

# **The network of University “snitches”**

**A new step towards fascism in Colombia?**

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As a result of climate change, frogs — amphibians which are very sensitive about the change of temperature — are at risk of disappearing in many corners of the world. But not in Colombia, where they proliferate and reproduce like nowhere else on the planet [ed. “frog” is slang for “snitch” in Colombia]. From the first day of Uribe’s government, the emphasis was on the strengthening civil-military aspects of a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy called “Democratic Security”- Plan Colombia’s offensive expression-, by creating an extensive network of civilian informants. Today, at the end of the second period of his term, Uribe plans to expand this network of informants among the awkward and rebellious university students, who certainly need a good dose of “patriotism” and “discipline” to stay away from all that can be seen as dissent.

Although there is good reason to believe that this news has been manipulated in order to lay a smokescreen in front of the problems over the Public Health Emergency and the deep discontent it has generated, we cannot make the mistake of overlooking the importance of this measure. This policy is really not a novelty, but is the corollary of a plan of systematic attacks by the Uribe administration against the university community, which has been worsening during his second term in power<sup>1</sup>.

## **Democratic Security and the Informant Network**

The plan to build a network of informants was formalized in Valledupar, the lands of the far-right paramilitary leader known as Jorge 40, on August 8, 2002<sup>2</sup>. As part of this plan, an accelerated recruitment of hooded paid informants began, who denounced and accused people in a manner not unlike those informants used by right-wing paramilitary groups in the early ‘90s. Truthfully, we can say that the Informant Network, as it was called, was the institutionalization of the network of informers and “snitching” launched by the paramilitary group AUC and extended nationally during their operations to clear the field of “guerrillas” at the end of the ‘90s, which led to atrocious massacres like El Salado, Mapiripán, etc. This network received the official blessing of the Colombian State and was formalized in December by Decree 3222 of 2002 creating the “Networks of Support and Citizen Solidarity” that coordinated the public security system with the private security system that is plagued by members of the paramilitary squads and other hired assassins. Today, the network of “informants” is made up of no fewer than **2,200,000** people, who regularly receive some form of financial reward for fulfilling the tasks of government surveillance<sup>3</sup>.

This initiative was widely denounced by human rights organizations and popular movements because it deepens the involvement of civilians in the conflict and breaks up the social fabric, disseminating distrust and fear. In fact, there have been quite a few cases in which the accusations of “snitches” hidden behind their balaclavas have been used to settle private disputes or to harass the unarmed opposition. This phenomenon had already appeared before with the “snitches” employed by the AUC — as confessed by the paramilitary leader known as HH:

*“More innocent than guilty persons have died (...) All the people killed in the towns were civilians. We certainly made many mistakes in the Urabá, because we based our actions*

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the campaign of aggressions against the public universities check “Uribe’s other war: students and public universities under siege in the Colombian conflict” [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

<sup>2</sup> [news.bbc.co.uk](http://news.bbc.co.uk)

<sup>3</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

*on the information provided by the “popular commandos”, who were demobilized from the EPL. And we killed many people just for the fact of being pointed by them. Over time we realized that many of the people were accused due to personal vendettas between them, and they had nothing to do with subversion and because of that, all those people who deceived us were also killed by us (...) It was a problem because at first they gave us information that was not real and many innocent people died.”<sup>4</sup>*

With the implementation of the network of Uribe collaborators many similarly arbitrary acts have been committed, but in this case, it is even more cynical as the State has washed its hands of responsibility entirely. In most cases these anonymous informers are used to settle personal scores or to support political persecution with testimony that is fictitious, altered, induced, etc.<sup>5</sup>. Not to mention the fact that “snitching” has become a lucrative business, where many informants are busy looking for conspiracies around every corner, and if they do not find one, they invent it: this is not an exclusive problem of the “network” but goes across all the Democratic Security strategy that, in basing its counter-insurgency strategy in the logic of economic reward (logic which is identical to that consolidated with the hired killers in Medellin at the hands of the famous narco-terrorist Pablo Escobar), has resulted in many “informers” completely inventing their accusations or themselves being busy manufacturing situations to report. Here “snitching” goes hand in hand with the phenomenon known as ‘false positives’, that is, a plot orchestrated by the security forces as a result of the pressure from high commanders to show results in battle or for economic ambitions. A pathetic case occurred on July 15, 2006, when an individual left a car bomb in a southern neighbourhood of Bogotá (Barrio Molinos) to then collect the reward for passing the information about this “terrorist” threat!<sup>6</sup>

To the network of informers, the practice of mass arrests can be added, truly “miraculous catches,” of Uribe, that multiplied a thousand times the abuses caused by the policy of rewards. Just in the period between August 2002 to August 2004, 77 mass arrests (each of over 20 persons) occurred where 5535 persons were incarcerated, all of them peasants or poor people –to demonstrate the arbitrariness of this measure is sufficient to mention that only 2% of these cases received some form of sentence<sup>7</sup>. However, notwithstanding the fact that the ordinary courts could not find anything against these people (except some form of political affiliation, membership to a social organisation or trade union that was bothersome to the government mandarins)<sup>8</sup>, the paramilitary justice did issue a summary sentence of their own when many people released for lack of evidence, were killed by hired assassins a few days later.

## **Students “snitches”: Paramilitarization of the university and violence in Medellín**

This extensive network of “snitches”, that some naïve commentators insist has been “inefficient”, in reality it has been tremendously effective, perhaps not for its official aim, but for its real,

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<sup>4</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

<sup>5</sup> [www.prensarural.org](http://www.prensarural.org)

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the so called “false positives” and the democratic security policy check (in Spanish) [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

<sup>7</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

<sup>8</sup> For a brief report on political prisoners in Colombia, check (in Spanish) [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

unofficial, purpose: to sow terror and distrust in the population, while the para-police apparatus of the State extends to the whole social fabric as a true “Big Brother” who observes, knows and judges everything, even “bad thoughts”.

So it is not enough that approximately 5% of the population (2,200,000 people!) are “snitches” in the payroll of the state or that the military forces have 450,000 troops in its ranks. The increasing militarization of the Colombian society, the strengthening of the para-police/military tentacles and growing authoritarianism of the “Commander in Chief” Uribe who wants to subject all spheres of social life to its scrutiny, today requires a new impetus to this policy, taking it to university campuses, where its intended to recruit at least 1,000 students and give them a monthly salary of \$100,000 (Colombian pesos) to guard (snitch) and control their colleagues<sup>9</sup>. This proposal was announced in late January and has been adorned with enough lyricism in Uribe’s statements to hide the nauseating stench behind it:

*“This is a general call to the citizens, and to off course all the young people who want to help us, wonderful, it is required; it induces a culture of respect for the norms (...) it worries me that people are kept in this vulnerability and silence when they are murdered. (...) The Public Force intelligence and the administration of justice intelligence requires a prior element that is information and it requires that the citizens report; without civilian information citizenship itself is subjected to drug trafficking criminality by the inability of the Armed Forces to effectively protect citizens.”<sup>10</sup>*

The reason given for this network of “snitches” in the universities, is the undeniable increase in violence in Medellín, violence that reflects the cracks of the Democratic Security policy and its shaky foundations: according to Forensic Medicine in 2009, 2,178 murders were committed in Medellín, an increase of 108% compared to 2008<sup>11</sup>. But this violence does not reflect increased “guerrilla” penetration in the city or a insufficiently tough hand on crime, as appears from the official discourse: the apparent “peace” achieved by the administration of mayor Sergio Fajardo in Medellín, actually coincided with the control process of the metropolitan area by the unified command of the paramilitary after a long and bloody struggle for dominance in this region. This superficial peace, in reality, hid the hegemony of the mafia with the complicity of the local authorities. With the breakdown of the unified command after the dissolution of the AUC, which exacerbated the struggle for control of the mafia economy by the middle ranks of the new paramilitary groups; if we add soaring unemployment and misery as a result of the economic crisis, we find all the elements to explain the rise of murderous violence in Medellín<sup>12</sup>.

But what does this reality of violence in Medellín have to do with college students? Nothing. Or almost nothing. The bulk of these violent events is happening in the suburbs, in the communes, not in college campuses. A security strategy that seeks to effectively stop this wave of violence would focus on areas where paramilitary mafia struggle is being waged. The cynicism of the proposal has not gone unnoticed by some commentators who correctly pointed out that “*the violence between cartels that occurs in slums of Medellín cannot be neutralized in study centres*”<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

<sup>10</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

<sup>11</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

<sup>12</sup> “El Medellín que se Oculta”, Plano Sur, Nodo-Cepa Medellín. In Cepa magazine, Year IV, Issue 9, August 2009.

<sup>13</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

If there is a relation between the rise of violence in Medellín and the universities, is that since Uribe the pressure on college campuses has increased as part of a growing persecution of dissident thinking and a global strategy of suppression, intervention and control of public universities. Along with the criminalization of student protests (as part of the criminalization of all forms of social protest), the violent repression of the police agencies (ESMAD), and the McCarthyist campaign that uses the mass media to claim that universities are nests of guerrillas, the country is witnessing a rapid paramilitarization of public universities: we had a pilot intervention of the Caribbean universities by the AUC, led by Mancuso, since 1999 (power that was consolidated when Uribe came to power in 2002); we had a “Plan Pistola” in the UIS, where the rector of the university provided lists of “red” students for the paramilitaries to “clean”; and now we also have a campaign of threats, assassinations, curfews and lists of “social cleansing” that has accelerated dramatically in the last couple of years but which rose sharply since the inauguration of Uribe’s second term in power (2006). This is the only logical relationship that exists between students and paramilitaries, in which the paramilitaries, amid the escalation of violence, coordinates systematic aggression against the university community<sup>14</sup>.

To say so categorically, this proposal can only worsen the situation of violence affecting the university community by delivering an open, formal and institutional backing and support to the paramilitarization of universities -it is not difficult to imagine what elements will feed the network of “snitches”. The same infiltrated paramilitaries that today slide threatening pamphlets under doors, will serve as breeding grounds for this network of “snitches”. Uribe knows well thanks to his experience with the “Convivir” [ed. so called “self-defence” cooperatives] that he himself sponsored in the ‘90s as governor of Antioquia and that then became the facade structures that enabled the development and convergence of paramilitarism in a national plan. And how the story will end, it is something we already know: they will say, alas, we are sorry, it got out of hand, it was a good intention gone wrong, and so on. That is, they will wash their hands again when the damage is already done.

It’s hard to believe that this initiative for student-informant networks is a response to violence in Medellín: this has not been anything but an excuse to present to the public what cannot be otherwise presented. According to an article in *El Espectador*, on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of April in 2007, the U.S. Embassy in Colombia organized a workshop on handling informants which proves that there is a deeper strategy behind this, a strategy of construction by Uribe of an authoritarian state coincident with the interests for hemispheric control of Washington<sup>15</sup>.

## **The student snitches networks: a further step towards fascism in Colombia**

The overall control strategy and intervention of universities in Colombia is related, on the one hand, to the repression of social movements that antagonize with the social and economic model promoted by Uribe. But ultimately, if universities preserve a relatively high degree of autonomy<sup>16</sup>, they are likely to produce potential dissent, arguments against the reason of State: for that reason, the university is a space that no totalitarian regime can choose not to intervene.

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<sup>14</sup> [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

<sup>15</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

<sup>16</sup> University “autonomy” never is full.

The persecution of dissident intellectuals and the very possibility of dissent from the worn off discourse of Democratic Security is masterfully exemplified by that Goebbels' apprentice and cousin of Pablo Escobar, who was a former adviser to President Uribe: we are referring to the very Jose Obdulio Gaviria. In his latest diatribe in *El Tiempo* (where else?), he summarizes the Uribe doctrine:

*“Colombia should give a legal leap forward and pursue, without complexes, any ‘understanding’ expression with the guerrillas, and why not?, Neutralize that systematic campaign to demoralize the armed forces. Can a State remain undaunted in its struggle for the moral ground? Can it give up fighting crime? (...) Why, then, Colombia cannot punish the apologists of the FARC? Why can it not pursue those who legitimize the ‘armed struggle’ (according to them, ‘social and political armed conflict’), or the propaganda in favour of kidnapping (or ‘holding prisoners of war’)? Why leave unpunished the discourse about the invincibility of the terrorist movement and the consequent demand for surrender of the State (or ‘negotiated political solution’)? Jorge Enrique Botero, a journalist, travels the world defending the FARC. But our justice and various media give him a strange immunity and a guarantee of impunity. Well! Let’s not say ‘strange’, but rather, say powerful immunity.”<sup>17</sup>*

It is in this climate in which we can have a better understanding of Uribe's new proposal: A climate of increasing persecution and resurgence of the State's "miraculous catches", of progressive limitation of the spaces of opinion and of manifest **fascistization of the country**. And I'm not using "fascism" as a mere synonym for "ultra-right", I mean it in a very precise sense. This is a state moving towards a particular form of "state of emergency" in which there are both general and peculiar features that begin to appear contradictorily (duplication of state institutions, hypertrophy of the Executive, absolute primacy of the Great Capital, support by the urban middle classes to a political project that seeks to override the normal guarantees of bourgeois democracy, implementation of the Führer-Prinzip, i.e., the unlimited will of the head of state to be above the law, with the consequent subordination of the judiciary to other branches of the state, and so on., etc., etc.). The resolution of these contradictions at the hands of the Uribe partisans will no doubt lead to established fascism. Fascism, as a particular form of a capitalist state of emergency, distinguished from other forms of state of emergency by the state apparatus that holds the primacy: in the case of fascism, the upper hand remains in the hands of the **political police** once the system is well established<sup>18</sup>. In Colombia, we are not referring only to the DAS [ed. the intelligence agency linked to the Executive], which in itself has far exceeded its powers and has become a link between the institutional apparatus of the paramilitaries, with the state structure<sup>19</sup>. We are also referring to this network of informants that, indeed, has established itself as a large political police, to which millions of people come as a mechanism to get perks as well as, economic and social benefits. The mafia culture, thus, makes a blood pact with the

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<sup>17</sup> [www.eltiempo.com](http://www.eltiempo.com)

<sup>18</sup> Poulantzas, Nicos "Fascismo y Dictadura", Ed. Siglo XXI, 2005, p.393

<sup>19</sup> It is not necessary to make any lengthy reference to the DAS scandals, that range from accusations about links to drug cartels to well known link with far right paramilitaries, as well as systematic work of harassment, threatening, persecution and espionage against social movements' leaders, members of opposition parties and human rights associations.

fascistization of the Colombian state. This political police serves primarily an ideological role, permeating the whole society, transmitting an image of the omnipresent authoritarian project.

With the consolidation of fascism, **it is society as a whole that is converted itself into political police**. On the Italian Fascism, Gramsci says:

*“police [should be understood] in the broad sense, meaning, not simply at the service of the State for the suppression of crime, but as all the forces organised by the state and the individuals (...) to protect the political and economic dominance of the ruling classes. In this sense, some political parties as well some other economic organisations should be considered political police organisations in its entirety, since their character is that of inquisition and prevention”<sup>20</sup>.*

When an element of espionage is aimed to be introduced in all forms of organised social life, first through the installation of informants, then by changing the very nature of these social expressions (whether sports clubs, unions, like taxi drivers, etc.) with the aim of primarily preventing and monitoring the “enemy within”, we found ourselves before the rise of open and manifest fascism. Again, I’m not using the term lightly but literally.<sup>21</sup>

Is this the Colombian reality? Everyone can draw their own conclusions depending on how you analyze the situation in Colombia. What is crucial is to stop using the term “fascist” lightly, as synonymous with conservative, far-right, and so on. One has to understand exactly what this overly used expression really means and the risks that fascism entails for the popular movement. Because one of the tragic elements in the rise of European fascism in the twentieth century was that it was at all times avoidable-up to the moment of its consolidation. The popular and student movement in Colombia should take note. Because the croaking of the “frogs” [snitches] in universities may be announcing a very, very, dark night.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Lest we should be carried away by the fashionable temptation among some Colombian opinion makers that have turned into their favourite way to criticise Uribe, through void and superficial comparisons to Chávez in Venezuela. So deeply ingrained is intellectual servitude in Colombia that it is impossible to talk bad of Uribe without first condemning Chávez, or what’s more, Uribe can only be condemned for alleged resemblance to Chávez: sentences like, they are so similar, they look like twin brothers, they need each other, both are “totalitarian” (term used in the vaguest possible sense) and other idiotic expressions have become common currency in the ailing liberal press.

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