

COLOMBIA'S NATIONAL STRIKE: OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION AND STRATEGIES MOVING FORWARD

by Jason Marczak and Camila Hernandez



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Colombia's National Strike: Overview of the Situation and Strategies Moving Forward

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Amid the third peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Colombia faces the longest and most destructive mass protests in recent history. The protests, which began on April 28, 2021, were triggered by a tax-reform bill proposed by the government to stabilize public debt and fiscal deficit. Despite the bill's removal on May 2, 2021, protests continued and expanded, becoming a broad call for improvements in other areas.

HOW DID COLOMBIA GET HERE?

Colombia, like other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, its economy contracted by nearly seven percentage points, affecting the livelihoods of millions of people. Poverty rose from 35.7 percent in 2019 to 42.5 percent in 2020, which reversed the country's progress in the fight against poverty by almost ten years.

To address this situation, the Colombian government undertook a series of emergency actions in 2020. It increased public spending to strengthen the healthcare system, to assist vulnerable populations, and to help businesses remain afloat. As a result, the fiscal deficit rose from 3.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019 to 7.8 percent in 2020; public debt increased from 44 percent of GDP in 2018 to 55 percent in 2020. In 2021, the fiscal deficit is expected to reach 8.6 percent of GDP, and public debt 65 percent.

If unattended, Colombia's fiscal situation will negatively affect societal well-being and quality of life in the medium-to-long term. Fiscal unsustainability compromises a country's ability to attract foreign capital, create new jobs, provide public services, and finance social programs. In fact, Standard and Poor's (S&P) Global Ratings reduced Colombia's credit rating from BBB- to BB+ on May 19 and warned of future downgrades, moving the country's debt to junk bond status and hurting future economic growth.

President Iván Duque's proposed tax reform aimed to improve Colombia's fiscal situation by raising nearly \$6.4 billion. The reform would have reduced the threshold for starting to pay income tax, placed a value-added tax (VAT) on new products and services, and removed many VAT exemptions.⁵

Most Colombians—fully 80 percent—opposed the bill.⁶ Many political parties and leaders, including those close to President Duque, were also against it. Notwithstanding the advisability – and even

urgency – of addressing Colombia's fiscal situation, a tax hike on top of COVID-19 lockdowns, led many to conclude that the approach was not well timed. As a result, thousands of Colombians took to the streets on April 28 to protest the proposed reform.

Despite the government modifying the bill on April 30 and removing it on May 2, protests continued and expanded to include pre-existing grievances, many exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Protesters have voiced discontent over growing inequality, deficient public services, the slow implementation of the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), unkept government promises to vulnerable communities, political and social violence, corruption, and increases in organized crime. Unless these and other underlying issues are addressed, social and political tensions are likely to continue.

HOW HAS THE NATIONAL STRIKE EVOLVED?

Led by the National Strike Committee, labor unionists, Afro-Colombians, indigenous communities, LGBTQI people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex), students, and activist groups, thousands of Colombians mobilized on April 28 against the now-cancelled tax overhaul. Fueled by other grievances, protests have continued for nearly two months.

Although demonstrations have been largely peaceful, some have resulted in violent clashes between protesters and police forces. On June 9, Human Rights Watch (HRW) confirmed that thirty-four deaths occurred in the context of the protests, attributing at least twenty to the police.⁷ HRW also received, and is investigating, credible reports of thirty-four other deaths.⁸ On June 13, Colombia's Attorney General's Office reported fifty-one civilian deaths, of which twenty-one were directly connected to the protests, nineteen were not, and eleven still need to be verified.⁹ The Colombian government claims that more than 1,100 civilians have been injured as a result of the protests. Also, according to Colombia's National Police, two police officers have been killed and more than 1,360 have been injured.¹⁰

To investigate alleged abuses of force and police misconduct, Colombia's National Police opened two hundred and four disciplinary investigations.¹¹ Arguing that investigations related to homicides, personal injuries, and sexual violence should be conducted by the Attorney General's Office, that agency requested on May 31 that Colombia's Ministry of Defense share all information on these investigations.¹² In addition, on June 6, President Duque announced upcoming reforms to the Ministry of Defense and National Police.¹³

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) visited Colombia from June 8 to 10 to assess the human rights situation.¹⁴ The delegation met with diverse sectors in Bogotá and Cali, including government officials, civil society and union leaders, and

victims of human rights violations and their families to gather testimonies and complaints.

Protests have also led to vandalism, arson, and property destruction, particularly in Cali, Bogotá, and Medellín. The police have reported more than 4,300 of such instances, most of them targeting public transportation, banks, and commercial establishments, as well as government and police buildings.¹⁵ Also, nearly three thousand road blockades have taken place across the country, disrupting the flow of people, interrupting COVID-19 vaccinations, and causing shortages in goods and services. The effects of blockades have been especially dire in the Valle del Cauca department and its capital city, Cali. Only a few days into the protests, the department became the epicenter of violent clashes and criminal activities. Illegal armed groups and other criminal actors have taken advantage of ongoing unrest across the country.

Public opinion regarding the national strike has evolved as protests continue. The strike has also become an increasingly polarizing issue in Colombia. After two weeks of protests, 72 percent of Colombians said they supported the strike, with 68 percent against blockades as a form of protest.¹⁶ A May 15 survey also found a strong correlation between political-party identification and opinions on blockades.¹⁷ A month into the protests, support for the national strike fell to 47 percent and disapproval of blockades reached 79 percent.¹⁸ Still, the almost 50-50 split in attitudes toward the strike underscores the polarizing and divisive nature of the situation.

After ten days of protests, President Duque announced his "Agenda on the Fundamentals," a space for dialogue with different sectors. However, as with the failed National Dialogue of 2019, the agenda was set by the government; members of other participating sectors believed they should have been consulted in the drafting of the agenda. Between May 6–9, the government met with business associations, universities and colleges, student and youth groups, religious leaders, unions in the healthcare sector, local quasi-governmental Community Action Boards (*Juntas de Acción Comunal*), and Colombia's higher courts, including the Special Jurisdiction of Peace (*Justicia Especial para la Paz*).¹⁹ President Duque also met with mayors and governors, who later agreed to hold regional dialogues. He also had a meeting with political opposition leaders.

Thirteen days into the protests, on May 10, the Colombian government met with the National Strike Committee, something that had not happened since 2019 talks were derailed by COVID-19. Formal negotiations were announced on May 14, and conversations began on May 20. Accusing the government of delaying negotiations, the National Strike Committee halted talks on June 6.

Ongoing dialogues with different sectors have produced important, yet insufficient, outcomes, most of which benefit young Colombians. These include free public-college tuition for low-income students in the second quarter of 2021; the Young Homeowners Program that will reduce interest rates and increase



Demonstrators take part in a protest demanding government action to tackle poverty, police violence and inequalities in healthcare and education systems, in Bogotá, Colombia, May 19, 2021. REUTERS/Luisa Gonzalez

financing options for young home buyers; and new credit lines with preferential rates for youth in agriculture. The government is also working with groups of young Colombians to develop a Great Pact for Youth (*Gran Pacto por la Juventud*), which will prioritize connectivity and opportunities for youth employment, education, and representation.

WHAT ARE THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE NATIONAL STRIKE?

Blockades and vandalism across the country are having detrimental social and economic effects. The first thirty-one days of protests have cost the Colombian economy between \$1.3 and 1.6 billion, comprising between 2.3 and 2.9 percent of the country's GDP in the first quarter of 2021.²⁰ After a year of economic contraction, Colombia had started to slowly recover productive activity and domestic consumption in early 2021. However, experts now project slower economic growth in the second quarter.²¹

Ongoing blockades are also hurting societal well-being by compromising employment recovery and putting at risk existing jobs. A survey of nearly thirteen thousand business owners revealed that more than 90 percent will have to lay off between one and five employees due to the effects of the National Strike. In Bogotá, 21 percent of businesses will reduce staff if the situation continues.

Medium- to long-term employment will depend on how many businesses need to reduce or permanently close operations. As of May 24, more than 53 percent of Colombian companies were operating at 50 percent or less of their productive capacity, and more than 22 percent had to suspend their operations.²² If blockades continue, more than 12 percent of businesses would have to permanently shut down in June.²³ This would cause a massive spike in unemployment, which was already relatively high prior to the national strike, at 15 percent.²⁴ An increase in unemployment would reverse decades of progress in poverty reduction, curtailing domestic demand and compromising the prospects for a speedy COVID-19 recovery.

Blockades are also disrupting the free flow of people and essential goods and services, particularly in the departments of Valle del Cauca and Cauca. In those departments, nearly 70 percent of companies have faced food-supply interruptions, and more than 47 percent of workers have struggled to get to work.²⁵ More than half of the productive capacity in these areas is paralyzed, and nearly 53 percent of companies expect to reduce or permanently close their operations in June.²⁶ In fact, almost 42 percent of companies in the Valle del Cauca and Cauca departments had to lay off workers in May.²⁷ In addition, the port of Buenaventura in Valle del Cauca, Colombia's most important port in the Pacific, remained closed for forty-eight days causing billions in economic losses. A return to normal will take at least four months.

Shortages have led to increased prices in basic foodstuffs such as potatoes, eggs, dairy products, and animal proteins, putting a strain on low-income and unemployed Colombians, who are already experiencing food insecurity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸ Moreover, protests and road blockades have interrupted COVID-19 response by preventing the transport of key medical supplies, including oxygen.²⁹ Mass demonstrations are also expected to cause a surge of transmission of COVID-19.

Vandalism and criminal activities have severely impacted Colombia's public and private infrastructure and interrupted crucial infrastructure projects. In Bogotá, damages to the TransMilenio rapid-transit system, which transports 2.5 million passengers per day, will take up to six months to repair.³⁰ Additionally, seventy-five active construction projects were forced to halt operations.

The current climate of uncertainty is also impacting Colombia's ability to attract and retain foreign capital. S&P Global Ratings already lowered Colombia's long-term foreign currency rating to BB+, and Wall Street banks predict that credit rating agency Fitch will follow suit.³¹ Many businesses have already postponed their investments in Colombia to 2022. If investor confidence continues to decrease, Colombia may experience capital flight, leading to increased levels of unemployment and poverty.

Finally, the current political and social polarization, fueled by the protests, might lead to a precipitous decline in trust in democratic institutions. This, along with the increased antagonism evidenced between sectors of the civilian population and government, will have lasting effects with important implications for Colombia's upcoming presidential elections in 2022.

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO THE UNITED STATES?

The United States faces unprecedented global and regional challenges today. The longstanding and strategic relationships with

partners like Colombia are fundamental to addressing these challenges.

Hemispheric stability and prosperity hinge upon a close and efficient alliance between the United States and Colombia. As President Joe Biden said, Colombia is the "keystone" of US foreign policy toward LAC.³² US foreign policy toward Colombia is also a point of bipartisan consensus. Representative Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) reinforced this on May 19 at an Atlantic Council event, saying, "Colombia has been an amazing foreign policy success story and an amazing ally."³³ US Representative Ruben Gallego (D-AZ), also present, said, "Colombia is our best Latin American partner in the Western Hemisphere...they have been a stabilizer in the region...a true model for South America about what liberal democracies can do and can continue to do."³⁴

In the past two decades, the United States and Colombia have built a mutually beneficial alliance that has safeguarded US interests in LAC, and consolidated Colombia's role as a key regional player. Colombia has also become an indispensable US partner on many fronts. It hosts the largest Venezuelan diaspora, recently granting temporary legal protected status to nearly two million people. Colombia also cooperates with the United States on security and defense in Central and South America, and in the global fight against drug trafficking, money laundering, and organized crime.

HOW CAN THE UNITED STATES SUPPORT COLOMBIA?

In May, the Atlantic Council convened its US-Colombia Task Force—a bipartisan, binational group of experts from Colombia and the United States—to discuss concrete ways in which the United States can support Colombia as it continues to address the situation. Here are three things the United States could do.

1. US Vaccines to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), particularly Colombia. Given the urgent need for vaccine support across the Western Hemisphere, the United States should continue to prioritize LAC countries as it allocates the remaining fifty-five million US vaccine doses available for global distribution by the end of June. Although critical, the six million doses allocated to LAC countries on June 3 are only a first step. China, by comparison, has provided 165 million.

Sharing more doses of US vaccines with Colombia will accelerate COVID-19 recovery and help to curtail the conditions that have furthered protesters' grievances. It will also strengthen US-Colombia relations, support regional peace, and allow Colombia to continue welcoming migrants and refugees safely from Venezuela. As of May 20, Colombia has bilateral and multilateral agreements for nearly seventy-two million vaccine doses, but has only received fewer than twelve



A man walks behind a barricade built with parts of a police station, in Cali, Colombia May 13, 2021. Picture taken May 13, 2021. REUTERS/Luisa Gonzalez

million. More US vaccines to Colombia will help to increase the percentage of the population that is fully vaccinated, which currently stands at nearly 8 percent. Those vaccines should then be allocated to Colombia's vulnerable and marginalized communities, particularly Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples.

2. Increased Financial Assistance for the Venezuela Crisis. The Venezuela regional crisis remains the most underfunded crisis in modern history. By 2020, the international community had provided only \$1.4 billion in funding to assist Venezuelan migrants and refugees across the region—an astonishingly small number when compared to the \$20.8 billion provided for the Syrian refugee crisis. Given their similarity in magnitude and evolution (both have displaced 5.5 million people in their first five years), the gap in funding is even more striking. In per capita terms, host countries like Colombia have received \$256 in international assistance for each Venezuelan migrant

or refugee—less than one tenth of the \$3,150 received by host countries for each Syrian refugee.³⁵

Colombia hosts the largest Venezuelan diaspora, with nearly two million people making up 32 percent of the total number of migrants and refugees from Venezuela. Despite the social and economic challenges brought on by COVID-19, the country has continued to welcome and provide critical assistance to Venezuelans in its territory.

The United States should increase its financial, diplomatic, and technical support to Colombia and other host countries as they respond to the crisis amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This will not only support hemispheric peace and stability, but also help prevent the continued upward spike in Venezuelans arriving at the US southwest border due to deteriorating conditions in Venezuela and in host countries.

3. Information Assessment. Decision-makers in the United States should continue to inform themselves about the situation in Colombia. Through social and traditional media, people in the United States have received an important, yet incomplete, version of recent events. It is essential that the international community, including the US government, continue to engage with key stakeholders in Colombia (policymakers, business leaders, civil society), as well as independent groups of experts, to learn more about the situation on the ground. This will help to inform future official and unofficial policy actions, as well as decisions regarding US foreign policy toward Colombia.

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