

Colombian Presidential Race: Sanín Emphasizes Economic Reform in Speech at FIU

Speaking to a largely Colombian audience at Florida International University, presidential hopeful Noemí Sanín attributed most of Colombia's problems to structural causes rather than the present armed conflict. In an address that outlined the key elements of her independent platform, Sanín emphasized economic and judicial reform as among her top priorities.

Sanín maintained that violence is responsible for only about 15% of Colombia's problems. The real root of the crisis, she argued, is misguided economic policies and judicial impunity. While acknowledging that many critics blame the country's economic opening in the 1990s for plunging the Colombian economy-traditionally one of the most stable in Latin America-into the worst recession in memory, she refrained from taking a clear stand on economic liberalization. She pledged to seek more free trade agreements, adding only that her administration would make a greater effort to protect Colombian interests. The main economic problem she identified was a confusing policy of fiscal reform, which she blamed for alienating investors by "constantly changing the rules of the game." Sanín promised to create tax havens in such areas as tourism, science and technology, lower tariffs on imports of capital goods, and increase access to credit by microenterprises. She criticized the US-backed Plan Colombia as taking a short-term approach to alternative development, and called instead for more profound, systemic reform of the rural economy as the only way to lure farmers away from coca and other illegal crops.

On the current armed conflict, Sanín asserted that 75% of FARC/ELN funding and 50 % of the AUC paramilitaries' funding comes from the narcotics trade. She said that if the guerrillas are not effectively contained soon, Colombia risks "outside intervention," presumably because the internal conflict is spilling over national borders. While Sanín did not clarify what scenario she foresaw producing that result, she said she would "rebuild the army and the state based upon social justice." Nevertheless, she then asserted that "war is not the answer," but that a "stronger public force" is necessary. She left unclear whether her army buildup would aim to fight the guerrillas to a stalemate, thus presumably strengthening the government's position for a negotiated peace.

A former government minister in the Betancourt and Gaviria administrations, Sanín criticized Colombia's two-party, power-sharing system as restricting democracy and political competition. She resigned her post as ambassador to Great Britain, she noted, after revelations that then-President Ernesto Samper had accepted campaign funds from drug traffickers. She ran for president herself in 1998, finishing with a respectable showing.

In the 2002 race, Sanín faces formidable competition from Liberal Party rivals Alvaro Uribe Vélez, the former governor of Antioquia whose advocacy of civilian self-defense squads alarms some observers, and political veteran Horacio Serpa. While acknowledging the importance of strengthening the armed forces, Sanín omitted any direct discussion of her security strategy. Instead, she sought to distinguish her

candidacy on the basis of gender, emphasizing the "unique" qualifications that a woman would bring to the job of chief of state.

Sanín's visit to FIU continued the Colombia Lecture Series organized by the University's Latin American and Caribbean Center and Summit of the Americas Center. Uribe Vélez visited the campus in June and former Armed Forces Commander General Harold Bedoya will discuss his candidacy as part of the series later this month.