

# Colombia's ex-president Uribe freed from house arrest to lead right-wing repression

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Colombia's ex-president Álvaro Uribe was freed from house arrest Saturday, two months after the Supreme Court ordered his detention. Uribe is facing at least 60 open investigations regarding his ties to fascist paramilitary groups, corruption and drug trafficking.

The release was the result of pressure from the administration of President Iván Duque of the Democratic Center Party, which is led by Uribe, and from the White House.

On Saturday, US President Donald Trump celebrated Uribe's release, calling him "a hero" and "ally of our Country in the fight against CASTRO-CHAVISMO." As he incites fascist militias and far-right supporters to back his plans to overturn the US elections in November, Trump is hailing a figure responsible for countless massacres.

The Supreme Court had decided to detain Uribe over a case opened in 2018. It included evidence that Uribe bribed witnesses to lie about his role in founding and financing a faction of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). The AUC is an umbrella paramilitary organization responsible for killing over 260,000 people, according to the Conflict and Memory Observatory, and stealing millions of hectares of land from peasants at the behest of agricultural and mining corporations, local landowners and drug cartels.

The Supreme Court had already called him to testify about three specific massacres in 1996 and 1997, involving AUC leaders allegedly bribed by Uribe to lie about his involvement. The charges considered against Uribe included crimes against humanity. Prosecutors were reportedly nearing an indictment that will put him on trial.

In August, Uribe resigned from the Senate. This compelled the Supreme Court to turn the case over to the regular courts under the Prosecutor's Office, a

procedure overseen by procedural judge Clara Ximena Salcedo.

Salcedo's ruling Saturday invalidates the legal condition of flight risk and house arrest arrived at by the Supreme Court. What is more significant, however, is that it orders the Prosecutor's Office to dismiss all other rulings and procedures agreed to so far and begin the probes from scratch under a different law.

Salcedo claimed that the ruling seeks to protect Uribe's "presumption of innocence." However, her explanation points to the real forces in the Duque administration behind the decision, indicating that it "grants the request presented by the defense, supported by the General Prosecutor's Office and the representative from the Public Ministry."

Uribe's detention and release can only be understood in the context of the economic and political crisis gripping Colombia, which has been sharply intensified by the coronavirus pandemic.

Shortly before Uribe's detention in August, the courts and Congress ruled against the deployment of US troops in Colombia, a ruling that was immediately dismissed by Duque and the Pentagon, with joint US-Colombian military exercises organized last month.

At the same time, Duque extended a miserable \$43 monthly stipend for the poorest households in an effort to ease growing class tensions. However, the September 9 police killing of Javier Ordóñez in Bogotá, and a subsequent massacre of protesters by police firing live ammunition, tapped into the simmering anger at the underlying social and health crisis.

The mass protests against police repression, together with a series of strikes and protests against austerity that began on November 2019, have sharpened the class struggle in Colombia to levels not seen since the insurrectionary National Strike of 1977.

Asier Hernando, director of the charity Oxfam for Latin America, told Reuters this week that the pandemic crisis could create 52 million new poor and 40 million unemployed in the region, commenting: “This could break the social contract of the region and could lead to years of enormous social conflict.”

The UN Economic Commission for Latin America estimates that Colombia’s official poverty rate will rise from 29 to 34 percent. Meanwhile, the reopening of nonessential workplaces has increased the seven-day average of new COVID-19 cases by 30 percent in the last week. Colombia has more than 912,000 cases, the fifth highest in the world, while the number of COVID-19 deaths in the country has risen to 28,000.

Amid low commodity prices and the global economic downturn, pressures are growing on the ruling class to carry out further structural adjustments in the public sector—including to pay back a recent \$17.2 billion loan from the IMF—as well as attacks on workers’ wages and benefits.

Moreover, US imperialism is responding to the crisis by escalating its confrontation with Chinese and Russian influence in the region. This includes pushing Colombia to assume a central role in efforts to overthrow the government of President Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, including through potential military intervention.

Uribe, the real power behind Duque’s government, is seen by imperialism and the Colombian oligarchy as a crucial figure in mobilizing the state and right-wing paramilitary forces in order to break the resistance to these massively unpopular policies.

As the conservative *Nuevo Siglo* writes, “his return to the political stage has vast implications, since 17 months away from the elections and without the restraints of a parliamentarian, it’s expected that he’ll lead the Democratic Center more decisively.”

Under house arrest and threatened with imminent prosecution, Uribe could not actuate—and when necessary settle conflicting interests among—his networks in the military, the paramilitary groups, the financial sector, the landed oligarchy and, most centrally, in the White House.

Significantly, Uribe was the one invited by Trump to the United States after Duque’s election in 2018.

Washington’s backing for both Duque and Uribe, which is bipartisan, exposes US claims about “narco-

terrorism” used to justify aggression against Venezuela. The same pretext has been invoked for massive US military aid for Colombia’s bloody counter-insurrectionary operations against guerrillas and peasants and the repression of workers and youth.

A declassified 1991 US Defense Intelligence Agency report on “the more important Colombian narco-traffickers” lists Uribe, a rancher and Senator at the time. It says that he “was linked to a business involved in narcotics activities in the US” and that he “has worked for the Medellín Cartel and is a close personal friend of [the cartel’s leader] Pablo Escobar Gaviria.”

It also gives the lie to alleged US concerns over “human rights.” Other US diplomatic cables released recently by the Trump administration confirm Uribe’s funding of paramilitary groups. Moreover, Uribe oversaw the “false-positive” murders and their cover-up between 2002 and 2008. Colombian troops killed thousands of innocent civilians in cold blood, claiming that they were guerrillas, in order to inflate body counts and to win promotions and benefits, as well as increased US military aid. Cables released by WikiLeaks confirmed that the Obama administration also had knowledge of this operation, which, according to one study, claimed the lives of 10,000 Colombians.

The Pentagon continued to give full backing to Uribe, applauding his “aggressive leadership,” while Congress has continued granting \$1.2 billion in yearly assistance for the new *Uribista* government.

The attempts by the Trump administration to establish an authoritarian presidential dictatorship in the center of world imperialism is part of a global phenomenon. It can only be combatted by an international political movement of the working class against its source: the capitalist profit system.



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