

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

A power to reckon with

Colombia's oligarchs are more afraid of an ex-President Betancur than they are of the man still in power.

Many articles have been appearing in the Colombian press of late, nervously commenting on the prospects of a Colombian President who, probably for the first time in decades, will be leaving the presidency more popular than when he came in.

Come Aug. 7, Belisario Betancur will leave office carrying with him the backing of the three most important pillars of Colombian political society. His unequivocally strong stand against the M-19 narco-terrorists who stormed the Justice Palace last November won him the admiration of the armed forces, despite the barrage of opposition press which claimed Betancur was "soft on communism." His decision last year to name veteran trade-union leader Jorge Carrillo to the post of labor minister—a first in Colombian history—captured the labor movement as well.

And, of course, the Catholic Church has been with the President all along. The Pope's visit to Colombia in July can only strengthen Betancur on that front.

All that is enough to give the country's drug-tainted oligarchs nightmares, for anxious as they've been for the departure of the unpredictable maverick Betancur, they are beginning to realize that he may prove more dangerous to them on the outside—especially as the traditional Liberal and Conservative Parties are universally viewed as the stomping ground of the cocaine mob. At least, that's what their media mouthpieces are suggesting.

Exemplary is columnist María Jimena Dussan, who predicts in *El Es-*

pectador of April 15, "President Belisario Betancur, as ex-President, will be a stunning political phenomenon from the very start. . . ." Not only will Betancur's successor be forced to consult with him, says Jimena Dussan, but Betancur's return to the political battlefield "will produce tremors of unpredictable political consequences." It is well known that Betancur is a long-standing enemy of the current Conservative Party presidential candidate Alvaro Gómez, as well as of former Liberal Party President López Michelsen, the mafia-linked "puppet-master" behind the front-running Liberal candidate, Virgilio Barco.

Jimena Dussan concludes with the warning, "If Betancur leaves the [presidential] Palace of Nariño with the prestige inherent to all those who leave that charge, he will enter the gallery of former Presidents with an aura that his most recent predecessors Turbay Ayala or López Michelsen would envy."

It is no surprise, therefore, that López has done his best to discredit Betancur's presidential accomplishments, starting with the regional negotiating body for peace in Central America known as Contadora. López sneered in a March 6 speech that "the farther a country from the center of events . . . the more enthusiastic [it is] about the Contadora group. In Australia, Contadora is highly popular because no one knows where El Salvador is, nor Nicaragua, nor Colombia, nor anything."

López continued, "There is the Organization of American States, which has been laid aside by the Contadora group, although it is an institution of nearly 100 years of existence. . . . There exists a court of justice, a series of procedures sponsored by the United Nations. Why have we abandoned institutions like these to place ourselves in the hands of improvised presidential groups which are here today and gone tomorrow, and have no institutional nature?"

López has also tried to turn the military against Betancur by raising the spectre of a Nicaraguan invasion of disputed Colombian territory while simultaneously accusing Betancur of "lawyering" for the Sandinistas because of his stand against U.S. aid to the contras. Declared López, Betancur should "put his own house in order" before trying to "solve Central America's problems for it [and] turn us into lawyers for Nicaragua."

A close associate of López's, Colombian Attorney-General Carlos Jiménez Gómez, launched his attack from a slightly different angle. Earlier in April he opened an investigation of Justice Minister Enrique Parejo González—Betancur's anti-drug representative in government—for alleged complicity in the March 19 escape from jail of top drug mafioso Matta Ballesteros. Jiménez also leaked to the press a report from his office implying a government coverup of mishandling of last November's Justice Palace siege.

Betancur's enemies have help from abroad as well. The international edition of *Newsweek* on April 21 lies openly that "the military is already breathing heavily down the neck of the civilian government of President Belisario Betancur. . . . In Bogota these days conservatives have begun quietly to discuss the prospects for a military coup."