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## FEATURED Q&A

# Why Has Colombia's Former President Been Arrested?



The Supreme Court's decision to place former President Álvaro Uribe under house arrest has opened a Pandora's box of controversy, Peter DeShazo writes below. // File Photo: Colombian Government.

**Q** Colombia's Supreme Court on Aug. 4 ordered former President Álvaro Uribe to be placed on house arrest in connection with witness-tampering allegations against him. Uribe, who has not been charged, has denied wrongdoing. To what extent is politics playing a role in the investigation against Uribe? What does the probe say about Colombia's legal system? How could the case affect Colombia's politics and President Iván Duque, an Uribe ally?

**A** Cynthia Arnsen, director of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: "Last fall's protests in Colombia, followed by the unity-forcing coronavirus pandemic, seemed to demonstrate that Colombian politics had issues at its core other than the country's decades-long internal armed conflict. The Supreme Court's order of house arrest for former President Álvaro Uribe has brought the conflict roaring back to the center of national debate, and with it, the deep cleavages and polarization regarding Uribe's two terms as president and the nature of the peace accord struck with the FARC. The judicial and political issues around Uribe's arrest are technically separate, but in practice form part of the same red-hot miasma. Uribe and his lawyer are accused of witness bribery and procedural fraud in a separate case involving left-wing Senator Iván Cepeda. The Supreme Court—the only body in Colombia with authority to prosecute sitting members of Congress—ordered Uribe's house arrest based on the apparent concern that he would repeat the crime of which he's accused during the investigation. In the ensuing backlash, Uribe supporters, including President Iván Duque, contrast his arrest with the

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### ECONOMIC

## China Finds Virus in Latin American Food Imports

Officials in two cities in China have discovered traces of the novel coronavirus in imported frozen food and on food packaging from Latin America.

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### ECONOMIC

## U.S. Seizes Cargo of Fuel Headed for Venezuela

The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump said Thursday it had seized the cargo of four privately held tankers it was targeting for transporting Iranian fuel to Venezuela.

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### BUSINESS

## Mexico, Argentina to Begin Vaccine Production

Production of Covid-19 vaccines under a deal between the Mexican and Argentine governments and U.K.-based AstraZeneca could begin in the first quarter of 2021, said the head of the company's Mexico unit, Sylvia Varela.

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Varela // Photo: Mexican Government.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## Brazil Economy Not Likely to See V-Shaped Recovery

Brazil's economy is unlikely to have a V-shaped recovery, due in large part to the fact that continued lockdowns will drag down the services sector, Fabio Kanczuk, the Brazilian central bank's director for political economy, said on Thursday, Reuters reported. "Retailers are rebounding steadily, the industry is doing well, but the service sectors—run by families, such as hairdressing and cleaning—will not rebound as strongly," he said during an online event. Instead, Kanczuk described the Brazilian economy's most likely growth trajectory as having the shape of a check mark, according to the report. Kanczuk added that some economists have said that the recovery will be in the shape of a swoosh, the brand symbol of the U.S.-based sportswear company Nike, O Estado de S. Paulo reported.

## Chinese Officials Find Virus in Food From Latin America

Officials in two cities in China have discovered traces of the novel coronavirus in imported frozen food and on food packaging from Latin America, local authorities said Thursday, raising concerns that food shipments might lead to new outbreaks in the Asian country, Reuters reported. A sample taken from the surface of frozen chicken wings imported into the Chinese city of Shenzhen from Brazil tested positive for the coronavirus, as did samples of outer packaging of frozen Ecuadorean shrimp sold in the northwestern Xian city, Chinese officials said. Earlier this week, authorities in China's Anhui province also found traces of the virus in a sample from shrimp packages coming from Ecuador. Last month, China suspended imports from three Ecuadorean shrimp exporters after detecting coronavirus in shipments

then, sparking criticism from producers in the Andean nation. Two of the Ecuadorean firms involved in the July incident issued strong statements noting that the virus was found only within the walls of the container, adding that China was exaggerating potential risks, Reuters reported. "It is regrettable that with the result of [coronavirus found] inside the wall of the container, they are tarnishing the reputation of our industry," Santiago Salem, president of Ecuadorean producer Santa Priscila, said in a statement.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## U.S. Seizes Cargo in International Waters Headed for Venezuela

The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump said Thursday it had seized the cargo of four privately held tankers it was targeting for transporting Iranian fuel to Venezuela, the Associated Press reported. U.S. officials say the sale was arranged by a businessman, Mahmoud Madanipour, with ties to Iran's Revolutionary Guard, which the United States considers a foreign terrorist organization. Prosecutors alleged the four ships were transporting 1.1 million barrels of gasoline, which has been in short supply in oil-rich Venezuela as it struggles with international sanctions and the consequences of years of economic mismanagement. In the seizure, U.S. officials threatened ship owners, insurers and captains with sanctions in order to force them to peacefully hand over their cargo, which now becomes U.S. property, unnamed officials told the wire service. The vessels are headed for Houston, Texas, according to The Wall Street Journal. In related news, earlier this week Reuters reported that a shipping joint venture between Venezuela and China has fallen apart in the wake of U.S. sanctions, resulting in the South American nation losing three supertankers. PetroChina, which had been Venezuelan state-run oil firm PDVSA's partner in the venture, took control of the three tankers between January

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Aeroméxico Files for \$1 Billion in Financing

Grupo Aeroméxico said Thursday it had filed a debtor-in-possession, or DIP, financing motion in U.S. bankruptcy courts to obtain \$1 billion in term loans. The flag carrier airline of Mexico, Aeroméxico said in a statement it will use the funds to cover working capital expenses and general corporate purposes, as well as restructuring costs. Ninety percent of its passenger traffic disappeared in the second quarter due to the global coronavirus outbreak, resulting in an 85 percent drop in revenue from a year earlier, The Wall Street Journal reported.

## U.S. Bans Charter Flights to Cuba Starting Oct. 13

The U.S. Department of Transportation on Thursday barred private charter flights to Cuba as the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump seeks to put more economic pressure on the Cuban government, the Voice of America reported. "The Castro regime uses tourism and travel funds to finance its abuses and interference in Venezuela. Dictators cannot be allowed to benefit from U.S. travel," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said. The ban will go into effect for most flights on Oct. 13.

## Spain's OPDEnergy Lines Up \$103 Million for Wind, Solar Projects in Chile

Spanish developer OPDEnergy said Thursday it had closed on \$103 million in financing for two of its renewable energy projects in Chile. In a statement, the company said the funds will be used to construct the La Estrella wind farm in the O'Higgins region and the Sol de los Andes photovoltaic plant in Atacama. Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation (SMBC) has provided the financing, which will in part pay for 11 wind turbines supplied by Siemens Gamesa. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in this week's edition of the Energy Advisor.]

and February, according to documents from a Singapore court reviewed by Reuters. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the July 28 issue of the Advisor.]

## BUSINESS NEWS

# Mexico, Argentina Could Begin Covid-19 Vaccine Production

Production of Covid-19 vaccines under a deal between the Mexican and Argentine governments and U.K.-based pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca could begin in the first quarter of 2021, the head of the company's Mexico unit, Sylvia Varela, said on Thursday, Reuters reported. During Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's daily morning news conference, Varela said that Phase III trials were expected to conclude by November or December, after which the firm plans to produce 150 million doses for distribution in Latin America. Eventually, it would make at least 400 million doses for the region, Varela added. "We'll be prioritizing the vulnerable populations," she said, adding that the cost of the vaccine, while not yet final, is not expected to be more than \$4 per dose. Earlier this week, Argentine President Alberto Fernández announced his and the Mexican government's agreements with AstraZeneca to produce an eventual Covid-19 vaccine. Fernández said the goal is to produce the vaccine in the first half of next year, and that there will be no profits from it during the pandemic. He added that the initial supply aimed to reach all of Latin America except Brazil with the help of Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim, Bloomberg News reported. A spokesman for the businessman told Reuters that the total investment would be significant but did not give an exact figure. Valera said AstraZeneca plans to transfer technology to Argentina's INSUD Group and Mexico's Laboratorio Liomont at the end of the year before going ahead with production. [Editor's note: See also the Advisor's July 1 [video](#) with Arachu Castro on vaccine nationalism.]

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leniency accorded the FARC in the peace agreement, in which guerrilla leaders under investigation by a special court walk free, hold seats in Congress or have fled the country. Whether or not the Supreme Court erred in ordering Uribe's house arrest, this juxtaposition of ordinary and transitional justice systems has given rise to ill-timed demands for judicial reform. Duque, under blistering pressure from the Democratic Center Party, has tried to have it both ways, criticizing the court's failure to let Uribe defend himself as a free man, while voicing support for the separation of powers. At a time when Colombia needs unity to face down Covid-19 and overcome its devastating economic and social effects, in the inimitable words of William Faulkner, 'the past is never dead. It's not even past.' "

**A Peter DeShazo, visiting professor of Latin American, Latino and Caribbean Studies at Dartmouth College and former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs:** "The Supreme Court's decision to place former President Álvaro Uribe under house arrest has opened a Pandora's box of controversy. While Uribe's approval ratings have plummeted over time, he is idolized by his core supporters and remains the most divisive figure on Colombia's political scene. Consequently, reactions to the Supreme Court's move have run the gamut, from claims from supporters that it amounts to a political vendetta against the man who saved Colombia from the nightmare of insecurity, to satisfaction on the part of Uribe's critics that he is facing what they consider a long-delayed date with justice. As it progresses, the case against Uribe will prove a challenging test of Colombia's judicial and political fabric, and the conduct of the process will have large implications for democratic governance. It is essential that the legal process be transparent and, just as important, be seen by the Colombian public as fair and unbiased. Focus must be

kept on evidence and on procedural integrity. The extent to which the legal process can be separated in the public mind from partisan politics will also depend on how committed the pro and anti-Uribe factions are to digging in for a fight. The Supreme Court's eventual ruling on this case will leave many Colombians displeased, but public perception of the integrity of the process and support for judicial independence and the rule of law will be, in the end, more important than the outcome."

**A Adam Isacson, director for defense oversight at the Washington Office on Latin America:** "Over the years, close associates of Álvaro Uribe have been imprisoned for collusion with paramilitary groups and narco-traffickers, out-of-control illegal espionage, vote-buying and other crimes. Uribe himself has avoided prosecution, until now. This case is serious. In a 1,554-page document accompanying its house arrest recommendation, Colombia's Supreme Court carefully explains that the evidence points to the ex-president offering benefits to jailed witnesses, including ex-paramilitaries, so that they might give false testimony against

**“ Uribe's political star has fallen more than those outside Colombia realize.”**

— Adam Isacson

a political adversary. That he is confined to his ranch pending trial is an important signal that nobody in Colombia is too powerful to evade justice. Uribe's political star has fallen more than those outside Colombia realize. Pro-Uribe protests occurred after the arrest order, but not massively. A Datexco poll surprisingly found 64 percent of Colombians agreeing with the Supreme Court's move. Gallup's regular polling in Colombia places

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Uribe's favorability rating—once consistently more than 70 percent—at 30 percent in June, and under 40 percent since February 2019, with 59 percent unfavorability. The criminal allegations have hurt Uribe's image, but so have perceptions that, with the FARC now out of the picture, the ex-president's brand of aggressive ultraconservative radicalism is out of step with Colombians' everyday concerns. For Duque, it's conceivable that Uribe's arrest could help him get out from under his longtime patron's shadow. Duque is one of the most moderate members of Uribe's ruling Democratic Center Party. That party and its allies lack a congressional majority and cannot pass legislation on their own. To truly govern, Duque would need to reach out to the opposition. Right now, his party prevents him from doing that. With Uribe distracted and under a cloud, Duque might be able to govern from a more moderate place during the remaining two years of his term."

**A** **Maria Velez de Berliner, managing director of RTG-Red Team Group, Inc.:** "Had Colombia's Supreme Court charged and arrested ex-FARC leader Jesús Santrich and his cohorts for heinous crimes, many Colombians who support Uribe, some reservedly, would have taken his house arrest as legally justified and not as a political coup that made Uribe a political martyr. Uribe's favorability has increased because of his arrest, while the court's action adds to the contempt most Colombians have of their judicial system. Given speculations about Uribe's legal transgressions throughout his political career, many believe Uribe should

have faced justice long ago, provided Colombia had a judiciary. Uribe's supporters could trust; that is not the case. Therefore, if Uribe goes to trial, many believe it would be before a Kangaroo Court that will deliver a political rather than a judicial judgment. This would be lamentable because it would be advantageous to Colombia to put speculations about Uribe to rest, if warranted, through a fair trial. Colombia's most influential politician in recent times cannot continue under a

**“Uribe's favorability has increased because of his arrest...”**  
— Maria Velez de Berliner

cloud of unproven allegations of direct or indirect criminality or malfeasance. More so when Centro Democrático, Duque's and Uribe's governing party, has its unique leader, Uribe, judicially muzzled, when presidential and congressional elections are around the corner. It is known that Duque was 'Uribe's man,' but Duque could not deliver 'Uribe's third term' due to the rampant insecurity he inherited, coupled with a precarious economy which Covid-19 exacerbated and a virulent opposition in Congress. Colombians must be careful because, without Uribe's political influence, it is possible the left could succeed in gaining the presidency after Duque, making Colombia's political future perilously uncertain."

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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