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INTERVIEW WITH:
SENATOR
LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO
BOGOTA, COLOMBIA
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JOHN: To begin, how's the position of the faction (*bancada*) regarding a project or a voting decided inside the party or the *bancada*? Is there coordination or not?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: Not really. The Parliamentarians' entrance into the Congress of the Republic is seen more as pressures from regional forces, under the identifying label (*rótulo*) of some parties that don't really exist as a party, that perhap live a bit more from those parties' history, from their past, than from their present and future possibilities; we enter here, I repeat, as an expression of these regional forces marked by a party, but we don't operate as a party. Nor our arrival, aside from taking the party's name, is due to any action that the party as such develops in the collectivity (*conjunto*) of the nation. In other words, I'd say that in Colombia parties don't exist, there are no parties.

JOHN: That's the reason for the separate slates (*listas separadas*) by each candidate.

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: Yes, I believe that one of the fundamental reasons is that each candidate is the leader of his group, he represents his own candidacy *(aspiración)* and in the best of the cases, a regional candidacy but, hardly, a national project.

JOHN: In general, do copartisans vote together in the Senate or not?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: I would say no. There aren't party positions. Tendencies can exist inside the party; that there may be a majority of Parliamentarians who are or aren't in agreement. However, the clearest example is yesterday's parliamentary meeting *(junta)* of the *Partido Conservador* (Conservative Party), where first there wasn't a quorum and where, second, we couldn't reach an agreement of whether or not it was convenient or to vote on the political reform. Really, that clearly demonstrates that we don't function as party and that we don't come to an agreement to vote the bills or legislative debate as a block.

JOHN: And there's no sanction, for example, for those who break their militancy?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: There's no sanction for those who don't vote along with the party, nor for those who on the day following the elections make a different or contrary decision to the one that the party's leadership (*dirección*) - what's called *dirección* or what is believed to be the party's *dirección* -, decides. For example, President Pastrana won the elections, on the following day an important group of liberals abandoned the *Partido Liberal* (Liberal Party), upon instructions that were dictated by the *Partido Liberal*, to make an opposition and they left to work with the government. That doesn't have any

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type of sanction.

JOHN: Then what are the most important factors in the formation of coalitions?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: The most important factor in the formation of coalitions - the only one - is to have or not have the government, the Executive, the prebends. In a country where politics are made with the personal favor, it's very important for politicians to have power, to have the government and the factor that agglutinates these coalitions, fundamentally in the Congress of the Republic, is to be or not be with the government.

JOHN: Even for the legislators of parties which aren't that of the government.

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: Even with legislators of the parties that are not in the government; such as in the concrete case of this government, when the other day it had to woo an important number of Parliamentarians of the *Partido Liberal* to be able to arm a majority coalition that would allow it to get its bills out in the Congress. But there isn't another agglutinating factor. Let's say, a bit of shame and an interest to have the party's identifying label where some Parliamentarians can stay; however, sometimes it's a dialectical problem, because this is a country where a national front always appears and every time that we have a crisis, the homeland is over and above the parties and the bureaucracy is what's really over and above the parties.

JOHN: When is nominal voting used in the Senate?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: When a Parliamentarian requests it and when it's the second round (*segunda vuelta*) of a legislative law *(acto legislativo)* .

JOHN: The second round?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: The second round because legislative laws are to reform the Constitution and, to reform the Constitution in Colombia, two rounds are required, eight debates - four in every legislative period, in two consecutive periods -.

JOHN: They're not frequent?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: Yes, they're frequent. Let's say, there are always one or two constitutional reform bills in each legislative, but as an instrument, we could say, on the request of any Parliamentarian, the voting should be carried out nominally.

JOHN: And it's obligatory?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: It's obligatory, the fifth law. Do you want [a copy of] the fifth

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law? We can get one so you can take it with you. So, we'll get you a book that's the fifth law and the Constitution. Tomorrow I'll give you [a copy of] the fifth law of the Congress' internal regulation that says how voting should be carried out, when you vote.

JOHN: How does the leadership of the Congress, the House (*Camera*) or of the Senate know how the Representatives have voted if nominal voting isn't used? It's unknown?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: Because generally, when the bill's important, there's always someone who requests the nominal voting, overall to be able to gauge the loyalty of the Parliamentarians to the coalitions, etc.

JOHN: How do you characterize the relationship between the legislators and the voters in Colombia? How strong, weak or what?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: It's very weak. In our country, although it's said that the 1991 Constitution made the 1986 Constitution, which was representative, transit *(tránsito)* to a participative democracy - although I believe that all democracies are representative -, but if the idea or if the fundamental objective was greater civic participation, it hasn't really been achieved. It hasn't been obtained because the development of the instruments for civic participation which were created in the Constitution aren't really viable instruments. For example, there hasn't been after ten years, the first abrogative of the mandate to any mayor in this country. Since there are no parties, it's very difficult to identify the militancy. Yes, perhaps leaders of the parties' movements, like neighborhood leaders, leaders of small villages, leaders of towns. But it's very difficult to identify the citizens who vote for a person. The channel that exists to reach them is the leader, the intermediary. And really, there are no mechanisms that allow for that rapport between the voter and the person elect. What's more, I'd say that on the day after the elections, dangerously, the mechanisms are broken. A tie's maintained which is to those who have the need to look to the Senator very rarely for something other than the solution to their personal problem, the job position, the space [for their child] in the school; the possibilities [to resolve] any kind of personal problems where the public administration plays an important role and the Senator can serve as an intermediary. But there are no mechanisms beyond those that you yourself can create or try to do with the aim to communicate with your voters.

JOHN: What do the citizens know about the legislative activities?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: I think that *Señal Colombia* has been important, which is the television channel that transmits the sessions; it has been important. The media in this country is very restricted, they're difficult to access, they're means which are manipulated by certain oligarchies, certain interests of groups, of parties, of people and there really are no mass diffusion mechanisms. The citizen who has an interest in following up on the Congress as a whole and on a Parliamentarian in particular, tunes into *Señal Colombia* a lot.

//////////////////////: The rest of the information is very brief, very schematized and very much of

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circumstance *(de coyuntura)* and it affects the importance.

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: Correct. Official press statements that appear, that don't appear. Or we have a [type of] journalism that likes or exalts the show and negative [aspects] more than cerebral and positive [aspects]. For the journalists, it's more important to stand on your head in a legislative seat (*curul*) than to present an agrarian reform project in this country..

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

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: Yes, I would say that they not only want to be re-elected, but rather, they want to go into retirement as a Parliamentarian. The average age in the Congress - at least in the Senate - is high and the average of permanency is also high. We have Senators who have thirty years.

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

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: Basically, I believe the bureaucracy, the power, to take resources to the region. Today, in good measure, [it's important] to conserve a good image and to operate in a clean and transparent manner. But what's been the common denominator and the most important strength, is to maintain the political clientele machineries well-oiled and that is done fundamentally through the management of the State budget and of the State payroll (*nómina*).

JOHN: Do the Representatives or the Senators remain in the same commissions? If they have a parliamentary commission, do they stay in the same commission to preserve their experience [on the commission] or do they change?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: The tendency seems to be to conserve permanency in the commissions. Yes, that's how it seems to be. I'm a Senator who is entering the Congress for the first time, I entered the First Commission, I'm an engineer, and in an act of irresponsibility I'm in the First Commission because I believe that the political reform is fundamental for this country and to organize the politics, that's why I entered the First Commission.

JOHN: The First Commission?

/ / / / / / / / / / / / / / / /: The First Commission's in charge of constitutional matters.

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: Me, being an engineer, I'm in the Commission of Constitutional Matters, I must make a double effort.

JOHN: In your opinion, what effects would the public vote have on the legislative process? In other words, has it been proposed as part of the political reform?

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LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: I believe that it's very important. That's to say, I think that today the vote is almost always public, there's almost always a demand for the voting to be nominal. When the topics are delicate, there's always a request that the vote be public. I believe that the problem is too much diffusion. That the citizen has more knowledge of that Parliamentarian's behavior; some sort of instrument that allows the citizen to follow-up on him [the Parliamentarian]. To see what the Parliamentarian's attitude is on the topics, how he votes on them, how he pushes for them, what he says, what his opinion is. What the vehemence he places on each one of those topics is. I think that that would be a lot and that's why *Señal Colombia* is important, but it's not enough *(se queda corto*). We need other mechanisms.

JOHN: Last question. Has an electoral system reform bill also been proposed in the Congress?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: Yes.

JOHN: In your opinion which electoral system would be the best for Colombia?

LUIS HUMBERTO GOMEZ GALLO: I believe that what we need is a regimen of parties. We need a Congress that can work by *bancadas* and some parties that have a conductive thread *(hilo conductor)* which agglutinates the operation *(accionar)* of their parliamentarians, of their mayors, of their councilmen, of their legislators (*diputados*) and governors. For that we have to achieve a type of politics which is programmatic, of ideas, of pretexts. And for that we need some parties. The reform that's running through *(haciendo tránsito)* the Congress right now is fundamentally seeking that. It seeks to organize the parties. It's a big discussion, sometimes with intellectual ethics and other times looking for a way to bring down the reform. To see if what's being proposed in the reform - single slates (*listas únicas*), that are closed with internal consultation, figure distributor *(cifra repartidora)* , threshold *(umbral)* - really are the mechanisms that are required in order for the parties to work in this country. Yes, I think so.

JOHN: Those are all my questions. Thank you.