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The narrow limits of Colombian press opinion

El Tiempo and Claudia López

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This article is written to complement the interview with Colombian journalist Hollman Morris, in which we touched upon the case of Claudia López, a Colombian journalist recently dismissed for criticizing the complicity of her newspaper with government policies. www.anarkismo.net Simply, this article is intended to give a clear, recent example of the straight jacket imposed on critical journalists and columnists in Colombia.

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Just as Hollman Morris was in Dublin, we received news that the Colombian journalist Claudia López had been fired from El Tiempo newspaper for daring to question the impartiality of the paper, whose owners are linked to ex-Minister of Defence, Juan Manuel Santos, a member of Uribe's circle of trust and his lieutenant for the re-election. Upon finishing her column of the 13th of October, the executive of the aforementioned newspaper added the following note: ***“Editor’s Note: EL TIEMPO rejects as false, malicious and slanderous the claims of Claudia López. The Executive of the paper interprets her criticism of our journalistic work as a resignation letter, which it immediately accepts”.***

As one would expect, the paper was inundated with protest letters and with comments from forum members upset with such an arbitrary decision, which was communicated in such an inappropriate and mean-spirited manner. The two thousand comments were quickly removed by the executive, but the following day, the editorial had to justify its decision which it

qualified as a “*painful decision, but at the same time, firm and irrevocable*”. After an overdose of lyricism and self-praise because of the fact that El Tiempo supposedly grants freedom of expression [to its contributors], the editorial concludes with a final justification of its decision: “*one thing is the right to the freedom of speech is one thing which El Tiempo has respected and defended in an undeniable manner over its almost 100 years of existence, and quite another is the responsibility of its columnists to abstain from making unfounded accusations and insults*”¹.

It is surprising that this is the main motivation for dismissing López, when other columnists in El Tiempo, who, curiously share the political line of Uribe and the Santos family, only spew foam from the mouth against the real or fictitious opponents of the government. This fails to cause the slightest offence to the executive of the paper. To shine a different light on the reasons given by the El Tiempo editorial, that same day José Obdulio Gaviria — a former advisor to President Uribe, a cousin of the infamous drug-trafficker Pablo Escobar, brother of one of those implicated in the murder of the former editor of El Espectador — a liberal newspaper- Guillermo Cano (1986), and recalcitrant denier of the Colombian humanitarian crisis — wrote a note which does not appear to conform in the slightest to the requirement of “proving” the accusations, which according to the editorial, is demanded of all columnists. Compare the measured, balanced and well-written column of López (which is translated at the end of this note), with the following diatribe of José Obdulio Gaviria, written about the reproach which the Colombian government suffers in some international fora for its systematic violation of human rights.

“Colombia is a democracy, of course it is! Perfect? What [democracy] is? But, if you went to the OAS, in Washington, the majority of its members — even the Haitians — were asking when, finally,

¹ www.eltiempo.com

facts to support its argument. It states that one of the reasons Santos is strengthened is that “the conservatives, also, have to commit themselves to an internal consultation to find its presidential candidate, while ‘the U’ [ed. Party of president Uribe] already has theirs: Santos”. ‘The U’ has not chosen its presidential candidate. The only thing they have offered Santos is the party leadership, not the presidential candidacy. ‘The U’ is the promoter of the re-election referendum and if it is approved it hopes it will be Uribe and not Santos who is the presidential candidate of ‘the U’. I suppose these facts would have damaged the “analytical focus” and for this reason were ignored.

“It is by no means certain that Noemi will be worthy of the support of Uribe, after she has accused him of ‘paying for’ the referendum and threatened him with ‘defeating him’ at the ballot box”. This phrase, almost transcribed from the declarations of Santos, tries to present as journalistic [fact] Santos’ version that he, unlike Noemi, is not a traitor and does not want to defeat Uribe. Anyone that has followed the career of Santos in passing knows that changing allegiances has been the one constant in his political ascent, just like for Noemi, and everyone knows that both want to succeed Uribe; only that Santos wants to do it without it appearing a betrayal, I add.

The journalistic quality of EL TIEMPO is constantly becoming more compromised by the growing conflict of interest between its commercial proposals (to win the [bid for the] third TV channel) and political ones (to cover the government which will decide on the channel and its partner in the campaign) and its journalistic duties. This type of biased coverage does nothing to contribute journalistically to the resolution of that conflict; the only thing it does is highlight it.³

Claudia López

³ www.eltiempo.com

The slanted fabrication began with a question in the forum on *eltiempo.com*, it continued with a note which underlines what had been said by the forum contributors and finished with a supposed article of analysis. On the forum the contributors were asked whether they believed that Arias [Minister of Agriculture] should resign because of the AIS scandal. It is also worth recording that it never occurred to EL TIEMPO to ask its forum contributors if Juan Manuel Santos [ed. Associate of El Tiempo and former Minister of Defence] should resign because of the ‘falsos positivos’ [ed. false positives – a scandal in which members of the army kidnapped and murdered working class people to present them as guerrillas killed in combat and thus advance their career]. In the case of Arias it did, however, occur to them. To finish the forum, they published a note titled ‘Andrés F. Arias incurs the indignation and rejection of *eltiempo.com* readers for the Agro Ingreso case’, in which they underlined that “the majority of users asked for the ex minister to abandon his bid [ed. for the Presidency]” and that “there were very few who defended Arias”. After the forum and the underlining note, they finished him off with an article whose title announced: ‘Andrés Felipe Arias emerges weakened and Juan Manuel Santos achieves an advantage [ed. in his political career] through the AIS scandal’.

It is obvious that Arias emerges weakened, but it is far from obvious that the consequence will be that Santos “achieves an advantage”. EL TIEMPO assures that Arias’ stumble “allowed Juan Manuel Santos to become the week’s net winner. How does EL TIEMPO sustain that the ground lost by Arias was won by Santos? Did they perform a survey? No, but in the absence of a survey the newspaper used its forum to float the question, induce a response and construct its conclusions from there.

Even though Arias is not competing with Santos, but with Noemi for the conservative [Presidential] nomination, the supposed analysis does not even mention that one of the possible winners of Arias’s slip-up is Noemi. Also, the analysis invents

democracy will reach us ... There my fuse was lit and I understood, finally, why declarations of the FARC as terrorists were always blocked in the OAS, while on the other hand, they were described as an insurgent army (I was in attendance at intense verbal battles between Uribe and other presidents on this matter). And I discovered how in that institution – this is the most scandalous thing -, sectors of the Colombian political and judicial apparatus, associated with international ‘mamertismo’ [ed. ‘mamertismo’ is a pejorative term used by the Colombian far-right to refer to communism], are those which impose those abominable definitions.”

And it goes on. The uribista paranoia, which sees conspiracy against them in the smallest criticism or the smallest reversal of the wishes of their “boss” in the Casa de Nariño [ed. Colombian palace of government], forces them to pick a fight against Judicial Power in Colombia, with another series of accusations, which apart from being fearful, are unfounded and laughable:

“(…) there is a long tradition of linkages between the Communist Party, and through it, of the FARC, with the unions of the judiciary (...) Certain magistrates of the Supreme Court, acting like useful idiots on behalf of the FARC and its international masters (nobody would suggest their direct militancy), were in Washington last week: they reinforced the arguments about Colombian dignity; they proposed preventative measures and insinuated an international consensus against our government. In that context, one can understand why the Court declared – in a sentence – that the motivations of the guerilla are altruistic and worthy of benevolent judicial treatment.

We all initially thought it had been somebody that messed it up. What a joke! That criterion was begun on a majority basis and sustains the Court's political campaign against the Executive and the judicial decisions taken regarding members of the guerillas (in their favour) and members of the national security services (against them). Examples: 1) Repeated denials of extradition requests for guerilla fighters. 2) Transfer operation to Arauca of the most dangerous member of Coce [ed. military commander of the Army of National Liberation (ELN by its Spanish initials), Colombia's second most important guerilla group], Pablito, with the blatant proposal of facilitating his flight. 3) The freedom of Mateo, a murderer captured red-handed in the camp of Iván Ríos [ed. commander of the FARC-EP killed when betrayed by one of his guards in March 2008]. He has done so well, that he was a chairman of the board of directors of EPM [ed. Empresas Públicas de Medellín a major semi-state utility company]. 4) The freedom of the trade-unionist of Fensuagro, captured in Sumapaz when efforts were being made to re-establish the terrorist campaign in Bogotá (they managed to put a bomb in Blockbuster). The law accepted the naive thesis that he had been kidnapped by his comrades. 5) Immediate liberty of the "messengers" captured with photographs of kidnap victims. 6) A refusal (on hold in their chambers) to investigate 'FARC-politics'.

On the other hand, the law persecutes without mercy any police-officer or soldier that acts against the guerilla."

Is this article, perhaps, an example of the "*pluralism, seriousness and professionalism*" which El Tiempo demands of its columnists? Is this article "*a support for the consolidation of democracy and to combat the sectarian positions adopted by various groupings, like the abuse of power*" which the newspaper supposedly requires of its columnists?²

The readers will be able to draw their own conclusions.

There follows the article which created the discord. We believe the contrast between the boorish yells of Obdulio Gaviria and the pen of López speaks for itself, and because we believe that the column in question is relevant to the subject of the interview and this note.

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.
23 October, 2009

Reflections on a Scandal

Rudolf Hommes was asking himself in his column last week why certain subjects are scandal-prone and others not. He was suggesting that the public has to pay attention and that there needs to be an instigator. The coverage, given by EL TIEMPO to the Agro Ingreso Seguro [AIS — Agricultural Investment Insurance, a scandal in which funds supposedly aiming at poor peasants, was given to huge landowners], presents the opportunity to reflect on this.

Unlike the other written media, EL TIEMPO did not focus on the AIS programme, but rather on the political effects of the scandal. Taking that angle was a valid journalistic decision given their partners in the magazine Cambio had already done the remainder of the work. However, more than covering the story, what EL TIEMPO did was a fabrication motivated to support their desired reading of the political effects of the scandal.

² See the last paragraph of this editorial www.eltiempo.com