

Colombian Congress to investigate Duque over electoral fraud allegations



Bogota, February 26 (RHC)-- Colombia's Lower Chamber's Accusation Committee opened a preliminary investigation Monday against Colombian President Ivan Duque after accusations of electoral fraud by former Congresswoman Aida Merlano.

"We have taken the decision to open an investigation" after receiving the complaint against Duque from House Representative David Racero, of the "Decentes" opposition movement, the president of the Accusation Commission, John Jairo Cardenas, told the press.

Cardenas explained that Congressmen Edward Rodriguez (Democratic Center), Andres Calle (Liberal Party), and Wilmer Leal (Green Party) were appointed to the investigation and will officiate "as investigators of the process."

"From this moment on, they are invested with the faculties that the Constitution and the law confer on them to carry out all that is pertinent in the development of this investigation," said Cardenas.

The Commission, which is in charge of investigating those who enjoy immunity, is made up of politicians from various parties, and although it has opened cases against several presidents or former presidents, it has never convicted anyone. The Commission's decision is based on a complaint filed a few days ago by Racero and seeks to find out whether Merlano's statements are indeed true. The investigation will seek to prove whether or not the head of state is responsible for the alleged crimes of electoral fraud, corruption, and vote trafficking.

Merlano, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in Colombia on electoral corruption charges, escaped from a dental office in Bogota last October and was recaptured on January 27 by agents of the Special Action Force (FAES) of the Bolivarian National Police (PNB) in Maracaibo, Venezuela.

During a live interview with Colombian magazine *Semana* last week, Merlano accused Duque was aware that the Gerlein and Char families bought votes in the Atlantic department to get him elected as president in 2017.

"Julio Gerlein and the Char family bought votes to elect Duque (...) The Chars directed all the traditional politicians of the coast to purchase votes for the election of presidents of the Republic (...) Everyone bought votes to choose Duque," the former congresswoman said, adding that each vote was worth around 10,000 pesos.

Merlano recalled that Julio Gerlein told her that he had invested vast amounts in Duque's campaign in the face of his presidential aspirations. She said he invested 6,000 million pesos "and the Chars held a fundraising" between contractors.

The Gerlein and Char families are among the most powerful economic groups in Colombia. Merlano said that Julio Gerlein - brother of Roberto Gerlein, a former Senator and career politician from the Conservative party to which Merlano belonged to - "not only bought votes, but he had ID cards, mistreated the leaders, and intimidated the people to comply with the agreements."

Merlano also mentioned that former Attorney General Nestor Humberto Martinez is an accomplice of Colombian corruption and knew about the contracts granted to the construction company Odebrecht, as well as the bribe" that Colombian congressmen received, "if Nestor Humberto falls he goes down with the whole political class," she added.

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