

Colombia's democratic facade is crumbling to pieces

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

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April 28 has quickly turned into a historic date in Colombia. On this day, a broad coalition of social organizations and trade unions called a strike against the tax reform proposed by the far-right government of president Iván Duque. A skillful mix of government incompetence and state terror turned what would have been just one day of protests, into one of the most serious political crises in Colombia's recent history. Each passing day, each new death, added an extra reason for protesters to remain on the streets and radicalize their tactics and demands against an elite that is out of touch with the daily hardships of ordinary Colombians, and whose actions exacerbate their sufferings.

The state's brutal response may come as a shock to international observers and to some Colombian middle-class urbanites, but this is the type of response to protest that people in peripheral urban regions and particularly in the countryside have known forever. We are now also witnessing the type of rule through *manu militari* in cities that is routine in rural Colombia. This type of response is, naturally, well entrenched in the ideology of the elites and the military, which view the citizens of their own country as an enemy to tame and suppress, an ideology rooted in counter-insurgency and fascist-leaning doctrine.

People have poured to the streets out of sheer despair. They have not much else left to do. The fact that amidst this peak of the pandemic the people decided to take to the streets in protest offers a sense of the deep malaise the country currently finds itself in.

TAX REFORMS AMIDST A PANDEMIC OF VIOLENCE

This tax reform was clearly targeted at the poorest sectors of society. It planned to extend the VAT on basic consumption goods, public services and even funerals, adding a sinister touch to the proposal at a time when the country is seeing a peak in COVID-19-related deaths. The reform also proposed extending income tax to those earning COL\$2,500,000 a month (just over US\$600), a segment of the population already badly affected with the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic.

Times have never been easy in Colombia, which is one of the most unequal countries in the world and has the highest level of inequality in Latin America. The distribution of land ownership is also one of the worst in the world. While last year alone 3.6 million Colombians were pushed below the poverty line (which engulfs 42 percent of the population), there is a 15 percent unemployment rate plus an extremely large informal sector, with over 50 percent of people employed informally for mere survival on a day-to-day basis. Of course, the pandemic, social distancing and the lockdowns have affected these informal workers disproportionately. In the popular quarters of the cities, red banners were raised in the thousands to indicate that people were hungry in that household.

On top of this, violence has been a daily staple for the poorest Colombians, millions of whom fled the conflict in the countryside to become internally displaced in the misery belts of the big cities. Others who have managed to get a meager income out of coca cultivation, face renewed threats of large-scale fumigations and military operations, under pressure from the US — both from the previous Trump and current Biden administrations. This will take away whatever means they have to feed their families.

This not to mention the situation of social leaders and demobilized guerrillas who have been the target of a veritable process of systematic extermination for decades, but which has become distinctively acute under Duque's government.

All of this, while the government announced that it would buy US\$4 billion in fighting jets. Colombia is, with Brazil, the country with the highest military expenditure in Latin America, spending a staggering US\$10 billion yearly, while education and health are in a very poor state, and an important segment of the population goes to bed hungry every night and the number of deaths due to the COVID-19 crisis keep growing.

PEOPLE ARE ON THE MARCH AGAIN

One key problem is how out of touch Colombia's ruling elite is with the life of ordinary citizens. This was made evident in a statement of former Finance Minister Alberto Carrasquilla, the mastermind behind this reform, when he assured a dozen eggs cost COP\$1,800, exactly five times less than what they actually do! This blatant ignorance about the costs of life when most Colombians are counting every penny, was too much to stomach. So, when the National Strike Committee, a broad coalition led by the trade union movement, called for renewed protests on April 28, millions took up the call and poured onto the streets.

If the 21N protests of November 2019 were concentrated in the main cities, protests now occurred all over the country: from the major urban centers to small towns, villages and the countryside. These protests show in the same way the oligarchy accumulated wealth on the back of the crisis, the people had been accumulating grievances and anger. The momentary respite the oligarchy enjoyed during the COVID-19 crisis was over and the tensions that had been increasing since a series of massive protests last October all erupted at once on April 28.

The unifying factor among all the protesters who came out was their opposition to the tax reform; this was a very clear rallying call for everybody. But different groups each had their own additional quarrels with the government. Health workers demanded back pay, workers rejected the pension scheme reform, Indigenous people protested 500 years of oppression, people of all walks of life denounced the systematic murder of social leaders, and coca peasants objected to the plan to resume glyphosate fumigations and the militarization of their territories.

REPRESSION BACKFIRES

The remarkable thing about protests in Colombia is not only the bravery of the people in the face of lethal state violence, it is the high levels of restraint they normally show. Despite the enormous structural, cultural, symbolic and physical violence they face, despite the blatant venality of the ruling classes, despite being kept in a state of subsistence, Colombians have a strong tradition of peaceful protests. The 28A protests were no exception.

But the protests were met with brute force nonetheless. This time, however, the people have had enough, and the repression backfired. It was police repression that turned a single day of protests into a country-wide battle that has been raging for the past two weeks. And it was police repression that also led the protesters to expand their demands to the resignation of the authorities and to a political trial to the murderous leadership of the country. The government

dropped the proposed tax reforms on May 2, and Finance Minister Carrasquilla resigned the next day, but the protests are still going strong.

So far, nearly 50 people have been murdered, thousands of people have been arrested or wounded, there have been multiple denunciations of police rape and torture, and almost 500 people have been disappeared in the context of the protests. In Cali, one of the biggest cities in Colombia, the authority has been in the hands of the army for nearly two weeks. The civilian authorities were summarily displaced, while tanks are in the streets and Black Hawk helicopters fly overhead to support operations in the poor neighborhoods against unarmed demonstrators.

Most recently, on May 9, Indigenous people in Cali were attacked with army-issued assault rifles by a group of civilians. Despite the city being heavily militarized and of the numerous videos which can help identify the perpetrators of this attack, nothing has happened.

These attacks, amounting to acts of state terror, are not a collection of fortuitous events. They are part of a long tradition of repression that is deeply entrenched in state counter-insurgency structures, reinforced through the National Security Doctrine with which the armed forces have been indoctrinated, and in the extreme reactionary mentality of the ruling elites.

This violence not only has been naturalized, but it is also regarded as morally just. Former president Álvaro Uribe, the mentor of Iván Duque, got a message deleted by Twitter from his account in which he glorified police violence in unequivocal terms: “Let’s support the right of soldiers and police to use their firearms to defend their integrity and to defend people and property from criminal acts of terrorist vandalism.”

In another twist, Uribe referenced concept developed by Alexis López, a Chilean neo-Nazi-turned military advisor and guru in Colombia, where he has been invited to give two conferences this year to the Military Academy. This concept, the so-called “dissipated molecular revolution,” a hybrid between the National Security Doctrine and a perversion of Guattari, Foucault and Derrida, states that all forms of protest are basically a subversive danger that needs to be dealt with violently and contained from the start in order to avoid it to become a full-scale revolution.

This is the – undeniably fascist – doctrine that is popular among the armed forces of Colombia. No surprise then about their proven links to all kinds of violence, torture, disappearances, death squads and other crimes. Unlike Bolsonaro in Brazil, the Colombian elites’ openly fascist proclivities had been downplayed by the so-called international community and almost excused a mere week before 28A. It is hard to imagine other political figures in the world who could speak and behave in this way and still be considered as respectable partners by the EU.

TOO LATE FOR DIALOGUE

The democratic facade of Colombia is starting to crumble while the ugly face of a counter-insurgent state, molded by the most reactionary and racist oligarchy on the continent, headed by a far-right and openly fascist clique is appearing for everyone to see. When we warned about the process of fascistisation of Colombian politics in the past, we did not mean it in a metaphorical sense. The presence of actual Nazi doctrines within the army confirms that this is part of something much bigger and much more dangerous.

Such a process can only be confronted by an organized force able to mobilize consistently against it. In short, the only limits of fascism – as Poulantzas remarked – are the limits that the class struggle can impose on it through popular mobilization and organization. The people sense

it; this is why the mobilization is no longer about a reform, no longer about a single minister quitting.

Similar to the protests in Chile, mobilization has become a mechanism in which a new political subject is coming into being, while the rotten system is being actively dismantled. Despite some politicians trying to promote a form of dialogue between the protesters and the government, there is little to talk about this time. It is 40 deaths too late for a dialogue with Duque. People want them out of power and to be held accountable for their crimes.

These formidable protests across the entire country are the result of over a decade of mobilizations in which little by little the people got qualified, numbers have grown and their resolution only strengthened. The people's pencil, as a Haitian proverb says, has no eraser.

These experiences will not wither away, and in the heat of the struggle, new ways of understanding politics, new ways of understanding Colombia are being created. While the left has been stuck discussing electoral alliances for the last year or so, these protests remind us that it is not the ballot box that will decide the fate of Colombia in the end.

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