

Andean Report by Javier Almario

Liberals back mafia against Betancur

Former Colombian President and friend of the dope lobby López Michelsen engineered the latest stab in the President's back.

On Dec. 7, just as the secretary of the Liberal Party's national convention began to read a message from President Belisario Betancur to the assembled delegations, a spokesman of the faction of Alberto Santofimio Botero, political lackey of cocaine king Pablo Escobar Gaviria, shouted "Down with Belisario!" While some delegates were stunned by the scandalous behavior, another delegate linked to presidential pre-candidate Alvaro Uribe Rueda, strode to the secretary's chair and proceeded to rip the text of the President's cable into little pieces. By this time, and with the assistance of "plants" in the auditorium, the conference had been whipped into anti-Betancur hysteria, with many joining the chant against the President.

The Liberal daily *El Tiempo* sought to explain the unprecedented behavior at the convention by observing that, "For the first time in many years, a President addressed himself to a party convention distinct from his own affiliation." President Betancur is a member of the Conservative Party, and his message had been an appeal for non-partisan solidarity in confronting the country's economic crisis.

The Conservative paper *La Republica* revealed, however, that it was Liberal chieftain Alfonso López Michelsen himself who had talked Betancur into sending the message to the convention. López had even suggested that the President address the Liberal delegation; had he done so, it would have posed a serious physical threat to the President from the mafia

elements in Liberal Party ranks.

Although a "contrite" López took to the press to confess his "error of judgment" in urging on the President's message, it was hardly a mistake. In fact, the incident at the convention was precisely what López had been hoping for.

By threatening the Betancur government with a withdrawal of all support and collaboration on the part of the "official" Liberal Party, the President is left with one of two stark choices: either total dependence on the political machine of Alvaro Gómez Hurtado who, although a Conservative, is an avowed neo-fascist and bitter rival of the President's as well as López's leading political ally; or Betancur can strengthen his political relations with the "New Liberalism" dissident faction of the Liberal Party led by Luis Carlos Galán, an alliance which would function as a new third political party.

At the same time, López's skilled manipulation of the Liberal convention succeeded in imposing his intimate mafiosi friends in the party directorate. In the irrational climate López and company had orchestrated, and following 14 hours of sterile discussion, the vote for a new directorate was called at 2:00 a.m. With almost half of the 800 delegates having already abandoned the meeting, López's diehards had little trouble putting their people onto the National Liberal Directorate (DNL). They were Alberto Santofimio Botero, Ernesto Samper Pizano, Jose Name Terán,

Victor Mosquera Chaux, and Bernardo Guerra Serna. With the new DNL, the already corrupted "official" Liberal Party passed completely into the hands of the drug mafia.

- Alberto Santofimio Botero, the political godfather of Santander department, kept leading mafiosi Pablo Escobar in the ranks of his "Popular Alternative Movement" long after Escobar's drug trafficking activities were notorious. Today, Escobar is a fugitive from justice and implicated in last April's assassination of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, who had repeatedly charged that Santofimio's movement was financed by drug money. Santofimio himself has several criminal charges pending against him, including tampering with microfilms of his bank account.

- Samper Pizano, repeatedly exposed in this publication as Colombia's leading drug legalization advocate, has admitted to accepting thousands of dollars of political contributions from top mafiosi while serving as campaign manager for López Michelsen in 1981.

- Victor Mosquera Chaux has for several decades been a fierce public defender of coca producers in the department of Cauca where Mosquera Chaux has his political base.

- José Terán is one of the Liberal Party bosses from the Atlantic Coast famous for widespread vote-buying in that region of the country. Where the money for the vote-buying comes from everybody knows and nobody says.

With López fully back in the driver's seat, election of Liberal presidential candidate Virgilio Barco as the tool of the mafias is the next task. Should Barco dud out, as he has in past electoral campaigns, López can always play the "Alvaro Gómez" card he keeps handily in his back pocket.