

# U4 Expert Answer



## Colombia: Overview of corruption and anti-corruption

### Query

**Please provide an overview of corruption and anti-corruption in Colombia.**

### Purpose

Our agency is compiling a series of corruption country profiles.

### Content

1. Overview of corruption in Colombia
2. Governance structure and anti-corruption efforts in Colombia
3. References

### Summary

Colombia has made some improvements in terms of rule of law in the last decade. The current peace talks with the FARC (Colombia's Revolutionary Armed Forces) are a clear symptom of increasing political stability. Additionally, a mining boom and improved security conditions have driven strong economic growth since the early 2000s.

Nevertheless, neither these developments nor the new institutional reforms promoted by the government of President Santos—the new Anti-corruption Act of 2011, and the creation of a new Anti-corruption office in the Presidency—have contributed to curbing corruption. To

the contrary, in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perception Index, the country received the worse score in ten years, going from 57 in 2002 to 94 in 2012.

Colombia still faces several structural corruption challenges: the collusion of the public and private sectors, clientelism and policy capture by organized crime, lack of state control and weak service delivery in remote areas of the country, and the inefficiency of the criminal justice system. Moreover, although the swift development of extractive industries in the country has boosted the economy, the lack of adequate regulation and accountability mechanisms is a cause for concern. Particularly as the first symptoms of the "resource curse" effect might have started to show.

Whether the country continues improving its governance performance will depend on its capacity to enforce its robust legal framework and implement its strategic commitments against corruption.

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**Date:** 15 March 2013 **Number:** 373

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# 1 Overview of corruption in Colombia

## Background

Colombia is a presidential democratic republic that gained independence from Spain in 1819. As a result of more than hundred years of an elite two-party system, relative economic stability was reached, but the rule of law and the agreement between legality and legitimacy were weakened overtime. Furthermore, a comprehensive land reform was never implemented, allowing an elevated concentration of land and capital in few families. This was the breeding ground for the contestation of the status quo by opposition groups, which developed into the longest revolutionary armed struggle in South America.

Left-wing guerrillas (most notably the FARC) have operated now for over more than six decades in Colombia. In the 1970s they started to be challenged not only by security forces, but also by paramilitary groups funded by landlords and other economic interests. The armed conflict was further deepened with the rise of the drug cartels between the 1970s and end of the 1990s, breeding a climate of insecurity and state capture by illegal forces. This has been reinforced by the relative absence of control by the central state in many remote regions, enabling the violent fight between landlords, drug cartels, paramilitary groups and guerrillas to seize power.

During the period in office of President Uribe (2002-2010), the government of Colombia launched a full-fledged military campaign against the guerrillas, which increasingly funded their operations with drug trafficking. Simultaneously, the Uribe administration attempted to demobilise the paramilitary groups through the Justice and Peace Law, by which members of armed groups could surrender their weapons and reintegrate into civil society. As a result of the military campaign, the guerrillas were seriously weakened and fragmented, but the costs in terms of civilian victims and displacement of population were high. Furthermore, serious misconduct by the security forces and some public officials was identified, highlighted and sometimes prosecuted. Trials regarding extrajudicial executions and collusion between members of the governmental coalition and paramilitary groups are still on-going.

Alvaro Uribe's former defence Minister, Juan Manuel Santos, succeeded him as President (2010-present) and started a programme of institutional reform and pacification. As a result, the Colombian government is currently embarked on peace talks with the FARC (Thoumi et al., 2010).

## Extent of corruption

Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perception Index ranks Colombia 94th out of the 176 countries and territories assessed, with a score of 36 on a scale of 0 – 100, where 0 means that a country is perceived as highly corrupt and 100 means that a country is perceived as very clean. Despite the armed conflict, Colombia's score in 2012 is similar to many of its neighbouring countries, such as Panama, Peru and Ecuador.

Similarly, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) place Colombia in the lowest half of the percentile ranks, with a score of 46.4, on a scale from 0 to 100, in terms of control of corruption. On the other hand, the same indicators show that the rule of law in Colombia has improved dramatically, from 25.8 in 2002 to 47.9 in 2011 (World Bank, 2012).

Citizens also perceive corruption to be widespread in the country. The latest data available from the Global Corruption Barometer (2010/2011) dates from the end of Alvaro Uribe's period in office (2010). According to this survey, 56% of respondents perceived that the level of corruption in Colombia in the previous three years had increased. The institutions identified as the most corrupt in this study were the political parties and the parliament, with an average score of 4.2, on a 1 (not at all corrupt) to 5 (extremely corrupt) scale. Other institutions with scores over 3.0 were the police and public officials (4.0), the judiciary (3.8) and the military (3.4). While 46% of respondents evaluated the government actions against corruption as ineffective, 35% considered them effective.

The survey conducted by the Latinobarómetro in 2011 revealed that Colombians considered that the most important factors to strengthen their democratic system would be reducing corruption (63%) and improving the transparency of the state (54%). Moreover, 63% of respondents consider the state is capable of ending corruption. 54% of respondents found that committing procedural irregularities "to get things done" damages democracy (51%), and only 13% agreed with bribing as means to achieve the same purpose.

According to the Americas Barometer, the perception of corruption in the country was 81% in 2011, compared to 78.2% in 2010. It is the highest value ever found since 2004, the first year the study was published. However, corruption was a priority only for 12% of respondents (LAPOP, 2011).

According to studies published by Transparencia por Colombia, the weakest governance factors within the national public sector are the complexity of procedures, the opacity of public procurement tenders, and limited public accountability, although there has been a slight improvement in the last two factors (Transparencia por Colombia, 2010c). At the regional level, the main governance weaknesses are inadequate service delivery to citizens, deficient procurement practices and monitoring of works, deficient recruitment practices and poor fiscal discipline (Transparencia por Colombia, 2010a). Meanwhile, Colombian local authorities are characterised by their opacity and discretionary operation, afflicting particularly procurement practices, recruitment/human resources and social programmes (Transparencia por Colombia, 2010b).

## Forms of corruption

Corruption can be found at several levels of the state apparatus in Colombia. Corruption manifests itself in various forms, including widespread financial and political corruption, patronage, and misuse of power. Both petty and grand forms of corruption are prevalent in the country.

### *Petty and bureaucratic corruption*

According to the results from the National Transparency Index 2008/2009, only 7.3% of 137 evaluated public institutions had a low risk of corruption, and the sectors with the highest risk were education (particularly in universities) and law enforcement, while the sector with the lowest risk was commerce, tourism and industry (Transparencia por Colombia, 2010c).

Consistent with these findings, the data from the Global Corruption Barometer 2010/2011 revealed that 24% of respondents had paid a bribe within the previous 12 months. From those that had contact with the police, 31% paid a bribe. Respectively 18% and 17% of respondents that had contact with the judiciary or registries/permit services paid a bribe. 38% of those paying bribes did so to receive a service they were entitled to. Similarly, the US Department of State highlights that, although the law provides for public

access to government information, officials were reported to solicit bribes in order to release the information (2011).

According to the last available data from the World Bank Enterprise Survey, Colombia scored significantly better than the average of Latin American countries and the world average in most indicators of petty corruption in the business environment. Correspondingly, only 2.8% of polled enterprises reported to be expected to pay bribes "to get things done" with regard to customs, taxes, licenses, regulations, services, etc. and facilitation payments were reported as requested in only 1.8% of public transactions a (World Bank, 2010). On the other hand, a survey on anti-bribery practices in Colombian companies shows that 93% of employers perceived that there are companies who offer bribes, and 61% of the bribes aim at getting things done (Transparencia por Colombia, 2010d).

Entrepreneurs rank Colombia 45 out of 185 countries regarding the "Ease of doing business", while contract enforcement is the country's least competitive factor due to relatively lengthy and costly legal procedures (World Bank, 2013).

However, public officials perceive that public finance management has improved recently. According to official statistics, budget planning and execution in 2012 was perceived to be influenced by political links and pressures only in 8.3% of the cases (16.3% in 2010) and by exchange of favours in 6.8% (13.9% in 2010) (DANE, 2013).

### *Political corruption*

In Colombia, political or grand corruption takes place at the highest levels of the political system. Several high ranking officials, including two of the last four Presidents and 25 per cent of the Congress, have been recently investigated for political misconduct and abuse of power. Despite some prosecutions, however, over 25% of public administration officials reported that government officials and parliamentarians still exercise irregular influence in the activities of the civil service (DANE, 2013).

During the Government of Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010), Colombia's domestic intelligence agency was illegally wiretapping and monitoring judges, journalists, politicians and human-rights activists considered to be opponents of President Uribe, and had planned smear campaigns against them (The Economist, 2011). Additionally, in 2008 five former members of the Alvaro

Uribe administration were charged with bribing a former congresswoman to persuade her to vote positively about a constitutional change needed in 2004 to allow Uribe to run for the presidency again in 2006, which he run and won (Global Integrity, 2011b).

Furthermore, the Justice and Peace Law process has exposed corruption and paramilitary ties within the government and security forces, by which a total of 94 sitting or former parliamentarians were investigated; subsequently, 25 were acquitted and 37 convicted. Furthermore, 15 governors were investigated, 8 of whom were convicted (US Department of State, 2011). In addition to these, the army has been at the centre of several corruption scandals, mostly related to collusion with narco-paramilitaries (Global Integrity, 2011b; de Córdoba, 2012).

Recently, local public officials and technocrats have also been prosecuted. The mayor of Bogotá was suspended for failing to fulfil his public duty and for irregularities in awarding contracts which were part of a \$500 million bribery scheme, involving a former member of Congress, a large construction group as well as other businessmen, politicians, and high-level urban planners. He remained in jail while the criminal investigation against him continued (US Department of State, 2011). Also, in 2011, investigations over an alleged plot to embezzle billions of dollars in public funds between 2004 and 2009 led to the arrest of 12 staff from the Office of Taxation and Customs (DIAN) (Caracol Radio, 2011a).

### *Electoral fraud*

In the 2002 legislative elections, paramilitary and paramilitary-backed candidates won across large areas of Colombia thanks to the intimidation of voters and the financial support of narco-paramilitary groups with revenues from organised crime. Before and during the 2011 regional and municipal elections, Colombian media reported widespread vote-rigging and vote-buying across large areas of the country (Justice for Colombia, 2011). This process has been denominated "para-institutionalism".

According to the Ministry of the Interior the main threats to the electoral system are voter fraud, vote-buying and illegal campaign financing. From the over 5,000 complaints, grievances and requests recorded in the second half of 2011, the most reported crime was "electoral transhumance", which is the transportation of voters to a new district dodging the electoral registry (Colombia Reports, 2103). Similarly, the National

Electoral Council (CNE) decided to investigate 120 governor and mayoral candidates for failing to submit information regarding the financing of their political campaigns.

### *Nepotism and cronyism*

Employers perceive a high level of nepotism, cronyism and patronage within the civil service, leading to many businesses to refrain from contracting with the state due to suspicion of unfair competition (Global Integrity, 2011a). However, according to recent official statistics, public officials' perception of recruitment and public contracting/procurement being done on the basis of friendship or family ties sank significantly between 2010 and 2012 (DANE, 2013).

### *Organised crime, state capture and money laundering*

Organised crime represents a fundamental risk for governance in Colombia. The first attempt of state capture by drug cartels dates back to 1982, when Pablo Escobar was elected to Congress in an attempt to gain immunity and co-opt the judiciary. The Cali cartel used a different strategy; it funded the presidential campaign of Ernesto Samper, who won the election in 1994. In both cases, the visibility gained by their attempts at state capture turned the cartels into targets. Resulting from the weakening of the Medellín and Cali drug organizations, guerrillas and paramilitary groups started trading illegal drugs to finance their operations. The involvement of drug traffickers with paramilitary groups resulted in the formation of narco-paramilitary groups, which in turn colluded with the state as part of the armed struggle against the guerrillas and gained strength at the cost of the latter and local populations (Thoumi, 2012; Garay Salamanca, 2008).

Organised crime, mainly narco-paramilitaries, relied on more sophisticated strategies than the drug cartels of the 1980s and 1990s to embed itself in national and (above all) regional/local institutions. First, they controlled local elections and authorities, mainly through intimidation. Second, they infiltrated Congress thanks to their cooperation against the guerrillas and political funding (increasingly used for money laundering purposes). Third, they negotiated the Justice and Peace Law to achieve a partial demobilisation/reintegration (Thoumi, 2012; Garay Salamanca, 2008). According to some estimates, in 2010, up to a third of local government and a third of parliamentarians were part of this "para-institutionalism" (INDEPAZ, 2011).



According to a study, the estimated volume of money laundered from the illegal drug trade would account for 3% of the country's GDP, or roughly \$16 billion yearly. As money laundering through financial institutions demonstrated to be too traceable, organised crime developed a sophisticated method to exchange illicit money through the smuggling of imports and (to a lesser extent) used illegal cash imports as alternative methods (Caballero and Amaya, 2011).

### *Corruption in extractive industries*

Colombia has the largest coal reserves in Latin America, as well as substantial reserves of iron ore, nickel, gold and copper. It produces 90% of the world's emeralds and has large petroleum reserves. The mining sector accounts for 4.5% of Colombia's GDP and 24.8% of the country's exports (\$7.3 billion in 2009).

While Colombia is described as an upper middle income country, its income per capita is 70% below the OECD average, its unemployment rate (12.1%) is a cause for concern, and the country's economy might be showing symptoms of the "resource curse" effect (OECD, 2013b).

Current legislation stipulates that 80% of royalties paid by the extractive industry are to be reinvested in the producing regions through development programmes (this will be reduced to 15% in 2015). However, information about the production volumes and the royalties being paid is difficult to access and it is not disaggregated, which makes it hard to determine the regional income redistribution. Furthermore, public authorities are allegedly withholding part of the information provided by the producers (Tearfund, 2011).

There have been high profile cases of serious corruption in the granting of mining rights by the Geological and Mining Institute, including the granting of titles in national parks and reserves, monopolies on titles, and violation of rights in mining communities (Colombia Reports, 2011). Meanwhile, there are reports of gold mining companies allegedly co-opting the state by handing cash to local officials in order to smooth mining title deals and the construction of infrastructure (Publish What You Pay, 2013).

## 2 Governance structure and anti-corruption efforts in Colombia

Despite all these challenges, the legal institutional reforms carried forward by the government of President Santos have strengthened the country's governance structure. Enforcement of these reforms and the effectiveness of the judiciary in tackling impunity will determine whether the country's improvement can be sustained (see Salas, 2012).

### Legal framework

#### *International Conventions*

Colombia recently signed the OECD's Anti-Bribery Convention (OECD, 2013a). The country is also a signatory to the Inter-American Convention against Corruption (MESICIC) and the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). Additionally, Colombia currently takes part in the UNCAC's voluntary Pilot Review Programme (UNODC, 2013), and has also committed to implement the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI, 2012).

#### *National legislation*

The 2011 Anti-corruption Act redefined the legal framework and criminalised extortion, active and passive bribery, foreign bribery, political corruption, trading with confidential state information and money laundering, establishing administrative, criminal, and fiscal sanctions as well as creating new agencies to tackle corruption (República de Colombia, 2011).

Comprehensive rules regulating the civil service and administration are in place. However, control mechanisms must be improved in order to prevent political interference and avoid nepotism, cronyism or patronage. The regulation of conflicts of interest of civil servants and their asset disclosure is also comprehensive, but the implementation of these regulations requires strengthening. Similarly, although asset disclosure information is not publicly available or independently audited by law, obtaining this information is observed by the freedom of information legislation (Global Integrity, 2011a).

The Colombian Constitution enshrines the right of citizens to request government information. Citizens can request information and resolve appeals to

requests at a reasonable cost (often for free). The Colombian e-government portal (<http://www.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co/web/guest>) provides a unified gateway to access to information, procedures and services provided by state agencies. Furthermore, an improved e-procurement system (<http://www.colombiacompra.gov.co/es/sistema-electronico-de-contratacion-publica>) was made fundamental part of the body in charge of leading and coordinating a more effective and transparent procurement system (Colombia Compra Eficiente), created by the Santos government in 2011. In 2012, the Congress approved the Law of Transparency and Public Access to guarantee citizens' access to public information. However, the production of comprehensible information in real time is still a challenge for government institutions at the national level, and particularly at the regional/local level (Global Integrity, 2011a).

A comprehensive set of regulations rule the financing of political parties and candidates, observing the operation of two independent monitoring agencies and public access to information. Monitoring of political financing seems to be relatively effective, although parties and candidates tend to delay answering to information requests from citizens (Global Integrity, 2011a). This is being tackled through a new system for accountability (Global Integrity, 2011a). Transparencia por Colombia and the Instituto Nacional Demócrata developed in 2006-2007 a web-based application called Clear Accounts in Elections (*Cuentas Claras en Elecciones*) to enable candidates and political parties to comply with their obligation to consolidate, audit and present reports on campaign incomes and expenses. In 2010, it was adopted as the official accountability tool for electoral campaigns (Transparencia por Colombia, 2013).

Whistle-blowers are protected by law both in the public and the private sectors, and reporting mechanisms are in place. However, the implementation of existing mechanisms is not yet effective. Moreover, while there are protection mechanisms for victims of human rights violations, explicit protection mechanisms for witnesses of corruption cases are still missing (Global Integrity, 2011a).

To counteract organised crime and drug trafficking the state has implemented asset and money laundering policies (AML), turning Colombia into a pioneer of such policies, but the overall results in terms of asset recovery have not been satisfactory, as organised

crime developed more sophisticated money laundering methods (Thoumi and Anzola, 2012).

## Institutional framework

### *The Presidential Programme and the National Commission for Moralisation*

The Santos administration has demonstrated its commitment to tackle corruption with a robust set of legal and administrative measures. The National Plan for Development 2010-2014, which establishes the policy guidelines for President Santos' mandate, included the development of a strategy against corruption as a transversal approach to strengthen democracy.

The plan defined the role of the Presidential Programme for Modernisation, Efficiency, Transparency, and the Fight against Corruption in implementing the new Anti-corruption Act of 2011, and laid down the principles for civil society participation of civil society in the development of an anti-corruption information system, which would produce an annual monitoring report. In order to structure this information system, the Attorney General's Office developed an online anti-corruption observatory (<http://www.anticorrupcion.gov.co>) that would serve as interactive platform for sharing information (Transparencia por Colombia, 2012). Moreover, the Anti-corruption Act observes the creation of the National Commission for Moralisation, Regional Commissions for Moralisation, and the National Civil Commission for the Fight against Corruption.

The new legal framework should be improved by advancing in the adoption (including appropriate funding and capacity-building) of new regulations and guidelines for implementing and enforcement agencies, developing explicit protection mechanisms for whistle-blowers and witnesses, developing a comprehensive capacity-building programme for the civil service regarding the new anti-corruption framework, and strengthening the programme's implementation (Transparencia por Colombia, 2012).

### *Attorney General's Office*

The Attorney General's Office has the highest responsibility for overseeing the civil service. It is an autonomous agency, but it is elected by the Senate from a list of candidates submitted by the President, the State Council and the Supreme Court. The Attorney General may be removed in exceptional cases after a

ruling of the State Council. The compliance of its mandate at the national level has been highlighted by prominent cases, like the suspension of the Mayor of Bogotá.

### *Comptroller General's Office*

The Comptroller General's Office oversees fiscal management and is independent by law, but the Comptroller General is elected by Congress from a list of candidates submitted by the Supreme Court, the State Council, and the Constitutional Court, and may be removed in exceptional cases after a ruling of the State Council. The Comptroller General's Office has limited budget compared to the Attorney General's Office and the Prosecutor General's Office, and is not adequately staffed to fulfil its mandate. The main challenge for this office is to control compliance regarding royalties from mining (Global Integrity, 2011a).

### *Supreme Audit Institution*

The Auditor General of the Nation is the country's supreme audit institution and works directly with the Comptroller General's Office. While both bodies have remained politically independent and public access to audit reports is exemplary, financial constraints and internally identified irregularities have challenged their performance (Global Integrity, 2011a).

### *Prosecutor General's Office*

The Prosecutor General's Office is responsible for prosecuting criminal offences. It is an independent agency by law, but the Prosecutor General is elected by the Supreme Court of Justice, from a list of candidates submitted by the President of the Republic, and may be removed in exceptional cases after a ruling of the State Council. The Office is appropriately funded and adequately staffed, assigning staff to career posts in compliance with the principles of equality and merit. The Prosecutor General's Office has also been strengthened since the Santos administration took office. Significantly, it has prosecuted several high profile members and collaborators of the previous administration.

### *Judiciary*

Both judges and prosecutors confront serious risks when investigating powerful figures (Freedom House, 2012). Within four years, 700 judges have been threatened and 5 have been murdered because of adjudicating corruption cases (Global Integrity, 2011a). Furthermore, the judicial system needs improvement in terms of allowing access to justice for women, ethnic

minorities, and citizens in remote areas. Effective regulation of conflicts of interest and asset disclosure of judges are not in place (Global Integrity, 2011a).

Judicial overload is still a big issue in the country: 24.3% of firms found the courts system as a major constraint to doing business in Colombia, being the second largest obstacle after corruption (World Bank, 2010). Moreover, the judiciary has been identified as an institution inflicted with high risk of corruption (Transparencia por Colombia, 2010c).

### *The National Police*

The dual nature of the police as a civilian institution with the structure of an armed institution makes its operations more difficult. While independent from political control, it is subordinate to the executive, which becomes particularly problematic at the local level (Global Integrity, 2011a).

### *Office of the Ombudsman*

The Colombian Ombudsman is politically independent by law. However, there have been complaints about allegedly governmental interference and lack of effectiveness. Despite receiving regular funding, the ombudsman agency is understaffed and payroll irregularities have raised concerns (Global Integrity, 2011a).

### *Electoral Commission*

Colombia has two electoral monitoring agencies, the Rapid Response Unit for Electoral Transparency and the Commission for Coordination and Follow-up of Electoral Processes, which are entitled to conduct independent investigations of irregularities. They are relatively effective, although voter registration is somehow lax, as it does not require proof of address. Moreover, votes can only be nullified due to registration irregularities after the election (Global Integrity, 2011a).

## **Other actors**

### *Media*

In Colombia, freedom of speech and press is guaranteed by law, but journalists are often harassed by politicians, civil servants, security forces, and/or attacked by the armed groups. As a result, self-censorship is common, particularly in the regional press. Dozens of journalists have been assassinated with impunity in the last two decades. The Ministry of the Interior and Justice supports over 200 journalists through a protection programme and an alert network

that operates through a small number of radios and an emergency telephone hotline (Freedom House, 2012; US Department of State, 2011).

### Civil society

The right of free association is guaranteed by the Colombian Constitution. Furthermore, the state provides support for the creation of non-profit organisations. Good governance and human rights NGOs are free to accept funding from any foreign or domestic source and are not required to disclosing their sources of funding. Nevertheless, their constitutional rights are restricted in practice by violence. Unlike his predecessor, President Santos has eased the tension with NGOs, but threats and attacks by paramilitary groups have actually risen. Despite governmental protection, , activists have been assassinated in recent years, mostly by paramilitaries (Freedom House, 2012; Global Integrity, 2011a).

The majority of the Colombian respondents to the Global Corruption Barometer 2010/2011 (90%) considered that ordinary people can make a difference tackling corruption (global average 70%) and stated that they would support a corruption complaint from a friend or colleague (91%; global average 82%), they could imagine themselves getting involved in campaigning against corruption (79%; global average 68%) and would report an incident of corruption (86%; global average 75%).

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