

Premonitions of Instability

The path the new president of Colombia will follow is still unclear. Nonetheless, Colombians fear a civil war that could turn their country into a battleground.

Virgilio Barco Vargas, a liberal technocrat, became President of Colombia on August 7th. The conservative opposition expressed this laconic

opinion of him: "he says little." Shortly before, Barco's predecessor, Belisario Betancur, claimed that he was handing over the office with "all calm on the home front." Barco Vargas responded without mincing words, doing justice to the conservatives' description, "The house is a real mess."

Nonetheless, for some observ-

ers, likening Colombia to a messy house is a rather weak analogy. The country's problems have more in common with an imminent eruption by the Nevado de Ruiz volcano than with a badly organized household. It is probably safe to say that Colombia represents a synthesis of the problems that beset the entire region: the confrontation between the army and guerrilla forces has submerged the country in violence, 45% of the population lives in conditions of abject misery, drug smugglers go about their business with total impunity, a huge coffee crop faces collapsing world market prices, and as if all that weren't enough, the inflation rate is rising and the foreign debt stands at 15 billion dollars (although the debt problem could be considered minor when compared to the situation in neighboring countries).

Thus, it's rather unlikely that many people envy Virgilio Barco's job. From a family with a long tradition of political activity and married to a woman from the United States, the 65 year old, MIT trained economist and engineer will probably continue to say little for now, at least in public.

PROMISES AND BROKEN TRUCES

The guerrilla situation is probably the most difficult problem left behind by the Betancur administration. In fact Latin America's oldest guerrilla army is the Colombian FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Other guerrilla groups in the country include: M-19 (April 19th Movement), with a rather confused ideological line, although clearly nationalist and populist; ELN (National Liberation Army), pro-Castro; and ELP (Popular Liberation Army), Maoist. There are also other smaller and less influential groups.

One of former President Betancur's first major undertakings was to try to bring peace to the country. With this in mind, he devoted enormous energies to meetings with major guerrilla leaders. By 1984 the FARC, the M-19 and the ELN had agreed to a truce. While other groups never formally accepted the accord, they either put their operations on hold or greatly reduced their activities. It was clearly one of the high points of Betancur's presidency.

But the situation didn't last for long; mutual accusations gradually eroded the temporary calm. In mid-1985, the M-19 announced that it was breaking the truce and returning to armed struggle. Things deteriorated further, climaxing last November when an M-19 commando occupied the Supreme Court Building, taking 100 hostages, most of them judges, and demanded that the government accept a list of conditions for resuming the dialogue. Betancur refused to negotiate and sent the army in to take the building. The operation ended in tragedy: all but 12 of the hostages



Photo by CNT

In the midst of nature's abundance, marijuana grows freely and guerrillas hide easily.

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died, along with the entire guerrilla commando. That clearly sealed the split between the government and the guerrillas, and since then, the M-19, as well as the country's other insurgent forces have renewed and intensified their military activities.

The major exception has been the FARC, which condemned the M-19's occupation of the Supreme Court, calling it "an infantile act." They not only reconfirmed their participation in the truce, but also decided to form a political party, the Patriotic Union (UP), that ran as an opposition coalition in the recent elections and won 9 congressional seats.

But the tension continues. The impressive display of security forces at Barco's swearing in was eloquent testimony to that fact. In his inaugural address, the new President reaffirmed his commitment to national pacification while explaining that he would take a hard line "against those groups that refuse to lay down their arms." In the same speech, he congratulated the FARC for having become a political party. In a later statement, referring to the M-19, Barco Vargas maintained that he would not

begin a dialogue until the guerrillas change their attitude.

One of the big remaining questions concerns the Patriotic Union and its future in the country's political life. Representing a clearly defined alternative for many voters, the UP has already produced some important results, winning nine congressional elections even though it became a party just a few months before the voting. What makes its future uncertain is both the extreme right and the extreme left. In the last few months, there has been a veritable wave of kidnappings and murders aimed at UP mayors and legislators. Almost everyone agrees that extreme right "Death Squads" are responsible. The key question, though, is who is behind them. Drug smugglers? Retired army officers? It's very hard to know.

BOOTS AND VOTES

Just like in many other Latin countries, the Colombian military has never completely given up its direct hold on power. Its strength as a political force today rests on its role in fighting drug traffic and the insurgency.

During Betancur's presidency, the civil government and the army faced off over the issue of national pacification. Many of the truce violations could well have been the result of the Army's open defiance of government policy. For quite some time now, many political sectors have maintained that the truce was the victim of the conservatives' decision to accept army demands, thus keeping the armed struggle alive and assuring the military its quota of power.

Virgilio Barco Vargas confronts, then, yet another set of difficulties in office. He will have to learn how to handle the delicate relations with the armed forces. His new Defense Minister, Samudio Molina, is very definitely a practical man. And Barco himself has explained that he will continue the policy of national pacification, at the same time holding firm against groups refusing to give up their arms. Perhaps his statements reflect an attempt to work a very cautious double deal. The new President will try to display a certain openness toward the guerrillas, while guaranteeing a role for the army.

THE COUNTRY'S ACCOUNTS

Colombia's economic situation is closely tied to its political woes. In his inaugural address, Barco defined the major lines of his economic policy: eliminate the abject poverty affecting some 45% of the population; reduce the deficit; create jobs; and begin development projects for the country's poorest regions.

The foreign debt is not crushing; as we explained earlier, it's "only" about 15 billion dollars. Nonetheless, coffee still represents the country's most immediate hopes for bringing in more foreign exchange, just at a time when market prices for Colombia's principal export crop have plummeted. Over the next few years the country also could become an important oil producer, with a potential to export some 400,000 barrels a day.

But here, too, there is scepticism, since it is unlikely the oil market will recuperate before 1990, just about the time Barco's term draws to a close. In addition, the development of the country's oil industry is very much conditioned by the political situation. The ELN guerrillas have specialized in sabotaging oil producing facilities; in one of their most recent actions they blew up a section of a pipeline, causing close to a million dollars worth of damage.

Barco Vargas has already issued a series of decrees attempting to regulate the economic situation. In one recent statement the government asked the Colombian people to give it some "breathing room," while at the same time announcing proposed legislation to create 300,000 jobs in agro-industry, urban transport and free trade zones. Measures were also announced that will regulate land tenure through an agrarian reform. In principle, the reform will provide land to some 250,000 peasant families. The program is intended to create more equitable land distribution; currently 4% of property owners own 75% of the country's productive land. This glaring inequality moved the nation's Catholic Church to call on the government to play a stronger role in regulating property matters.

Most observers agree that Barco will implement classic austerity measures in an effort to clean up the deficit problem.

It's not certain how the country will respond, but at least one new factor is developing in this regard. A new labor association has been founded, the Unified Confederation of Unions (CUT), bringing together the majority of liberal, progressive and independent trade unions and representing about 70% of the country's organized labor force. In spite of the fact that the CUT's future director is a member of the Liberal Party and a former Minister of Labor, the new association has not been well received by the country's two other major



Manuel Marulanda, "Tiro Fijo", guerrilla leader turned politician.

labor federations, both affiliated with Conservative Party politics. With some 230,000 members, the two conservative labor groups have both accused the CUT of being leftist and of having ties to drug traffickers. In response, spokesmen for the new organization explained that communist and socialist unions are in the minority and that "in this country even Queen Elizabeth is accused of having ties with drug smuggling."

BARCO AND HIS FRIENDS

Virgilio Barco also seems to be very cautious about his country's foreign policy, and in several instances he has sent out what could be read as mixed messages. On the one hand, a Cuban delegation was present for his inauguration even though Colombia does not maintain diplomatic relations with Havana. That immediately opened the way for speculation that relations would soon be reestablished, following the example set by Uruguay and Argentina, South America's fledgling democracies. But to date, Barco has once again preferred to say little. On the other hand, U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz was also present for the ceremony and had a private meeting with the new President. The statement issued after their talk explained that they had not dealt with the question of the foreign debt or the guerrilla movement. Thus, it was presumed that their meeting focused on two even more pressing topics: drug traffic and the strategic facilities that Colombia might grant the United States.

With regards to drug traffic, Colombia's position is a rather embarrassing one. As things are viewed from the U.S., Colombia is a paradise for drug traffickers, serving as the main center for processing Bolivian and Peruvian cocaine and for sending the refined product off to clandestine landing sites in Florida and the Bahamas. The recent participation of U.S. troops in anti-drug operations in Bolivia weighs heavily on Colombia. Thus, a strict legal accord has been

reached with the U.S. regarding the extradition and trial of drug smugglers. Under this agreement, the U.S. may sentence Colombian citizens taken prisoner on U.S. soil and even extradite Colombians from their own country. The Barco Vargas government went on to announce joint operations with Peru to fight drug trafficking, declaring that "we don't need U.S. troops in our territory."

The other crucial issue has to do with a U.S. request to set up radar installations on the Colombian island of San Andres, located in the Caribbean Sea just 9 minutes flying time from Nicaragua. Until now the Barco government has been reluctant to grant permission, arguing that the proposed equipment is out of date. Washington hurriedly replied that it would be willing to install more advanced equipment. It could well be that Virgilio Barco is thinking about distancing his country from the Contadora process, but granting permission for a U.S. radar station on Colombian territory might be seen as going too far, too fast; hence the reluctance. At any rate, it is widely believed that the new Colombian President is interested in a closer alignment with general U.S. policy in Central America, which could well mean backing off from the process initiated by his predecessor.

The fact that it was Colombia that inspired the pantagruelian excesses of Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* helps illustrate some of the limits on the new administration. Barco Vargas will have to run his government in accord with the country's history and national character. For now, correspondents for two major international news agencies, Reuters and DPA, agree that the new President's administration has been "indecisive during its first month, occasioning premonitions of instability." The question for the future is, will that indecision cause Barco's ship to spring a leak? ★

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