

The emergence of Neopopulism in Colombia? The case of Álvaro Uribe

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ABSTRACT *This article examines the thesis that Álvaro Uribe, the new president of Colombia (2002–06) is a neopopulist. Such a thesis holds that Uribe can be classified as a neopopulist given his election to the presidency after breaking ranks with the Liberal Party, his massive support from largely unorganised citizens, his government under a state-of-siege decree, his promotion of a national referendum, and his frequent public meetings with citizens throughout Colombia. I reject this thesis, arguing that Uribe’s method of winning the presidency did not constitute a significant departure from previous practice in Colombia’s system of fragmented political parties. His personality lacks a strong charismatic aura. More significantly, Uribe made no concerted effort to cultivate political support among the masses. In office Uribe’s state-of-siege powers have been curtailed by decisions of the Constitutional Court, which he has, significantly, been careful to respect. His proposed referendum had to be negotiated with—and was significantly transformed by—the Colombian Congress. And Uribe’s public meetings consist largely in his listening to citizen complaints, rather than giving electrifying public orations. A close examination of Uribe’s history and governing style shows him to be a talented politician but not a populist.*

To describe Álvaro Uribe, the new president of Colombia (2002–06), as a neopopulist is at first glance surprising. Uribe is widely (and not incorrectly) perceived as a hard-line, even authoritarian, politician who appeals primarily to the middle and upper classes with his call to restore order throughout Colombian territory by confronting the leftist guerrilla movements with an iron fist. His economic policies are orthodox and neoliberal in nature, aimed at reducing state spending (except on the state security forces) and with little in the way of redistribution to poorer sectors of society. Nevertheless, a case can be made that Uribe is a neopopulist when this term is understood as a political strategy in which an individual leader gains office and exercises power through the largely unmediated support of dispersed private individuals. This argument would hold that Uribe can be fairly classified as a neopopulist given that he was elected to the presidency after having broken ranks with the Liberal Party and through the massive support of largely unorganised citizens who placed in him their hopes for ending the violent conflict in Colombia. Moreover, once in power, Uribe’s

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governing style has been characterised by populist tactics such as ruling under a state-of-siege decree, promoting a national referendum, and holding frequent public meetings with citizens throughout Colombia.

This article examines, but ultimately rejects, the thesis that Álvaro Uribe is a neopopulist. Rather, it argues that Uribe's method of winning the presidency did not constitute a significant departure from previous practice in Colombia's system of fragmented political parties. His personality, despite the fascination that Colombians have with his disciplined, workaholic style, lacks a strong charismatic aura. Moreover, Uribe made no concerted effort to cultivate political support among the masses, particularly where such support is seemingly most available, among the hundreds of thousands of uprooted and displaced Colombians who are victims of the ongoing internal conflict. Once in office, Uribe's state-of-siege powers have been curtailed by decisions of the Constitutional Court, which he has, significantly, been careful to respect. His proposed referendum had to be negotiated with—and was significantly transformed by—the Colombian Congress. And Uribe's public meetings consist largely in his listening to citizen complaints, rather than giving electrifying public orations.

The article begins by clarifying the concepts of populism and neopopulism as used herein. It then briefly examines the history of populism in Colombia. The body of the article focuses on Álvaro Uribe, providing a short biographical sketch, an examination of his 2002 presidential campaign, and an analysis of his policies and actions during his first six months in office. The article concludes with a brief assessment of the utility of populism in helping us to understand Uribe.

The concept of populism

Populism is a contested concept. It has been viewed by some social scientists as a multifaceted, historically specific occurrence and by others as primarily an economic policy, a political strategy or a sociological phenomenon. This article will not delve into the complexities of this debate, a task that has been performed admirably elsewhere (Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 2001). However, it is necessary to describe briefly how populism has traditionally been perceived in Latin America, the emergence of neopopulism in the region, and the basic understanding of populism that guides this analysis.

In the context of Latin America, 'populism' traditionally referred to political movements or regimes led by a charismatic leader who mobilised large masses of primarily lower class people in a personalistic fashion, without recourse to a highly organised or ideologically rooted political party. Although the bulk of followers were lower class in background—often part of the incipient urban working class—populist movements were multi-class in nature, including middle class professionals and even marginal upper class elites. Populist leaders employed nationalistic and anti-oligarchic discourses. In the economic realm, they enacted expansionary policies often rooted in import substituting industrialisation. Such movements were especially predominant from the 1940s to the 1960s and were epitomised by Argentina's Juan Perón, Brazil's Getúlio Vargas, and Peru's Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre.¹

Military regimes attempted to extirpate populism in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, beginning in the 1980s populism appeared to make a comeback, although with notably different characteristics than the traditional model just described. This 'neopopulism', as it came to be called, was similar to classical populism in that it was rooted in a charismatic, personalistic leader who appealed to and mobilised broad masses of unorganised citizens, often utilising anti-oligarchic rhetoric. However, rather than carrying out Keynesian expansionary policies, these neopopulist leaders often embraced harsh neoliberal economic reforms such as privatisation, fiscal austerity and trade liberalisation. They were also less tied to organised labour, drawing their support instead from the poorest members of society who made their living in the informal sector. Typical of such neopopulist leaders were Argentina's Carlos Menem, Brazil's Fernando Collor and Peru's Alberto Fujimori.²

The significant disparities between the traditional and newer forms of populism have produced a lively debate over precisely what this concept should signify. Increasingly, social scientists have emphasised the political nature of populism, viewing specific economic policies, sociological bases and historical roots as incidental, rather than inherent, to its definition (Mouzelis, 1985; Conniff, 1999; De la Torre, 2000; Weyland, 2001). Although a commonly accepted definition of populism has yet to be established, there is broad agreement on the principal elements of populism conceived as a political phenomenon.

First, populism is characterised by a personalistic form of political leadership, usually charismatic in nature, in which the leader arouses exceptionally fervent devotion and enthusiasm among followers. Second, populism works through a multi-class political coalition heavily dependent upon lower-class individuals. The specific sociological base of the coalition tends to vary—it may include strong support from organised labour or it may rely largely upon self-employed individuals in the informal sector of the economy. What appears key is that these people 'feel excluded or marginalized from national political life' (Weyland, 2001: 114). Third, populism entails a political strategy of mobilisation that favours direct, unmediated ties to followers over highly organised political parties. Such a vertical strategy of mobilisation differs from clientelism in that it employs techniques to foster a sense of direct contact between the leader and his followers. Moreover, patronage benefits are used to reinforce allegiance to the national leader, rather than to the local political broker (Mouzelis, 1985: 334). Finally, populism often lacks a coherent ideology, but invariably employs an anti-elitist political discourse. This discourse tends to be Manichean in nature, presenting 'the struggle between the people and the oligarchy as a moral and ethical fight between good and evil, redemption and downfall' (De la Torre, 2000: 140).

The analysis of Álvaro Uribe that follows is based upon the preceding understanding of populism as a political concept. In short, 'populism' will be viewed as a strategy of political mobilisation in which a personalistic, charismatic leader constructs a multi-class coalition with significant lower-class support through establishing direct ties to followers and employing an anti-elitist discourse. The term 'neopopulism' will be understood to refer simply to the most recent wave of populist leaders in Latin America. Thus, whether the economic policies of a neopopulist are Keynesian or neoliberal in nature is irrelevant to this designation.

Populism in Colombia

Colombia has traditionally been viewed as unfertile territory for populism. Unlike most other major Latin American countries, Colombia has never had a populist president, nor have populist movements obtained majority representation in Congress (Urrutia, 1991: 370). Explanations for the lack of populist success have focused on the relative stability of the country's two-party system and its extensive clientelistic networks, which have functioned to provide relatively broad access to public services (Urrutia, 1991). Such a perception, however, overlooks the fact that two significant populist movements emerged in Colombia in the twentieth century, those created by maverick Liberal Party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in the 1940s and by former dictator and retired general Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in the 1960s and early 1970s. Gaitán's movement was cut short by his assassination in 1948, and Rojas Pinilla's movement dwindled after possible electoral fraud in 1970. As Dix noted some years ago, 'they have been the only two Colombian leaders of the twentieth century who have developed genuine mass movements and posed real challenges for the presidency on that basis' (1978: 335). As such, both merit examination.

Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was a populist politician of lower-middle class background who had become a brilliant criminal lawyer. He first garnered national attention by excoriating the Conservative government on the floor of Congress for its role in the 1928 massacre of banana workers on Colombia's Caribbean coast. In the early 1930s Gaitán had briefly attempted to form his own political movement, the Unión Nacional Izquierdista Revolucionaria (UNIR), or Revolutionary Leftist National Union, but by 1936 he had returned to the Liberal Party, eventually contesting its leadership. Gaitán split the Liberal party in 1946, running for president against the party's official nominee. Although the Liberals lost the election because of this internal division, Gaitán's electoral performance was notably strong and in 1947 he assumed the party's leadership. While Gaitán made use of the Liberal Party, it was clearly secondary to his direct and charismatic appeal to the lower and lower-middle classes, often through mass rallies and parades. Gaitán employed an anti-elite discourse, conveyed in passionate oratory, which argued that both Liberal and Conservative oligarchs exploited the state for their own benefit while ignoring the needs of the masses (Bushnell, 1993: 198). In contrast, Gaitán explicitly identified himself with them ('I am not a man, I am a people'). Braun notes that 'for his followers he was the savior who would redeem them from all earthly ills' (Braun, 1985: 37). Although Gaitán derived most of his support from the urban Liberal masses, he sought to portray himself as a defender of the masses of both parties, declaring that 'I fail to see the difference between the malaria of the Liberal *campesinos* and the malaria of the Conservatives' (Dix, 1978: 347). Gaitán was the most likely presidential candidate of the Liberal Party for the 1950 elections. Unfortunately, his assassination on 9 April 1948 marked both the end of his populist movement and the intensification of a period of bloody national violence that eventually became known simply as *La Violencia*.

Gustavo Rojas Pinilla came to power five years after the murder of Gaitán. Both the Liberal Party and a major faction of the Conservative Party, hoping that

the general could put an end to *La Violencia* and pave the way for a return to civilian rule, broadly supported his 1953 military coup. Nonetheless, it soon became clear that Rojas sought to perpetuate his stay in power by creating a political base of support through social reforms and appeals to labour. Disillusioned with this course of events, politicians from both parties began to oppose Rojas. Their resistance to his military regime culminated in the removal of Rojas from power in May 1957 by a five-man military junta, which served as an interim government until bipartisan civilian rule was restored in 1958 in the form of the National Front. In 1961 Rojas re-emerged as a political figure, creating the Alianza Nacional Popular (ANAPO), the National Popular Alliance. ANAPO was clearly a personalistic vehicle to promote the political aspirations of Rojas, who utilised anti-elite rhetoric to appeal to lower and lower-middle class discontent with the bipartisan National Front regime. Rojas' appeal to the masses was based less on charisma than on 'his aura of authority as a former military leader and president who in power would be able to solve the pressing problems of the poor' (Dix, 1978: 345). ANAPO's platform was an eclectic combination of traditionalism, nationalism and socialism, which earned it the epithet of being a mixture of 'vodka and holy water' (Bushnell, 1993: 229). Rather than promoting class struggle, Rojas promised immediate material benefits such as 'free education for all, free medical and dental service for the poor, bank credit for small entrepreneurs ... and a new plan for housing the poor' (Safford & Palacios, 2002: 330). Rojas reached the height of his influence in 1970, when he lost the presidency amid credible accusations of electoral fraud. In the wake of this election ANAPO began to decline as a political force, especially after Rojas passed its leadership to his daughter as a result of illness. The party virtually disappeared after the death of Rojas in 1975.

The movements led by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and Gustavo Rojas Pinilla both meet the criteria for populism as defined in this article. In each case a personalist leader mobilised a multi-class coalition with significant support from the lower classes by establishing direct ties to their followers and employing an anti-elitist discourse. In the decades following Rojas' death, no new populist movement emerged in Colombia. As Bushnell has noted, the heir to ANAPO was 'a growing apathy and cynicism regarding the political process generally' (Bushnell, 1993: 242). One might also add that these years were marked by the growing strength of non-electoral expressions of popular discontent such as civic strikes and guerrilla movements. The experiences of Gaitán and Rojas demonstrate that Colombia is not immune to the phenomenon of populism. Indeed, both came exceedingly close to winning the presidency—under slightly different circumstances either could have brought their populist movement to power. Having established that Colombia is not an exception to the phenomenon of populism, it is time to examine whether Álvaro Uribe qualifies as a populist.

Biographical sketch of Álvaro Uribe

Relatively little in Álvaro Uribe's life up to 2001 would suggest a populist vocation. His political career over two decades was established as a steadfast member of the Liberal Party, one of the two traditional political parties in

Colombia. Obviously, this alone should not preclude a populist classification—as noted above, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was the leader of the Liberal Party and at the peak of his populist career when he was assassinated in 1948. Nonetheless, neither Uribe's life nor his political career contain many similarities to those of Gaitán.

Álvaro Uribe was born on 4 July 1952 in Medellín, the oldest of five children. Unlike either Gaitán or Rojas Pinilla, Uribe was born into a prosperous family. His father, Alberto Uribe Sierra, made his living buying and selling land and Álvaro was reared in comfortable conditions. His official campaign biographical sketch underscores that he was named the 'best student' of his high school graduating class, and that he was exempted from final exams in all subjects during his last two years of high school thanks to his 'excellent academic performance' (Uribe, 2002a). Uribe's parents were both Liberal stalwarts, and it is not surprising that, having been born in the midst of *La Violencia*, Álvaro Uribe grew up instilled with a strong commitment to the Liberal Party.

Uribe graduated as a lawyer from the Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín. At the age of 24 he received his first political appointment, as Chief of Assets for the Public Utilities of Medellín. Two years later he was appointed Secretary General of the Ministry of Labour in Bogotá, during the Liberal presidency of Alfonso López Michelsen. Then, in 1980, at the age of 28, Uribe was appointed the national director of Aerocivil, the Department of Civil Aviation. It is worth noting that these political appointments were garnered through Uribe's active participation in the political machine of a regional Liberal Party boss, Bernardo Guerra Serna. This was neither unusual nor particularly objectionable in Colombia's deeply entrenched system of clientelistic politics. Indeed, a bright young man with political ambition could go far by attaching himself to a powerful *cacique*. However, this was not a likely career path for a populist, especially when the political boss was a traditional machine politician like Guerra Serna.

In 1982, at the age of 30, Álvaro Uribe was appointed mayor of Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city and the capital of Antioquia, under incoming president Belisario Betancur. Once again, the appointment came in large part thanks to his connections to Bernardo Guerra Serna. Nonetheless, Uribe lasted barely four months in the position before being forced to resign, apparently as a result of political differences with the governor of Antioquia. Six months later an incident occurred that seemingly had profound repercussions on Uribe's subsequent political outlook. In an apparent kidnapping attempt, FARC guerrillas killed Uribe's father, Alberto Uribe Sierra, on 14 June 1983 at one of the family's haciendas. His brother, Santiago Uribe, was also gravely wounded in the attack. Uribe's future hard-line intransigence toward Colombia's guerrilla insurgencies may well be rooted in that unfortunate family tragedy.

In 1984 Uribe returned to the political arena, for the first time running as a candidate for popular election. He won a seat on the Medellín municipal council, as the head of the electoral list sponsored by his political patron Guerra Serna (López Suárez, 2002). Ultimately, Uribe served for two periods in the Medellín municipal council, from 1984 to 1986, and again from 1988 to 1990. Nonetheless, by 1986 Uribe had broken ranks with Guerra Serna, apparently viewing

him as too much of an old-school political baron, whose corrupt figure tarnished the image of the modern, efficient politician that Uribe was attempting to construct. He formed his own regional movement, the Sector Democrático. Nonetheless, unlike Gaitán and the UNIR, Uribe did not break with the national Liberal Party. Instead, he joined his regional force with Poder Popular, a national movement within the Liberal Party led by a younger and seemingly more modern politician, Ernesto Samper.

In between his two terms on the Medellín municipal council Álvaro Uribe was elected to the Senate in 1986. He was subsequently re-elected twice to the Senate—in 1990 to a Congress that was later dissolved by the 1991 National Constituent Assembly,³ and in 1991 for a shortened term that ended in 1994. One aspect of Álvaro Uribe's Senate career worth noting is his sponsorship of several pieces of important legislation. Uribe's campaign biography proudly lists 10 major laws that he shepherded through the Senate (Uribe, 2002a). This is not simply campaign hagiography. Uribe was, in fact, one of the most serious legislators in Congress. The legislation that he tackled was lengthy and complex, requiring a keen mind and attention to detail. Indeed, his reputation as an earnest and effective technocrat began largely during his years in the Senate. Uribe's efforts were acknowledged by both colleagues and journalists, who on distinct occasions declared him to be the 'Star Senator' (1990), 'one of the five best Senators' (1992) and 'Best Senator' (1993) (Uribe, 2002a).

It is also important to underscore the neoliberal tenor of much of this legislation. For example, Law 71 of 1988 undertook radical pension reform, raising the age for retirement and creating private pension funds. Likewise, Law 50 of 1990 entailed an extensive neoliberal labour reform designed to make the labour market more 'flexible'. Of the same nature, Law 100 of 1993 tackled the issue of the social security system, with the practical effect of precluding access to health care services for many of the poorest sectors of society. Obviously, neoliberalism *per se* is not incompatible with populism (Roberts, 1985; Weyland, 1999). However, populism does entail the mobilisation of a broad multi-class coalition with significant appeal to the lower classes. One looks in vain for any such effort by Álvaro Uribe during his years in the Senate.

In October 1994 Uribe was elected governor of his home department of Antioquia. During his three-year term in office (1995–97), Uribe solidified the public persona that was to characterise him (positively and negatively) during his campaign for the presidency in 2002. First, he reinforced the image of a sober politician who eschewed demagoguery in favour of hard work. The news magazine *Semana* published a favourable profile of the governor in 1996, noting that 'he is a man that always speaks seriously ... He describes himself as "tiresome," given his indifference to frivolity and gossip. But although he might not be the most entertaining person to have at a party, his seriousness is impressive' (*Semana*, 1996). Second, Uribe continued to enact neoliberal measures as governor. Most notably, he slashed the number of departmental workers by 60%, reducing the number of employees from 14 061 to 5499 (*Semana*, 2002b).

Third, and of greatest significance, Uribe consolidated his image as an unyielding hard-liner on security issues. Antioquia had long been one of the most violent departments in Colombia (Roldán, 2002: 5). By the mid-1990s the banana-

growing region of Urabá, the low-lying country along the Magdalena River, and even the slums encircling Medellín had all become bloody battlegrounds for the violent struggles between leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and state security forces. Uribe did not shy away from exerting his authority to maintain public order. To the contrary, he tended to micromanage the state security forces in his department. For example, *Semana* recounts the time Uribe telephoned a general and calmly said ‘General, four hours ago I called you and told you that there was a guerrilla roadblock on the highway to Cocorná. And they just told me that it is still there. I expect that in half an hour you call me and tell me that citizens can now travel peacefully’ (*Semana*, 2002b). Every morning at 7:00 am Uribe would hold a Security Council meeting with the leaders of the state security forces in Antioquia, requesting specific results from the generals regarding their operations (*Semana*, 2002b).

More controversially, Uribe based his security policy in Antioquia upon the promotion of active citizen collaboration with state security forces. Specifically he became the foremost promoter in Colombia of the Special Vigilance and Private Security Services (CONVIVIRS). The CONVIVIRS were designed, in principle, to be civilian self-defence forces, explicitly authorised by the state to help provide public security in zones where this could not be effectively guaranteed by the state security forces. The CONVIVIRS initially had the task of reporting suspected delinquents or guerrillas to the police or the army. However, they were soon granted the right to carry small arms, theoretically in order to defend themselves. Unfortunately, the CONVIVIRS quickly became involved in a broad array of human rights abuses, including torture, extrajudicial killings and massacres (Human Rights Watch, 1998: 85–89). Moreover, strong ties developed between some CONVIVIRS and the vicious right-wing paramilitary groups—paramilitaries apparently joined or created CONVIVIRS, and these carried out paramilitary-like actions. Despite this troubling record, Uribe remained an adamant defender of the CONVIVIR strategy, arguing passionately that its record had been distorted. Notwithstanding Uribe’s intense focus on public security, political violence intensified during his term, with the rate of political murders committed outside of combat more than doubling in Antioquia, peaking at 1431 victims in 1996 (Kirk, 2003: 283).

Two other aspects of Alvaro Uribe’s life deserve comment before concluding this biographical sketch. First, Uribe’s political career has been dogged by insistent rumours of ties to drug traffickers. The most explicit case has been made by journalists Joseph Contreras and Fernando Garavito in their recently published *Biografía no autorizada de Álvaro Uribe Vélez* (2002). The authors detail supposed family ties to drug traffickers, accuse Uribe of favouring traffickers during his tenure at Aerocivil, suggest that his dismissal as mayor of Medellín was the result of a clandestine meeting with members of the Medellín Cartel, highlight Uribe’s opposition to the extradition of drug traffickers as Senator in 1989, and underscore Uribe’s loyalty to Ernesto Samper during the drug scandal that plagued his presidency (Contreras & Garavito, 2002). Nonetheless, these authors provide little in the way of concrete, verifiable evidence. As Kirk has noted, those who accuse Uribe of links to drug trafficking ‘cannot prove it beyond the inevitable contact that anyone living in Antioquia during the 1980s

might have had, particularly if that person had interests in land and politics' (Kirk, 2002: 280). Nonetheless, for Uribe it was an irksome charge that he had to confront repeatedly during his presidential campaign.

Finally, Uribe assiduously cultivated the image of a studious politician. He twice took the opportunity to study abroad. In 1991 Uribe took classes at Harvard University, studying, among other subjects, conflict resolution. In 1998 he studied at Oxford University as a Senior Associate Member of St Antony's College. In public interviews he emphasised the importance of continual education: 'The more one studies, the more one feels that they know less. The problems [of Colombia] are so complex that one needs to continue revising and examining one's ideas every day' (*Semana*, 2002a). This studious image is frequently noted in public profiles. Kirk writes that 'Uribe doesn't look like a warrior ... Uribe wears wire-rimmed spectacles and is boyishly slender, a policy wonk far more fluent in the language of government than war' (Kirk, 2002: 280). Alma Guillermoprieto describes Uribe as 'a slight, boyish forty-nine-year-old, who looks like what he once was: an honors student with a doctorate in law and political science and some business-management courses at the Harvard University Extension School' (Guillermoprieto, 2002: 53). Uribe's bookish image is worth taking into account when analysing whether or not he is a populist. Certainly, intellect of itself is no barrier to populism—most accounts agree, for example, that Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was a brilliant man. Nonetheless, populists strive to create a direct link between themselves and the masses, usually through a charismatic personality. Many Colombians admire Uribe's disciplined, even ascetic, work habits and his studious nature. However, such is not the stuff of charisma, in which Uribe is clearly lacking.

In sum, Álvaro Uribe's public life before his campaign for president reveals little in the way of populism. He had a long career in politics, being appointed to various high-level bureaucratic posts, as well as to the mayorship of Medellín, and was elected to the Medellín municipal council, the Senate and the governorship of Antioquia. All these political posts were garnered through Uribe's participation in the Liberal Party, first as a follower of Bernardo Guerra Serna, and then through his own regional movement within the Liberal Party. His political style is low-key and technocratic and he has made a name for himself as a serious politician. His legislative achievements have been largely neoliberal in character, with little in the way of efforts to reach out to, or mobilise, lower-class citizens. His greatest public recognition stemmed from the hard-line, even militaristic, stance that he took towards the guerrilla movements in Antioquia, and his stubborn defence of the controversial CONVIVIR groups. Álvaro Uribe was probably a more complex politician than either his supporters or his detractors were willing to admit; however, there was little in that complexity that was populist in nature.

Uribe's quest for the presidency

The argument in favour of classifying Álvaro Uribe as a neopopulist emphasises that he was elected to the presidency after having broken ranks with the Liberal Party. This view suggests that he achieved massive support from largely

unorganised citizens who placed in him their hopes for resolving the Colombian crisis. This perspective is correct as far as it goes. However, the preceding characteristics are insufficient to merit the label of 'populism'. Uribe's impressive victory did not come as the result of a strategy of political mobilisation in which he utilised charisma, employed an anti-elitist or anti-oligarchic discourse, or appealed directly to the lower classes or poorest sectors of society. Rather, his electoral triumph relied upon more traditional forms of mobilisation and the appeal of a hard-line candidate at a critical juncture in Colombia's internal conflict. This section examines Uribe's campaign platform and the mechanics of his election strategy to argue that Uribe was not a populist candidate.

As noted in the previous section, Álvaro Uribe did not build his political career as a charismatic leader. This did not change in his presidential campaign. Even his vice-presidential running mate, Francisco Santos, conceded as much. Santos wrote of Uribe, 'He is a politician who, *without having the charisma of others*, is convincing because of his trajectory, the clarity of his proposals, and the facility with which he explains them' (Santos, 2002, emphasis added). Uribe himself explicitly disavowed populism, declaring in his principal campaign document, 'I am offering a serious, efficient, honorable Government, not a miraculous one. I fear both demagoguery and populism because the frustration of electoral promises affects democratic credibility' (Uribe, 2002b). Nor did Uribe base his campaign around an explicit appeal to the lower-class masses, or attempt to set them in opposition to the elite or oligarchy. To the contrary, the first of the 100 points contained in his 'Democratic Manifesto' proclaims 'I dream of a Colombia with the predominance of a democratic, tolerant *middle class*' (Uribe, 2002b, emphasis added). This was hardly the stance of a populist firebrand.

This is not to say that Uribe foreswore appeals to the lower classes. Like any politician competing for votes in a society with a large number of impoverished citizens, Uribe offered campaign promises that sought to address some of their concerns. Of particular note, Uribe proposed expanding the system of primary education to accommodate 1 500 000 more students. He also promised to construct 100 000 new low-cost housing units per year, and to address the issue of unemployment through the construction of systems of mass transportation in the intermediate cities of Bucaramanga, Barranquilla, Cali and Cartagena (Uribe, 2002b). Nevertheless, such promises were nothing out of the ordinary in the context of Colombian politics, and were accompanied by repeated calls for government austerity in spending.

Perhaps a more populist message could be seen in Uribe's strenuous denunciations of government corruption and 'politiquería'. Indeed, Uribe promised that on the very day of his inauguration he would submit to Congress for approval a 'Referendum against Corruption and Politiquería'. More radically, Uribe proposed to introduce a unicameral Congress and reduce the total number of legislators from 266 to 150 (Uribe, 2002b). However, an anti-corruption stance had become standard fare in Colombia during the preceding two decades, particularly for politicians trying to construct a modern, non-clientelistic image that appealed to urban, middle-class voters. Moreover, Uribe justified his plan to reduce the size of Congress primarily in terms of fiscal austerity, rather than as a

frontal attack on professional politicians. In fact, unlike either Gaitán or Rojas, Uribe did not utilise a discourse pitting ‘the people’ against ‘the oligarchy’ or even ‘the political class’. Much less did he try to portray himself as the embodiment of ‘the masses.’

It is notable, in fact, how little Uribe sought to appeal to the uprooted, unorganised urban masses flooding into Colombia’s cities. Recent analysts have suggested that neopopulists have based their strategy less on appeals to organised labour than to the poorest sectors of society who eke out a living in the informal sector (Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 1999). In the Colombian case such sectors are permeated by hundreds of thousands of displaced persons who have fled the violent conflict in the countryside. In the past 10 years, some 1.2 million people have been forcibly displaced, out of a population of 40 million (Isacson, 2002: 1). According to the Colombian non-governmental organisation CODHES, in 2001 alone some 342 000 Colombians were forced to flee their homes, the equivalent of 937 persons per day (CODHES, 2002). Such masses would seem ready-made for mobilisation by a populist politician. And yet rarely did displaced persons even make an appearance in Uribe’s speeches or campaign documents. One explanation, of course, is that the majority of displaced persons were uprooted as a result of right-wing paramilitary violence, and not the actions of the leftist guerrillas who were the focus of Uribe’s hostility (US Department of State, 2002). If so, Uribe may have (correctly) perceived that efforts to mobilise displaced people would be largely futile. In any case, Uribe’s campaign made no significant effort to mobilise the vast number of persons in Colombia’s informal sector.

More than anything else Uribe’s campaign platform was notable for its unyielding stance on the issue of public security. Indeed, Álvaro Uribe quickly became known as the hard-line candidate with regard to the country’s left-wing guerrillas and peace negotiations. He drew upon his record as governor of Antioquia to buttress his claims that he had the political will to confront the guerrillas and force them to declare a ceasefire as a prerequisite to negotiating. Although Uribe condemned the paramilitaries as well as the guerrillas, he reserved his passion and harshest comments for the latter:

Who produces the hostilities? The guerrillas. They attack civilians, the public security forces, infrastructure; they kidnap; they are involved in drug trafficking. When I speak of stopping hostilities, I’m referring to their suspending all of these crimes. To negotiate a stoppage of hostilities is to continue to give them opportunities to keep on assassinating and kidnapping people. (Aznarez, 2002)

Uribe was also extremely critical of the peace negotiations engaged in by President Andrés Pastrana, particularly his ceding the FARC guerrillas a 16 000 square-mile demilitarised zone in order to facilitate peace talks. Uribe dismissed the zone as a ‘paradise for delinquents’ (Aznarez, 2002). Shortly before the peace talks ended in February 2002, he fulminated about efforts to save the negotiations despite the apparent intransigence of the FARC:

What I have to do is to explain to the Colombian people that in no part of the world has peace been created by exchanging hugs on television with violent people; in no part of the world has peace been created by caving in to violent people. The history

of humanity is full of examples that peace is the daughter of the exercise of authority, peace is the daughter of social justice. They have spent three years turning the country over to the violent ones, and the only thing that they have achieved is that the FARC has grown by 32%, it has expanded its terrorist capabilities, and it now wants definitively to take power by violent means. (*Primer Colombia*, 2002a)

When a journalist suggested that peace was achieved in Central America through negotiations, Uribe rejoined: 'the Central American guerrillas negotiated because they were defeated' (Aznarez, 2002). This outlook informed Uribe's fundamental position that 'violent groups can only be stopped when the state exercises authority and demonstrates to them that it is able to defeat them' (*El Espectador*, 2002a). According to Uribe, the guerrillas have 'learned Machiavelli's lesson well, which is that if a government is generous toward you, you should take that as a sign of weakness' (Guillermoprieto, 2002: 54).

Throughout the campaign Uribe emphasised the need to re-establish state authority. In practical terms this meant greatly strengthening the state security forces. Thus Uribe proposed nearly doubling the number of professional soldiers in Colombia, from 54 000 to 100 000 (*Primer Colombia*, 2002b). He pledged his complete support for Plan Colombia, and called for its expansion in order to help Colombia prevent 'terrorism, kidnapping, massacres, and the taking over of municipalities' (Uribe, 2002b). More polemically, he suggested that Colombia should invite multinational forces, under the auspices of the United Nations, to reinforce national troops. He called for an anti-terrorist statute to facilitate searches and detentions. Uribe emphasised the need for citizens to support the state security forces, and he pledged to create a network of one million citizen informants to provide timely intelligence to the police and armed forces. He proposed that Mondays be set aside as a 'Day of Recompense', when the government would pay citizens who in the previous week had helped the state security forces to prevent a terrorist act or capture a suspect (Uribe, 2002b).

Such proposals were both extreme and militaristic. Any yet they clearly resonated with many in a populace grown weary of guerrilla violence. For many middle and upper class Colombians, as well as for many poorer Colombians who had been harmed by guerrilla actions, Uribe represented the rare politician who had the backbone to confront the leftist guerrillas. Uribe also clearly benefited from the context of the times. Colombia's civil conflict, which had been in existence for nearly 40 years, greatly intensified in the 1990s. By 2001 over 7500 Colombians a year were being killed in political violence, while some 3000 persons were kidnapped annually, most by leftist guerrillas (Fundación Social-UNICEF, 2002). Increasingly the public believed that the guerrillas, especially the FARC, had taken advantage of Pastrana's generous peace process by continuing to prepare for war instead of negotiating seriously for peace. This negative impression was reinforced during the presidential campaign by an incident in the town of Bojayá where, in the midst of a clash with paramilitary forces, the FARC launched a gas cylinder bomb which hit the church, killing 119 people who had taken refuge there (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Uribe himself was twice the target of assassination attempts by the FARC during the campaign, the most damaging of which failed to harm him, but killed three bystanders and wounded 15 others (AP, 2002). Uribe's calm demeanour in the aftermath of these attacks

reinforced his popularity, and bolstered the public image of a hard-liner unafraid to confront and defeat the guerrillas.

Although his public persona, rhetoric and campaign platform were not populist in nature, it might be argued that Uribe pursued a populist strategy by breaking with the Liberal Party and appealing directly to unattached voters for support. Nonetheless, such a strategy was less populist than it seems at first glance. First, Álvaro Uribe never stopped identifying himself as a Liberal. Indeed, his campaign literature consistently referred to him as a 'dissident' Liberal candidate. There was a clear precedent for this action, even within his own Liberal Party. Most notably, the modernising Liberal politician Luis Carlos Galán ran for president on a dissident ticket in 1982, opposing the official party candidate. Like Galán, Uribe launched his independent bid for the presidency out of discontent with the official party machinery, in particular after it became clear that his principal rival, Horacio Serpa, had an invincible lock on the party's formal sponsorship.

Second, Uribe was clearly not unique—much less populist—in attempting to construct a supra-party coalition to support his bid for the presidency. In fact, his immediate predecessor in office, Andrés Pastrana, had put together just such a coalition—the Grand Alliance for Change—which had attracted numerous Liberal and Independent voters to his formal Conservative candidacy (Dugas, 2000: 105–106). In Álvaro Uribe's case he established the *Movimiento Primero Colombia* (Colombia First Movement) and, while never eschewing his own Liberal identity, eagerly welcomed support from Conservatives and Independents.

Third, the nuts-and-bolts of Uribe's campaign were not populist in nature. Although he did appear at some large and enthusiastic mass rallies, he was not a rhetorical master who established a mystical bond with his followers. Moreover, his public appearances became increasingly limited as the death threats against him increased. Although Uribe did seek to appeal to independent, unattached and undecided voters, he also clearly sought the support of established politicians, particularly in Congress. Indeed, one of the high points of his campaign was the official adherence of the Conservative Party to his candidacy (*El Tiempo*, 2002a). Post-election surveys indicated how important such support was, given that 81.1% of self-identified Conservatives claimed to have voted for Uribe—compared with 49.2% of self-identified Liberals (Hoskin *et al*, 2003: 24–25). By the time of the May 2002 election Uribe had secured the support of 55 of 102 senators and 97 of 165 representatives (Forero, 2002). Such support was crucial because these established politicians could utilise their regional networks to mobilise voters for Uribe. In other words, far from being a populist politician who appealed directly to the unorganised masses, Uribe worked through the existing political machinery, just as he would have as the chosen candidate of the Liberal Party.

Finally, it bears repeating that Uribe did not direct his campaign or his message primarily towards the lower classes of society. If anything, it was aimed at middle and upper class citizens who were becoming increasingly anxious about the growing threat of leftist guerrillas. Not surprisingly, this focus is reflected in post-election surveys. A recent study shows that a majority of members of all

income groups claim to have voted in favour of Uribe. Nonetheless, support was lowest in the lowest income group (58.8%) and increased steadily by income bracket, with 100% of the highest income group claiming to have voted for him (Hoskin *et al*, 2003: 17). One would expect that the poorest sectors of society would disproportionately favour a populist politician in comparison with wealthier sectors. Yet, in the case of Álvaro Uribe, precisely the opposite occurred.

In brief, Álvaro Uribe's triumph in the May 2002 presidential elections was not a populist victory. Neither his campaign platform nor his electoral strategy were populist in nature. His victory was rooted in traditional forms of mobilisation and in the clear appeal of a hard-line candidate in a time of increasing public anxiety over the inroads made by leftist guerrillas.

Uribe in office

Álvaro Uribe won the presidential election on 26 May 2002 with 53% of the votes. His nearest rival in the crowded field of 11 candidates was Horacio Serpa, the official candidate of the Liberal Party, who received 31.8% of the votes (Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, 2002). Uribe assumed office on 7 August 2002. In the first six months of his presidential term he maintained exceedingly high levels of public approval. After his first 100 days in office 74% of respondents in a Gallup Poll had a favourable image of Uribe, and 75% approved of his performance in office (*Cambio*, 2002a: 18). After five months in office, the presidential honeymoon was beginning to wane. Nonetheless, a Gallup Poll conducted in January 2003 found that 66% of respondents had a favourable image of the president, while 68% approved of his performance (*Cambio*, 2003: 16). Such strong levels of public approval are impressive, especially given the situation of political violence and economic recession in which Uribe had to govern. Nevertheless, popularity is not the equivalent of populism. Despite certain populist tendencies in his governing strategy, Álvaro Uribe did not exercise power as a populist. The case that Álvaro Uribe has governed as a populist focuses upon a number of distinct issues: his personalistic governing style, his frequent public meetings with citizens, his promotion of a national referendum against corruption, and his declaration of a State of Internal Unrest, which allowed him to enact legislative decrees. Each of these is examined below.

Uribe's personalistic governing style consists principally of an unwillingness to delegate decisions to cabinet ministers, and a concomitant tendency to micro-manage all aspects of his government. In large part this appears to be a reflection of his personality: Uribe is a workaholic who is obsessed with details. His discipline and stamina are legendary—he rises at 4:30 in the morning and works until midnight or 1:00 am. He frequently bypasses formal chains of command, particularly in the military, preferring to talk directly with battalion commanders to give orders or verify incidents in zones of conflict (*Cambio*, 2002b: 22–26). This governing style has reinforced the public image of Uribe as a serious, hands-on leader, giving his utmost in the service of his country. It has also produced a situation in which 'high-ranking functionaries do not dare to make decisions without first consulting the President, for fear that they will be overturned'

(*Semana*, 2002c, 70). Moreover, it has led some commentators to remark that ‘in this administration there is more president than government’ (*Semana*, 2002c: 68). Populist theory highlights the importance of ‘personalistic’ leadership, in which the person of the leader is exalted, largely for the political purpose of strengthening the admiration and respect of the masses. However, Uribe’s governing style—although personalistic in its own way—does not fit this description. It is not a conscious strategy to bolster his image, nor is it designed to create or reinforce direct ties to the masses. Uribe is simply a strong leader who micro-manages governmental affairs. Such a ‘personalistic’ governing style should not be equated with populism.

Uribe’s administration has also been characterised by the president’s frequent reunions with local leaders and citizens in regional community meetings (*consejos comunitarios*). In fact, Uribe quickly established a regular pattern of holding a community meeting each Saturday in a different part of the country. The meetings are designed to give ordinary citizens the chance to speak face-to-face with Uribe and his cabinet ministers, who accompany him. The president himself moderates the gatherings, which are marathon affairs that last from 10 to 14 hours and are broadcast by the public television station Señal Colombia. In the first three months of his presidency, Uribe held 10 such community meetings, primarily in departmental capitals, attended by roughly 4000 persons (*Semana*, 2002d, 38). This political strategy does, in fact, have strong overtones of populism. As noted previously, populism attempts to create a direct and unmediated relationship between the people and the leader. And yet, if these are populist encounters, they are curiously low-key affairs. First, Uribe’s community meetings do not showcase the president *per se*. They consist largely of citizens expressing a litany of complaints to the government, while Uribe listens and takes notes. These are not assemblies in which Uribe gives electrifying public orations or touts his own accomplishments or those of his administration. Second, in the community meetings Uribe has been careful not to make promises to resolve local problems, particularly when these require fiscal resources that the state does not have. Third, and perhaps most significant, the community meetings are not explicitly geared toward mobilising the lower classes, or even the general citizenry, to support Uribe. This is not to deny that they have a clear political purpose—to portray the president as a concerned leader, interested in knowing the details of local problems. Nonetheless, a truly populist strategy would be much more proactive in building a mass movement and in establishing direct, unmediated ties between Uribe and the lower classes.

A third possible indicator of populism is Uribe’s promotion of a national referendum. A referendum is considered a key tool of populism because it ‘allows the bypassing of political or administrative mediations (the short-circuiting of the representative system)’ (Taguieff, 1995: 32). As noted earlier, Uribe promised during the campaign to present a ‘Referendum against Corruption and Politiquería’ to Congress on his first day in office. As originally introduced, the referendum consisted of 15 specific questions that set forth a broad array of political reforms. These included the establishment of a smaller, unicameral legislature; the elimination of alternate delegates (*suplentes*) in the legislature; the requirement of nominal voting in all elected legislative bodies;

the abolition of discretionary funds (*auxilios*) used as patronage by politicians; and the strengthening of conditions under which a member of Congress could be removed from office. The proposed referendum also presented the possibility of anticipating congressional elections for the new unicameral legislature. Although, in principle, a referendum can represent a populist attempt to skirt the legislature and exercise power through a direct appeal to the people, in the Colombian case such a rationale does not hold. Rather, the constitution requires that a national referendum be the product of a law approved by majority vote in both houses of Congress (Art 378). Thus, any decision to utilise a referendum to amend the constitution, as well as the content of that referendum, must first receive the approval of the legislature.

In the case of Álvaro Uribe's referendum Congress did not hesitate to modify its content significantly. Most importantly, it refused to approve both Uribe's proposed unicameral legislature as well as the possibility of calling new congressional elections before 2006. The Uribe government itself chose to add a variety of new issues to the original referendum. These included a proposal to freeze public spending for two years, to lengthen the period of sitting mayors and governors, and to outlaw the personal consumption of illicit drugs. After four months of wrangling, Congress approved a significantly revised referendum to be placed before the voters (Gómez Buendía, 2003: 17). The referendum was then sent to the Constitutional Court, which had to rule on whether, during its passage through Congress, any constitutional precepts were violated. On 9 July 2003 the Constitutional Court approved the constitutionality of the referendum, but removed from it several key questions, including the possibility of outlawing the personal consumption of illicit drugs and of extending the period of the sitting mayors and governors (Sentencia No C-551/03). The referendum is currently scheduled to take place on 25 October 2003. The point to be underscored is that, although Álvaro Uribe chose to bring political reform to the voters by means of a referendum, such a strategy in no way entailed bypassing the other democratic institutions of government authority. In that sense, his use of a referendum did not constitute a populist strategy.

Uribe's declaration of a 'State of Internal Unrest' four days after assuming office might also be interpreted as a populist move. This is because such a measure constitutionally allows him to enact legislative decrees without recourse to Congress. Nonetheless, this state-of-siege declaration is better understood as a determined effort to confront quickly and vigorously the challenge posed by the leftist guerrilla movements. This was the central theme of Uribe's presidential campaign, and it was reinforced by the FARC's launching of mortar attacks on downtown Bogotá in the midst of his inaugural ceremony. Three aspects must be kept in mind when considering the state-of-siege declaration. First, the focus of the declaration, as well as the subsequent legislative decrees promulgated by the administration, has been to restore public order. It is a narrowly construed declaration, not one that allows Uribe to legislate in all areas of public policy. Thus the principal measures enacted under the state-of-siege have all been related to strengthening the ability of the state security forces to confront and defeat violent armed actors. For example, they include a new tax on the assets of wealthy Colombians, earmarked for expanding the police and the armed forces

(Decreto No 1837 de 2002), as well as the creation of special 'Rehabilitation and Consolidation Zones' in which military commanders are granted judicial and police powers that supersede those of civilian authorities (Decreto No 2002 de 2002).

Second, Uribe's state-of-siege decrees are subject to judicial review by the Constitutional Court, which has not been hesitant to act. For example, in November 2002 the Court struck down the most onerous provisions governing the special military zones, including the ability of the military to carry out searches, make arrests and intercept communications without a civilian judicial order, the conduct of special censuses of the inhabitants, and the requirement that foreign journalists request permission to enter the zones (*El Tiempo*, 2002b; *El Espectador*, 2002b). Notably, Uribe has been careful to respect the court's decisions. Third, Colombia has a long political history of executive governance under state-of-siege, which has never involved populism. Indeed, the country was under a state-of-siege for over 30 of the 40 years preceding the 1991 Constitution (Gallón Giraldo *et al*, 1991: 11). After the adoption of the 1991 Constitution, a 'State of Internal Unrest' was declared on five subsequent occasions before the Uribe Administration. This is not meant to justify Uribe's resort to state-of-siege measures, which have been rightly criticised by human rights organisations. Rather, the point is that Uribe's declaration of a 'State of Internal Unrest' fits into a long historical pattern. Neither Uribe's measures, nor the ones that preceded him, have been populist in nature.

Finally, it is worth noting that Uribe's first six months in office have been markedly neoliberal in terms of social and economic policies. He has managed to push through Congress major pension, labour and tax reforms, all of which disproportionately punish the poorest sectors of society. Clearly, a populist political strategy can coexist with neoliberal economic policies. What is notable in the case of Uribe, however, is how little he has tried to appeal to the poorest sectors of society. Certainly, his programme is not devoid of measures that would benefit the poor, such as his plan to expand access to elementary education. Moreover, Uribe's community meetings reveal a paternalistic concern for ordinary people and their problems. However, there is no discernible effort to mobilise the lower classes, or to construct an alliance between them and their president.

In short, despite Álvaro Uribe's popularity as president, he is no populist. His personalistic governing style, community meetings, national referendum and state-of-siege measures—when examined closely—are not indicators of a populist politician.

Conclusion

At first glance Álvaro Uribe might seem to be a perfect case of neopopulism. He was elected to the presidency after breaking ranks with the Liberal Party and garnering massive support from largely unorganised citizens. Once in office, he was noted for a personalistic approach, frequent community meetings, a national referendum and governing under state-of-siege measures. Nonetheless, such seemingly populist characteristics are deceiving.

There is no doubt that Uribe is a masterful politician. He has excellent political instincts, a good touch in dealing with ordinary people, a keen intellect and seemingly inexhaustible energy. However, if we define a populist as a personalistic, charismatic leader who mobilises a multi-class coalition with significant support from the lower classes by establishing direct ties to them and employing an anti-elitist discourse, then Uribe clearly fails to fit the bill. Although popular, he is not particularly charismatic. While personalistic in his governing style, he has never sought to build a movement based upon direct, unmediated ties to the masses. Although elected with significant multi-class support, this came disproportionately from the middle and upper classes, not from the poor. And while attacking corruption and ‘politiquería’, he has never relied upon anti-elitist or anti-oligarchical rhetoric.

Uribe is a hard-line politician with a sincere belief in the (re)establishment of state authority. His impressive rise to power was not so much a result of his own political talents or strategy, but of the critical juncture in which he ran for office. Álvaro Uribe happened to be in the right place at the right time for a populace increasingly weary of guerrilla violence and anxious for change. After the failure of Andrés Pastrana’s three-and-a-half-year effort to negotiate peace, a majority of Colombians from all social sectors were willing to try the iron fist that only Uribe offered among the candidates for president. Their support was not based upon a strategy of populist mobilisation. Nor is Uribe’s current popularity rooted in populist stratagems. Whatever the ultimate outcome of his administration, Álvaro Uribe’s success or failure cannot be attributed to populism.

Notes

- ¹ For discussions of traditional or ‘classical’ populism in Latin America, see Conniff, 1982; Drake, 1982; Dix, 1985; and Stein, 1987.
- ² For analyses of neopopulism in Latin America, see Roberts, 1995; Philip, 1998; Weyland, 1999; and Demmers *et al*, 2001.
- ³ The 1991 National Constituent Assembly was a specially elected body charged with drafting a new and more democratic national constitution. The decision to dissolve the recently elected Congress and to call new congressional elections was among its more controversial decisions.

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