

## **An interview with Jorge Robledo**

Submitted by justin on Sat, 2007-03-10 19:56. [Colombia](#)

By Justin Podur and Manuel Rozenal

*Jorge Robledo has been a Colombian senator with the Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA), a democratic left party, since 2002. In recent years he has given a national voice to the opposition to the "free trade agreement" between the US and Colombia, which has delivered the country's public sector industries, resources and territories to multinationals. In recent months, the Polo Democratico has also opened a national debate to expose the connections between the political system and the paramilitaries, death squads linked to the government who are implicated in massive human rights violations, assassinations, massacres, the liquidation of social opposition, and narco-trafficking. Another senator with the PDA, Gustavo Petro, has been instrumental in investigating these connections, and was interviewed during a recent trip to the US on Democracy Now!*

*(<http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=07/03/09/1443229>) and WBAI ([http://archive.wbai.org/files/mp3/070309\\_070001wuc.MP3](http://archive.wbai.org/files/mp3/070309_070001wuc.MP3)).*

*With Bush's visit to the region, US Senators McGovern and Leahy, as well as others in the Democratic party, have challenged Bush's sponsorship of President Alvaro Uribe Velez. Popular protests against Bush's visit have taken place all over Latin America. Senator Robledo will be raising questions about the beneficiaries of paramilitarism in Colombia, and its backers, in the US. We interviewed him over the phone on March 9.*

**Justin Podur: Can you introduce, and explain briefly to readers who don't know, what the 'para-scandal' is, how it came to be exposed, and what its effects have been on politics in Colombia?**

Jorge Robledo: Colombia has long had the phenomenon of "paramilitarism". Paramilitaries are armed groups linked with the state. One sector of the paramilitaries was organized by wealthy rural landowners for the purpose of attacking the guerrilla movement, but many paramilitary crimes have been directed against the civilian population. They are closely linked with narco-trafficking and organized crime. This has been the case for at least 20 years. Over this time, the paramilitaries have become a significant political power, in regional governments, municipalities, governorships, the congress, and the senate.

The 'para-scandal' is this: in recent months it has come to light that the paramilitaries are connected throughout the political system of the country, and

especially the congress and senate. The supreme court has sent some congresspeople and other politicians to jail. According to the national newspaper, El Tiempo, there are 19 more congress members who could end up in jail. No less than the chief of the secret police, DAS (departamento administrativo de seguridad) is in jail. There are publicly available documents signed by congresspeople and paramilitaries, explicit agreements.

But the other part of this scandal that's less-often discussed, is that all of the paramilitary-connected politicians, almost all of them, are friends of the Uribe government (Colombia's President is Alvaro Uribe Velez). So even though the scandal is referred to as a scandal of "para-politica", it makes more sense to call it "para-Uribismo".

**JP: But the connections between paramilitarism and the state, connections between paramilitaries and politicians, between paramilitaries and the army – these were all well-documented and well-known, and have been for years. What is it that has raised common knowledge to the level of a ‘scandal’?**

JR: That's a million-dollar question, and you're completely right. Years ago, one of the paramilitary chiefs said that they had 30% of congress in their pockets. This was known. The new part today is that the supreme court has proceeded with an investigation and sent 8 congresspeople to jail.

**JP: How far do you think the ‘scandal’ will go? What will its effect be on politics in Colombia?**

JR: What we hope is that many more congresspeople who we know are connected to paramilitarism, as well as governors, mayors, and others, end up in jail. This is just the beginning. We know the connections are very deep but we do not know how far the process will be allowed to go. There are very powerful forces who do not want the truth to be known. When the final accounting is done, we know that it will involve business, the armed forces, the judiciary. So we are all wanting to see it pursued and concerned about whether it will go far enough, how far it will implicate the President, for example. Uribe continues to have the polls even though 90% of the paramilitary-connected politicians who have been exposed and punished so far are his friends, people he supported, people who supported him in his campaign.

**Manuel Rozental: You mentioned the chief of the secret police, DAS, Jorge Noguera. We know that Noguera is very close to the President, and that the charges against him are very damning of the President and of the US. Can you talk about this?**

JR: This is, in the midst of a massive scandal, one of the most scandalous pieces of

information. The director of the nation's secret service, DAS, Jorge Noguera, is in prison for his participation in paramilitary crimes. This is a real scandal because the charges include electoral fraud, assassinations of unionists, academics, activists, the use of president's own car used for paramilitarism. Noguera was chief of Uribe's electoral campaign in Magdalena. Uribe has stayed at Noguera's house various times. These two people are very close. When the charges were coming to light Uribe tried to get Noguera a post with the Colombian Embassy in Italy. When the press challenged him, Uribe became very intemperate, as he often does.

**MR: Can you explain also the link between the para-scandal and the 'peace process' between the government and the paramilitaries?**

JR: The government has accused those of us who are bringing the evidence of "para-politica" or "para-uribismo" to light of trying to ruin this "peace process". So the "peace process" was started by the national government in 2002-2003. It was a process to pardon the paramilitaries from their crimes and resolve the legal problem, to legalize them, giving some of them light sentences, not amnesty but a very generous pardon. This process was supported by some of the politicians who are in jail now. Part of the "peace process" was that the paramilitaries confess their crimes, their connections, and their relations. And in these confessions, the paramilitaries are saying things but they have not yet exposed the main connections. They have confessed some of their links to the military, Salvatore Mancuso, the paramilitary chief, talked about connections to various brigades of the army, but very little of the connections with politicians has been brought to light through the "peace process".

**JP: Some people close to Uribe have proposed, as a solution to the para-scandal and the loss of credibility by politicians linked to paramilitarism, the closure of Congress. What do you think of that "solution"?**

JR: That is correct. One of the Uribistas, Marta Lucia Ramirez, who was the Defense Minister, about two weeks ago proposed that congress be closed. We in the PDA frankly opposed this because in Colombia's conditions, there are no laws to permit the closure of congress. Congress cannot be revoked. To do so would be a break from judicial order, and this would benefit the president who would become a dictator. To change the norms to close the congress, they would basically have to have a coup. We have called this an "auto-golpe", or a "self-coup", which is what President Fujimori did in Peru. It's important to remember that nearly the totality of those implicated in paramilitarism are Uribistas. Not all of congress is involved, and those who are, are all Uribistas. So it's unacceptable that the solution be to close the congress. The effect would be to throw out those who are denouncing paramilitary

control and connections to congress and hand all power to the Presidency, whose role in paramilitarism has not yet been investigated or determined.

There is another important point of legality to consider. If Ramirez considers that congress is illegitimate and should be closed, presumably because of the evidence that has arisen of widespread electoral fraud organized in part by the paramilitaries, then she has to also consider that these same votes helped to elect the President. If congress's mandate is revoked, she'd have to revoke the mandate of the President also. She is not talking about doing that, and so this is all manipulation in order to try to hide the political responsibility of the President (not the legal responsibility) for the "para-politica".

**JP: Your political work has been devoted to opposing the "free trade agreement". Can you explain this work and, are there any connections between "free trade" and the "para-scandal"?**

JR: From before I got to congress, in the 1990s, I was organizing against neoliberalism, which is now called "free trade". For nearly five years since I have been in congress we opposed the free trade agreement. The free trade agreement is not to integrate the economies of Colombia and the US, but to annex Colombia's economy to US monopolies and multinationals. This is easy to demonstrate. It is the same model that the US imposes on all countries. In the text of the free trade agreement, the White House declares its interests, and they are imposed on countries like Colombia. This imperialist imposition makes us a colony. It has practically ruined our agriculture and industry. It is responsible for much of the barbarity, corruption and horror we have experienced. It is responsible for the deterioration of labor rights, the environment, poverty, and unemployment, for the past 17 years since the economizing 'opening' in 1990.

This whole "para-politica", is a project of the Right. The Right is the agent of neoliberalism, close to White House, close to Washington. The Right in Colombia's congress has supported all the neoliberal reforms, since they ruined the economy with the 'opening' of 1990, privatizing state enterprises, giving privileges to foreign investors. As the economy has been devastated, the paramilitaries and the 'para-politicos' have seen their fortunes grow. Their wealth doesn't come from the national economy, but from kidnapping, crime, the seizure of land.

**MR: They would have us believe that Colombia is unique for the level of violence it faces and the paramilitary strategy. But if you look at Latin America's history you see the same strategy was used with the death squads in El Salvador and Guatemala or the Contras in Nicaragua. The strategy goes beyond paramilitarism and the US is**

**always behind it.**

JR: Everything happening in Colombia has to do one way or another with Washington. We're in the orbit of the empire, by way of Plan Colombia. Plan Colombia of 2000 did more than just impose a way of managing 'narcotrafficking'. There were also 20 pages of small type in the Plan that detailed the reorganization of Colombia's economy.

So if Plan Colombia imposed an economic, political, and military model on us from the US, then we wonder how it is possible that the US Embassy and State Department don't know about paramilitarism in this country. How can paramilitary crimes be so pervasive without the US knowing about it, or being involved? We'd like to know how the US is involved, and we'll know more when large numbers of Americans demand that their government assume responsibility for paramilitarism.

**MR: Can you speak a bit more about Plan Colombia, now entering its second phase?**

JR: Plan Colombia was designed between the US and Colombia with the proposal of reducing production, processing, traffic of drugs by 50%. That was its basic objective. Not to end narcotrafficking, but to reduce it by 50%. To this end, over \$1 billion from the US and over \$4 billion from Colombia were spent. The money was spent on "security", fumigation, helicopters, mercenaries, and so on. This is well known.

But it also has another aspect that we have tried to raise, the small print connecting Plan Colombia to economic changes, and this is how imperialism covers its "free" support. They came to "save" us but the fine print says for example that Colombia has to join the free trade agreement. The fine print outlines the importance of Colombia getting foreign investment - ie., to give the country to US investors. The state enterprises, energy, banks, were all given notice in the fine print. And everything there has come to pass.

Another thing to say about Plan Colombia is that it's a failure. The objective was to reduce trafficking by 50%. But all analysts agree that prices haven't risen – prices are the simplest and most effective way of knowing that supply hasn't been reduced. So it is a failure to reduce the drug traffic.

I see it as an imperialist pretext for the US to get involved in our country and loot our economy.

**JP: Uribe's habit, like Bush's, is to accuse those who oppose him of being "terrorists". He has done so with the Polo Democratico. What is the intention behind these smear campaigns and how can they be defeated?**

Remember that Bush and Uribe are right-wing spokespeople for the global right wing. This right wing is currently defending torture as a technique of criminal investigation, this right wing invaded Iraq with the support of Uribe, who supports that invasion to this day. These are characters of the extreme right, which has been using "terrorism" to justify everything. Everything they do justify by "terrorism". Every opposition is stigmatized as terrorism.

Uribe gave a speech recently saying the passage of the free trade agreement was a victory against terrorism. That implies that those of us who opposed free trade are friends of terrorism. The PDA, folks like Gustavo Petro, have exposed the "para-politica", or "para-Uribismo", and so Uribe's tactic is to distract people. He has had some success in his aggression against us. He called us "terrorists in civilian clothing" – he's trying to imply we are guerrillas or friends of the guerrilla. He wants to polarize.

We are trying to say there are more than two positions. We have a third position, we don't have any faith in violence, neither in violence of the paramilitaries nor of the guerrilla. Our manipulative president makes insinuations to paint democrats as guerrillas. This is a political attack on us partly because, and we have to admit this, partly because the guerrillas are at an all-time low of prestige, because Colombians are sick of violence.

**JP: Colombia's democratic left parties have suffered terror and assassinations like Colombia's social movements generally. How does PDA organize in such a context? What are the risks you face? What are the possibilities for the future?**

JR: There is, unfortunately, a long history of political violence in Colombia. In the 1940s and 1950s, we had "La Violencia" of Liberals and Conservatives, the two parties of Colombia's oligarchy killed each other for 15 years, with 400,000 killed. After that there were various stages of guerrilla movements, which were favored by Colombia's complicated geography and size, many different guerrilla organizations, all facing the establishment with a left position.

In the 1980s, as part of a peace process, a party called Union Patriótica was created. That party was destroyed by the establishment, who first insinuated they were friends of the guerrilla, and then killed them. This was a real, dramatic massacre of thousands, for which the Colombian government could be called to account in international courts.

So this is a permanent part of our history. The number of people who have been killed for their involvement in political parties, unions, social movements, guerrillas, is immense.

In this context, Uribe's practice of linking the polo with the guerrilla is shown to be an extremely irresponsible thing to do. In the case of the PDA it's made even worse, because we are a democratic left, a coalition of many forces, and one of our points of unity is that we do not use violence in politics. We don't make our demands by way of arms. We don't agree with kidnapping or assassination, irrelevant of the goals.

**MR: There are multiple levels of "para-politica". At the local, regional, municipal levels, we have seen the infiltration of the state by the paramilitaries. At the national level, the investigation is getting closer to Uribe. And internationally, it is impossible to believe the US is not behind much of this. Democratic senators like McGovern and Leahy of the US are starting to say publicly that Uribe is not just an observer in what is happening with paramilitarism. Bush in his visit is saying that he supports Uribe because Uribe is getting to the bottom of paramilitarism. So we have Bush protecting Uribe, who is actually acting on behalf of the US.**

JR: That's why I use the term "para-Uribismo". All the congresspeople who have gone to prison already are Uribistas. Of the 19 in line for judgement, 17 are Uribistas. One of the famous documents, the document of Santa Fe Ralito, signed by paramilitaries and congresspeople, the congresspeople who signed were Uribistas. The director of DAS is an Uribista. The organization ARCOIRIS, with 83 congresspeople from paramilitary-controlled zones, 90% are Uribistas. This is not to say that all Uribistas are paras, but it does say the phenomenon is that these are friends of the president. This is understood in the exterior, and democratic senators in the US like McGovern and Leahy have noticed as much. Leahy said in *El Tiempo* that the US government must correct its support for Uribe. Leahy said "someone explain to me who we are working with in Colombia."

We in the PDA insist that these are political, not just penal, responsibilities for Uribe. He has to explain why so many of his friends are involved. And we also want to know how far is the US involved? The US embassy is full of CIA, DEA, FBI, and they don't have any idea what is happening with paramilitarism? It is not credible.

**JP: Do US officials have the moral high ground to ask questions like: "Who exactly are we involved with in Colombia?" Should they not just ask, more simply, "Who exactly are we?"**

JR: Good question. And we do not know with precision how involved the US has been, but we do know that Plan Colombia was voted in by both Democrats and Republicans. On the other hand, the attitude of any such Democratic politician is very helpful. And we don't want to say they're all with Bush, and we have to work with everyone who can help. For there to be people in the US looking for truth is

important. The big battle of PDA and Colombia is the search for truth and Uribe is doing everything to prevent this, that's why he tries to silence us. If he can prevent the truth from getting out, then every one of our problems will be made worse. So for people outside the country, in Europe, in the US, to be raising questions, is very important! It's a big help

Uribe has two things working in his favor. Less than a year ago he was re-elected, with significant support, and that makes the political fight against him for two reasons. First, he is seen, internally and externally, the leader of the struggle against the guerrillas. He is able to take advantage of the war-weariness of Colombians. People are so sick of violence that the result is a society that is permissive and tolerant of the kinds of measures Uribe has passed. Second, Uribe is a cynical, professional manipulator.

These two things combined have given Uribe enough support to move. The US says "he's our guy over there". He's contained the indigenous rebellion, the opposition struggles, the campaigns against free trade, all things the US doesn't like. In the US, Bush was able to get the free trade agreement passed without the Democrats. But this fight isn't over. I don't have illusions about the Democrats, Colombia doesn't matter much to them, it's a transaction between politicians to them. But when Bush talked to El Tiempo last week he was pessimistic about various matters.

**MR: What is the future of the PDA in this context?**

JR: The present is very positive. We've managed to unite 99% of the democratic left in Colombia. There is no precedent for that. We have 18 members of congress. We had 2.6 million votes for Carlos Gaviria in the presidency.

In this battle with the government of Uribe, free trade, and the para-politica, I don't mean to be immodest, but we have struggled well. Supporters of democracy in Colombia see us sympathetically. I'm optimistic, we're in conditions to advance rapidly. Uribe has para-uribismo, he has no solutions for the country, for problems of poverty and development and violence. We have an option, we have a chance in 2010 and we'll see. We should be able to actually create an effective alternative.

**MR: How is Bush to be welcomed in Colombia?**

JR: There have been huge demonstrations in Bogota and elsewhere. There are mobilizations in all universities against Bush, and on Monday we will have a concentration near the Plaza in Bogota and it will be good. There are many things in the media. Colombia is starting to wake up like so many Latin American countries, to struggle for sovereignty, national independence, opposition to imperialism and neoliberalism. This is happening in Colombia.

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