

# Courting the black caucus in Colombia

By Kevin Bogardus and Ian Swanson  
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One month before the White House finished negotiations with the Colombian government on a free trade deal, a Republican-leaning organization began working with black members of Congress on a project in the South American country.

The International Republican Institute's (IRI) goal was to establish a counterpart in Colombia to Congress's own Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). But it was also talking with a group that could potentially swing the controversial trade deal in Washington.

The IRI's board members and staff are mostly Republican, and it generally works with GOP offices, but in this case it reached out to Democratic offices, and even paid for some staffers to go to Colombia.

Officials with the group said the effort was intended to help a historically disenfranchised group, and not to build support in the U.S. for the trade deal, a top priority for President Bush that has been blocked by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

"The work we do is very consistent with work we do in other countries," said Alex Sutton, IRI's director of Latin American programs, who recently returned to Washington after working on the IRI project in Colombia for several years. He said the IRI typically works with disenfranchised blocs of people in foreign countries to help build democratic efforts.

Afro-Colombians, the descendants of slaves who for centuries lived in relative isolation in Colombia, in recent years have increasingly found themselves caught in the middle of Colombia's civil wars. Their schools are underserved, their communities are disproportionately poor and their local leaders have been targets for assassination by various factions in Colombia.

But the timing of the effort, and the fact that the IRI has close ties to the Bush White House, raised concerns among human-rights groups and some Colombian dissidents that the IRI's main goal was to build support in the U.S. for the Colombia free trade agreement (FTA). They said the caucus of black Colombian lawmakers, which is split on the FTA, does not reflect the views of local Afro-Colombian government bodies, who appear almost universally opposed to the deal.

Some members of the Congressional Black Caucus who worked on the IRI effort do not dismiss a link between the IRI's work in Colombia and the trade deal.

“It would be naïve of me not to think there was [a] connection,” said Rep. Yvette Clarke (D-N.Y.). “They didn’t have to take up the cause of the Afro-Colombians.”

The IRI is one of four democracy-building organizations set up by former President Reagan in the mid-1980s as the Cold War dragged to a close, and it remains the group closest to the White House. Its board of directors is chaired by Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), the GOP’s presidential candidate, and its president is Lorne Craner, who worked on democracy-building as an assistant secretary of State for Bush.

The group helps develop political parties and democratic institutions in more than 100 countries and is not affiliated with the Republican Party. The IRI’s funding comes from tax dollars, as well as private grants, and it does not take positions on domestic policy in the U.S.

Its work with the CBC took place as the Colombian government undertook a concerted effort to reach out to black lawmakers in the U.S. in the hope that they would support the trade deal.

“I think the CBC is viewed as a key for passing the Colombia FTA,” said Luis Gilberto Murillo, a former governor of Choco, a Colombian state near the Pacific coast populated by Afro-Colombians.

Sutton said the Colombia trade deal wasn’t even mentioned when the group decided to work with the CBC to create an Afro-Colombian caucus, and Democratic aides described the work as separate from the free-trade deal.

The trips by Democratic staffers were unusual because the IRI rarely pays for travel by Democratic offices.

According to congressional travel records, only seven of the 48 trips IRI has sponsored for lawmakers or their staff members since 2000 were for Democrats. More than half of those trips were to Colombia.

But those who went said they had few reservations about working with the Republican group.

“At the end of the day, I didn’t care if green Martians are working on it. People are working on something that needs to be done. The issue is what matters to me,” said Ian Campbell, Clarke’s chief of staff, who took an IRI-sponsored trip to train staff on the new caucus.

Sutton said the objective was to help Afro-Colombian legislators from different parties realize they could work together for the benefit of their constituents.

Instead of focusing on grassroots efforts with local Afro-Colombian bodies, the IRI

worked to help black Colombians develop a stronger voice at the national level. The best example for developing that voice, Sutton said, was in the U.S., where the CBC is a power base in the U.S. House.

Getting black lawmakers in Colombia to rally around causes was more difficult, however, since unlike the CBC, which is completely Democratic, Afro-Colombian legislators hold political views running all along the spectrum from left to right. For example, four of the caucus members are allies of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and support the trade deal with the U.S., while four are opposed. Another prominent Afro-Colombian senator who opposes the trade deal has yet to join the caucus.

Sutton said the IRI helped the diverse group rally around common issues, such as dedicating a large portion of the Colombian budget to Afro-Colombians.

Groups opposed to the trade deal suggest the formation of the caucus was meant to strengthen the idea that Afro-Colombian legislators were divided on it. This could have made it easier for some U.S. lawmakers to support the deal.

A letter opposing the FTA that was signed by 168 groups, many representing local Colombian groups, was circulated to House members in May.

Marino Cordoba, a black Colombian political leader who fled his country after an assassination attempt, faults some U.S. lawmakers, including Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.), for pushing the Colombian government's position on black Colombian issues instead of representing grassroots groups.

In an interview, Meeks, one of only 15 Democrats to vote for the Central American Free Trade Agreement in 2005, said the IRI's effort could build support for the trade agreement by illustrating the Colombian government's assistance to black Colombians.

"Helping with the Afro-Colombians could help them win votes for the FTA," said Meeks, who has spoken out in favor of the trade deal, saying it could help black Colombians.

If the FTA helps build democracy in Colombia, so much the better, he said. "[IRI's] mission is to promote democracy. If part of that is promoting the FTA, so be it," he said.

Cordoba and some human-rights activists expressed wariness over IRI's activities in part because of the group's history in other countries.

"It's of concern that one of the most important legislative bodies is being funded by the IRI, which has been notorious in Latin America for all kinds of things," said Nicole Lee, executive director of TransAfrica, a human-rights group.

She noted the controversy surrounding the group's actions in Haiti in 2003, when the U.S. ambassador to that country charged the IRI with undermining the stated position of

the U.S. government in that country and helping to topple then-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

“I think the caucus is an important mechanism; however, I think the IRI has a track record of not dealing fairly in Latin America,” said Lee, who questions whether Afro-Colombian legislators in the caucus really support the trade deal.

“It’s an uninformed point of view,” Sutton said in response. “And other than that, I think a response would only add credibility to the remark.”

In the U.S., black lawmakers have long supported Afro-Colombian causes, but the trade deal has sometimes divided them.

Meeks and Clarke, two CBC members who have been involved with the IRI’s work, are not co-sponsors of a resolution backed by Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.) that calls for local Afro-Colombian governing councils to have a greater say over the trade deal. Most CBC members have signed on to the resolution.

Clarke was initially a co-sponsor, but withdrew her support a month later because she was worried the resolution could lead to tensions between the U.S. and Colombian governments, and that this would not advance the interests of Afro-Colombians.

“I hadn’t [had] a chance to fully review if that was in the best interests of Afro-Colombians,” Clarke said of the resolution. “I was concerned about any backlash with that level of focus ... We are speaking to the government and admonishing them.”