

# Colombian family's political clout fuels debate

## In Colombia, the Araujo family's alleged ties to paramilitary groups are putting President Alvaro Uribe in a pinch.

The Miami Herald  
Jan. 08, 2007

**BOGOTA** - In Colombia, where strong political families are a tradition, the Araujo clan stands out. From the highest courts to the inner halls of President Alvaro Uribe's administration, Araujos can be found at senior levels.

But recent investigations into the political influence of illegal paramilitary groups in the northern region where the family is based have put the Araujos under scrutiny, have shaken the Uribe government and could impact U.S.-Colombian relations.

The Araujos have denied any wrongdoing, saying some family members were forced to attend meetings with the notoriously violent right-wing paramilitary groups in the province of Cesar or face repercussions. But multiple documents seized by authorities in a raid on paramilitary offices and various testimonies before prosecutors indicate a strategic collaboration to extend the paramilitary reach through coercion and fraud.

Political opponents of Uribe have called for the dismissal of Foreign Minister María Consuelo Araujo after prosecutors questioned her brother, Sen. Alvaro Araujo, about his meetings with paramilitary leaders. Uribe has stood by his minister.

"Her presence in that position is hurting the country," opposition Sen. Cecilia López said during a congressional session on the scandal.

The attorney general's office is also investigating the foreign minister's sister, Ana María Araujo, on suspicion of illegally securing a government contract to modernize the nation's ID card, the proceeds from which allegedly went to a senior paramilitary leader, Rodrigo Tovar Pupo.

### KEEPING QUIET

U.S. officials in Colombia have kept quiet on the matter, while the Supreme Court, which is heading the investigation, tries to sort out who was voluntarily collaborating with the paramilitary groups and who was forced to go along. Four congressmen have been charged with collaboration, and the fallout seems sure to reach the U.S. Congress as it debates the annual, nearly \$700 million aid package to Colombia.

"This is a problem for President Uribe," Aldo Civico of the Center for International Conflict Resolution at Columbia University wrote in an e-mail. "This case confirms that in Colombia ... What is surfacing is a system of corruption that has been penetrating and affecting the political and economic life."

The paramilitary groups were established in the early 1980s by large landowners, often under the direction of military officers, to help the fight against leftist guerrillas. Over time, drug traffickers usurped the groups to protect their trade and land. And with the help of drug money, the groups grew to unparalleled influence, infiltrating the government at all levels.

Last year, investigators arrested a top official of the powerful DAS intelligence agency -- roughly equivalent to the FBI -- for working with the paramilitary groups. Paramilitary leaders have boasted that up to 35 percent of Congress was beholden to them -- a claim partially confirmed after authorities confiscated several computers and disks full of information about paramilitary operations.

Peace Commissioner Luís Restrepo, in charge of government talks with the paramilitary groups that have led to the demobilization of 31,800 fighters since 2004, has acknowledged that he used Sergio Araujo, brother of the foreign minister, to contact Rodrigo Tovar Pupo.

Sergio Araujo told The Miami Herald that he has known Tovar since childhood, but only recently reinitiated contact with him.

### **SAME HANGOUTS**

According to interviews with several Araujo family members, before joining the paramilitary forces, Tovar frequented the same schools, country clubs and bars as the Araujos, and they all lived in the same neighborhood.

Sergio's cousin, Hernando Molina, now governor of Cesar, also knew Tovar well -- he says that the two played on the same adult softball team. Opponents of Molina, who did not want to be identified for their own safety, say the paramilitary support of the governor helps explain why he ran unopposed in the campaign in 2003. Molina denies this, saying his only contact with the paramilitary groups was when Tovar's group demobilized last year.

The attorney general's office has said it has no official investigation of Sergio Araujo or Hernando Molina.

Cesar is an area known for its cattle and homegrown accordion music, *vallenato*. The Araujos gained political sway with Colombia's political elite by helping to develop and host an annual *vallenato* festival.

Consuelo Araujo, Molina's mother, served as culture minister under President Andrés Pastrana. Consuelo's brother, Alvaro Araujo Sr. -- the father of María Consuelo, Alvaro, Ana María and Sergio -- was a Congress member from 1986 to 1991, then served in the Senate from 1991 to 1993. And her second husband, Edgardo Maya, is now the nation's inspector general. Their nephew, Jaime Araujo, is a magistrate on the Constitutional Court.

Some opponents of the Araujos, like the Rainbow Foundation, a Colombian think tank that has written several reports on the paramilitary influence in politics along the country's northern coast, have said that such a strong presence on the national level is part of the paramilitary groups' plan to influence the government.

Indeed, documents seized by authorities from paramilitary groups quote a paramilitary commander as saying that Sen. Alvaro Araujo should be groomed for the presidency.

Foreign Minister María Consuelo Araujo has strongly defended her family, telling The Miami Herald that it is as large and diverse as any in Colombia, with differing political positions.

She said her cousin Jaime voted in the Constitutional Court against Uribe's bid to reinstitute presidential reelection, while she was one of the coordinators of Uribe's second election campaign. Her brother, Sen. Araujo, campaigned for Uribe's opponent, Horacio Serpa, in 2002, and later became a staunch Uribe supporter.

### **RECEIVING THREATS**

The Araujos also say their family has suffered at the hands of the paramilitary forces and the leftist guerrillas.

They say they have received threats from both sides, and guerrillas kidnapped and killed matriarch Consuelo Araujo in 2001.

Sen. Alvaro Araujo did not respond to multiple requests for interviews, but he has told the local media that he was forced to meet with paramilitary groups for his own survival. However, critics like the Rainbow Foundation and Claudia López, an independent analyst, say he was part of a paramilitary plan to gain control of the region's institutions and their financial resources.

They say that those meetings led to political alliances, and that documents seized by the government and voting records show how paramilitary groups favored certain candidates, pressured voters to support them, and sometimes made sure they had little or no opposition in their races.

"He had a choice," López said of Alvaro Araujo. "Some [politicians] left politics. And some decided to come to an agreement with the paramilitaries; in my mind, that's a crime."