

Colombia's FTA: Monkey Business for U.S.

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The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) appears to offer a fair deal. It promises to open U.S. markets to Colombia in exchange for opening the Colombian market to the U.S. But in reality it is a Trojan horse in a minefield.

Colombia is pursuing this FTA as its way to push itself to the free and global market. It's a very worthy aspiration -- if only the country wasn't overrun by packs of domestic economic hyenas, seasoned speculators and corrupt middle men, not to mention the narco traffickers who have infiltrated the current government. This unsavory band is slaving to use the FTA for their advantage, but the unexpected beneficiaries of FTA are likely to be the resilient guerrillas, FARC (Colombia's Revolutionary Arm Forces). The FARC have been in existence for over four decades, and are badly in need of a new cause to revive their anti-imperialist ardor and inflame patriotic feeling in Colombia.

Uribe's administration has been skillful enough to put in its pocket politicians as diverse as Mr. George W. Bush and Mr. Bill Clinton. Mr. Uribe, yesterday a friend of Mr. Pablo Escobar, today is a friend of Mr. George Bush. This relationship is not the best PR in a region already distrustful of the U.S. Latin America is well aware of the values and standards the U.S. put aside to support Mr. Uribe.

Bush has chosen to overlook the character of the current Colombian government under the reign of Mr. Alvaro Uribe, the two-time president. The Bush administration embarrassed itself in the region by ignoring a Defense Intelligence Agency report from 1991, indicating that Mr. Alvaro Uribe is untrustworthy and has ties with the narco-traffickers. Bush has not only undermined the intelligence service, but has rejected any further investigation of the matter. Today, Colombia struggles with "paragate" -- it's scandalous "narco-paramilitary politics", describing the association of narco-traffickers and paramilitaries with Mr. Uribe's umbrella of parties.

Mr. Uribe relationship to narco-traffickers and paramilitaries, officially protected by U.S. policy, is now off-limits to U.S. intelligence. (Considering that Arabic is not Colombia's official language and that plenty of spies speak fluent Spanish, it is astonishing that the CIA now professes ignorance of the growing influence of narco-paramilitaries in Mr. Uribe's government).

More astonishing is the fact that Mr. Uribe has not even bothered to conceal his criminal connections. There is hard evidence in Antioquia, Mr. Uribe's state, and the Colombian Congress that Mr. Uribe's campaigned for Mr. Pablo Escobar, former leader of the infamous Medellín Cartel, and protected him from extradition. Mr. Uribe's family has close relationships with narco-paramilitaries. Pablo Escobar's cousin has been Mr. Uribe's long time confidant, adviser and defender, and the narco-paramilitaries themselves have publicly described Mr. Uribe as the best president they ever had.

There's more. Mr. Jorge Noguera, another close friend of Mr. Uribe's, helped the narco-traffickers gain political power in the north cost of Colombia. When his criminal wrong doings were denounced, Mr. Uribe responded by making Noguera the director of Colombia's intelligence service, DAS (Department of Administrative Security). Mr. Noguera then ordered the disappearance of narco-paramilitaries records from the DAS and turned over information on government opponents to narco hit squads. Mr. Uribe then named Mr. Noguera his diplomatic representative in Milan, Italy, where Colombian narco-paramilitaries make contacts with Italian mafias. Finally, Uribe examined documents in the case, for Noguera's lawyer -- in violation of judicial policy -- and Noguera is today out of jail.

Further on, the Colombian Secretary of State, by coincidence another close friend of Mr. Uribe, has had to resign her position because of criminal connections with the narco-paramilitaries by members of her family. Her brother is in jail and her father left the country to escape justice. The coincidences keep piling up. Several of Mr. Uribe's other friends in Congress are also in jail for ties to the narco-paramilitaries. Despite widespread knowledge of Mr. Uribe's sinister activities, the Bush administration continues to proclaim him a clean politician and a shining example for neighboring Venezuela and the rest of the region.

To gain U.S. confidence, Mr. Uribe has given lip service to policies that are the opposite of those he has actually followed. Mr. Uribe declares that he is now for full extradition of narco traffickers, -- except for the narco-paramilitary leadership. Mr. Uribe calls them "peace leaders" for supporting his questionable "Justice and Peace" law, he made for them.

By playing on the split between Colombia's FARC and anti-FARC, Mr. Uribe is advancing his narrow political goals and enriching his friends even as he aggravates conditions for civil war -- a war initiated by the narco-paramilitaries. It is a war that could find further fuel in the Pandora's Box of the FTA.

Until now U.S. policy has been driven to support the worst of all possible choices: either the narco-paramilitary or the FARC. Can the U.S. untie itself from the false equation that camouflages the true intentions of Mr. Uribe's narco-paramilitaries?

If there is one Free Trade Agreement in the world that the U.S. has to consider carefully, is the one with Colombia. Is this the right Colombian

government to make this agreement with? Shouldn't the U.S. Congress listen to Cardinal Rubiano Saenz of the Colombian Catholic Church who foresees a health catastrophe intensified by the FTA? What about the development concern of Colombian economists like Mr. Guillermo Maya or Colombian Senator Jorge Robledo? These respected authorities predict that the FTA with Colombia would worsen the critical livelihood of the 60% of Colombians living in chronic poverty.

If the FTA fails in Colombia, an explosive country of vast potential danger, the U.S. can expect serious and lasting consequences against its interests in the whole of Latin America.

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