

Article by Alessia Cappelletti, Global Security Analysts – May 2021

It isn't only about the tax reform: Colombia's years-long struggles

Since the 28th of April, Colombians have been taking the streets of the major cities across the country, to protest against a tax reform which would see individuals and businesses increasingly taxed as a response to the pandemic. President Iván Duque deems the reform 'necessary' but he agreed to withdraw it and instead present a new version once consensus is reached.

On Monday 3rd of May, the minister of Finance announced his resignation. The protests, however, have not stopped and more strikes and marches are planned for the days ahead. Trying to grasp the complexity of the current protests requires the understanding of the country's history and the lived experiences on the ground.



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Not an isolated incident: a short account of last years' protests

Colombia's recent history, roughly since Duque's inauguration in August 2018, is filled with protests and reasons to march against the unsatisfying government's administration. In the second half of 2018, students organized strikes and marches to protest against education expenditure cuts – some of Duque's first implemented alterations. Protests started in October and diminished in December.

Back then, the protest took various forms and shapes; Some people danced, some made music, others were chanting and waving flags representing various factions joining the marches. Very few protests actually turned violent, which generally only occurred in the later hours of the day. The universities were empty, exams got cancelled. Some people stayed home but supported the cause, others, joined for a small bit marching down Carrera 7 towards Plaza Bolívar. Police officers were at the sides of the roads and sometimes one would hear loud bangs. To the outside ear, this could promptly be mistaken for the thunders of fireworks if one is not accustomed to the heavy response of Colombia's police and ESMAD.

The protests ended around mid-December 2018, but in reality they never really did. In November 2019, protests started to reignite. The motives of the protests weren't as clear-cut as the student's manifestations of 2018, but signalled a widespread discontent towards the country's situation then, and now. People walked in the streets for different reasons, from plans to fund education that never

saw a follow through, to state alleged pension funds cuts and decrease of minimum income. Others protested for the continuous deteriorating human rights situation of indigenous people, ex-combatants who agreed to lay down arms and human rights defenders themselves. Colombia, in fact, is one of the countries with the higher number of targeted killings of social and political leaders.

Another topic subject to popular critique was (and is) the poor implementation of the 2016 historic Peace Agreement with the FARC-EP. The agreement is an incredibly comprehensive document that seeks to resolve issues of land grabbing, illicit drug trade, political representation and safeguard, victims' rights abuses, and re-establish as truthfully as possible what happened in the more than 50 years long conflict. If implemented, the agreement is expected to bring long-lasting peace and positive effects for the country.

The current ruling party, however, was already opposed to the agreement when it was signed in 2016, and since it took office in 2018 the efforts to implement it have been minimal. At times the Duque's administration would even go against what was agreed, such as in the case of approving plans to resume aerial fumigation of coca crops, instead of allocating resources to substitution plans, which would improve long-term living conditions of farmers across the country.¹ As a consequence of this, in August 2019, major factions of the then-at-peace FARC-EP declared they would join the dissidences and continue fighting the government from the frontlines due to the poor implementation of the deal. Some of these

¹ Aerial fumigation was re-introduced after pressure by the United States, as coca production rates reached an all time high in 2019.

dissidents are now being fought by the Venezuelan Bolivarian Armed Forces in the border state of Apure.



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In short, the past few years of Colombia were characterised by continuous protests. To summarise, there have been expenditure cuts protests, anti-tax cut marches, human rights movements, and various other implementations of anti-government policy demonstrations. It is evident that the multi-thematic nature of these protests showcase a deeply rooted grievance present in the minds of the population vis à vis its government.

Protests escalating

On the 23rd of November 2019, in the middle of the street, an 18 years old student gets shot by the ESMAD - or the riot police force tasked with maintaining public order, The young protestor, Dilan, dies two days later amidst the shock, fear and anger of the demonstrators. The protests escalate, while curfews are established in Bogotá and Cali and protestors keep being dispersed with tear gas.

The protests then continued well into 2020, only partially stopped by the pandemic. In February there were peaceful marches, especially participated mainly by students and university professors. It is only after the first impactful wave of coronavirus, however, that serious protests started to re-emerge in the major cities of the country. In September 2020, the streets filled with thousands of people marching.

This time, the protests were sparked by police brutality and subsequent impunity after Javier Ordóñez died by the hand of the National Police. The escalations were amplified by the weight of months of coronavirus lockdowns that severely halted economic growth and left marginalized communities to their own devices. People once again filled the streets, but authorities responded repressively leaving dozens injured. There were many online accounts of what happened during the protests of September 2020, which resembled a much more conflict-like situation compared to the initial 2018 protests. People's anger and frustration for injustice and fear for an unpromising future were much more tangible in 2020, as the police response was increasingly more repressive. This sparked the debate on police training, resources and disproportionate use of force.

In October 2020, the protests and symbolic gestures continued and were joined by people from many different backgrounds. On 21 October, Bogotá saw its streets filled with indigenous protesters who arrived in the capital after a 10 days march. Ten days in which they walked across the country to protest against the management of the 2016 peace accords, the lack of human rights protection, and the economic model the country is pushing for. They have been joined by students and

farmers who are all equally affected by the government's neglect.

It isn't only about the tax reform

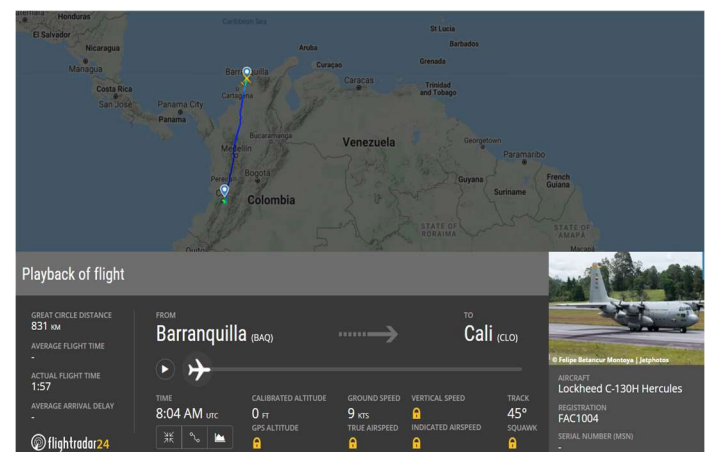
Fast forward to today. The reform proposed to arrest Colombian debt, create a basic rent and increase a fund for environmental conservation.¹ However, it would do so by increasing taxation on the salary of businesses and individuals above a certain (low) monthly income and raise VAT taxes on certain items. The reform was promptly retracted by President Duque on Sunday. Yet, people are still on the streets. Some may raise an eyebrow – why are the protests not over now that the reform is withdrawn? – but the majority will understand that it is not, and never was, merely about tax reforms. It hardly ever is about one thing.

In the night between Monday 3, and Tuesday 4 May, The Guardian reports 16 protestors and one police officer dead² as a result of the last days' clashes. In the early morning of the 4th, the New York Times reports 19.³ France24 says there were 1.181 abuses of police power and 26 fatalities.⁴ Other sources, as grassroots NGOs, estimate that more people may have lost their lives in the protests.

On Twitter, scenes of police brutality are highly graphic and display severe agony. A quick but careful look in the hashtags #SOSColombia, #ColombiaEnAlertaRoja, or #NosEstanMatando gives an idea of the disproportionality of the violence, as police officers beat up people four on one, shoot bystanders filming the protests, and leave bloody bodies on the streets.

The Guardian reports the protests were largely peaceful at the beginning, but the army was mobilised nonetheless, following Duque's call for 'military assistance.' This is a particular provision of

Colombian law that permits the military to help police bodies (usually would be implemented in times of war), responding directly to them and their needs. Military planes such as the FAC1004 Lockheed were spotted leaving Barranquilla, where part of the military is based, en route to Cali, where major clashes are currently taking place. The Minister of Defence said ex-FARC and other criminal groups are very likely behind the extreme violence in the city.⁵



So, *el paro sigue*. The strikes continue. All over the country people are marching, blocking highways, organizing cacerolazos, while [tanks roam in the cities next to peaceful](#) inhabitants.⁶ Every analysis of these protests should then take into consideration what the country has had to endure up to this point. If there is something that emerged after the last days of violence it is that people are tired of the current state of Colombia. This includes: the deteriorating economic situation, high taxation, poor future perspectives for students and young professionals, inefficient protection of human rights for many social and political leaders, corruption and crime, and the very little effort the government is showing in implementing the 2016 Peace Agreement which would set the basis for a new Colombian future.

This is merely an account that covers, in bits and pieces, the last two years and a half of social unrest in Colombia. Protests did not start in 2018. Depending on who you ask, problems in the country started at different times. Some will tell you it all started with Spanish colonialist rule. Others agree that it all originated in the period of *La Violencia* of the 1940s, in which Liberals and Conservatives brutally murdered each other. Some will tell you it was the FARC starting in the 1960s, some the paramilitaries following right after. Some will say it was Alvaro Uribe, the 2002 to 2010 president, some will say Juan Manuel Santos (2010 – 2018). However, what matters is not to understand where the conflict started – but that it never ended, and it only built up. This calls for a reforming action by the government, which could start from the implementation of what agreed in 2016. Foreseeably, this won't be the last protests we will witness to in Colombia this year.

Notes:

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3. Julie Turkewitz, "In Colombia, 19 are killed in pandemic-related protests," *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/03/world/americas/colombia-protest-deaths.html>
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5. Unidad Investigativa El Tiempo, "¿Quiénes están detrás del acoso criminal a Cali?" *El Tiempo*, 4 May 2021. Available at: https://www.eltiempo.com/unidad-investigativa/bloqueos-y-desmanes-en-cali-quienes-estan-detras-del-acoso-criminal-585787?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1620126200
6. Laula_7, Twitter Thread, Available at: https://twitter.com/laula_7/status/1389294705981145092



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