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INTERVIEW WITH:
SENATOR HOLGUIN SARDI
BOGOTA, COLOMBIA
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JOHN: How's it decided, inside the party or the *bancada* (faction), what the *bancada's* position will be regarding a bill *(proyecto)* or a voting?

HOLGUIN SARDI: Well, in Colombia the concept of *bancada* doesn't exist at all, nor is there anything similar to it. I'd say that there's also very little left of the party concept. The parties are in a very serious institutional crisis, as both are; maybe it's more accentuated in the *Partido Conservador* (Conservative Party) because of it's being the majority party, and also due to other factors. Therefore, it's almost impossible for one to say that the *bancada* or the party made a decision. However, the procurement of consensus is attempted inside the party, when there are very important bills - like for example a tributary reform [bill] or this bill for the political reform -, through a series of meetings which are called the parliamentary meetings *(juntas)*. In the case of the Conservative Party, this *junta* is contemplated in its statutes, it's a party organism. And also, well basically with the government's action over the Congress, no? When the government has a lot of interest in a bill, well, it pressures, it goes from Parliamentarian to Parliamentarian, it summons them and, obviously well, it also appeals to procedures that aren't very holy and they greatly impair the independence that there should be between the Legislative and Executive branches.

JOHN: Then there's no formal sanction for a Congress member who votes against their copartisans?

HOLGUIN SARDI: Absolutely none.

JOHN: What are the most important factors [that influence on why] the legislators don't vote along with their copartisans? In other words, what are the most important factors that divide the parties?
HOLGUIN SARDI: The government and the prebends or the things that the government can offer, basically bureaucratic representation. That was complicated much more mainly during the past government, when due to President Samper's problems, well because he had to assure his permanency at any price and not be judged by the Executive. But it has also existed in the current government, which is one of parliamentary minorities, which had to resort to the formation of a majority based on the distribution of bureaucratic positions and other things.

JOHN: Well, I was going to ask you what the most important factors are for the formation of multiparty coalitions, but it seems to me that it's support to the Executive, no? The Executive's resources?

HOLGUIN SARDI: Yes, that's correct. It's the distribution of the Executive's *gajes* (resources).

JOHN: When is nominal voting required or when is it used in the Senate?

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HOLGUIN SARDI: Theoretically, according to the regulations, nominal voting can be requested by, - oh, I don't remember right now, but I believe that [it can be requested] by anyone - any Congress member can request that the vote be carried out nominally; then, the presidency of the corporation makes a discretionary decision, it accepts the petition or doesn't accept it. And that decision by the presidency can be appealed by the plenary. I believe that nominal voting, as such, has been used very little, lately. Public voting is used, which means that those who vote in favor have to stand up and then they [the votes] are counted; that's the most common way to vote in the Colombian Congress.

JOHN: So the leadership, in other words the Congress' executive board *(mesa directiva)* , knows how the Congress members voted by those who stand up?

HOLGUIN SARDI: Yes, and the government, too.

JOHN: But there isn't a permanent public record *(registro)* that can be published, for example in the newspaper, or [something] that the public can have access to?

HOLGUIN SARDI: No. There are very few cases where there's a request, when nominal voting is required, very, very few. Of what I remember, I believe that in Senate's plenary there's been only one case over these last two years.

JOHN: How would you characterize the relationship between the legislators and the citizens? As strong, as weak or how?

HOLGUIN SARDI: It's still very weak, however my experience is the that, yes, the communication between the citizens and the legislator has advanced a bit more. A number of years ago it was almost unusual for one to receive some sort of communication or a manifestation of interest about a bill or an opinion on a bill. You had to go look for them, we'd even go before the economic unions themselves. For example, you had to go and say: "Man, look, there's this bill here, I'd like you to tell me what you think about it or for you to give me your opinion". I remember many cases. Now there's a little more communication; one frequently receives letters, - at least I do - even from common everyday citizens, not from union reps or representatives of interests. But it's still absolutely weak. However, the relationship is stronger between the person elect and his political team, his political machine, his political clientele, yes, we can say that this exists; but with the citizenship in general, it's still not strong.

JOHN: So, what do the citizens know about the legislative activities?

HOLGUIN SARDI: Little and they're hardly interested [in them]. What's more, it must also be said, with realism, that the truth is that the media distorts the Congress' and the Congress members' activity a lot. I'm not going to defend the Colombian Congress; I'd say that it's an institution without a schedule, with no calendar dates. The year only has forty weeks and the week has only three or four days, no? What do I mean four days, just two days! And, on those two days you never know what time a session will begin nor what time it'll be over; it's too much informality. But well, as in everything, there is [some] responsible work [being done] and one works seriously on the topics on behalf of many.

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But this is distorted a lot and it's created a [bad] image, - that the Congress is one of the worst institutions - to the national public opinion in Colombia.

JOHN: Do the legislators in their majority want to be re-elected to the Congress?

HOLGUIN SARDI: Yes, I believe at least 90% [of the legislators do].

JOHN: What are the most important things that should be done to be re-elected?

HOLGUIN SARDI: For the immense majority, to have bureaucracy. That is the most important thing.

JOHN: Does an electronic voting system exist in the Senate?

HOLGUIN SARDI: No, they were installed once but they never worked.

JOHN: And why didn't they work? Due to technical reasons or what?

HOLGUIN SARDI: It was never known [why] and that was that; nobody inquired about it; that was many years ago. And the holes are there, but there's no electronic voting mechanism, nor has anyone been concerned about establishing one.

JOHN: Why?

HOLGUIN SARDI: Well, I'd say that perhaps it's due to an interest that there be no registry of the votings, but I'd say that it's more so there's no registry of the absenteeism. I believe that what most concerns many [of the legislators] is the roll call, which is the traditional form of establishing you're presence.

JOHN: Is the public vote part of the political reform that's already been proposed before the Congress?

HOLGUIN SARDI: Yes.

JOHN: And do you think that it has possibilities to be approved or not?

HOLGUIN SARDI: Yes, I think that in this part I'd say that there's an awareness that there should be much more transparency given to the legislative process. I believe that it's something in the political reform - I don't know if you perceived it during the meeting with the colleagues - I would say that the part regarding the reform of the Congress' operation is quite good, but it hasn't been as important to the Parliamentarians as the part regarding the electoral reform. So, the concern and considerations are more focused on the electoral reform. All of these institutions in the new electoral system, - like the

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public vote, for example - don't concern them as much as the single slate *(lista única)* or the distributing figure *(cifra repartidora)* , - no?

JOHN: But in your opinion would the public vote have an effect on the legislative process?

HOLGUIN SARDI: I believe that there'd be much more responsibility in the voting. For example, the transmission of the sessions , the tele[vised]sessions; I'd say that, well, they criticize it a lot and many of the Parliamentarians use it, well, for clowning around *(payasada s)*, for superficial things, but also it's forced the people, - good, responsible people - to be even more responsible and more serious. Whatever needs to be done to give it [the legislative process] transparency, I personally am in favor of that; I believe that there's a majority feeling about this, to change and make the legislative procedure more transparent.

JOHN: And finally, with regard to the proposal for the reform of the electoral system, what electoral system do you believe would be the best for Colombia? Or if it's easier [for you],we can speak about the reform that's already been proposed.

HOLGUIN SARDI: Yes, I believe that one can not speak of ideal electoral systems; all are imperfect and all are complicated and it depends, as all things after all, on people's attitudes. In this case, on the attitude of the will of the voters, as well as of the persons elected and of the electoral authorities, well of course. But yes, I believe that the reform is upcoming - just as it's been proposed - with some necessary objectives for the Colombian reality. The first is to establish a greater balance between governability *(gobernabilidad)* and representativeness *(representatividad)* . Today it's relatively easy to be elected without a party, with your own resources, with your own ideas and to say that you represent two thousand votes, or twenty thousand votes or whatever. But this has greatly injured governability. Second, well I believe that institutions like the single slate *(lista única)* and the threshold *(umbral)* , will achieve a cohesioning of the parties. Third, not of the current parties, but rather instead of that dispersion, to be able to attain something more than... Fourth, I think the distributing figure *(cifra repartidora)* is a more equal system for assigning the *curules (parliamentary seats*). The reform has the serious inconvenience that the single slate and the threshold can become a lock *(cerrojo)* to new political expressions, to the appearance of new forces. However, well finally, what one has to aspire to with political realism, with democratic realism let's say, is that what's attractive should be the theses and that a political formulation *(formulación)* or a political formula, should be attractive not because of the advantages or disadvantages that the electoral system provides, but because of what's being proposed and in this respect, I believe that the reform makes advances.

JOHN: Thank you.