

Ernesto Samper Pizano: a tale of three bribes

by Javier Almarino and Valerie Rush

Colombian President-elect Ernesto Samper Pizano has spent the weeks following his June 19 election victory trying to convince international and national public opinion that he is not in the pocket of his country's cocaine cartels. But the scandal that broke two days after election day, with the surfacing of incriminating evidence against him, just won't die.

When the Colombian media published the transcript of three telephone conversations between Cali Cartel bosses and an underling discussing Samper's going price, the President-elect first accused defeated Conservative Party candidate Andrés Pastrana of "dirty tricks," then accused the cartel itself of concocting the tapes to try to tar his administration. When the cartel underling, "journalist" Alberto Giraldo, publicly admitted that the telephone exchanges were authentic, but cleared Samper of actually accepting the money, the country's political elites breathed a sigh of relief and prayed that the matter would dissipate. That's when the second tape recording arrived, this one confirming that the cartel had met with Samper's treasurer, and that the money— as much as \$5 million—*was delivered*.

Not only does the scandal lay bare the close-knit relations between a dominant section of Colombia's political class and the drug cartels, but it leaves Samper's future presidency—if he in fact is inaugurated on Aug. 7—indelibly branded a criminal government in the eyes of the world.

The making of a narco-President

Samper's political career began in 1977, at the age of 25, with his appointment to the coveted presidency of the National Association of Financial Institutes (ANIF), the lobbying machine of the powerful Grancolombiano financial group. Head of Grancolombiano and Samper's immediate sponsor was banker Jaime Michelsen Uribe, a first cousin of former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen and chief beneficiary of the financial "reform" López implemented in his first administration (1974-78), which paved the way for first the marijuana and then the cocaine "bonanza." No one was surprised when Grancolombiano tripled its assets in the first six months of 1976 alone, and went on to

become the country's most powerful financial group. In December of 1983, Grancolombiano's own illicit financial activities, and a well-placed investigation by the Betancur government, led to Michelsen's downfall. He and his top henchmen fled the country to Miami, and spent many years there as fugitives from Colombian justice.

While at ANIF, Samper became Grancolombiano's point man for a well-financed drug legalization campaign which included international tours, high-profile symposiums, research projects, and publications. Samper worked closely with the U.S.-based marijuana lobby, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), and with the U.N.-linked International Cannabis Alliance for Reform (ICAR). Samper later characterized ANIF as "the Latin American coordinator of the international alliance to amend marijuana laws."

Never one for modesty, Samper privately boasted that the legalization campaign "is what will make me President. I am going to be President, it's already decided."

Samper's credentials for a narco-presidency were already publicized in this 1979 statement: "Morality, like criminality, is not an absolute category, as if set for all time; criminal behavior is a political determination born of the state, which establishes that determination based on an interpretation of an *ethos historico*, that is, on popular ethical sentiments. That which was a crime yesterday, today is no longer, because of this golden rule."

This argument clearly had appeal to López Michelsen, who took Samper out of ANIF in 1980 and made him director of the ruling Liberal Party's newly created think-tank, the Institute of Liberal Studies. When López managed to secure the Liberal Party's 1982 presidential nomination, Samper was made his campaign manager. It was in that year that Samper met with Medellín Cartel bosses Pablo Escobar, Carlos Lehder, and others, and accepted substantial campaign contributions in return for López's pledge to legalize drugs if re-elected.

López lost that election, but went on to become a permanent interlocutor for the cartels. Two years later, in March 1984, Cali Cartel boss Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela was

feeling the anti-mafia heat generated in the aftermath of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla's spectacular raids against cocaine jungle cities run by the cartels. Rodríguez prudently sold his majority holdings in the Colombian Banco de los Trabajadores to a frontman. That bank had been created in 1974 under the benign eye of then-President López Michelsen as a money-laundering apparatus for the mob. Brought onto the bank's board of directors in Rodríguez Orejuela's place was, among other López associates, Ernesto Samper Pizano.

One month later, just days after cartel hitmen assassinated Colombia's courageous justice minister Lara, López secretly met with Pablo Escobar and tried to negotiate an amnesty for the drug lords. He was unsuccessful then, but in 1989, following the mafia murder of presidential front-runner Luis Carlos Galán, López's services were once again offered. At the head of a group of so-called "Notables," López helped to negotiate a cartel "surrender" pact with the Gaviria government in 1990. Only it was the government, not the cartels, which did the surrendering.

If López's *public* career was waning after his electoral defeat in 1982, Samper's was just beginning. Under a joint López/cartel sponsorship, he went on to become a Bogotá city councilman (1984) and a senator (1986). He tested the presidential waters in 1989, but got washed away in the anti-drug flood that followed the Galán assassination. He was nonetheless made development minister in the early years of the current Gaviria administration, and later ambassador to Spain before resigning in early 1994 to pursue his presidential dream.

As a presidential candidate, Samper toned down the pro-legalization rhetoric, but his sentiment is unchanged. Samper revealed his tactic in a July 1979 interview made available to *EIR* at the time. When asked if drug legalization were not a difficult cause for a presidential candidate to uphold (referring at the time to Ted Kennedy's presidential ambitions), Samper answered: "Yes, I think that it is very difficult with the marijuana issue to obtain political support. It is very difficult. But, if you present the issue as a social problem, as a problem which is causing more danger to American society with enforcement than with legalization, you can prove to public opinion that you are working on the drug issue in the right way. . . . You can see, if you look at the way legalization has been going, that when elections are about to happen, legalization is very bad, but when the election passes, legalization goes up. Right?"

Bribes, and more bribes

Samper was not only urging a negotiated "peace" with the drug cartels during this period, but was actively soliciting money from them to finance his presidential campaign. According to an informant for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration who had infiltrated the Cali Cartel, Samper

accepted at least \$800,000 from the cartel in 1990, in exchange for a promise to help ban extradition of drug traffickers from Colombia to the United States. However, rumors in the Colombian intelligence community are that Samper was paid the money as indemnification for his 1989 "accident." It appears that Samper had made the mistake of chatting with a Communist Party leader just when cartel assassins decided to assassinate the man. Samper took a dozen bullets, but survived to make political hay out of the incident. The cartel's target was not so lucky.

According to a *Miami Herald* account of June 23, 1994, U.S. congressional sources report that the Central Intelligence Agency briefed Congress on how Samper "not only took money [from the cartels], but solicited it."

In 1991, the cartels bribed the majority of delegates to a Constituent Assembly to include a ban on extradition in the new Colombian Constitution. Despite the existence of a videotape containing evidence of the mass bribe, President Gaviria and the co-presidents of the Assembly refused to release or investigate the evidence. The presidency of the Assembly was shared by three avid drug-legalization proponents: "former" narco-terrorist chieftain Antonio Navarro Wolf of the M-19 and Conservative Party oligarch Alvaro Gómez Hurtado—both presidential candidates—and Horacio Serpa Uribe, a representative of Samper to the Assembly who was later Samper's presidential campaign manager. Serpa has now been named as Samper's new government minister!

On election day 1994, Samper's early dreams of reaching the presidency were realized. At his side throughout the victory celebration was Alfonso López Michelsen, a.k.a. "The Godfather." The Cali Cartel had to do its celebrating the next day, since—according to one cartel member quoted by the *Washington Times*—the bars were all closed that day.

A non-refundable presidency

When the post-election scandal first broke on June 21, Samper Pizano insisted that he would continue to wage war against the drug trade until his country was freed of that evil. If taken at his word, Samper would clearly have to confront the very powerful and very dangerous men who have repeatedly given him their financial backing over the years. And yet, any attempt to negotiate with the traffickers or legalize their trade would be viewed by the world as one more proof of Samper's corruption.

Samper insists, just as he did in 1982, that his campaign ledgers are open to anyone who wishes to review them, and that there are no cartel contributions in his books. But, he added, should it turn out that drug money had filtered into the campaign, the person responsible would pay the consequences. After hearing Samper's bluster, one foreign correspondent observed that "everyone knows that money can come in from any part of the world to win the favors of

future rulers, and no one is so foolish as to put it in the official records.”

Far from dying away, the flames of scandal continue to grow. Humberto de la Calle Lombana, Samper's vice president-elect and known as one of the heads of Masonry in Colombia, has also been accused of links to the Cali Cartel. “We have conducted an investigation of the close collaborators of the vice president-elect, who are indisputably linked to the Cali Cartel,” declared French anti-drug expert Alain Labrouse on a French television program on June 27. Labrouse, head of the Geopolitical Drug Observatory, has claimed that much of his evidence comes from Colombian anti-drug investigators who had to flee their country under threat of death.

De la Calle's wife, Rosalba, has also been implicated in fraud run through Cajanal, the state agency for retirees, which she headed in 1992. According to a two-year investigation conducted by the Colombian security police, DAS, not only was more than \$30 million stolen from the agency on her watch, but under- and over-invoicing and similar illicit accounting practices were reportedly used by Cajanal to illegally import chemicals used in cocaine processing. Further, all of Cajanal's clinics were stocked with pharmaceuticals purchased from Rodríguez Orejuela's pharmacy chain, La Rebaja.

Despite the mounting evidence of corruption, Samper has received full support from outgoing President César Gaviria, whose Liberal Party sponsored Samper's presidential candidacy. First, Gaviria's Communications Ministry issued a ban against any media reproducing further transcripts of the tapes containing the explosive material on Samper. Then, in a public statement, Gaviria announced that an investigation of the tapes would be pursued, but expressed confidence that “this matter will dissipate when [the new administration] proves that the fight against drugs will continue.” In other words, Samper has already been cleared of all charges.

To make certain of that, the investigation has been handed over to Prosecutor General Gustavo de Greiff, like Samper an ardent proponent of drug legalization. De Greiff's daughter Monica was Samper's campaign manager during the early part of his 1993-94 presidential bid. It is widely expected that De Greiff, referred to affectionately as “the old one” on the tapes, will endorse López Michelsen's argument that “Samper's prestige is the national patrimony.”

The vast majority of the Liberal Party—with the notable exception of former justice minister and ex-presidential candidate Enrique Parejo González—has aligned itself with Samper, López, and Gaviria, as have the country's leading business associations. The debate in the López-dominated media has not centered on whether Samper took cartel money or not, but rather on “what were the obscure intentions of those who taped the conversations.”

And yet, for the first time in decades, an important chunk of the country's political elite—headed by the Conservative Party's Pastrana family—has taken off the gloves against this mafia which has dominated Colombian politics, with few exceptions, for 20 years. It was defeated Conservative Party presidential candidate Andrés Pastrana who quietly handed the first incriminating tape over to the government for investigation *five days before the election*. Despite the fact that it was the daily *El Tiempo*, the López-linked Liberal Party mouthpiece, which went public with transcripts of the tape, it is Pastrana who has been accused by virtually the entire political class of behaving like “a sore loser” in turning over the tapes to the authorities, instead of burying them!

Declared *Semana* magazine, owned by one of López Michelsen's sons, Pastrana's “imprudent” decision to turn the tapes over to the government “has turned the Samper

Cali Cartel on tape: millions for Samper

The current scandal first erupted around a tape-recording of three telephone conversations between “journalist” Alberto Giraldo, known as a Cali Cartel public relations man, and the brothers Gilberto and Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela, chieftains of the Cali Cartel.

Giraldo was a columnist for the daily *La República*, director of a television news show, and a writer for the popular magazine *Cromos*, owned by the multimillionaire Santodomingo Group, which is allied to Ernesto Samper Pizano and Alfonso López-Michelsen. In 1981, Giraldo was press secretary for former President Belisario Betancur's electoral campaign. In other words, Giraldo was a “respected” journalist, although his unsavory ties to the cartel have been public since at least 1987.

It was in that year that Giraldo requested a press interview with then-Attorney General Carlos Mauro Hoyos for the newspaper he was working for at the time, *El Siglo*. However, instead of showing up with a tape-recorder, Giraldo presented the Attorney General with none other than Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela, who handled the cartel's legal affairs. At the time, brother Gilberto was in a jail cell, and Miguel had hopes of winning his brother's release.

Attorney General Hoyos reported the incident to the press, which led to Giraldo's sacking by *El Siglo* and to his being named in the book *Los Jinetes de la Cocaína*

government's honeymoon into the shortest in history, which could prove good on day one for the opposition, but which could have an immense cost for the accuser." Wrote *El Espectador* journalist María Jimena Duzán, "What bothers one is not the presence of 'hot money' in the campaign, which is an undeniable reality of the country, but the opportunistic and low way in which Pastrana manipulated the information in the cassette."

Despite the accusations and threats, Pastrana has stuck to his guns, insisting that "nothing will stop the change we have begun. I pledge to continue working to keep this alive." Already, his brother's newspaper *La Prensa* has begun to target Alfonso López Michelsen as "the man who introduced Ernesto Samper to the drug trade business."

How the Clinton administration responds to the Samper scandal could well determine whether Colombia succeeds

in freeing itself of Dope, Inc.'s clutches. Although there are clearly elements in the Washington which are working on behalf of the drug legalization lobby, there are also those who are horrified at the implications of a Samper presidency in Colombia. Outgoing U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Morris Busby met with Samper in Bogotá shortly after the scandal broke to seek "clarifications," and yet, when Samper visited New York the last week in June, he was grilled in his hotel room by two senior State Department officials on the charges against him. According to State Department spokesman Mike McCurry, "We . . . obviously saw a need to raise the issue again. We want some very precise clarifications about allegations that have been made."

As Pastrana's *La Prensa* noted in a recent editorial, isn't this the time for "all the other tapes" in the possession of authorities everywhere to be given a public airing?

(*Cocaine Horsemen*) as the Cali Cartel's public relations man. The adverse publicity notwithstanding, Giraldo was hired by *La República*. In 1989, Hoyos was kidnapped and butchered by drug mafia assassins.

In one of the taped conversations, Rodríguez Orejuela asks Giraldo, "How's the Samper thing going?" to which Giraldo replies, "The presidency is in your hands." To win the vote, Giraldo explained to the cartel boss, "they need 5 billion pesos [\$5.8 million]. They have 2, and need 3 from you." Rodríguez Orejuela responds, "Done." In a later tape, Giraldo says the Samper campaign needs more money, and the cartel boss says, "We've already given 4" billion pesos.

The Cali Cartel's "aid" to the Samper campaign was, of course, not without strings. In addition to the "five appointments" to the Samper cabinet the cartel intended to purchase with its donation, its principal demand is that it be made clear that cartel members "are decent people, people who want to legalize their lives, who have all their lives helped people."

On the tapes, it is clear that Samper wanted the money, but at arm's length. One can hear Giraldo inform Rodríguez Orejuela that "Number One [Samper] met with Eduardo [Mestre Sarmiento] and told him: 'Do what you have to, but don't tell me about it; do what you have to.'" In response, Rodríguez demands a commitment from Samper: "This business of 'don't tell me about it,' we don't go along with that." Mestre Sarmiento is a Liberal Party regional boss with longstanding ties to Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela.

Samper's campaign treasurer, Santiago Medina, is seriously implicated in the tapes as well. "We spoke to Medina already, relax," Rodríguez Orejuela tells a ner-

vous Giraldo at one point, while referring to numerous meetings with "Santi" in another conversation. Giraldo is instructed to tell Medina that the money will arrive in two separate shipments.

Also implicated is retired Army Gen. Miguel Maza Márquez, who spent four years as director of the National Police's intelligence department and another four years as director of the state security agency, the DAS. For a long time there had been rumors that Maza worked for the Cali Cartel, and that he had privately backed Samper's drug legalization efforts. Maza was a presidential candidate in the May 29 first electoral round, and won 40,000 votes. On June 5, as the candidates prepared for the run-off vote on June 19, Maza threw his support—and presumably his 40,000 votes—to Samper. In the tapes, Giraldo asks his boss for an unspecified amount of money to give to Maza Márquez, and insists that it be in cash.

Not only was Maza Márquez notorious for his refusal to prosecute the Cali Cartel, as he did the rival Medellín Cartel, but he was also made an adviser on drug matters to Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez, whose friendly relations with certain prominent Colombian narcotics traffickers is a matter of public record and who today sits in a Caracas prison for defrauding his nation.

It is noteworthy that Maza admitted to the media that he met with Samper Pizano and Samper's defense ministry appointee Fernando Botero Zéa, at the apartment of Alberto Giraldo; but neither Maza nor Samper have explained why Maza's decision to throw his support to Samper was negotiated in the apartment of the Cali Cartel's go-between. Surely the man who was director of Colombian national security for eight years must have known about Giraldo's underworld links.