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Ongoing Political Persecution Will Turn Colombia Into Venezuela

By Álvaro Uribe

When Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos meets with President Trump at the White House on Thursday, May 18, there will be much to discuss — from the financing of the impunity deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to the recent skyrocketing of the cocaine influx into the United States. Yet, Santos will undoubtedly dodge addressing his complicity in the persecution of his own and other political oppositions in our region.

In Latin America, the persecution of political dissenters is not just a Venezuelan anomaly, where there are some 180 political prisoners. For instance, in Ecuador, media owners and journalists have had to flee into exile after criticizing President Rafael Correa. In Bolivia, Evo Morales' predecessor and many of his cabinet members are also in exile, seeking protection from a political vendetta. Santos has been silent about all these situations.

This is, in a large part, because he doesn't want anyone focused on his own domestic record. Santos, in alliance with a politicized faction of the judiciary, has undertaken a systematic persecution of political leaders critical of his deal with FARC, the largest cocaine cartel in the world, whose war over a half century claimed more than 250,000 lives and displaced more than five million. The agreement exonerates from jail and prohibits extradition of FARC members responsible for atrocious crimes — massacres, kidnappings, and narco trafficking — and also grants them the right to run for political office.

The most egregious case of political persecution is directed at my former Minister of Agriculture Andrés Felipe Arias, who currently seeking asylum in the U.S. As Minister, Arias spearheaded

the reduction in coca crops to historic lows by 2010, was a leading negotiator of the U.S.–Colombia FTA, and was always one of the most vocal critics of the FARC. The moment he decided to run for president in 2010 in defense of my administration’s policy against narcoterrorism, he became the target of politicized judicial persecution that continues to this day.

Arias was unfairly accused of a fraud scheme in an irrigation subsidy program that was operated with technical cooperation from the Organization of American States. He was imprisoned for two years while on trial. Those individuals who benefited from the alleged fraud testified that they never met Arias, that he was never involved in their wrongdoing, and that they never gave him anything, nor contributed to his presidential campaign.

The independent inspector general of Colombia requested his acquittal on all counts and cleared Arias of any wrongdoing in his personal and campaign finances. Despite all this, Arias was found guilty and sentenced to more than 17 years in prison. To make matters worse — and in defiance of Colombia's obligations under international law — Arias has been systematically denied the right of any appeal of his conviction.

To secure Arias’ extradition to Colombia, Santos has tried to resurrect a defunct extradition treaty between our countries. Colombia extradites people to the U.S. based exclusively on Colombian domestic law, not based on a treaty. Indeed, Santos himself previously refused to extradite notorious narcotrafficker Walid Makled to the U.S. and instead sent him to Venezuela justifying his decision by saying the extradition treaty with the U.S. was not in force.

But since the U.S. can only extradite under a treaty, now Santos has now claimed the treaty is valid so he can get ahold of Arias and impede his application for asylum in the U.S. We’ll see what Santos has to say about the treaty when President Trump requests the extradition of a FARC kingpin.

Unfortunately, Arias is not the only victim of political persecution in Colombia. Over a dozen leaders of the opposition have fallen prey to the same tactics of the Santos administration. Several members of my cabinet have also been persecuted and convicted by former Supreme Court justices that explicitly decided their cases politically and not in accordance with the law, as revealed by audio recordings of their sessions made public by Colombian media.

Political persecution in Colombia endangers the prospect of long-term peace in our country. The Colombian people can’t understand why opposition leaders are silenced and persecuted while FARC kingpins are granted full amnesty and a privileged political platform allowing them to run for office.

I hope that the political persecution in Colombia doesn't go unnoticed for too much longer. If anything, this is the most important lesson to be learned from the global community's neglect of the early signs of Venezuela's return to authoritarian rule.

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