

## OF “PARA-POLITICOS,” SILENCES AND SMOKE-SCREENS\*

Jorge Enrique Robledo, Bogotá, February 23, 2007

\*Translator’s note: Senator Robledo issued this statement shortly after the resignation of Colombia’s Foreign Minister María Consuelo Araújo.

President Uribe must have been aware of the damage done to Colombia by his decision to retain, against all national interest, María Consuelo Araújo as Minister of Foreign Relations. He also must have known of the statements made in foreign circles about a government in Colombia, a country with extremely high levels of criminal activity and corruption, which stubbornly kept in her post as Cabinet Minister an individual connected by close family ties to criminal and corruption scandals. These realities could not be obfuscated by President Uribe's televised histrionics since, among other reasons, there were no listeners to his speechifying beyond the national borders. The official pretense that Foreign Minister Araújo was absolutely indispensable was ridiculous. Truth be told, her only unique quality was limited to her family name which got her where she is.

In the face of such presidential irresponsibility, Colombians are reminded of a previous event. When the arrests connected with the link between the paramilitary elements and politicians began, the Foreign Minister’s brother,

Senator Alvaro Araújo asked for special protection. If he were to be dragged down, said the Senator, his sister and the President himself might be in danger of being dragged down by the investigations as well. We must then ask: was the extensive support granted by the President to the Foreign Minister a way to provide cover for Senator Araújo and himself?

We support the independent spirit and civic courage which the Supreme Court has demonstrated in pursuing this case. We also hope that the Office of the Attorney General will conduct seriously its search for the truth with regards to paramilitary activities in Colombia. What is not acceptable is that the President and his cronies utilize the Court's actions to claim credit for themselves while evading responsibility for events that implicate them in many ways.

Not only have nine members of Congress been detained but they are Uribe's close political allies. In connection with the scandal more than one hundred high level political bosses and appointees, all closely connected with the President, are implicated, detained, or have become fugitives from the law. Yet neither the parties to which these individuals belong nor the President himself have explained why so many dedicated political supporters--who

delivered the votes, helped finance the campaign, and crisscrossed the country with him-- were "para-politicos."

Did the President not give his support in their election races to all those members of Congress who are now in jail? Did the President not make Alvaro Araújo eligible to run for a Senate seat by opportunely changing his sister's ministerial assignments?

Let there be no confusion among honest Colombians, including those who voted for Uribe, that a significant reason behind the corruption on a national scale we now witness is the prevailing attitude that, in Colombia, political accountability is not to be expected. Clearly under current political practices the worst conceivable conduct is tolerated.

Former Defense Minister Marta Lucía Ramírez proposal to dissolve Congress to open the way for a new election is quite a curious one. If the Senate and the lower chamber of congress are deemed illegitimate because of the tainted votes obtained by the para-politicos, doesn't that make the Presidency of Alvaro Uribe illegitimate too? Didn't the pro-Uribe para-politicos in fact work their constituencies to vote in favor of Uribe?

Regardless of whether the proposal to close down Congress is presented as an attempt to "improve" the situation, the fact remains that under current rules, this would be the equivalent of a coup d'etat. Colombia would become a dictatorship and the President a despot.

Making things worse, the proposed coup d'etat would not guarantee that new elections, if they ever took place, would not be won even more handily, because of the same, or even higher, level of corruption by the same cast of characters the proposal purports to replace. It is also clear that this is a pro-Uribe proposal because, by equating guilty congressmen with innocent ones, the former are in a certain sense absolved of any crimes.

Colombians must be on the alert because the pro-Uribe forces aim to stop or discredit the search for the truth, proposing to maneuver an electoral reform that will not get at the root of para-politicking, will reduce democratic participation, and seeks to perpetuate Uribe in power.