At the beginning of President Alvaro Uribe’s second term in 2006, the government launched a non-refundable subsidies program for farmers, known as “Ingreso Agro Seguro” (Guaranteed Agro Income). To promote it, TV commercials portrayed humble peasant families who would supposedly benefit from it.

In the years since, however, the families who have actually benefited from the subsidies couldn’t be more different from those who were portrayed in the commercials. Instead, at least CP25 million (US$12.5 million) of this program wound up in the hands of members of three influential families who were both donors to Uribe’s political campaign and local leaders of a campaign to collect signatures in favor of his re-election.

This was revealed in 2009 by the TV show Noticias Uno, which utilized old pictures of the three families (one of each family) to illustrate the story. As it listed the names of the individuals who received funds from the subsidies, the show pointed out who each individual was in the pictures. Practically all the people appearing in the three pictures had received funds, and they are not the only ones alleged to have improperly benefitted.

For example, the relatives of Banco Agrario’s president received another CP3 million (US$1.5 million). Even beauty queens and extradited criminals have received government money. The first individual to be exposed as being involved in this matter was Dany Alirio Villamizar, the son of the president of Congress, who recently led the majority coalition to approve a constitutional reform to allow Uribe to run for a third term as president of Colombia.

The president’s coalition in Congress has reformed the Constitution twice in order to allow Alvaro Uribe to be re-elected. Seventy-eight members of this coalition are now under investigation or serving jail sentences for their collaboration with right-wing paramilitary bands on what is called the “parapolitics” scandal. Uribe’s first intelligence chief is on trial for killing unionists and for “having put the DAS (Security Administrative Department) in the service of paramilitaries.”

Three other members of the Uribe coalition are under investigation for their alleged involvement with illegal wiretaps on judges, opposition leaders and journalists, and two of their cabinet members are under investigation for
arranging benefits for people in Congress for the first re-election approval process.

Still favored

Despite all this controversy, Uribe is still the favorite to win a third term as Colombia’s president. In the midst of the Ingreso Agro Seguro scandal, his favorable rating in opinion polls has risen to 70 percent. In October 2009, noted columnist Miguel Angel Bastenier wrote an op-ed in the daily El País in Spain, describing how Colombia seems to have ignored the “horrors museum” of Uribe’s second term. Bastenier diagnosed the country as suffering from Dorian Gray’s Syndrome: a fear of looking at itself in the mirror. Coincidentally, the day after the Bastenier op-ed was published, the daily El Tiempo, previously run by Uribe’s vice President Francisco Santos, fired one of its most popular columnists.

Claudia López, an authority on the “parapolitics,” issue said the newspaper focused the discussion on its online opinion forum of the Guaranteed Agro Income scandal against the former Agriculture Minister Andrés Felipe Arias, who is now a presidential pre-candidate, and in favor of Juan Manuel Santos, a former defense minister who is also a pre-candidate and a member of a family of shareholders of El Tiempo.

Opposition leader Jorge Robledo calls this “plutocracy,” a rule that empowers the wealthiest, but he excuses it is as necessary for generating employment. The government claims that its policy is an investment that is necessary for a “process of transition that requires profound changes to take full advantage of the international trade scenario.” Its program Familias en Acción (Families in Action), which aims to give funds to three million of Colombia’s poorest families, mutes the plutocracy accusation.

There are, in fact, poor people who have really been helped by Alvaro Uribe’s government, but there are also many sad stories. Take, for example, Isabel Martínez’s. Decades ago, Martinez formed the Society for Options with Dignity for Women (Asodig) and generated jobs for more than sixty other single mothers like her, picking up soda cans, paper, metal and glass in the streets of Bogotá, Colombia’s capital. She became a prominent leader of Bogotá’s Association of Recyclers (ARB). This association was, until 2008, certified to bid for the recycling administration contract in Bogotá, a city of eight million inhabitants.
The last push in favor of their project took place in 2005 during an episode of “Community Council,” the 10-hour TV show the president presents on Saturdays (with daily broadcasts of previews and reruns). President Uribe was promoting the Entrepreneur Training Program of National Learning Service (SENA), which gives subsidies to displaced persons and single lonely mothers. The city’s Environment Department and the Chamber of Commerce provided training and international-cooperation agencies offered economic and institutional support.

Limited resources

The women of Asodig owned no more than four vans. They rented storage space for their recycling program and worked with only their own hands and few tools, but their efforts satisfied their most demanding client: the duty-free area of Bogotá, a 10-acre multinational compound located less than two miles from El Dorado, the biggest airport in Los Andes.

Then, in 2005, the client received a proposal from Tomás Uribe, who was a newcomer in the recycling business but turned out to be a very desirable partner. No one in the recycling business knew of Tomás Uribe during this time (2005-2008). He had started his own company, Residuos Ecoeficiencia (Ecoefficiency Residues), with US$500 in 2003 during his second year of college “as an answer to the industry’s search for a standardized strategic partner to handle recyclable waste,” according to the corporation’s website.

In fact, “standardization” was a term first introduced in 2005, when Isabel Martinez’s organization finished its accreditation for the city’s bidding process. In 2007, this concept became an obstacle to Asodig’s ability to stay in business when Congress created new regulations for recycling. Martinez understands the client’s decision to fire her and her team. Beyond offering a solution to garbage problems, Residuos Ecoeficiencia’s proposal was new, twice as large and closer to the airport and duty-free areas. But, as it turned out, Residuos’ owner, Tomás Uribe, was also the Colombian president’s oldest son.

Claims of farmers returning

President Uribe’s TV show promotes the idea of “investment confidence” as a pillar of the American government advised and financed “democratic security,” program, which has allowed the Colombian people to return to the farms they had been driven from due to paramilitary violence.
As evidence of this outside influence, the regular TV schedule was interrupted for live broadcasts of the official welcome of Microsoft’s Bill Gates, Jordan’s Queen Noor and other prominent visitors. President Uribe went so far as to personally welcome Graham Mackay, CEO of the major beer brewer SABMiller. “You are partners in Colombian prosperity… This country had lost the faith about our ability to produce barley, but you have brought hopes to our farmers,” Uribe said to Mackay during the opening of a brewery’s that was located in the duty-free area.

But there are no new barley farms in Colombia, no meaningful barley harvests and no money from the Ingreso Agro Seguro program aimed at growing barley. In fact, the first step that SABMiller took, when they opened a plant in Colombia in 2005, was to sell the old barley farms. Coincidentally, some farms around the airport were even closer than the duty-free area where Isabel Martinez used to clean and Residuos Ecoeficiencia bought these parcels in 2006, three years after the company started.

Bought for US$16,000, they were valued at US$1.6 million in 2008. Purchased by the acre, the land is now being sold by square meters, with all of the sales income exempt from local and national taxes.

The roads running through the area were refurbished, and the property later received official recognition as an industrial development area. A city license was then obtained to qualify it as a “big area” (meaning where commercial or industrial development is allowed) and by December 2008, the land received duty-free status, which was approved by two ministers and two other presidential advisors. This occurred just two days after President Uribe sanctioned a law that made it illegal for anyone, other than those connected with official dumps and “big areas,” such as duty-free zones, to pick up garbage from the streets.

Meanwhile, the price of the land increases. Tomás Uribe was shown on an official video attending a meeting where authorities discussed a new metro train that will cross a corner of an old barley farm sold off by SABMiller.

Isabel Martinez and her 60 associates have no farms; most of them were forced to abandon them because of acts of violence committed by right-wing paramilitary and guerrilla factions. Now they have lost the safety net that the agro-income program was supposed to offer them. Instead, the president’s family and friends and the
members of the government coalition in Congress seemed to have made the program into their own profit center.

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