

# **Colombia on strike: “This government has to fall”**

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A specter is haunting Latin America — the specter of class struggle. From Haiti, Ecuador and Peru to Chile — until one month ago an oasis of neoliberal governance — people are taking to the streets in protest. Their anger is directed not only against their governments, but even more so against a system that causes unspeakable hardship for most while creating obscene profits for a few. People have had it with the rampant inequality and with barely being able to survive in countries that, according to all economic indicators, are seemingly doing fine.

These protests pose a formidable challenge to the decade of neo-conservative and neoliberal dominance in the region. The governments of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, the *de facto* president and *putschist* Jeanine Añez in Bolivia, Lenin Moreno in Ecuador, Sebastián Piñera in Chile and Iván Duque in Colombia are all part of this new technocratic and neoliberal far-right that flirts with the dictatorial penchants of the old far-right.

Racism, misogyny, homophobia, religious fundamentalism, class supremacy, a foaming-at-mouth anti-socialist rhetoric and a venal attitude towards *res publica* are traits they have in common. They are part of a club that exchanges advisers in an aggressive crusade against “populism” and squarely subordinated to the dictates of the USA presidency. Incapable of original ideas, they repeat the same blabber day and night; property, patriarchal family, religion, fatherland and other mumbo-jumbo.

## IVÁN DUQUE, INCOMPETENT-IN-CHIEF

There are signs, however, that the tables are turning. Across the region, there is a surge in anti-neoliberal protests cornering these authoritarian puppets. Even though the far-right in Bolivia and Venezuela maintains its offensive capacity, emboldened by their patrons in Europe and the US, it has certainly lost the momentum.

Now it is the Colombian government’s turn to face the anger of the people. Authoritarian, repressive, venal, and most of all, incompetent, President Iván Duque has managed in just one year to become one of the most — if not the most — unpopular presidents in Colombian history, rejected by 70 percent of the population. It is an incredible feat in a country whose history is awash with presidents who have had set the unpopularity bar pretty high.

Duque was elected in early 2018 as the heir to former president Alvaro Uribe —another nasty far-right figure surrounded by scandal. His campaign relied on fear: of Venezuela, of the marginalized, and of the left. He gathered the support of the most conservative and reactionary elements of a society intoxicated with anti-Venezuela and anti-socialist propaganda.

Once in power, he has been a quarrelsome bully who attacks Venezuela (the same week of the frustrated aid-convoy’s shenanigans in February, the Colombian government denied humanitarian aid to Afro-Colombians suffering from floods in the impoverished Chocó region). He unilaterally terminated the peace negotiations with the ELN, the second largest guerrilla group in Colombia, and he has systematically undermined the peace agreement with the former FARC-EP guerrillas.

He is reigniting armed conflict through military operations against insurgents with disastrous humanitarian consequences — murdered children and economic incentives for soldiers to kill as many guerrillas as possible; these decisions led to the resignation of his Minister of Defense. On top of that, he has come back to the old policy of criminalization of the *cocaleros* (coca leaf

farmers) in spite of the — unfulfilled — promises of alternatives to illicit crops in the 2016 peace agreement.

All of this is happening in the midst of high unemployment rates, the skyrocketing cost of living, and murders of social leaders, members of opposition parties and demobilized guerrillas. After just one year, Duque's record is nothing short of appalling, and naturally, the people have had enough.

## 21N: FURY AND REPRESSION

A national civic strike (*paro cívico*) was called for November 21 to protest against some of Duque's policies, such as proposed labor reforms that would reduce the already-unsustainable minimum income and privatize the pension system. A civic strike is a form of protest in a country where most of the population does not have formal employment and therefore cannot engage in collective action at the workplace. Everyone comes out to the streets to protest in any way they can: workers go on strike, students do not attend classes, people in marginalized communities block the roads, etc.

The *Comité Nacional de Paro* (National Committee for the Civic Strike), an umbrella organization of Indigenous, agrarian, civic and labor organizations, made the call in October to protest corruption, the cost of living, and the revenue reform; with broad public support, they called for the defense of the right to social protest, an end to repression and militarization and action against unemployment, which borders on 11 percent without accounting for sub-employment and the informal economy that together make up for over 50 percent of the labor force.

Remarkably, most of the left-wing parties in Colombia, including the FARC party, have taken a lukewarm stance towards the strike. Probably being too busy with the past elections in October, they have failed to grasp the significance of this (post-electoral) movement brewing on the streets.

Before the strike even started, the authorities arrested and raided organizers' homes. Oblivious of the depths of popular anger and indignation, Duque accused boogeymen of organizing the protest, from "international anarchists" to the São Paulo Forum. A demobilized FARC-EP guerrilla explained to ROAR,

*People are really fed up of it all; students and workers can't stand this any longer, but the government can't say anymore, look, it's the guerrillas, the narco-terrorists infiltrating these protests. They are afraid, so they are making up new boogeymen to repress, discredit and dismiss the protesters.*

The government closed the borders, militarized the big towns, and threatened the organizers. They even banned a document published by a student collective that gave tips on preventing abuses by the ESMAD, the Colombian riot police.

Soon after, the president clumsily acknowledged that protesters may have a point or two. But this was too little, too late: by then, his cocktail of repressive measures and arrogance had already incensed much of the population. Duque then blatantly lied, denying he ever planned a pension system reform or a reduction of the minimum wage.

At this stage, however, the die was cast. Despite the terror tactics used by the government and the atmosphere of fear it created, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, from across the country

came out to protest, not just for specific demands, but even more so because they are fed up with the neoliberal capitalist system and Colombia's ruling cliques profiting from it.

Unlike protests in the previous decade, which were mainly dominated by rural unrest and agitation, the civic national strike was a predominantly urban phenomenon, albeit with the participation of several agrarian organizations.

As expected, repression came swiftly. The joint action of the ESMAD and the military left three dead in Cauca Valley on November 21, plus hundreds arrested and injured across the country. Confrontations in the city of Cali were particularly fierce. In response, neighborhoods of La Macarena and Candelaria in Bogotá started spontaneous *cacerolazos* (pot-banging protests), which spread all over the city and to the rest of the country.

The next day, demonstrations and blockades continued, and the ESMAD clashed with protestors in the working-class quarters of the main towns. Pro-government activists started a social network campaign to cause panic, claiming that vandals were attacking private houses to discourage people from joining the protests and painting those who did join as vigilantes.

The government's response was a full militarization of the capital — tanks and about 4,000 soldiers patrolled the streets of Bogotá, declaring a curfew from 9pm to 6am on Friday night.

People disobeyed the curfew *en masse* and came out at night for more *cacerolazos* and to dance in the streets. But the repression continued, particularly in working-class quarters. However, Gilberto Martínez, member of the executive board of the CUT Colombia (*Central Unitaria de Trabajadores*, the country's largest trade union), explained to ROAR, "*People are no longer afraid, so people face and respond to aggression, people faced the ESMAD, they came together on the streets.*"

## ESCALATING RURAL PROTESTS

Inasmuch as there is a tendency to — rightly — view the recent events in Colombia in the context of the global struggles against the cost of living, corruption and neoliberal austerity of the last decade, these struggles are also part of an internal cycle of protest in Colombia that started in 2008.

That year, sugar-cane cutters in southwestern Colombia went on a three-month strike, followed by mass mobilization of Indigenous communities known as *minga* ("collective effort" in various Indigenous languages). Since then, protests and popular mobilizations have been on the rise, particularly in rural regions. Urban protest has been limited to the huge student demonstrations of 2011 and the heroic-but-isolated struggles of various trade unions that are often attacked by hit men and death squads, accounting for Colombia's status as world leader in the murder of trade unionists.

Led by agrarian unions and Indigenous communities, rural Colombia experienced a period of popular mass mobilization opposing the militarization of the countryside, confronting — unsuccessfully — various free trade agreements with the US and the EU, and, most importantly, opposing the implementation of megaprojects in the agricultural and mining sectors.

It was this resistance, best exemplified in the struggles of the Tolima communities against gold-mining giant Anglo Gold Ashanti, which connected peasants with urban masses through the environmental movement.

Escalating rural protest, coupled with increasingly effective insurgent attacks against the military, particularly by the FARC-EP, provided the backdrop for the launch of the peace negotiations

between this rebel movement and the Colombian government in late 2012. Alas, its transformative potential was squandered by isolating the population from the negotiations that took place in Cuba, by not insisting on broader popular participation, and by limiting its scope to issues that were in the Constitution anyway, such as the government insisting that the economic model was not to be touched and the FARC-EP negotiating team accepting this.

Ultimately, the government's reluctance to implement any substantial change, combined with a guerrilla movement which by and large saw mass participation in the dialogues as a threat to their "ownership" of the process, resulted in a restricted, non-transformative, peace agreement in 2016.

In 2013, a series of rural protests — started by coffee farmers in March and followed by mobilizations of cocaleros in the border region with Venezuela in June — led to a mass agrarian strike against the free trade agreement with the USA signed the previous year. This rural protest brought millions out to the streets and gathered unprecedented support in urban centers. After some 25 people died and many hundreds were arrested and injured, the government agreed to negotiate with the agrarian unions separately by economic activity and region.

Thus, the collective power that had been built up over the course of a month of protests was successfully fragmented and contained. The traditional left and their movements, possibly alarmed at the independence of the movement, opted to turn away from sustained protest, discrediting direct action as "undermining" the Santos government and, therefore, the peace process. Instead, they focused on a futile electoral strategy, which rendered the poorest of results the following year. They did not understand that the anger in the streets is seldom channeled through the ballot box.

To a degree, the peace process — which had been described as an attempt at "pacification" by left-wing critics — plus the electoralist strategy of the left curbed the 2008–2013 tendency to the escalation of social protest. But this was to be only temporary.

## **WHAT NOW? LEARNING THE LESSONS OF A LONG HISTORY OF STRUGGLE**

The current protests are the biggest since September 1977, when a civic strike against the high costs of living, militarization and repression, and depressed salaries was violently repressed by the state. The 1978 Security Statute significantly empowered the military and authorized martial courts for the opposition. Afterwards, para-state mechanisms of repressions — i.e., death squads — proliferated, and the hideous practice of forced disappearance commenced.

One sector of the left thought that an urban insurrection would merge imminently with the rural guerrilla movement — an interpretation that, although it proved to be wrong, was not completely baseless in light of the events in Nicaragua. Guerrilla cells multiplied as the Security Statute and the wholesale repression following the 1977 civic strike moved many left-wing militants to join armed struggle as they saw the space for democratic political opposition shrinking.

It is a well-known pattern in Colombia that popular mobilization leads to state repression, and repression leads to a growth in number and size of guerrilla movements. Urban centers remained, however, by and large, a difficult nut to crack for guerrillas. The traditional left-wing regarded the events as an opportunity to gather votes and as a sign of the people moving towards the left. However, they too would be disappointed after their poor electoral performance in 1978.

Where to now? As the number of guerrillas who reject the 2016 FARC-EP agreement with the government continues to grow, it is clear that under the current conditions, and given the government's unwillingness to fulfill its duties as outlined in the peace agreement, there is a very real threat of renewed armed struggle in the countryside.

However, the urban centers have a completely different dynamic and the insurrectionary logic is not likely to bring about the changes expected by the vast majority of the population. Likewise, people in Colombia do not necessarily express their anger and frustration through the ballot box. Therefore, the conclusions from 1977 of both the insurrectionary left and of the traditional left are not applicable to the present.

Although it would be extremely unwise to dismiss the power of the far-right, of uribismo, it is clear that whatever legitimacy it had has been nullified in the eyes of most people. But, if a progressive alternative does not fill this vacuum, the doors will be opened for an authoritarian solution to the crisis of hegemony just as it happened in 1977–78. In this respect, Martínez of the CUT stated that,

*We are trying to keep up with permanent actions [...] this 21<sup>st</sup> was a magnificent display of fighting spirit. There were cacerolazos all across the country [...] So repression will likely get worse, because we have a far-right government. But people are not taking it anymore, but without a clear direction people don't know where to go, what's going to happen and we need to be prepared.*

Given the past experience, it would also be unwise to rely on the ballot box for an appropriate response to this crisis. The fighting spirit of the people needs to be organized independently, around their most immediate demands: committees for pensioners, for the youth, for women, for the myriad of demands. They need to be organized to exercise pressure and engage in direct action – what was fought out on the streets needs to be won on the streets. They also need to act as one, and no particular sector should engage separately in negotiations as happened in 2014; unity is key.

The labor movement needs to be strong and lead by example. Vis-à-vis the scale of the moral crisis of the political establishment, there is a need for the people to constitute power from below. Talking to ROAR, an activist from the working-class quarters of Cali remarked that,

*Things are heating up. People now believe that this can actually change. But we need to be firm and demand that Duque resigns at once. We do not have nothing to negotiate with him. Why should we? He never keeps his promises, he will only use negotiations as a diversion, so people sign up agreement they will never fulfill. This government has to fall.*

This warning becomes relevant now that the government is calling for a national dialogue, in all likelihood to wear down the movement. Agrarian activist from Putumayo explained, “We have always held that this is a mafia state, but then whenever we are called to sit down with them for a coffee, we run to their presence and thus we legitimate it. We need to be more coherent than that.”

Martínez, of the CUT, also emphasized,

*On Tuesday, [November] 26, the Executive Committee of the civic strike will reach a decision on the proposal. The government is talking of a national agreement with the demagogues, not really with the people's organizations. We don't need any more promises. They know our demands: social welfare, labor rights. Dialogue, for the government, is a way to end up imposing their own views, we should not be naive about this.*

The latest Colombian crisis is far from resolved. The challenge for the popular sectors consist of keeping the momentum, turning anger into organization, slogans into concrete proposals to be fought and won on the streets and to remain united and avoid fragmentation.

At the same time, pointless negotiations designed as strategies of attrition need to be avoided, and the same goes for provocations that try to put segments of the people against one another. A wave of agrarian unrest is in the making for next year, when it will hopefully merge with this new generation of urban rebels who learned their lessons the hard way. Then, the chance to give a mortal blow to the far-right will be at hand. If Colombia's oligarchy really thinks this is just a passing mood to be smashed through deception and repression, they have another thing coming.

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Colombia’s national civic strike is paving the way for a rural-urban coalition of protesters and movements that together can take on President Duque’s right-wing government.

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