

# The Last Big Hindrance in Colombia

## South American Nation May Be Asking too much of President Uribe

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WASHINGTON -- It seemed a good idea, bringing in the most prominent leftist leader in the Americas, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, to talk to the oldest leftist guerrilla organization in Colombia. Chavez could have a moment in the sun and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe could begin to surmount the last big hurdle to Colombia's peace process -- negotiating the release of hostages and bringing guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, to the table for peace talks. Sadly, incompetence and intransigence got in the way.

In August, Chavez had been asked to convince the FARC to free 45 high profile hostages in exchange for hundreds of FARC members held in Colombian prisons. But the Venezuelan strongman proved a bungling mediator. He sapped government leverage by revealing potential concessions and insisted that Colombia create a demilitarized zone for negotiations even though the Colombian government said such a concession would be a nonstarter.

As Chavez's acts of incompetence mounted, Uribe pulled the plug on negotiations, finding it simply too frustrating working with a shopkeeper who wanted to give away the store. Initially the Venezuelan government's response was polite and restrained, but then Chavez went off. On Sunday, he called Uribe a liar and claimed that Colombia "deserves a better president, one that is dignified."

That "dignified" president would no doubt be someone willing to join what Chavez calls his Bolivarian revolution. During his three months as mediator, he made no secret of his interest to promote the FARC as a legitimate political force in Colombia. Even with the FARC having shown no sign of goodwill concerning the release of the hostages, Chavez was enthusiastically talking about the possibility of the FARC becoming a political party in Colombia.

Uribe could very well have ignored the personal attacks and the political baloney. The 17,000 guerrillas of the FARC are no folk heroes to Colombians. Uribe's unabated popularity, due in large part to his military victories against them, reached 74 percent approval last week after the military killed three top FARC commanders.

But Uribe became enraged, and his outburst gave credence to Chavez's nonsense. In a virulent attack, Uribe accused Chavez of being less interested in Colombia's peace than in trying to make Colombia "a victim of a terrorist government of the FARC." Moreover, Uribe said, "the people of Colombia have every right to ... accept mediation, but not the type of mediation which seeks ... the political enthronement of terrorism."

The episode has had a chilling effect on bilateral relations, with Chavez recalling his ambassador from Bogota Tuesday. More fundamentally, this episode has revealed a greater impediment to peace -- Uribe himself.

Uribe's 2002 campaign slogan was "steady hand, big heart" and it was meant to convey his double-edged approach to peace: He would combat terrorism in Colombia by military means while reintegrating former members of guerrilla and paramilitary groups into Colombian society -- if they abandoned their murderous ways.

He has pursued this strategy to great effect. More than 30,000 right-wing paramilitary troops of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC, which is listed as an international terrorist organization by the United States and Europe, have demobilized. Also, during most of his five years in office, Uribe has been exploring a peace deal with the smaller leftist guerrilla movement, the National Liberation Army, or ELN. After several rounds of talks, his government proposed last year the promotion of legal reforms that could allow the ELN's political participation. Meanwhile, according to local officials, the group continues to commit terrorist acts such as the kidnapping of a mayor in a Pacific Coast province last week.

But when it comes to the FARC -- called by Uribe "the most bloodthirsty terrorists in the world" -- it does seem that the Colombian president's heart is not big enough. For the Uribe government, the fact that the FARC was regaining political recognition through "the negotiation of the (hostage) exchange became unacceptable," wrote Colombian security analyst Alfredo Rangel in the newspaper *El Tiempo* on Sunday. Rangel told me that Uribe may be taking this personally -- his father was assassinated by the FARC during a botched 1983 kidnapping attempt.

Rangel believes that Uribe can change and that with his popularity and his record, he is the ideal person to take that next big stride for peace in Colombia. But I am not so sure. Like many other Colombians, Uribe has his grudges. But those other Colombians are not the ones leading the country. Colombia may be asking too much of one man