruption. We cannot wait for the opposition, for the media, to come here to detect corruption and to blame our government. When my administration fully complied with the rule, everything was fine. In cases where corruption was denounced by outsiders, by the media, by the opposition, my administration, instead of accepting the problem, went after the problem and punished those responsible.

One of the elements of your Democratic Security Policy was to reestablish a strong connection between the population and government. How did you balance the requirements of winning the hearts and minds of the Colombian people with the counternarcotics policies of eradication and criminalization?

Uribe: First, I believe in the necessity of equilibrium between participatory democracy and representative democracy. Representation without participation is without legitimacy. Participation without representation becomes anarchy. Therefore, we need this balance. Second, through sincere participation and sincere dialogue, people become much more confident in their institutions. This permanent dialogue we had with our communities during the 8 years in government brought many positive outcomes. Because of this permanent dialogue, government officials were less likely to make promises but much more committed to look for options. If I go today to any community and I make promises and I have to come back tomorrow without having fulfilled my promises, I will lose credibility. But if we go today to any community and the community requests from us a solution, we in government say, “We cannot. We have not enough resources. We have no legal authorization.” And if we come back to this community in 2 to 3 months and the problem is not resolved yet, the community will ask us, “Please, Mr. President, you said to us that you cannot solve this problem but we need a solution. Look how difficult it is.” Therefore, it makes the government much more committed.

There were some important changes in the mindset of my fellow Colombians. At the beginning, during our first community meetings, people came to our meetings to express their

claims and people were upset and angry. During the 8 years of the administration, people continued coming to file their claims, and people complained because the country was not a paradise. But people did it with hope. The main change in the mindset of my fellow Colombians because of this permanent dialogue was to pass from anger to hope. And when people have hope in their governmental institutions, it is less difficult for the government to fight criminality.

What role did Plan Colombia play in the improvements in the country's stability and security?

Uribe: It was a very hard time. At the beginning, it was economically important. Nowadays, it is not. While Plan Colombia has a [U.S. Agency for International Development] commitment of something over \$300 million per year, Colombia's security program value is somewhere over \$11 billion each year. But in the year 2000, at the beginning of my administration during the years 2002, 2003, and 2004, it was very important economically. Politically, it has been always important. We received a lot of support, for instance, gathering intelligence. And the United States made two important decisions. I am always grateful that, first, President [George W.] Bush made the decision to reestablish air bridge denial in my country. It was effective for us to track and interdict illicit flights. The second decision made by the United States was to allow various authorities to sell Colombia smart weapons. These led us to a tipping point in our battle against the guerrillas.

Much of Plan Colombia was military-to-military and law enforcement assistance. Did economic development

assistance in Plan Colombia make any significant contribution?

Uribe: No. Although in the narrative of Plan Colombia there were aspects directly going to the economy, solving the problems of impoverished communities was made by the Colombian government. We expanded the chapter of social cohesion. The idea was to interpret security as a source of resources. When we promote investments and provide investors with security, the economy prospers. With prosperity, you can have more resources to increase social cohesion. If at the same time, people perceive that their lives are improving because of the social policies, this chapter of social cohesion becomes a validator for the other two main policies: security and investment. Therefore, security with democratic values, investment, and social cohesion made up what I call the triangle to restore confidence in my country. Security and investment promotion were the means. Social cohesion is the end and validator.

Can an insurgency be effectively defeated when the insurgents have safe havens in neighboring countries?

Uribe: I don't use the term *insurgency* because insurgency was the word used in Latin American countries to describe left-wing guerrillas fighting against dictators. In Colombia, guerrillas haven't had to fight dictators because, in the last century, Colombia has had continuous democracy with the exception of a 4-year interruption between 1953 and 1957. When communist guerrillas appeared, my country had already long ago restored democracy. Colombia was the most stable democracy in Latin America. This is one reason to make the distinction between Colombian terrorist groups

and insurgents in other countries. And there is another reason. I remember talking with people in El Salvador, specifically with Joaquin Villalobos, former guerrilla leader there. At Oxford University, he told me that Salvadoran guerrillas had decided to join in peace talks with the government for three reasons: first, they were in a military stalemate; second, they had run out of resources because Western European [nongovernmental organizations] no longer sent money to them; and third, the government agreed to introduce democratic reforms. In my country, the government has introduced many democratic reforms as I have already mentioned—direct popular elections of mayors and governors and so forth. Our government promotes the rule of law. These government terrorists may live from extortion, from kidnapping, from illicit drugs. The conjunction, the accumulation of all these factors, creates the idea that they are not insurgents, that they are terrorists.

Are there specific lessons that those countries can learn from the Colombian experience?

Uribe: The best lesson from Colombia during our 8 years was that we resolutely adopted the decision to defeat terrorism, and we maintained our determination.

What is the best U.S. strategy to help build strong liberal states in the Americas in your opinion?

Uribe: What is important is the combination of the rule of law, security, necessity to cease all illicit drug commerce, and, of course, advancement of social policies. It is important that the United States helps our countries solve the social problems that lead to drug production. At the same time, the United States can help by interdicting shipments, reducing consumption in the United States, fighting money-laundering in the United States, and confiscating illicit wealth kept in the United States. There are many channels through which the United States can work with great effectiveness in our countries to accomplish these goals, for example with the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. **PRISM**