

Colombia's Santos Proposes Judicial System Revamp Amid Scandal



Bogota, March 25 (teleSUR-RHC) Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos proposed on Tuesday a massive reform of the judicial system, as a corruption scandal involving the former president of the Constitutional Court continue to make headlines in the country.

Santos proposed ending the practice of justices being appointed to the country's high courts by the Congress, also prohibiting justices from participating in the designation of high-ranking officials, such as the attorney general.

“We must break, once and for all, the umbilical cord between politics and justice, something which has caused a lot of damage. This is perhaps the biggest flaw,” Santos said in an address to the nation.

Instead, the president proposed that the justices of Colombia's high courts be selected on “merit” by the justices themselves, from a list provided by the president of the republic. Justices will be required to have 20 years of experience and will be banned from practicing law before the courts for 5 years after their retirement.

The Colombian congress is already working on legislation to address the balance of powers between the branches of government. Santos suggested that his proposed changes be included as part of these reforms.

Current allegations against officials with immunity, such as those on the Constitutional Court, are investigated by the Accusation Commission of the Colombian House of Representatives. However that committee has been the target of criticism as well.

According to Colombia Reports, numerous politicians currently sitting on the Accusation Commission have themselves been involved in scandals, which has reduced the public's confidence in their ability to carry out their function.

President Santos proposed the dissolution of the Accusation Commission, suggesting it be replaced with a body – dubbed a “super commission” – that will have increased powers not only to investigate but also to suspend officials under investigation.

In addition, this commission would have the ability to call for the dismissal of an official, even if they enjoy immunity by virtue of their post. According to the president's proposal, the first members of the tribunal would be appointed by the president of the republic for a period of 3 years. Subsequently, members will be selected based on merit for a period of 8 years. The members of the commission will be able to investigate justices from the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, the Council of State, as well as the attorney general.

However, like the president and vice-president of the country, the 5 members of the “super commission” will enjoy immunity, meaning only Congress will have the right to investigate their actions.

Santos also rejected calls from opposition groups to hold a constituent assembly to rewrite Colombia's 1992 constitution. A similar demand has been made by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in peace negotiations currently underway in Havana, Cuba between the rebels and the Santos government.

The president also said he was not in favor of removing the sitting justices of the Constitutional Court, but did support calls for a thorough investigation of corruption allegations against the court's former president, Jorge Ignacio Pretelt. “No one here is untouchable! We cannot tolerate — and will not tolerate — the slightest hint of corruption from those who hold the highest positions in the justice system or any other branch of government,” said Santos during an impassioned address to the country.

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