

By Ignacio Gomez G.

When Ramiro Suarez removed his belongings from his Cucuta City Hall office in 2003, it was not the end of a “contracts-promoting business” that civil watchdog Pedro Duran alleged he ran from an unmarked office behind the mayor’s. Suarez opened his own mayoral campaign headquarters at the fanciest hotel in Cucuta, the regional capital known as the commercial bridge to nearby San Antonio del Tachira, Venezuela.

Before the October 2003 regional elections, Alfredo Enrique Flórez, contracts supervisor for the sitting mayor and another critic of the city’s business with Suarez, was murdered outside his own front door, and Duran was gunned down inside a public minibus.

By the end of 2003, National Police detectives found three of Flórez’s killers. “Benefits” provided by the Truth, Justice and Reparation Act convinced the arrested individuals to talk. They told authorities everything: how Suarez allegedly wrote down Flórez’s home address, the registry number of his car and gave his profile to “The Cat,” the alias given to an individual connected the paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC—United Self Defense Forces of Colombia) who supplied the guns and the orders.

Those arrested also spoke about a deal between Suarez and the lords of the AUC. According to the deal, AUC leaders would instruct people to vote for Suarez in exchange for the future mayor giving AUC members jobs at MetroSeguridad, a state-owned security company, after their “reinsertion in civil life.” They described how “The Cat” received an order from “The Iguana,” another AUC individual, who was backed by “The Pulp,” with all orders originating from Salvatore Mancuso, the commander of Bloque Norte, the biggest branch of AUC.

By the time this was revealed, however, Suarez was already about to begin his term as mayor. “‘The Cat’ is the one of the house; ‘The Iguana,’ the one in the forest, and ‘The Pulp’... No, I only have to answer questions about my work as mayor of Cucuta,” Suarez told Noticias Uno, a TV news program, after the police investigation became public. In 2004, the mayor was arrested on charges relating to the murder and his alleged paramilitary connection. However, he was cleared of the charges and returned to his post as mayor in March 2005 after spending eight months in jail.

Just prior to Suarez's arrest in 2004, Ana Maria Flórez, the regional attorney general and ex-wife of the murdered Alfredo Florez, also was charged with ties to the paramilitary group. She escaped to Costa Rica minutes before her boss, Attorney General Luis Camilo Osorio, signed her arrest warrant. Demands have been made for an inquiry into Osorio's connection to Flórez's escape. However, according to Mancuso, 35 percent of Congress, which is charged with investigating Osorio, came under AUC control after the 2002 elections. The legislators of the Accusations Commission say they still do not have a team to investigate the issue.

The Suarez case is seemingly unique, however, in a "para politics" scandal that has 17 members of congress in jail and more than 12 under investigation for their connection to the paramilitary groups. In 2006 the foreign affairs minister was forced to resign after her senator brother was arrested for his connection to the AUC and after her father was charged in the involvement of the kidnapping of a possible campaign opponent of his son's. There are similar embarrassments for hundreds of governors and legislators, mayors and city council members. The count grows exponentially, including the directors of national, regional, and local programs for food, health, agriculture, environment and roads.

The Suarez case is sui generis, not only because he was one of the first officials to be released from jail, but also because he seems to be finishing his term with more popular support than he had when he began it. Prior to his election, Suarez began managing Deportivo Cucuta, a soccer team that has advanced from Columbia's second division to the semifinal round of the South American Championship. He also claims to have brought peace to Cucuta, a city that was previously ruled by car thieves, guerilla groups and paramilitaries, which were known for smuggling all sorts of things from Venezuela — from gas (it is 15 times cheaper there than in Colombia) and international currency to groceries and people. The mayor's new security program, MetroSeguridad, now controls the neighborhoods.

The attorney general also has changed. New Attorney General Mario Iguaran is working on indictments like that of Jorge Noguera, the former director of the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS—Department of Security), for colluding with AUC paramilitaries to run investigations. "The Cat" was murdered in 2004 and "The Pulp" is still in hiding as the head of the smuggling business in Cucuta. "The Iguana" has taken advantage of the Truth, Justice and Reparation Act and has backed the testimonies of other individuals, adding details about four

more killings that he and Mancuso ordered to help get Suarez elected mayor.

In July 2005, a few months after he was released from jail, Suarez signed a contract with Angel Alfredo Iguaran, the attorney general's brother, to build a bridge. Even though the Cucuta mayor is a parapolitica (politician accused of colluding with paramilitary groups) who had charges brought against him, he was freed to finish his term. Today he is a mentor of the favorite candidates for the current mayoral, city council and state legislative elections scheduled for October 2007. In September 2007, however, a new arrest warrant was issued for Suarez for an alleged role in the 2003 murder of Flórez.

National politics are little different than local politics.

When the Supreme Court ordered the arrest of the first five national parapolitica legislators, President Alvaro Uribe gave his most famous quote via a YouTube video: "...to all the congressmen who have supported us, I ask that while you aren't in jail, vote for transferences, vote for Ecopetrol's capitalization, vote for tributary reform." Uribe, who is described as mi amigo (my friend) by U.S. President George W. Bush and is portrayed as a U.S. ally in American media, won the 2002 elections with the support of the parapolitica that are being investigated the court.

There were murders, kidnappings, death threats and armed pressure on voters all around the country, but Uribe's project of "democratic safety" is still supported by the United States with its US\$5 billion anti-drug plan, Plan Colombia. Consequently, most Colombians accepted a constitutional amendment allowing Uribe to be re-elected.

The alarm bells started to ring for Uribe last August when his national approval rating began to decline from 72 to 67 percent. The Colombian tribunals are full of testimony and even video evidence on how right-wing paramilitaries and candidates negotiated for control of the local and regional budgets.

But campaigns for the October 2007 regional elections were proceeding without the AUC officially promoting candidates. The AUC no longer exists, as most of their leaders avoided extradition requests from the United States by giving up their guns and going to tribunals to tell "some" truth. There are new criminal organizations of the same kind, but there is no need for their campaign work. The new political class has built an agenda that, in the midst of the crisis, is looking to build its legitimacy.