

Colombia's 'parapolitics' scandal casts shadow over president

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A political scandal that has engulfed Colombia's political class came a step closer to the president, Alvaro Uribe, after his cousin and close political companion was arrested on charges of colluding with rightwing paramilitary groups.

Mario Uribe, whose political career has run parallel to his second cousin's, was taken into custody last night after Costa Rica denied him political asylum.

He faces charges of allegedly seeking the political backing of paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso in 2002 just before national elections and of negotiating with another warlord the purchase of land in areas under paramilitary control.

President Uribe said he was "pained" by his cousin's arrest but that he "accepted the pain with patriotism".

Mario Uribe was the latest in a string of more than 30 politicians elected to Congress in 2006 who have been arrested on charges related to conspiracy with the paramilitary death squads that controlled huge swathes of the nation before they began demobilising in 2003.

Another 30 lawmakers are implicated in what has come to be known as the "parapolitics" scandal, including the senate president and staunch Uribe ally, Nancy Patricia Gutierrez.

President Uribe has said that it is thanks to his policies that Colombia has been able to go through the collective catharsis. But as the scandal reaches his closest collaborators, the image of Colombia's president could begin to tarnish, abroad if not at home.

The president's links to his cousin are not just through family. The two ran for Congress in 1986 on the same ticket of a dissident Liberal Party faction they had co-founded; Mario won a seat in the House of Representatives while Alvaro became senator.

When Alvaro left the senate to run for mayor of Medellin, his cousin took over his senatorial seat. In 2002, Mario Uribe supported his cousin's bid for president.

However, it looks unlikely that the president himself will be implicated in the scandal.

"I don't think this is necessarily going to affect him despite the very, very close relationship. Don't think you should assume [President] Uribe is next," said Michael Shifter, an analyst with the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue.

Despite repeated journalistic and judicial investigations into alleged links between the president and paramilitary groups, no evidence has ever come forth.

Domestically President Uribe enjoys an 84% approval rating. Most Colombians support him for bringing the country from the brink of becoming a failed state and though the parapolitics scandal is important, "the sense of regaining control trumps everything," said Shifter.

Internationally, though, the idea that the president's cousin could have close ties with drug trafficking paramilitary death squads "doesn't smell good," he said.

In Washington, where Colombia has been lobbying for congressional approval for a free trade deal, the news of Mario Uribe's arrest will be an additional argument for those who oppose the agreement.

"Things were already difficult for Colombia," said Shifter. "This will make things more difficult."

The ballooning parapolitics crisis has nearly crippled the Congress. As lawmakers have resigned or been arrested, other members of their political parties have replaced them. But many of the replacement legislators are under investigation as well.

Just one day before Mario Uribe's arrest, the politician who took up his seat in congress was arrested on orders from the supreme court as part of the same investigation.

A political reform bill would punish parties whose members were convicted of conspiracy with outlawed armed groups – be they paramilitaries or leftist rebels – by stripping the party of its congressional seat.

Opposition politicians of the leftist Polo Democrático party have suggested scrapping the congress altogether and calling new elections immediately.