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INTEVIEW WITH:
REPRESENTATIVE
JESUS IGNACIO GARCIA VALENCIA
BOGOTA, COLOMBIA
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JOHN: First, how's it decided inside the legislativa *bancada* what the faction's *(fracción)* or the *bancada's* position will be regarding a bill *(proyecto)* or a voting?

JESUS GARCIA: Well, here in Colombia, the mechanism of the *bancada* adopting decisions generally is not used. On some opportunities it's done, only a few times when there are very important bills, but generally decisions are made by each of us, individually, as we see fit.

JOHN: Generally, do all the members of the party vote together in the Congress or not?

JESUS GARCIA: No. That's to say, each member of the party votes according to the way he likes, as he considers the bill should be voted.

JOHN: But on some occasions are there disciplined votings at the level of the *bancada* ?

JESUS GARCIA: Very rarely. When the bill has, let's say, a lot of transcendency, I mention the economic field, in the political field; so the parties' executive boards *(directivas)* try to make some group decisions, but this is the exception.

JOHN: And what are the most important factors [that influence on why] the representatives don't vote together with their copartisans?

JESUS GARCIA: Let's see, because our parties are not properly organized parties, where their members have an ideological identity. Here the name of the party is used practically just to be elected. So, for example, I belong to the *Partido Liberal* (Liberal Party); the Liberal Party endorsed my election; but the fact that the party endorses me, doesn't generate any obligation from me to the party. So, I have to finance my own election, I have to do my political work and look for my voters and that's why, I practically don't feel - like none of the persons elected do - intimately linked to a party.

JOHN: So, there's no sanction that the party can place on the *bancada* ?

JESUS GARCIA: No, not up to now, no. They're trying to reform this, to see if the parties can be disciplined. But up to now there are no sanctions.

JOHN: How are they proposing to reform it?

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JESUS GARCIA*:* In the sense that each representative or senator who's elected by a party, has to act in conformity with the *bancada* , and if he doesn't, he's subjected to sanctions that the party can impose on him.

JOHN: And what type of sanctions?

JESUS GARCIA: Well, in short, suspension or expulsion from the party; in other words, this is undergoing a process of discussion, but the truth is that here there's total chaos in the parties' operation inside the Congress.

JOHN: Do multiparty coalitions or ones that include legislators from several parties or movements exist in the Congress?

JESUS GARCIA: Yes, sure. For example, this current government, doctor Pastrana's government, integrated a coalition among the members of the *Partido Conservador* (Conservative Party) - that's the party he belongs to -, some big faction *(fracción)* of the Liberal Party and some independent groups. So they all integrated a coalition that they called the *"Gran Alianza"* (Great Alliance) and they worked with that coalition for some time - perhaps around two long years -, but that, now, is tending to disintegrate because soon there's going to be another electoral process to choose a new president. So, now everybody's aligning themselves once more into the ranks of their original party.
JOHN: And when do coalitions like, for example, the Great Alliance for Change exist?

JESUS GARCIA: Let's see, that [coalition] was formed by the government in order to have a majority that could facilitate the processing of the bills that it was interested in. So, that "Great Alliance" elected the Congress' executive boards *(mesas directivas)* , in the House *(Cámara)* as well as in the Senate; it [the coalition] made a commitment with the government to vote for the most important laws, such as the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo* (National Development Plan) and other initiatives that the government had presented. So, that functioned more or less for two years, until the government proposed the possibility of a political reform through a referendum, thereby closing off the Congress. There, these allies of the government opened themselves up, so the government was practically without majority in the *Cámara* and in the Senate.

JOHN: What are the most important factors in the formation of coalitions? Common ideology, electoral advantage, control of the Congress' resources or support to the Executive?

JESUS GARCIA: Let's see, coalitions are generally conformed to support the Executive. Obviously, those who belong to these coalitions also have preferential treatment with regard to the budget's resources which can be applied the Senators' and Representatives' regions of origin.

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

JESUS GARCIA: Well, nominal voting is practically carried out when somebody requests it and there's no discussion in the respective *Cámara* , then you can proceed to the nominal voting. But if

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there's some type of discussion about whether the voting should be nominal or not, then it's necessary to resort to the ordinary voting, which is generally by *"pupitrazo"* (literally, by hitting the desk).

JOHN: To hit to the table, right?

JESUS GARCIA: Yes, to hit to the table.

JOHN: And how do you know which way each person votes?

JESUS GARCIA: Well, right now, here in the *Cámara* mainly electronic registry is used. So, when there's a voting, the registry is opened up and there it's established who voted positively and who voted negatively.

JOHN: But is this electronic mechanism used?

JESUS GARCIA: Yes, it's frequently used, yes.

JOHN: And does it produce a record of the voting?

JESUS GARCIA: Sure, it produces the record and then it says how many voted a bill affirmatively and how many voted it negatively.

JOHN: But also at individual level, for example, that Jesús Ignacio García voted "yes"?

JESUS GARCIA: Sure, it's [recorded] there. In other words, my name is there and then, I think that a green square appears in front of the name of all of the persons who vote "yes", and for those who vote "no" a red square appears. So, it's perfect, if you look at the board, for example if I want to know who voted "yes" and who voted "no", I look at the board and according to the color of the square that appears before the name I know how he voted, if he voted affirmatively or if he voted negatively.

JOHN: It's a new system?

JESUS GARCIA: Yes, it's a system that was introduced here approximately five or six years ago.
JOHN: Have many votings been registered in the other years?

JESUS GARCIA: Yes sure, sure, the system even prints [the registry] out and shows how the voting went and it's attached to the records *(actas)* of the sessions' proceedings.

JOHN: I didn't know that. Are the votings registries available to the public?

JESUS GARCIA: Yes sure, because the sessions are public here.

JOHN: And where are they keep? In the files?

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JESUS GARCIA: The General Secretary can give us information about where we can find them.
JOHN: How would you characterize the relationship between the legislators and the citizens? As strong or weak?

JESUS GARCIA: Let's see, the relationship of the legislators with the citizens is rather weak because here the parties don't have an ideological consistency. So, let's say, the followers don't do it due to an ideology, but rather their adhesion many times is practically, for example, due to the budget funds *(partidas)* that they can negotiate with the people for [public] works that are needed in the countryside *(province)* ; for the favors that they can obtain, for a position that was gotten for a son. But, let's say, there's not an ideological tie where people vote for certain party or for a certain candidate because of the program. In other words, for example this occurs mainly in presidential elections, where there's a bit of opinion, but the rest, in the congressional election, there's a relationship that's very defined by the benefits *(favors)* that the Parliamentarian can provide to his voters.

JOHN: And what do the citizens know about the legislative activities, about how they're represented by the legislators?

JESUS GARCIA: Well, nowadays there's a television program that's called *Señal Colombia* , and it mainly transmits the political control debates *(debates de control político)* . So, the citizens have some partial information about how the legislators' work is being carried out through this [program], but let's say, they don't have the facility to be able to follow up on the legislator's behavior, because despite the fact that the sessions' records are published in the Congressional Gazette, it's a newspaper with restricted circulation, it's only for the scholars *(estudiosos)* who come here.

JOHN: Do the legislators in their majority want to be re-elected to the Congress? Or do they want other political positions or do they want to follow a political career?

JESUS GARCIA: The majority, I would say that almost 100% presented themselves for re-election. What happens is that here, let's say, the system doesn't allow for the legislator to occupy any other position while he occupies the position as legislator. So, a legislator can not be a minister, as it may occur in other systems.

JOHN: Yes, as in the parliamentarian [systems].

JESUS GARCIA: Here no, here one can only be a legislator and if he has another employment or another position, then he loses the investiture as parliamentarian for life.

JOHN: For life?

JESUS GARCIA: For life. Here the loss of the investiture is for life.

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JOHN: So, they stay in the Parliament? The Representatives and the Senators prefer re-election facing this option?

JESUS GARCIA: Ah, sure. They prefer re-election, right? Because the bottom line is that they have the security of being four more years in the Parliament as opposed to suddenly being on the outside if the presidential candidate of their predilection doesn't win and therefore will not be able to take them to the Executive. So it's very aleatory to be able to reach the Executive and many times it's more secure to be able to continue in the legislative.

JOHN: And what's the re-election rate?

JESUS GARCIA: The re-election rate is more or less 50-60%.

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

JESUS GARCIA: Well, in order to obtain re-election, the most important thing - mainly in the countyside - is that the Representative has been able to negotiate the execution of [public] works, in the region, with the national budget. So, that's why it's the Executive - which is the [body] that manages the budget -, which has the possibility to help or not help the Senators or Representatives with the execution [of works] according to whether or not they're allies of the Executive. So, those who're not the Executive's allies are in disadvantage in comparison with the allies, since the allies can take many works to their regions; while those who are outside of the government, no, because it's more difficult for them.

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

JESUS GARCIA: Yes, of course.

JOHN: Which electoral system do you believe would be the best for Colombia?

JESUS GARCIA: Let's see, I believe that the problem isn't so much the electoral system that's adopted, but rather for me the problem is that here there's a lot of need from the economic and social point of view. So, during the electoral period, mainly those who manage many resources - be it at the official or the private level - well, they take advantage of those circumstances to move the electorate in their favor. So, here, no matter what system's imposed, while the voters have a low level of political awareness, it's going to be very difficult to be able to improve the operation of the electoral system; because, for example, before we voted here using a ticket *(papeleta)* where the slate of candidates *(lista)* was [printed] and the ticket was then introduced into the ballot box. It was said that this was a mechanism of corruption of the electoral system because a lot of times the ticket was given to the voter, without him seeing it, for him to put in [the box]. So then, it was necessary to establish the *tarjetón* , where now the people were going to vote for the candidate because there would be the photograph, there would be the distinguishing characteristic of the party and that would purify the electoral process. Well now what's occurring is that there's more fraud than before, because now they buy the juries

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(jurados) and the juries there at the voting table *(mesa de votación*), take [a bunch of] the *tarjetones* and mark a certain candidate and then they make it appear like the people have voted for him, when those voters haven't even gone to the polls. So here we are very skilled in undermining *(hacer trampa)* the law, so it seems to me that whatever system's adopted here, the people end up inventing a means *(trampa*) to undermine it. Above all, I believe that what's needed here is to elevate the people's political awareness level, and mainly, to take some social and economic measures that give the people more freedom to be able to act at election time.

JOHN: Well, that's everything, thank you.