

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

The Colombian presidential election

Will the nation's new President follow the path forged by Betancur, or permit the return of the narcos?

Virgilio Barco's overwhelming margin of victory in Colombia's May 25 presidential elections was less a mandate for the white-haired MIT graduate with the American wife, than it was a final and decisive *adios* to his opponent, Alvaro Gómez Hurtado. Gómez, son of the 1950s dictator Laureano Gómez, is closely associated in the minds of most Colombians with the era of the *Violencia*, a bloody civil war orchestrated by Gómez, Sr., in which the nation was bitterly polarized between the Liberal and Conservative parties—down to the present day.

Gómez is further remembered as the "silent partner" behind the 1974-78 government of Alfonso López Michelsen, which ushered in the reign of the dope kings. The so-called *tenaza* (pincer) alliance between the two "free-enterprise" enthusiasts succeeded in destroying the dignity of an entire nation.

The majority of Colombia's electorate historically votes Liberal. In the case of Belisario Betancur's stunning 1982 victory over López, the population was rejecting the corrupt, oligarchic family dynasties which have ruled Colombia for decades, opting instead for an innovative maverick risen from peasant, albeit Conservative, ranks. On May 25, they were offered no such choice, and returned to the Liberal fold. It remains to be seen whether Barco can now escape the clutches of Liberal Party boss López

Michelsen—and his own oligarchic pedigree—to continue the Betancur tradition.

A fervent nationalist, Betancur succeeded in reversing Colombia's descent into the inferno of drugs and violence by taking a vanguard role in fighting narco-terrorism, while simultaneously intervening to halt the degeneration of neighboring Central America, through the mediation of the regional Contadora Group (Panama, Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia).

The challenge to Barco is manifold:

- The drug mafia intends to ride back into Colombian politics on the Liberal Party's coattails, and has already put out a proposal for an amnesty in return for paying the Colombian foreign debt. If accepted, this would go a long way toward ultimate legalization of the drug trade—the goal of López Michelsen and company. Chosen for the presidency by the very Liberal Party machine controlled by López Michelsen, it is incumbent upon Barco to distinguish himself by waging an effective war on drugs. Barco has yet to respond to the mafia proposal, or issue a policy statement regarding the war on drugs.

- With the majority of the Ibero-American continent under the murderous blackmail of the International Monetary Fund, the proposal of Peruvian President Alan García for a presidential summit of debtor nations is at the top of the agenda for any gov-

ernment that would salvage its national sovereignty. Barco, a former director at the World Bank, has expressed a rather distant sympathy for the plight of Colombia's debt-racked neighbors, but appears unlikely to embrace the García proposal on his own initiative at this time.

- The escalating narco-terrorist threat in Colombia will present the President-elect with another tough challenge. Barco has indicated a willingness to preserve some version of the amnesty program Betancur forged with portions of the Colombian guerrilla movement, but must draw a sharp distinction between historically malcontent peasant layers and the terrorist armies deployed by the mafia.

- Barco has similarly stated his intention of backing the Contadora peace effort initiated by Betancur, but at this moment of difficulty for the Contadora Group he will have to provide the kind of inspired leadership that Betancur offered. That will especially mean rejecting the "advice" of López Michelsen, who has repeatedly denounced the Contadora initiative as "lawyering for Nicaragua."

- Finally, Barco will have to work hard to win the confidence of the organized labor movement, which is understandably resentful of remarks by López Michelsen just days before the presidential election. López charged that concessions won by labor constituted "subversion" of the state and that the right to strike was "a seizure of power, not through elections but through the unions."

López's attack on the unions is especially important, given that the former President has not abandoned his goal of capturing the presidency again. In a televised interview just before the election, López warned that a "Betancur candidacy, four years hence, is practically inevitable," and would have labor's backing.