# Being a mayor: the view from four Colombian cities

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**ABSTRACT** Local governments are particularly relevant to people's daily lives as they manage the infrastructure and services that directly influence quality of life. Elected mayors tend to be more responsive to the needs of the poor majority than centrally appointed mayors or mayors who are elected by fellow councillors. Colombia's municipal mayors have been elected since 1988 and local governments have been given increased responsibilities and powers to raise local revenues. In this paper, four municipal mayors at the end of their four-year term reflect, in their own words, on the role they have played in shaping their municipalities. They recount their personal engagement with local politics, share their views about their society and problems such as poverty, inequality and violence, describe the business of managing a local government and exercising leadership sometimes in difficult circumstances, reflect on the qualities of a mayor, and explain how they sought continuity for their government programmes. They see themselves as outsiders struggling against local political machineries. With one exception, they do not seem to see the poor as their natural interlocutors on whom they can rely for unswerving political support and to whom most of their energy should be directed.

**KEYWORDS** Colombia / governance / local government / local politics / mayors / urban inequality / urban poverty

## I. THE RISE AND RISE OF MUNICIPAL MAYORS

In recent years, local governments in many parts of the world have undergone a fascinating transformation from dull and rather politically obscure "black boxes", heavily dependent on central governments and with limited functions, to laboratories for political and technological innovation, a focus for the vociferous demands of increasingly educated voters and organized communities, and launch-pads for ambitious provincial politicians seeking higher office.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a new figure appeared in the local – and occasionally national – media: the city mayor. Whether in countries that had recently returned to democratic elections after years of autocratic rule, or in long-established democracies such as the United Kingdom, mayors started vying with national politicians for voters' attention and a spot in TV chat shows. Following political and constitutional reforms, elected mayors came into office with newly acquired powers and a direct mandate from thousands or – in cases such as São Paulo, Cape Town or London – millions of voters (thus, arguably, with a stronger direct political

endorsement than that of a prime minister elected by a small constituency in a parliamentary democracy).

The mayor has of course been a familiar political figure for decades in US politics, where some cities are virtually synonymous with individuals who left their mark over a period of years or even decades: Richard Daley in the Chicago of the 1950s to the 1970s, and then his son since 1989; in New York, LaGuardia in the 1930s and 1940s and more recently Rudolph Giuliani, whose name is inextricably linked to the aftermath of the 11 September terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. In Western Europe, strong local government leaders are associated with Mediterranean countries (Italy, Spain, France) and, only recently, with a handful of cities further north. In Latin America, widespread political reforms in the past two decades gave voters the possibility of directly electing mayors who, until then, had been appointed either by central government (usually the president, in the case of capital cities) or by provincial governments.[1]

In Colombia, municipal mayors were elected by universal suffrage for the first time in 1988.[2] Following decentralization reforms enshrined in the new 1991 national political constitution, local governments were given much increased responsibilities as well as powers to raise taxes and other sources of revenue. Under these reforms the mayor became a central figure in advancing the interests of the municipality and the well-being of its citizens. In the process, some mayors, particularly in the larger cities such as Bogotá and Medellín, have gained not only local but also national prominence by enacting bold fiscal and institutional reforms, helping to reduce crime and violence, fostering tolerance and the creation of a "citizen culture", and launching major urban programmes that helped coalesce major shifts in their cities' trajectories.[3]

In this paper, four acting municipal mayors in Colombia reflect, in their own words, on the role they have played in shaping the fortunes of their fellow citizens and the municipalities under their direction. The article draws on separate interviews in December 2007, a few days before they officially ended their four-year terms.[4] The mayors – all men aged between late-30s and mid-50s – recount their personal engagement with local politics, share their views about their own society and some of its pressing problems such as poverty, inequality and violence, describe how they went about the business of managing a local government and exercising leadership, sometimes in difficult circumstances, reflect on the qualities of a mayor and explain how they sought continuity for their government programmes.

## II.  FOUR CITIES, FOUR MAYORS

Colombia, a "lower middle-income economy" according to the World Bank, has a complex recent history marked by moderate economic growth and orthodox macroeconomic management, rapid urbanization with population growth spread across a spectrum of medium and large cities (as opposed to a single primate centre as is frequently the case in Latin America), high levels of socioeconomic inequality, major social dislocations and a high incidence of violent deaths both in urban and rural areas.[5] Since this is not the place to examine the causes behind the violence, suffice it to say that a major contributor is the profitable drug business fuelled by international narcotic consumption (mainly in the US and Europe).

1. Ward, Peter (1996), "Contemporary issues in the government and administration of Latin American mega-cities", in Alan Gilbert (editor), *The Mega-city in Latin America*, United Nations University Press, New York, pages 53–72.

2. Mayors were elected initially for a period of two years, subsequently increased to three and, since 2004, to four-year terms. Mayors can seek re-election although not for successive terms.

3. Detailed discussions on Bogotá's changes abound. See, for example, Gilbert, Alan and Julio D Dávila (2002), "Bogotá: progress within a hostile environment", in Henry A Dietz and David J Myers (editors), *Capital City Politics in Latin America: Democratization and Empowerment*, Lynne Reiner, Boulder, Colorado, pages 29–63; also Dávila, Julio D (2005), "La transformación de Bogotá", in Fernando Cepeda (editor), *Fortalezas de Colombia*, Editorial Planeta, Bogotá, pages 417–439; and Gilbert, Alan (2006), "Good urban governance: evidence of a model city?", *Bulletin of Latin American Research* Vol 25, No 3, pages 392–419. Much of the recent literature on Medellín has focused on violence. See, for example, Brand, Peter (2002), "Environments of harmony and social conflict: the role of the environment in defusing urban violence in Medellín, Colombia", in Sam Romaya and Carole Rakodi (editors), *Building Sustainable Urban Settlements: Approaches and Case Studies in the Developing World*, ITDG Publishing, London; also Gutiérrez Sanín, Francisco and Ana María Jaramillo (2004), "Crime, (counter-)insurgency and the privatization of security – the case of Medellín, Colombia", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 16, No 2, October, pages 17–30. For an overview of how illegal drugs helped shape the city's recent history see Hylton, Forrest (2007), "Medellín's makeover", *New Left Review* No 44, pages 71–89.

4. Owing to local adjustments to the national electoral

calendar, the term of the mayor of Manizales lasted only two-and-a-half years.

5. The literature on Colombia's history and recent violence is vast. See, for example, Safford, Frank and Marco Palacios (2002), *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society*, Oxford University Press, New York; also Moser, Caroline and Cathy McIllwaine (2000), *Urban Poor Perceptions of Violence and Exclusion in Colombia*, The World Bank, Washington DC; Cubides, Fernando, Ana Cecilia Olaya and Carlos Miguel Ortiz (1998), *La Violencia y el Municipio Colombiano, 1980–1997*, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Universidad Nacional, Bogotá; and Alesina, Alberto (editor) (2005), *Institutional Reforms. The Case of Colombia*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

6. All population figures refer to the 2005 national population census. See www.dane.gov. co/censo/.

7. Interview with Carolina Urueña, Colombian Federation of Municipalities (FCM). The experience of five women mayors in small municipalities affected by social and political conflict is vividly highlighted in a set of video interviews produced by FCM with support from GTZ, a German cooperation agency; for more information, see www.fcm. org.co.

8. Medellín is one of 10 municipalities in the metropolitan area of Medellín (known as Valle de Aburrá). In 2005, the municipality of Medellín had a population of 2.1 million, while the combined population of the other nine municipalities was 1.2 million.

9. Both municipalities did comparatively well in the national government's ranking of fiscal municipal management, with Medellín in tenth place in "fiscal performance" in 2006 and Zipaquirá in eighty-first in 2005. See Departamento Nacional de Planeación (2006), *Desempeño Fiscal de los Departamentos y Municipios 2006*, Dirección de Desarrollo Territorial Sostenible, DNP, Bogotá. The mayor of

However, the crime figures that made Medellín internationally notorious in the 1980s now seem largely buried in the past, as they are in many other smaller cities. Violent deaths are more likely to occur in relatively remote, sparsely populated regions as a result of clashes between the country's military (heavily funded by the US government and at times supported by local mafia-like paramilitary gangs) and armed rebel groups, funded through kidnappings, extortion and cocaine exports, with few remnants of the social justice ideals that sparked their creation in the 1960s.

The four cities featured in this paper are not meant to be representative of Colombia's 1,099 municipalities. In a country with a population of 42 million people, five cities with 1 million plus and 34 cities of between 100,000 and 1 million, this small sample can only offer a brief insight into the challenges faced by local governments at different demographic scales.[6] Moreover, the sample cities are located in only two of the country's four distinct geographical regions – although it is in the Andean region, where three of the sampled cities lie, that the vast majority of the population lives. The fact that no woman mayor could be interviewed is regrettable, as this might have contributed a different perspective on the job of mayor in what is still a fairly conservative and somewhat patriarchal society. Women are less inclined than men to go into politics, particularly in areas where armed violence prevails, to the extent that women represent only 95 out of 1,099 municipal mayors elected for the period 2008–2011.[7]

The characteristics of the four cities and their populations in 2005 are as follows: Medellín, with 3.3 million inhabitants, is the country's second largest city[8] and is also a major manufacturing and financial service centre, marked by deep social and economic inequalities; Manizales, with a population of 360,000, is located in what was for some decades a very prosperous coffee-growing region that has suffered badly from the sharp drop in international coffee prices; Santa Marta, with a population of 415,000, founded in 1525 by the Spanish conquistadors, is a port on the Caribbean sea and a tourist destination; and Zipaquirá, with a population of 93,000 and located in a fertile agricultural region 48 kilometres north of Bogotá, Colombia's capital city, was known from pre-Columbian times for its large inland salt mine – and from the twentieth century onwards for the vast subterranean Catholic cathedral built inside it.

The four mayors were approached for different reasons: the work done by Medellín's and Zipaquirá's mayors is generally regarded by different sources in Colombia, including the national government, as good examples of highly competent city management.[9] Manizales is highly regarded nationally and even internationally for its innovative and socially sensitive environmental management practices and for the close collaboration between the local government and local universities in shaping the city's future.[10] Santa Marta represents a particularly challenging case of municipal management. From the viewpoint of a municipal manager, Colombia's recent history, briefly outlined earlier, has taken a particular toll on Santa Marta. In stark contrast to the other three, this port city has a recent history of serious mismanagement and local corruption, made worse by violence and intimidation at the hands of the region's "paramilitaries", formerly private armies in the pay of large landowners seeking to defend themselves from kidnapping and blackmail from left-wing guerrillas, and now remoulded into extortion rackets. The city is effectively bankrupt and its finances are severely reduced and

overseen closely by the national government, thus placing an additional burden on the elected local government. Thus, it is not surprising that much of the mayor's efforts, as documented below, are focused on improving the city's finances and securing alternative sources of revenue for the municipality.

## III. GOVERNANCE, MAYORS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Local government is the government tier that is nearest to citizens and is, in theory, the area of public sector activity that can most easily be monitored and controlled by citizens themselves. Local governments are particularly relevant to people's daily lives as they tend to manage infrastructure and services that directly influence people's quality of life as well as their sense of order and security.[11] Because of this, in countries where the poor constitute a majority or a substantial share of the population, a well-functioning local government that focuses on their needs can play a crucial role in reducing poverty and increasing opportunity for those who are most disadvantaged.

Elected mayors tend to be more responsive to the needs of the poor majority than centrally appointed mayors or mayors elected by fellow councillors. This would appear to arise from the electoral process where mayoral candidates need to secure the votes of the poor majority "…*by demonstrating responsiveness to their agenda.*"[12] This may be less true in contexts where mayors cannot be re-elected for an immediate second term (as is the case in Colombia), so they can renege on their promises without fear of political reprisals from voters, where the poor lack the necessary political organization to demand their rights, or where the poor live in neighbouring municipalities but commute to work to the core municipality where they have no electoral visibility (as is the case in Manizales).

In Western democratic traditions of political representation, municipal governments are meant to represent the general interests of the community of people within their boundaries and to facilitate the participation of citizens in public institutions. In this tradition, local governments tend to be endowed with the role of fostering initiatives designed to maintain and improve the quality of life of their citizens. For some commentators, the existence of deep democratic roots in local spaces of political representation offers a guarantee that national democratic practices will also be maintained.[13]

The scope of action by local government is not entirely within its control insofar as it is located within the larger canvas drawn by the goals and actions of a range of external actors, including the central and provincial states, investors and even international organized crime. The capacity to respond to these forces will, to some extent, be shaped by the nature of local leadership, the structure of local government and its relationship to the national (or provincial) government.

Research on local government in Europe suggests that, historically, strong leadership has tended to prevail in a context of weak institutions; such is the case of politically centralized countries in southern Europe, where local governments have limited functions and local government leaders see their role as maximizing central government resources through lobbying or through party political machines. A contrasting model, more widely found in northern European countries with more decentralized

Zipaquirá was also awarded the private sector-sponsored Colombia Líder prize in 2006 for the "best municipal mayor in the 50,000–200,000 inhabitant category". Medellín's mayor was first in the "over 500,000" category and he ended his administration with a more than 80 per cent popularity rating among Medellín's population.

10. Velásquez, Luz Stella (1998), "Agenda 21: A form of joint environmental management in Manizales, Colombia", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 10, No 2, October, pages 9–36; also Velásquez, Luz Stella and Margarita Pacheco (1999), "Research–management as an approach to solving environmental conflicts in metropolitan areas: a case study of the Manizales–Villamaría conurbation, Colombia", in Adrian Atkinson, Julio D Dávila, Edésio Fernandes and Michael Mattingly (editors), *The Challenge of Environmental Management in Urban Areas*, Ashgate, Aldershot, UK, pages 275–286.

11. Maragall, Pasqual (1997), *Los Ayuntamientos*, Ediciones Destino, Barcelona; also Grindle, Merilee S (2007), *Going Local: Decentralization, Democratization and the Promise of Good Governance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

12. Devas, Nick (2001), "The connections between urban governance and poverty", *Journal of International Development* Vol 13, Issue 7, pages 989–996.

13. For Pasquall Maragall, who was mayor of Barcelona between 1982 and 1997, this was particularly true in 1980s Spain following four decades of dictatorship. See reference 11, Maragall (1997).

14. Steyvers, Kristoff et al. (2008), "From princeps to president? Comparing local political leadership transformation", *Local Government Studies* Vol 34, No 2, pages 131–146.

15. Some of the ideological premises on which this is based were questioned in October 2008 with the emergency nationalization of banks in the USA and the UK as a result of the so-called "credit crunch", which brought the world financial system close to collapse.

16. Swyngedouw, Eric (2005), "Governance innovation and the citizen: the Janus face of governance-beyond-the-state", *Urban Studies* Vol 42, No 11, pages 1991–2006.

17. These shifts are widely discussed in the literature. See, for example, Pierre, J and B Guy Peters (2000), *Governance, Politics and the State*, Macmillan, London; also Nickson, Andrew (2006), "The factors driving government reform", in Munawwar Alam and Andrew Nickson (editors), *Managing Change in Local Governance*, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, pages 25–32.

18. See reference 14.

19. The acronym CEO stands for Chief Executive Officer, a widely used term to designate the executive head of a private firm.

systems, involves local governments with a greater range of functions and discretion, though mainly concerned with service delivery where local leaders are expected to be "… *good managers of collective goods*".[14]

The profound economic, institutional, social and ideological changes experienced the world over since the 1980s that affected the way governments operate can be encapsulated in the notion of a shift from "government" to "governance".[15] In theory, this new governance involves a movement from the hierarchical, top-down exercise of power and rules of state-based systems, to more horizontal, networked systems reliant on the interaction of independent and inter-dependent actors who share a degree of trust.[16]

In a context of rapidly growing urban populations, infrastructure shortages and mounting fiscal deficits, and pressurized by multi-lateral lending institutions, central governments in many developing countries adopted a double strategy to shed responsibilities, horizontally to the private sector and other non-government agents such as NGOs or community organizations, and vertically to local governments.[17]

The new set of responsibilities and roles exerts additional strains on local government leadership insofar as the expectation is that it should engage in networking with other actors while becoming entrepreneurial in a context where cities compete with each other for national and international resources. The response in some contexts has been to personalize the selection of leadership while increasing the concentration of powers in the hands of individual leaders.[18] Thus, we increasingly witness the emergence of the "mayor as CEO" phenomenon, where mayors are supposed to embody not only political qualities but also impeccable managerial credentials.[19]

## IV. THE INTERVIEWS

Despite the media attention that some municipal mayors have enjoyed in their own cities and countries, in-depth explorations of the challenges involved in exercising the job of mayor are rare. This article and the interview by Florencia Almansi with the mayor of Rosario, Argentina, also in this issue of *Environment and Urbanization*, are attempts to fill this gap. Although the space given to each mayor in this paper is still limited (given what were in most cases very long interviews), I hope that the tone of the discussion and the willingness of the four mayors to share their rich experience will be appreciated by readers interested in local development and politics, particularly the capacity of local leadership to steer a socially progressive form of change. Their responses (translated from Spanish by me) have been grouped under a set of headings. I have added short interpolations in square brackets to clarify some passages. I am deeply indebted to the four mayors for giving me so much time at a very busy period in their schedules.

### a. Personal trajectories

Mayors were asked how they became involved in politics and, particularly, how they took the decision to run for local government office. All except Zipaquirá's mayor were born into well-off families who could afford to pay for their education to university level.

We start with **Sergio Fajardo**, Medellín's mayor, who has spent much of his professional career as a mathematics professor at an elite private university in Bogotá. With a PhD from the USA, his bid for mayor was his first incursion into electoral politics. During media interviews at the end of his mayoralty, he made no secret of his intention to run for president of the country.

> **Sergio Fajardo**: "My identity in life was always as a scientist … I always kept an eye on society from the viewpoint of a mathematician. Why do certain things take place? Why does this happen and not that? Why are there such deep social inequalities…?
>
> I delved into writings on peace … and always had an interest in conflict and more particularly in Colombia's historical violence…
>
> [In Medellín] I met with people and gradually provided the lead to … an independent civic movement, principles, proposals, a new approach to politics, coherence, neither Left nor Right, not one or the other, but (stressing) that this is the space that helps define us…"

Although involved with the private sector on and off until his election as mayor of Manizales in 2005, **Luis Roberto Rivas'** first elected position was as a provincial assembly member in the mid-1990s. He was later



**PHOTO 1**
**Sergio Fajardo, the mayor of Medellín, lecturing at UCL, London,
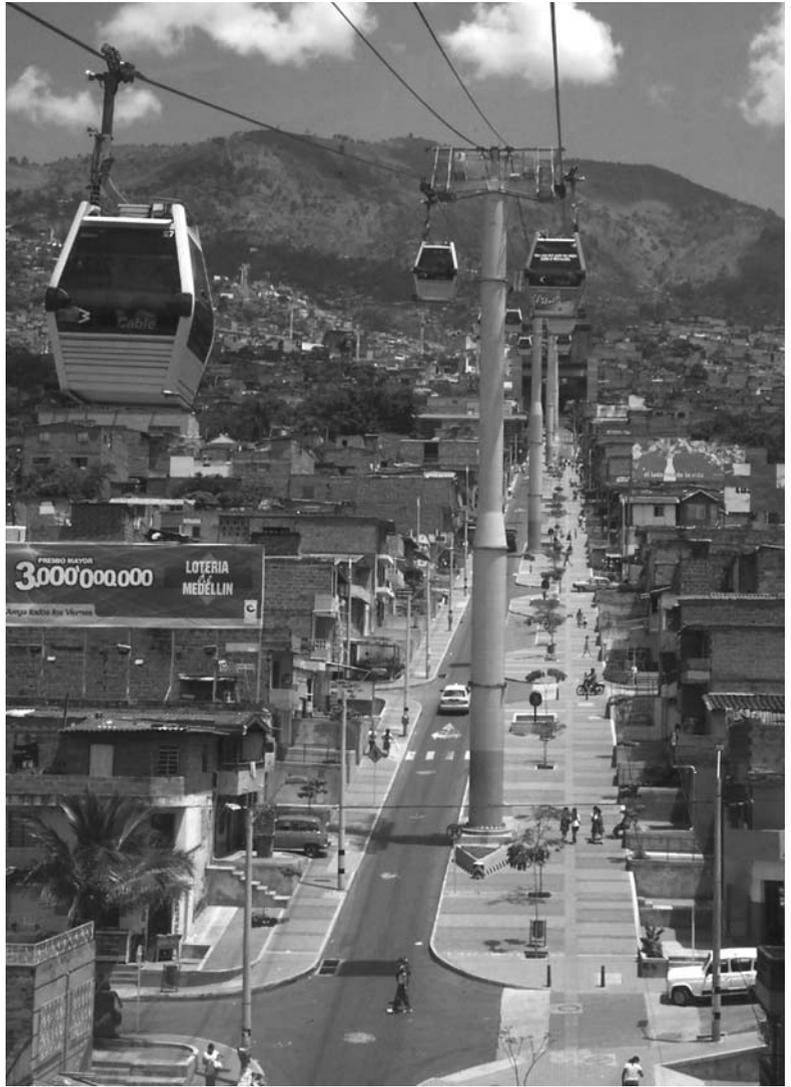October 2005 © Julio D Dávila**

**PHOTO 2**
**Medellín's Santo Domingo aerial cable car is part of a major**
**social and economic regeneration programme of a**
**formerly violent low-income area © Julio D Dávila**

associated with Manizales' municipal government, largely in an executive capacity, before launching his candidature for mayor.

**Luis Roberto Rivas**: "I had been working in the private sector… [In the mid-1990s] I became involved in politics with a group of friends also working in the private sector … our aim was to defeat the province's political coalition [of the two long-established traditional parties, Liberal and Conservative, with a strong grip on

**PHOTO 3**
**Luis Roberto Rivas, the mayor of Manizales, inaugurating the Olympic-size municipal swimming pool © Julio D Dávila**



**PHOTO 4**
**Manizales as seen from the mayor's office © Julio D Dávila**

local politics]... In the midst of the severe crisis due to low coffee prices [our proposals for the municipality included] information technologies, reforestation and tourism...

At the end of 1997, we had local elections and a popular candidate was elected mayor with 72,000 votes, the highest in the city's history, with which he defeated the political coalition... He and I hadn't met and he invited me ... to head Infimanizales, an institute that arose out of the unbundling of the city's utility companies into brand new separate companies ... as a way of shedding the heavy pension and social security burden of the old city company. Infimanizales was given all shares of the new public utility companies, and at the end of 1997 we sold 55 per cent of the telephone company's shares for which the city received a sizeable amount of funds...

In 1999, I was re-appointed head of Infimanizales for three years by [the new mayor]... it was then that we were able to start putting into effect our proposals for the city. I then launched my candidature and won with a difference of a mere 485 votes over the second candidate; we nearly lost!"

Santa Marta's mayor, **José Francisco "Chico" Zúñiga**, has in common with Fajardo that the mayoralty was his first elected post. Although he was head of the city's municipally owned telecommunications company in the early 1990s, he was appointed by the president as caretaker mayor for 15 months in 1993–94 after a local political crisis. He ran for mayor three times, twice unsuccessfully, before he was elected for the 2004–2007 term.

**"Chico" Zúñiga**: "I think we did an excellent job [as head of the city's telecommunications company]; we managed to modernize the system and provide the whole city with telephone service... and this made some people think that I should launch my candidature for mayor ... I had never aspired to elected office, least of all to get involved in political campaigning. I don't consider myself a politician. I love my city and want the best for it, and enjoy helping people, and this helped me take the jump... I was alone, with no political backing, against the city's political forces, with the city and provincial governments against me, and I was defeated by 3,000 votes. I then returned to my private sector business. At the next election the same people again asked me to stand for office... I ran three times... My campaign [for the 2004–07 mayoralty] was door-to-door, but the work done in the previous two elections was useful, a seed was planted in people. It was a high turnout where people from all sectors voted for me."

Zipaquirá's mayor, **José E Caicedo**, was born into a very poor family in Zipaquirá. The oldest of seven siblings, he sold homemade patties in the street to help pay for his primary and secondary education. After a period in a Catholic seminary, where he discovered that he had no vocation as a priest, he worked for 10 years with Minuto de Dios, an organization founded and led by a charismatic priest whose main aim was to build housing for the urban and rural poor using donations from the public, and who supported him through university. He obtained a university degree in forestry engineering and has postgraduate diplomas

**PHOTO 5**
**Francisco "Chico" Zúñiga, the mayor of Santa Marta,**
**at his desk José © Julio D Dávila**



**PHOTO 6**
**Santa Marta's Cathedral Square © Julio D Dávila**

in public management and in regional development. He was elected to Zipaquirá's city council for one term before running twice for mayor.

**José E Caicedo**: "[For 10 years] I travelled around the country, visiting marginal communities, people with massive needs, people living in shacks with plastic roofs, crammed in cardboard houses… This made

**PHOTO 7**
**José E Caicedo, the mayor of Zipaquirá, at his desk © Julio D Dávila**



**PHOTO 8**
**Zipaquirá and its salt mine as seen from the mayor's office**
**© Julio D Dávila**

me aware of people's needs, to strengthen my resolve and my social values. I internalized the dictum of the great Catholic theologian Saint Augustine: '*He who does not live to serve has no use in life*'… When I came back to my city I realized that the best way to serve people was to be close to power, where decisions and investments are made…

I got from my early family life an understanding of poverty, that I could not meet my basic needs. If I had not had the chance to study at university, I would not be sitting here as city mayor…

When I came back, I became very active with local communities, through the Juntas de Acción Comunal, the most important grassroots organizations in the country.[20] After seven years of deep immersion in getting to know my city's community, I decided to get involved in politics because I realized that from the viewpoint of citizen participation, the angle of community participation, one was limited to asking, to discussions, tirades, but could not take decisions… communities cannot help those in power to make decisions…

I was elected as city councillor against the city's political class, alone, in total solitude with my proposal for the city… but supported by leaders who knew who José Caicedo was … I got the second highest number of votes in the city council – amazing.

I [subsequently] lost the race to the mayor's office, against the three local *caciques* [traditional political leaders]. I was in fourth place … But I persevered and in the following elections I won in a seven-candidate election; I won with three times as many votes as the runner-up."

## b. The qualities of a mayor

Two of the mayors responded to the question "What qualities should a mayor have?"

**Sergio Fajardo (Medellín)**: "I see four qualities: first, honesty with absolutely no concessions. Second, knowledge… people still argue that it is enough if someone is talented and good at getting votes, but one must study the city's problems. Third, a huge passion for this endeavour. And fourth, a deep social awareness; give the same treatment to the humblest and the most powerful people, with the conviction that we are all part of one society."

**"Chico" Zúñiga (Santa Marta)**: "To be a mayor you need to love your city, have a great deal of social awareness, especially in cities such as ours where there is so much poverty and there are so many vulnerable people. One must be prepared to serve others, be willing to help improve things. A leader must show the path that the city should follow; this is the most important thing in a mayor. Honesty. Rejection of political patronage."

## c. Establishing priorities

Mayors were asked how they went about deciding what their priorities in government ought to be. In some cases, their answers show that they benefitted from interacting with a close circle of supporters.

**Sergio Fajardo (Medellín)**: "Fifty of us worked on this project, coming at it from different sectors: NGOs, the arts, academics, private entrepreneurs, community organizations. I provided guidance in the field of education, which was my entry point into the public sphere…

20. These are community self-help organizations set up in 1958 by the national government (and given impetus in the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution) to help fill the gap left by a weak state in small-scale rural infrastructure works such as roads and water supply systems. They became an important vehicle for improvements in low-income urban areas in the 1960s and 1970s, although their usefulness has recently waned as improved local government finances, especially in larger cities, have led to better urban infrastructure and service coverage. For a brief discussion of their origins in Bogotá, see Dávila, Julio D (2000), *Planificación y Política en Bogotá. La Vida de Jorge Gaitán Cortés*, Alcaldía Mayor, Bogotá.

I argued that education was the engine of social transformation and wrote newspaper articles … for me this has always been an intellectual project, to put together a proposal for the city. I didn't go to people asking them to tell me what to do. I participated in discussions. I understood the issues…"

**Luis Roberto Rivas (Manizales)**: "During my campaign for mayor, I stressed that the city's hospital [closed for some years at the time of his first involvement in local government] had to re-open. I signed a pledge at a notary public's office to re-open it as a public and teaching hospital, and I made this pledge public at a debate in the Autonomous University [of Manizales] in front of TV cameras and radio microphones… I said '*I made this pledge not because my word is not worth anything but because I want you to take this pledge very seriously*'…

When I won the elections, I discovered that the municipal government was seriously in debt … according to the national government we ranked 567 in fiscal performance among 1,099 municipalities."

**"Chico" Zúñiga (Santa Marta)**: "I was aware that the city was in serious financial difficulties… legally, the city was now covered by Law 550 [i.e. practically bankrupt] but no agreement had been reached with its lenders; it was a task I had to undertake: administrative restructuring, eliminate close to 1,000 jobs. It was tough. I had to shut down 10 parastatal agencies… This involves paying a large political price but it had to be done. I knew I had to do it because no one had been willing to do it before me for political reasons. If it had been done before it might have been less painful. I did it and the city's finances started slowly to recover. We've been paying our debts. Under the terms of Law 550, the city's revenues are tied for the next 14 years, which means there is virtually no money for investment… We had to work very hard to lobby the national government to get funds for much-needed projects: water supply, sanitation, roads.

Finances were the first priority. Second, promoting the city as a tourist destination as well as a destination for industry. We have excellent weather; we have over other cities the advantage of a deep-sea port, with a railway, with a dry climate … these qualities had to be made known. We gave fiscal incentives to new investors and this helped. And we had to work very hard in improving public services, especially water and sanitation. We've done much but lots still needs doing, because the city wasted too much time because investments were not made to support the city's future growth…

Education was another area. We have some of the worst educational standards in the country; this is an old issue, the result of poor quality teaching, poor school infrastructure, teachers who… strike with no apparent reason…"

**José E Caicedo (Zipaquirá)**: "My proposal was: 'A mayor who governs facing the city makes less mistakes than one who looks away from it.' 'He who governs with the people has less chances of going wrong than he who governs with a group of close friends or the elite.' The mayor's office should get out of its four walls, it must get about in the neighbourhoods, reach out to communities, understand needs.

This is crucial to be aware of the community's needs. The second principle is that of solidarity, with clear social targets…"

## d. Continuity over time

One major problem of elected local governments in weak institutional contexts is that strong leadership often translates into a desire to "start from a blank slate" and a desire to "leave a personal mark".[21] This often involves putting an end to programmes and projects launched in the preceding administration by starving them of funds or of political support, or both. Three of the mayors replied to the questions "How do you establish a balance between the short and the long term in a local government administration?" and "How do you ensure continuity over time of programmes supported by your administration?"

> **Sergio Fajardo (Medellín)**: "One must be able to plan ahead… we had a clear idea of how we wanted to intervene in the city, we were aware of its problems and knew what actions we had to initiate. When one has a clear direction, one has a diagnosis of the problems and how one should go about it, one can start to act. One must ensure that each new project is sustainable. People ask me '*How do we ensure that what you are doing will continue?*' I say to them: vote! There is no other way. The Iraq war will end when democrats are voted into the president's office of the USA. It is by voting that decisions are taken….
>
> Our challenge was to break with the past fast in a big way, to show what we were prepared to put into practice. Everything we did was conceived to be sustainable. But with the enormous powers invested in their office, any mayor can decide to put an end to it if they want to."

> **Luis Roberto Rivas (Manizales)**: "I have supported [the newly elected city mayor], I committed him to continue [our programmes] … I virtually appointed him [as a candidate]; he was reluctant at first, he is a private sector man and he had been heavily criticized [as head of the city's telephone company] for raising rates… We were able to show that when you place the city and the people at the centre, people respond, they are grateful, and he knows that if he does not want to fail he needs to provide continuity [to our projects]."

> **"Chico" Zúñiga (Santa Marta)**: "In the case of Santa Marta, I think there will be continuity because the new mayor is a young person; we have talked since we decided to support him in his candidature, and we outlined to him our current policies, our future projects... and there was agreement. He may change several things but I am sure he will continue because it suits him… But you cannot guarantee [that policies will continue], except for projects for which a contract has been signed."

> **José E Caicedo (Zipaquirá)**: "[Balancing the short and the long term] requires establishing a difference between what is important and what can make headlines in the media… One must balance investments so as to eliminate any gaps in governance. One also

needs a strong personality with clarity of mind, a vision, so as not to despair when criticism surfaces today, knowing that tomorrow's reality will end up being favourable… One must target one's actions and persevere. If your priorities are all over the place and you try to do everything at once, you'll end up doing nothing. You must decide on a set of priorities because the city has enormous needs and few resources. You must be aware that you will have to sacrifice something, but also be aware of what part of the city will end up benefitting as a result of this sacrifice."

## e. Leadership, networking and "mayor as CEO"

As discussed above, local governments in Colombia offer an interesting example of the governance shifts described earlier, particularly the expectation that mayors should be "good managers" with a proven record of managing either private or public sector enterprises (preferably both) before engaging as leaders in local politics. They are also expected to be good networkers, with a capacity to lobby and negotiate with a diversity of actors, from private investors to central government officials to corrupt provincial politicians. By contrast, in the rhetoric that animates much discourse on the capacities of mayors, little is said of their capacity to deal with organized communities and to move beyond simply offering the poor "a better deal" through improved utility services or forced relocations in the case of squatters, to engage in more horizontal partnerships involving a range of actors that both empower the poor and disadvantaged and offer them greater control over their own lives.

Below, the four interviewees reflect on the broad decision-making powers enjoyed by Colombian mayors. In their answers, they give ample evidence of the nature of their job as CEOs in their local government, as lobbyists and as networkers.

**Sergio Fajardo (Medellín)**: "For us, power has been extraordinarily useful in leading this transformation… I believe that [a high concentration of] power is generally a good thing, and in a democracy society has the right and the possibility of making mistakes. It is painful. It is not good to make mistakes. This is what happened in Cali,[22] which had municipally owned utility companies like Medellín's, and they have lost them. They made mistakes and the companies were pillaged. Society ends up paying a price, with the leaders it deserves at a given point in time. That is the nature of democracy. I think that in this context it is good to have [political] power, but there must be checks and balances."

**Luis R Rivas (Manizales)**: "When we were faced with the challenge of redressing fiscal imbalances in Manizales, I had an idea of how to get hold of funds for public investment. I invited the representatives of the construction and engineering sectors and said '*What, in your view, are the infrastructure projects that the city should undertake? For I have here a technical mobility plan done by the National University*'…

[When the national government tried to impose the successful rapid bus transit system using articulated buses and dedicated lanes that gave excellent results in Bogotá], we said '*You cannot do this from the*

22. Cali, Colombia's third largest city, has been beset by a recent history of municipal mismanagement.

*comfort of your desks, come and visit Manizales and you will soon realize that it is physically impossible* [for the system to work here]… *we cannot destroy our city*' … [The national government] then signed a decree barring the central government budget from funding aerial cable cars [arguably a better solution for Manizales' hilly terrain] … They then said '*You need to re-plan your bus routes and open them to public bidding*'; I said '*No way! Do you think that me, as mayor, will have an interest in inviting people from other cities in the country to become transport entrepreneurs in our city? No way, for a simple reason: in the country's transport system there is money of doubtful origin* [i.e. laundered from illegal activities], *and I do not want that money in my city*.'"

**"Chico" Zúñiga (Santa Marta)**: "I inherited a situation whereby 400 municipal teachers had been hired outside the officially approved education budget and this worsened the city's deficit. I had to sack them, which led to strikes and protests, all kinds of problems, but it needed doing… At present, we have exactly the number of teachers stipulated in the Ministry of Education's budget… We had the support of UNDP and GTZ… There was no database, no archival system, no on-line facilities. We were able to put all that in place… There is much to be done still but we've done what is most important…

There is a brand new cigarette factory in the city. When I was elected mayor of Santa Marta, before taking the oath of office, I heard of a group of investors whom I approached… I introduced Santa Marta to them as a good place to invest in and they were surprised. I said to them '*Santa Marta has a number of strengths and I am inviting you to come and visit*', and I showed them the city's strengths. I organized a meeting with the port company, with the railway company, with the Free Trade Zone authorities, with all the public utilities, with the Chamber of Commerce, with the Traders Federation, we introduced the city to them. They ended up investing in the city. At present, there are also two brand new bio-diesel plants … [including one by a] Japanese investor who toured several Colombian cities … and upon knowing that he was here I visited him in his hotel and told him '*Santa Marta has these strengths*' and he said '*I will stay here*' and immediately started building his plant, which is nearly ready… He got tax incentives, exemption on trade and industry and property taxes for 10 years, proportional to the number of jobs he creates."

**José E Caicedo**: "[In selecting collaborators] we are not dealing simply with an economic issue but also with an issue of management, trust, motivation. [We are talking about] individuals who can be leaders, who are not afraid of talking to people, who are able to govern with citizens and take decisions alongside the people, who do not mind that people's views differ from theirs, who can tell the mayor '*I disagree with you, why don't we do it this way instead*', who are not afraid of the mayor but instead see him as a close collaborator who represents them and can solve some of their problems. That, for me, is crucial.

Why is my government successful? First, because I am a technical person; I think that technical people can make good politicians, but politicians make poor technical people."

## f. Poverty, inequality and violence

A final issue discussed with the four mayors was the grim reality of poverty and inequality that deeply divides the societies in which they live. They were asked for their views on this and what they had done to tackle these problems. Although public (as opposed to domestic) violence is currently not perceived as a major public order problem in any of the four cities, few municipalities in Colombia have been left unscarred from decades of conflict and the pressures of internally displaced populations.

> **Sergio Fajardo (Medellín): "**[Medellín is] much more equitable than before. To start with, there is a greater awareness across the whole city that we are all together in this. This is one of the big leaps we made. We have invested in a big way in low-income areas. I believe that when you ask people they will tell you '*Those are investments from all of us in Medellín*'. We moved away from saying '*Those are Fajardo's investments*' towards seeing them as wealth from which the whole society [can benefit]. There is a phrase by Héctor Abad [a well-known journalist and writer from Medellín], a good friend of mine, who says that we redistributed wealth without appealing to the discourse of anger or aggression… We have done a lot in terms of public libraries surrounded by parks; everyone in Medellín knows about them and they are proud of them; this is part of feeling part of this society. We have given a new lease on life to the public sphere. We have placed our bets on the state, on public education. People argue that education should be privatized [with the argument] that state education can only be of poor quality. We said that education must remain public because it embodies citizen solidarity. In Medellín, we are supporting public education because it gives people a chance … I have no doubt that we have managed to elicit a conceptual mental change in this city … And, what happened at the last municipal elections? A candidate from our movement won. That two mayors with the same roots succeed each other in office had never happened before, even in Bogotá.

> [Our break with the past consisted] in showing to Medellín that it made sense to have hope, a new approach to public management, a large urban intervention, education as an engine of social transformation in a way that had never been used before, a change of skin for the city, social urbanism. These are major interventions that go to the roots [of problems] and managed to change the city's skin… Where there was despair there appeared public spaces to meet up with one another. Violence forces us to stay indoors. Instead, we can meet and create new relationships. Everything we build for the public sphere is linked with knowledge, with culture, with productive development, everything in the end to fight against social inequalities and ensure that we can live together."

> **"Chico" Zúñiga (Santa Marta)**: "This city was paralyzed, it was full of difficulties, poor basic services … its population grew and services stagnated … and this became worse especially in recent years due to … the large number of internally displaced people fleeing violence [in neighbouring rural areas, mainly from paramilitary groups]… We have no way of responding with a greater coverage of infrastructure

services, education, health, housing. This creates peripheries of misery, illegal squatting on unstable hills, environmental problems. Heavy rain covers the city in mud, the streets, the drainage system is overloaded and people are unhappy to see the storm drainage unable to cope. It's difficult…

In this region we have had a serious problem with the paramilitaries influencing politics. We live with this every day. We hear of several members of Congress who have been detained because of links to the paramilitary.[23] [Paramilitary groups] wanted to [illegally] appropriate local government funds for health, for education, by influencing the election of mayors, provincial governors, members of Congress.[24] It was a way of keeping their influence, using state funds and in the process, becoming rich. They used all these mechanisms to extort … to steal people's land and to get what they wanted from people using threats. The absence of a stronger state here has been a serious problem and we have all suffered from it. There was no authority to support us, who would defend us?

We had three strikes in Santa Marta, fostered by paramilitary groups. They forced shops to close and paralyzed the city. If you didn't comply, they would turn up at your shop and say *'Either you shut up shop for the strike or you die'*, and they would keep their word. We have suffered for this…"

**José E Caicedo (Zipaquirá)**: "The state was made for all but especially for the weakest people. The state should give priority to vulnerable groups and people with needs to meet. That's how I interpret it. That is my vision of the social sphere, which is the most important sector and where we invested 60 per cent of the budget in the past four years… in a head-on clash against poverty, against the lack of education, against the lack of health services, against the right to good health…

What am I outlining here? We are going to 'build' people first and later we can build things made of cement, surface roads, erect walls… My priority is given to three issues: education, health and care for vulnerable people.

Each child that we snatch away from the lure of the street is guaranteed to be saved. Each child that we take away from traffic lights, from the street, is a child that we snatch away from drugs, crime, perversity. We must guarantee that children stay at school and that they enjoy going to school because they get a school meal, because they eat well. They are hungry. Going to school means they will do well. It is about giving people back their dignity, people who had to suffer as I did when I went to the same schools and I had to walk with worn-out shoes to school…

We brought a state university to Zipaquirá, the provincial university, ours, which had no presence here… What do we want? We want that someone from the city who earns a minimum monthly wage can offer their children access to higher education, because they will never be able to afford the US$ 2,000–4,000 in fees at a private university in Bogotá. The provincial university will give the poorest people access

23. Under a 2005 national government law (the Justice and Peace Act), convicted paramilitary chiefs can negotiate for reduced prison terms in exchange for confessing all their crimes and providing the justice system with names of politicians or civil servants with whom they entered into deals. This has led to a number of prominent politicians being investigated and, in several cases, jailed.

24. This answer was in response to a question about the extent to which decentralization in Colombia has facilitated the illegal appropriation of local government funds by illegal armed groups. For a detailed discussion, see Sánchez, Fabio and Mario Chacón (2005), "Conflict, state and decentralization: from social progress to an armed dispute for local control, 1974–2002", *Crisis States Programme Working Paper* No 70 (Series 1), London School of Economics, UK.

to education. It will be beautiful to see that, once they have finished high school, instead of becoming young mothers, girls can say '*Hold on, Mom, I will go on with my education because I can now work during the day and study in the evenings.*'"

## V. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The interview format could rightly be criticized for providing one-sided views of what is in effect a complex set of political processes. Setting aside this obvious limitation, these testimonies provide an open and honest account of some of the pitfalls but also the great potential for change embodied in local governments in Colombia today. Whatever their motivations, these four men are clearly committed to their cities: they agreed to take on an elected position for a fixed period, with all the pecuniary and personal drawbacks that this entails, in a country where elected leaders are often victims of violence from illegal, armed groups.

The four mayors see themselves as political outsiders who oppose long-established local political machines to which they seek to bring a fresh breath of political air. A trait common to all is the zeal they bring to their job as mayor; for them this is akin to a "mission", the search for a new form of local politics involving a tough but much-needed job of breaking with bad political habits and putting local government on a new financial footing. Their sense of purpose must be admired and is perhaps all the more poignant because they are able to express it so fervently even at the end of their administration.

With the exception of Caicedo, Zipaquirá's mayor, they depict themselves as being part of a small group who reject the present state of local politics and, perhaps inevitably, it is to this small group that they owe their allegiance. Although they remain largely unspecified, these groups of supporters would appear to be members of the local intelligentsia or local entrepreneurs, on whose conditional support the mayors can count. By contrast, and perhaps because of his own early history of acute poverty, Caicedo clearly feels more comfortable among the poor, whom he sees as his natural political constituency.

Without discarding poverty as an important area of concern, none of the other three mayors seem to see the poor as their natural interlocutors, stakeholders or supporters on whom they can rely for unswerving political support and to whom most of their energy is directed. In the case of Manizales, this may be explained partly by the fact that most of the poor who work in the city live in neighbouring municipalities, from where they commute on a regular basis. In the case of Medellín, this may arise from the large size and wealth of the city, the complex range of actors present in it, and the nature of local manufacturing, construction and service firms that have an almost overwhelming presence not merely in the city but, in some instances, also in the country. In Santa Marta's case, the reality of a bankrupt local government and the constant intimidating presence of illegal, armed groups would no doubt focus the mind of any local leader.

It is interesting to note, finally, how aware of the media the mayors are. This is the case because local radio stations and regional TV channels have opened up new means of communication between them and their electors – and, in the process, have become powerful players themselves,

increasingly shaping not only the message that local politicians are able to convey, but perhaps also what they choose to prioritize during their administration. This has been noted in US politics for some time. In Colombia, as in most other democracies, local politicians are increasingly expected to communicate with their voters in an effective way, and professional media outlets provide ready-made means to do so. Although there is no evidence from the interviews of it happening here, it is possible that this may eventually lead to a greater distancing of elected officials from the daily reality of local voters, particularly the poor who may not have access to TV sets. Were this to happen, it might contribute to a weakening of one of the strongest advantages that local government has over national governments in democratic systems – the physical proximity to its people.

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