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COLOMBIA

Uribe's bid for 2 terms popular but questioned

Colombia's Congress is considering a bill that would allow a president -- backers have Alvaro Uribe in mind -- to be reelected.

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BOGOTA - A virtual presidential campaign is afoot in Colombia, a scant two years after President Alvaro Uribe won a four-year term on a promise to get tough on rebels.

The candidate? The widely popular Uribe, who is pushing for a constitutional change that would allow him to be reelected after he completes his first term in 2006.

The bill made it through its first round in Congress and is widely expected to be approved, despite objections from leading political parties and charges that Uribe bought support for the change by doling out patronage jobs to people with relatives in Congress.

THE STRONGMAN

But the controversy underscores Latin Americans' historic preference for strong leaders, in the caudillo tradition -- and Colombians' emphatic admiration for Uribe amid his so-far highly successful attack on common criminals and leftist and rightist guerrillas.

"Just as the U.S. did not think of ditching FDR in the middle of a war, I venture that a majority of Colombians would like Uribe to get another term to finish the job," said Florida International University Latin America expert Jerry Haar.

While it may be commonplace in the United States, most Latin American countries ban the reelection of presidents. Latin America has historically had weak government institutions but strong presidents, who sometimes refused to let go of the reins of the power when their time was up.

But polls suggest that Colombians today are ready to allow for presidential reelection for the first time since their constitution banned it in 1991.

"I am 51 years old and belong to the percentage of Colombians who have historically suffered the weakness of the government," Uribe told a local radio station recently. "I don't want that to happen to new generations."

Uribe enjoys extremely high approval, and polls show that 64 percent of voters would choose him again if given the chance.

Critics worry that the fundamental change to the nation's political design is too deeply pegged to one person: Uribe. It is troubling, they say, that the person leading the charge is the one who would most benefit.

"In principle, I don't like it in any country, in any case, for any job," said Alejo Vargas, director of the political science department at Colombia's National University. "The people behind these kind

of changes -- generally the president in turn -- are not interested in institutional reform, but rather prolonging the term of the person in the job."

Uribe campaigned in 2002 on a promise to get tough with two leftist rebel groups now carrying on a four-decades-old insurrection, as well as the rightist paramilitaries fighting the guerrillas. Weary of the rampant kidnappings and terrorism of the late 1990s, Colombians gave Uribe a victory by a 21-percentage point margin over his nearest rival.

Uribe now says that while rebel attacks and kidnappings are down, the guerrillas have retreated only to await the end of Uribe's term in August 2006.

"They already have the expectation that the next person will treat them differently and allow them to strengthen themselves again," he said. ``How can I be indifferent to that?"

Uribe's stance has indeed been largely effective: Crimes ranging from kidnapping and extortion to terrorism and homicides have dropped dramatically. Uribe's program, dubbed "Democratic Security," has for the first time in years made it safe enough for Colombians to do things such as travel long distances by car.

"This government has achieved a policy of aggressiveness. It would not be easy for a successor to [continue] that," said Victor Renán Barco, a legislator who broke with his party to support the president's bid. ``People against this are against it because of their own political aspirations."

But history plays a role as well, critics say.

THE DOWNSIDE

Former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori held on to power for a decade, abolishing Congress, rewriting the constitution and eventually fleeing the nation in disgrace. Argentina became notoriously corrupt in Carlos Menem's second term. In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez has vowed to serve all three six-year terms allowed by the new constitution adopted by a Chavez-dominated constitutional assembly, fueling charges that he's trying to impose a Cuba-like regime.

"It winds up being a trap," said Bogotá Councilman Bruno Díaz. ``These reelected leaders become authoritarians and autocrats. We prefer democracy."