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'The people of Colombia long for peace'

The recent protests have seen massive police violence. Yet Colombians continue to take to the streets. Kristina Birke Daniels in Bogotá explains why

In the last two weeks, there have been large-scale protests against the government in Colombia. The police responded very violently, at least 39 people were allegedly killed through police violence. What was the trigger for these protests?

Officially, there were 450,000 people protesting across the country — in the midst of the third wave of the pandemic. A Strike Committee had called for a general strike. Unions, students and committees are represented there. The protest was initially directed against a planned tax reform — the third, by the way, since President Iván Duque assumed office in 2018. This reform was very poorly communicated and completely overambitious. The goal was to expand tax revenue. Progressive elements of the reform would have helped to combat the recent sharp rise in poverty — around 42 per cent of the population is now considered poor.

However, hardly any redistribution mechanisms were planned for the richest one per cent of society. The main burden would have been carried by people who earn less than the statutory minimum wage each month. The majority of citizens did not understand why they should bear the costs of the social and economic crisis in the midst of the pandemic. Although the protesters won a partial victory and the reform was overturned and the finance minister resigned, people continued to march the following May Day and ever since.

Why are the protests continuing if the reform is now off the table?

There are more fundamental issues at stake than the tax reform or the equally controversial health reform. Since 2016, the country has been undergoing a complex peace process aimed at an historic realignment. The social, political and economic order is being redefined. This in

turn leads to struggles over distribution, as well as winners and losers. The process lacks direction and leadership. The government is critical of the peace process, not to say hostile to it. It has bled it dry financially and stalled its implementation. The high murder rate, in particular, is a major concern. Some 1,000 representatives of human rights groups, community leaders and demobilised FARC fighters have already been killed.

Moreover, the pandemic has highlighted and, in many cases, exacerbated social inequality in Colombia. This inequality continues to fuel the already existing conflicts. And this is why the protesters have many differing demands. It is worrying that more and more protesters, especially younger ones, speak of a sense of hopelessness when they think about the future.

So, there are many very different protest groups on the streets. Is there nevertheless a common denominator that goes beyond rejecting the government?

Support for the peace agreement has increased significantly since the failed referendum in 2016. Now more than half of the population is in favour of its implementation. Regardless of their income or regional origin, the people of Colombia long for peace and better life chances. They no longer want war. The state should protect human rights better, especially economic and social rights and accept the democratic right to peaceful demonstrations. The protesters are also demanding a reform of the police and the security sector. This issue was deliberately left out of the peace agreements with the former guerrilla FARC in 2016.

Why do the Colombian national authorities react so brutally?

The police and especially the army have indeed responded with massive violence. They justified it by claiming there was rioting of individual groups, the infiltration of the protests by armed actors, vandalism and damage to property, but also abstruse conspiracy theories. The director of Human Rights Watch believes that the protests of the last 14 days have seen a level of police violence previously unknown in Latin America. He claims that on this continent he has never seen "tanks firing multiple rounds of tear gas projectiles, among other things, horizontally at demonstrators at high speed. A most dangerous practice".

The militarisation of some cities ordered by the president has exacerbated the problem and made communication between demonstrators, local government and the army even more difficult. In Colombia, the police are under the control of the army. Nevertheless,

a clear difference can be observed where the army itself has been deployed. Some mayors have opposed the militarisation pushed by the president. Reform of the security sector is needed. However, it is questionable whether this could be achieved under the current government. Colombia must no longer assume that there is an "enemy within". The aim should be that the police actively protects human rights, including the right to peaceful demonstrations, and thus strengthens democracy and its institutions.

In recent years, protests against the neoliberal economic model have been increasing all over Latin America. But in reality, there seems to be very little change — is the power of the economic and financial elite so impenetrable?

Like everywhere else in the world, the economic and financial elite is a rather heterogeneous entity. Moreover, the economic and financial elites have different interests in different parts of the country. The impression is that, after independence, a self-made colonial policy has emerged to exploit some regions economically. Likewise, the population has different demands. How to democratise the economy, provide more and more humane employment and thus strengthen the economic and social rights of the population is one of the great challenges of the coming years.

In addition, the Colombian economic system, like most in Latin America, is based on the exploitation and export of raw materials. In the face of planetary limits, this model is increasingly reaching its own limits. A sustainable and inclusive industrial policy with a focus on expanding employment, investment in science and sustainable development could help to slowly establish a new economic system.

Colombia is traditionally governed by the right-wing conservatives. As is so often the case, a divided left camp makes things easy for the right. A left-wing alliance is now forming for next year's elections. Do they have a chance of success?

About 20 candidates in the centre-left spectrum are eyeing the presidency including, for the first time, two feminist candidates. All of them are looking for the support of broad social alliances. Parties play a subordinate role. Unlike in the past, alliances have formed that want to mobilise majorities in the centre or centre-left.

The "Historical Pact" (*Pacto Historico*) is an alliance of the social movement around Gustavo Petro (Iván Duque's challenger in the 2018 run-off election). According to polls, he is the most promising candidate and is mobilising voters together with the left-wing party Democratic Pole (*Polo Democratico*) and individual politicians who

have left the bourgeois camp.

The second alliance is the "Coalition of Hope" (*Coalicion de esperanza*). Here, Sergio Fajardo, the third-placed candidate in 2018, is considered the favourite. Unfortunately, this constellation harbours the danger of a repeat of the 2018 scenario — that Petro and Fajardo take votes away from each other. If Gustavo Petro were to win the run-off, the motto could once again be "everyone against Petro". In that case, the politicians of the centre-left spectrum might have to deal with the fact that, after a particularly unsuccessful right-wing conservative government, they have lost the chance to initiate the democratic political change that is so important for Colombia.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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