

# **After lockdown, anti-government protests resume in Colombia**

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By late 2019, a historic wave of anti-government protests was sweeping through Latin America, with unprecedented uprisings taking place in Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Haiti and Colombia. For the besieged governments that were part of a new pack of right-wing parties that had come to power after the receding of the pink tide, help arrived in the form of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing national lockdowns which effectively – but temporarily – quelled the protests.

Now, the break appears to be over. In Bolivia, after months of street-level resistance, the coup government was unceremoniously ousted from power through the ballot-box, exposing the lack of legitimacy of that racist clique handsomely supported by the European Union and the United States. And in Chile, the people have finally buried the last institutional remnants of the dictatorship by rejecting Pinochet's constitution and calling for a new constituent process by a landslide.

In Colombia, although we are still far from anything resembling a people's victory, the fact that the people have taken to the streets once again to protest an illegitimate government with a prodigal capacity to produce various scandals on a daily basis, is in itself a sort of triumph and an incredible display of resilience.

## **A decade of mass mobilizations**

As discussed in a previous article, the civic strike of November 21, 2019 was the most formidable national protest in Colombia's history. A broad coalition of social movements, led by the CUT labor union, called the people to protest corruption, unemployment, high living costs, tax reform, in defense of the right to social protest and to call for end to repression and militarization. While the left-wing parties were rather aloof to this call, ordinary people took to the streets *en masse*.

The murder of the teenager Dylan Cruz by the police only incensed the people turning discontent into outrage: millions came out to the streets for a full week of rebellion, banging empty pots in defiance of the militarization of the cities and the curfew decreed by President Ivan Duque.

These protests did not come out of the blue. They were the result of more than a decade of, mostly rural, mass mobilizations: the sugar-cane cutters and the Indigenous organizations in 2008, students in 2011, the peasantry in 2013, and the environmental movement that brought together rural and urban masses in opposition against the government's unsustainable development agenda all contributed to the fermentation of this latest mass movement.

## **State crimes during lockdown**

Amidst government talks of a national dialogue and the holiday season, the protests came to a temporary halt by the end of 2019. When the CUT decided to launch a new strike at the end of March 2020 because the talks with the government were not leading anywhere, the government decreed a national lockdown that very week, supposedly in response to the health crisis spurred by the escalation of COVID-19 cases all over the country. In a sense, this pandemic was a Godsend to the incompetent President Duque – whose government has been accused of links to drug traffickers, caused scandals for gross human rights violations and committed massacres of children.

As people were forced to stay at home in a country where over 50 percent of the workforce depends on a day-to-day income in the informal economy, hunger became a threat that was dreaded

as much as the virus itself. For most, the promised economic support never materialized and red flags were raised in houses of hungry families as a symbol of their want. People protesting the lack of support were met with severe repression — the self-proclaimed “progressive” mayor of Ciudad Bolívar, Bogotá deployed helicopters to bombard protesters with teargas.

Unsurprisingly, politicians violated the quarantine as they pleased — the General Attorney Francisco Barbosa and his family flew to the Caribbean island of San Andrés on a government plane in the middle of lockdown, for instance, bragging publicly that he would do it again. Over 100 mayors and governors are currently under investigation for misappropriating funds that were destined, to fight COVID-19 or support families affected by the pandemic.

Colombian prisons are on average 50 percent overcrowded, but in some prisons this number can rise up to 400 percent. As prisoners protested this potentially deadly overcrowding amidst the COVID-19 emergency, demanding better hygiene, face masks and gloves, the response of the government was exceptionally brutal. In La Modelo prison, a veritable dungeon, 23 prisoners were massacred in a single night of protest.

Outside prison walls, military offensives — allegedly for counter-narcotic purposes — in coca-producing regions left scores dead. The ongoing militarization of vast rural regions also led to other sinister forms of abuses, such as the mass rape of an Indigenous girl by the army. After this crime was denounced, causing major public outrage, it was found out there were over 100 military personnel who have been investigated for alleged sexual abuse of minors since 2016.

In the meantime, the murder of social activists, human right defenders and demobilized guerrillas continued. The quarantine rules did not apply to the death squads, naturally — around 250 demobilized guerrillas and over 1,000 grassroots activists have been assassinated since the 2016 peace agreement.

## **Indigenous groups march on the capital**

The people returned to the streets with force, however, in response to the killing of Javier Ordoñez, a young lawyer working as a taxi driver who was tasered and beaten to death by the police on September 8. As the video of his agony went viral, people in came out to protest spontaneously everywhere, attacking dozens of police stations in all of the major cities across the country. The police responded brutally, murdering 15 people in Bogotá the following night in one of the worst massacres recorded in the capital city.

Meanwhile, in Cauca, in the south of the country, Indigenous organizations called on the president to discuss the widespread poverty and the serious crisis they are facing in their territories: rampant violence, militarization and a failure to fulfill the promises of the peace agreement. Since the president did not heed their calls, 8,000 Indigenous people organized a so-called “*minga*” — an Indigenous word for a collective effort — and traveled from Cauca all the way to Bogotá, where they arrived on October 18.

Throughout their journey, they received overwhelming support from the people they encountered, who saw this movement as a reflection of the generalized anger against a government perceived as corrupt, inefficient and repressive. President Duque — or an empty chair with his name on it, to be precise — was subjected to a political trial in front of the governmental palace the next day. The Indigenous organizations accused him of promoting a totalitarian state and for

disregarding the economic, social and environmental rights of the people, a situation worsened by the COVID-19 crisis.

Coinciding with the *minga*, labor unions called for the strikes to resume after March's lockdown. The union leaders complain that the government did not keep its word about not proceeding with the reforms to the pension scheme, which it has been pushing relentlessly, taking advantage of the lockdown conditions.

The workers also demand a basic rent for those who lost their jobs because of the pandemic, more investment in the health and education systems and measures to prevent the mass violence against community leaders and women. On October 21, thousands came out to march against the government once again. The Indigenous groups remain in Bogotá, people from all walks of life are still angry, and the next months will be, in all likelihood, months of struggle.

## **The battle for Colombia**

It is truly remarkable how, in spite of the massacres, assassinations and the ongoing war against rural communities, the Colombian people still have the will and the strength to stand up against the murder machine in power.

What is remarkable about the current context, as proven by the attacks on dozens of police stations, is the absolute lack of legitimacy the ruling clique and of other institutions of the state have in the eyes of the people. In this sense, one may wonder, to what degree tactics such as the *minga*, which aims at negotiating with a much discredited government, can indeed infuse some legitimacy to it.

This is why for many grassroots activists, instead of piling-up an ever growing mountain of agreements and promises which will never materialize, it is important to understand this mass mobilization as a means of reclaiming sovereignty from below, as the real expression of a new people's power.

The battle for Colombia is not precisely a Sunday picnic. The body count of the last three decades is testimony to the brutality of the oligarchy. As the country descends into a new cycle of armed conflict, and as social protest escalates, we will see in all certainty the desperate attempts of this discredited oligarchy to hold on to the reins of power by sheer force. They realize that the brief summer of the right-wing governments in Latin America is coming to an end, and they are afraid they will be next. They do not fear a feeble and chronically divided left-wing in the electoral arena; they fear the force of the organized people on the streets.

It cannot be overstated that, if half of what currently goes on in Colombia, would be happening in, for example, Venezuela, there would be calls for sanctions and even interventions from the so-called international community. Yet, since this is happening in Colombia with the complicity of the EU and the US, who handsomely contribute materially and morally to the government, all we hear is a deafening silence.

It is paramount to embarrass these international supporters of Duque's criminal government by denouncing what is really happening in Colombia in all its gory details, and to destroy, once and for all, the myth that Colombia is a democracy respectful of the rule of law. Thousands of dead bear testimony to this fallacy. Whatever way the battle for Colombia is resolved will have, no doubt, fateful implications in a continent which seems, once again, on the verge of revolutionary changes.

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