

Colombia's Congress is crippled by militia scandal

By Toby Muse
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BOGOTA, Colombia — Sen. Jorge Enrique Gomez replaced a jailed senator, who had replaced a senator who resigned under criminal investigation, who had replaced a jailed senator. But the evangelical preacher's lack of legislative experience hardly matters — Congress doesn't do much these days anyway.

Ten percent of Colombia's 268 federal lawmakers are behind bars and another 10 percent, including the Senate's president, are under investigation. And with the arrest of a cousin this week, the scandal has grown uncomfortably close to President Alvaro Uribe, Washington's closest ally in Latin America.

The scandal revolves around allegations that illegal right-wing paramilitaries helped pro-Uribe lawmakers and governors get elected as they rid much of Colombia of left-wing guerrilla bands. In some cases, the politicians are accused of plotting killings with warlords.

The United States and Europe consider both the paramilitaries and the guerrillas to be terrorist groups, and both are active in drug smuggling. Uribe's government has vigorously hunted down the rebels while brokering a peace deal with the paramilitaries that offered reduced sentences in exchange for confessions.

Uribe himself has remained relatively unscathed. No evidence has been presented linking him to the militias, and he has fostered increased stability during his six-year presidency. His approval ratings regularly poll above 70 percent.

However, he went on the defensive this week after the arrest of Mario Uribe, his second cousin and a close political ally. He gave a series of lengthy radio interviews in which he pledged to let the investigations against his cousin run their course.

"I did not intervene in the episode," the president said. "The first instruction is that the government not intervene."

However, he and his ministers have often suggested that the accusations are political. Last weekend, Interior Minister Carlos Holguin said some of the probes could be based on flimsy evidence, drawing a rebuke from Supreme Court President Francisco Javier Ricaurte, who is investigating the cases.

The scandal broke in late 2006 after political analyst Claudia Lopez found what she called massive vote-rigging in areas controlled by the paramilitaries, and Sen. Gustavo

Petro, a fierce critic of Uribe, detailed before Congress how local politicians worked with warlords to take political control of the Caribbean province of Sucre.

One by one, politicians have been investigated by the Supreme Court, the only body that can try sitting lawmakers. Most of those arrested are being held at Bogota's La Picota prison, where lawyers in expensive suits can be seen entering at all hours of the day.

It's clear the scandal is far from over. This week, jailed paramilitary warlord Salvatore Mancuso said more than half of Colombia's lawmakers could be implicated. Before demobilizing, he had said the paramilitaries "controlled" more than a third of Congress.

"In the whole world, the most perfect mafia takeover of a state, the best achieved, has happened here in Colombia," Petro said.

President Uribe once called Petro, a member of the M-19 rebel group until it demobilized two decades ago, a "guerrilla in civilian garb." No federal lawmakers are known to be under investigation for ties with the guerrillas, although Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos spoke in Congress on Thursday of evidence tying the rebels to unspecified national figures.

The scandal is complicating attempts by Uribe and by U.S. President George W. Bush to persuade the Democratic leadership in the U.S. Congress to stop delaying a vote on a free-trade pact. Critics cite Colombia's human-rights record, while backers say Washington needs to reward one of its few remaining allies in the region.

The scandal, Uribe supporters in the U.S. Congress say, is evidence that the Colombian president is working hard to root out corruption.

"This shows the efforts he has taken to address those problems," said Rep. David Dreier, a California Republican. "The fact that they are under investigation shows the pursuit of the rule of law."

Colombia's own congress, meanwhile, is treading water, with most significant legislation stalled by the scandal. There has been so much turnover that many lawmakers' offices have no name on the door.

Aides to Gomez joke that his seat is "jinxed." But Gomez himself, a gravelly voiced man who founded his own church, holds out hope that he can help solve the crisis — if only by appealing to a higher power.

"The good people have to say to the bad people, 'Let's get out of this,'" he said. "'Let's get out of this with the help of God.'"

Associated Press writer Frank Bajak contributed to this report.

