

The battle for a political alternative in Colombia: After the social explosion of November 2019

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On 21 November 2019 Colombia experienced a social explosion unprecedented in the history of the country since the middle of the last century. On that day, the National Strike Directorate (CNP, Comando Nacional de Paro) called for a protest march against the announcement of regressive economic counter-reforms. The CNP is made up of the central trade unions (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores - CUT, Confederación General de Trabajadores - CGT, Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia - CTC) and by organizations of students, peasants, Indians, pensioners and environmental activists who, in recent years, have led the resistance by these social sectors to the policies of the Colombian state.

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The call for mobilizations was launched by the trade union federations, repeating the configuration of previous years: routine marches at the end of the year aimed at hampering the negotiations for the minimum wage with the government which, by legal obligation, must be convened in this period. Limits on union capacity stem from the low rate of unionization. They represent only 4% of the total number of employees. This has its origin, in part, in reactionary employment legislation and also in the criminalization of union resistance. [1] In terms of internal structure, this fragility in the capacity for "social negotiation" refers to the isolation resulting from a form of vertical and authoritarian organization. This, in terms of operation, implies agreements "at the top" between bureaucratized union leaderships, left parties and the non-partisan social left. In addition, their platforms of action are limited to the most immediate demands.

Everything suggested a routine demonstration. However, in the weeks leading up to 21 November, the social tensions that have arisen in recent months in neighbourhoods, universities, the informal sector and the unemployed started to converge towards this deadline. International news has contributed to this: at the same time, the Ecuadorian indigenous movement was in the midst of attempting to impose an adjustment plan, and in Chile - a country emblematic of Latin American neoliberalism, pointed to as an example by technocrats - a gigantic social explosion erupted which is still keeping the Piñera government at bay.

Thus, the "contagion effect" encouraged the desperate of one of the most unequal countries in the region. The announcement of greater sacrifices imposed on an increasingly impoverished population reinforced the movement of indignation provoked by the "routine" of the daily assassinations of social leaders - without anyone being found responsible for them - and the corruption practiced by

politicians and big crony tycoons in order to share the public wealth. All this in the context of a justice system muzzled by the powerful and which obeys the principle of impunity for them.

For this reason, 21 November became a massive mobilization, incorporating large sections of the population who took to the streets to protest against the multiple forms of oppression produced by the established order and the cynicism of its political representatives. For the first time in decades, the streets of the country's major cities saw millions of people parade despite government blackmail, despite curfew proclamations, despite selective searches before the demonstrations, in short, despite the classic threats of state terrorism. The mobilizations of November 21 had the nocturnal sound support of *cacelorazos* (casserole concerts) in the neighbourhoods, a complicit noise of declarations and proclamations read in the street, thus confirming the enormous social legitimacy of the strike. The following days, the marches and *cacelorazos* continued in the streets, the districts and in the squares, accompanied by the presence of musical and theatrical groups. A show of collective joy, combat and street art.

On Sunday 8 December, some 300,000 people attended the "strike concerts" in various places in central Bogotá, in which youth orchestras took part in order to show solidarity with the demonstrators. When the organizers asked for authorizations to hold the artistic day, the town hall offered them the Simón Bolívar Park, a place in the city that allows the concentration of thousands of people, designed for this type of spectacle. But the organizers rejected the offer by taking over the city streets with fixed scenes or others installed on trucks. It was a question of prolonging the joy throughout the public space, they said. They thus confirmed that there is a popular feeling of re-appropriation of public space, a feeling accompanied by the conviction that the time has come to abandon the fear that has condemned us for decades to be excluded from it. A feeling of reappropriation which is expressed in daily conversations by this symbolic formula: "This country is not the same after 21 November".

The failure of the government's "internal security" policy

Traditionally, the main justification of the elites for making social resistance illegal was to present the opponents as collaborators of the guerrillas, thus utilising the internal civil war, which started around the middle of the 20th century. Any protests by the people were considered to be linked to the guerrillas, which served as a pretext to apply emergency legislation to arrest and prosecute leaders in court.

- Negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), "concluded" in August 2016, prevented this argument from being used any longer, opening up new perspectives for the popular movement. These negotiations did not focus on the transition to democratic reforms, which represented the aspirations of democratic parties, organizations or figures who have supported the proposal for a political solution to the conflict for several decades.

The peace agreement was rejected in a referendum on 2 October, 2016 by a right-wing political alliance led by *Uribismo* (named after Álvaro Uribe, president from 2002 to 2010, currently a senator), which brought together the conservative party, the majority of the Catholic Church and the preachers of the evangelical churches. This refusal forced new negotiations between the parties with the presence of *Uribismo*, reducing the content of the agreements which, passing through the Congressional filter, were subjected to additional restrictions.

The final version of these agreements envisaged a system of justice, truth and reparation represented by the *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz* (Special Justice for Peace - JEP - responsible for all judicial and non-judicial measures to remedy the heavy legacy of human rights abuses in a society

emerging from armed conflict or a dictatorial regime), and the Truth Commission. In the case of the JEP, the treatment of those who financed the war (businessmen and large landowners) was so benevolent that appearing before this judicial body was voluntary. Likewise, the “chain of command” test, that is, the responsibility of the principals of both parties, was ignored and, in the case of responsibilities for human rights violations committed by members of the armed forces, the possibility appeared of an amnesty by means of a legal device called “renunciation to state action”.

- The economic agenda also did not indicate structural reforms. Given that the FARC was a guerrilla group with a peasant tradition and that they were present in the so-called *colonato* zones (the peasants work land which does not belong to them but to which they are bound and for which they have to pay a rent under various forms to the owner, and are taxed by the state), the land issue was at the heart of this negotiation. However, the agreement did not include measures effectively calling into question the concentration of land in the hands of large landowners, which had been reinforced during the war both by dispossession of peasants and by recycling and money laundering. [2]

This meant the de facto ownership of seven million hectares was recognized to the big landowners in the *colonato* areas where the FARC was historically present. As for the creation of a land fund composed of three million hectares, supposed to be distributed to the poor peasants of the country, it has so far been unfulfilled.

Another point in the deal was the state’s commitment to invest in marginalized and conflict-affected regions, but the government also ignored this under the pretext of the current budget crisis. As if that were not enough, 170 demobilized FARC members were killed inside the camps in which they are concentrated - as provided for in the agreements - after having surrendered their weapons.

Despite these limitations in the design and implementation of the agreements themselves, *Uribeismo* has tried to dilute their content even more. The Democratic Centre party, to which the current President Iván Duque belongs, presented to the JEP a series of objections to the peace agreement providing for the characterisation as “special peace districts” of 16 regions particularly affected by the armed conflict with a large number of individual or collective victims. The goal: to put a stop to the recognition procedure.

With regard to “public order”, the current government implemented a policy designed according to obsolete “internal enemy” hypotheses. It appointed General Nicacio Martínez as head of the army. The latter had been recognized by the Attorney General’s office as responsible for extrajudicial executions in the Caribbean region (departments of Guajira and Cesar) in 2006, when he was the second Commander and Chief of Staff of the Brigade located in this region. [3]

Once appointed, Martínez reintroduced into army protocols the guidelines that led to the widespread use of extrajudicial killings, which was denounced by the *New York Times*, which obtained information from official sources of murders and arrests of so-called “suspects”. In this context, the former FARC guerrilla, Dimas Torres, was murdered in the municipality of Convención, region of Catatumbo, located in the northeast of the country. He was arrested by soldiers while defenceless. This assassination had the particularity of being known and having been denounced by the inhabitants of the locality, which forced General Diego Luis Villegas, commander of the special forces of this region, to publicly ask for forgiveness and to repeat this before the Peace Commission of the Congress.

Subsequently, in early November 2019 during a parliamentary debate, the public learned of the tragic result of the bombing of a so-called “dissident” FARC camp, perpetrated at the end of August in San Vicente del Caguán, in the department of Caquetá, which killed 18 people. It became clear that the army had been informed before the bombing of the presence of children in the targeted

area: the brigade command had been officially informed by the representative of the public prosecutor in this municipality. For months, the military hid what really happened during the bombing. The debate led to the resignation of the then Minister of Defence, Guillermo Botero.

These tensions within the army and between the parliamentary factions of the government confirm the existence of a fissure within the elites between *Uribismo*, which defends the policy of “internal security”, and those who supported former President Santos in political negotiations with the FARC in Havana. The latter believe that the army must adapt to the post-conflict and gain legitimacy. This is why they also demand the implementation of the agreements in their final version and have formed a political bloc called “Defenders of Peace”. This bloc leads campaigns across the country that has been joined by all non-Uribist parties, including the left and human rights movements. They played an active role in the formation of alliances during the last regional elections which took place on 27 October and in which the candidates of the Democratic Centre were beaten in the chief towns of the provinces.

Beyond these inter-elite contradictions, the erosion of the government which pursues the warmongering option is obvious. Popular rejection of the incessant assassination of social and environmental leaders and members of ethnic communities in peripheral regions is finding growing resonance in the cities. The case of the children killed in the bombing of Caquetá aroused collective indignation and found massive resonance during the mobilization on 21 November.

On this day of national mobilization, the people had to face another form of state terror, the ESMAD (Escuadron Movil Antidisturbios) anti-riot brigades, a police force specializing in the suppression of demonstrations. Created in 2007 under the second Uribe government, these brigades are responsible for the deaths of several people and numerous arrests and beatings. In the midst of a social explosion like the one we are currently experiencing, this arbitrary behaviour has sparked an even greater rejection.

On 23 November, in downtown Bogota, a member of this riot brigade seriously injured an 18-year-old high school student, Dilan Cruz, shooting him at point-blank range. Dilan died a few days later in a city hospital, becoming a symbol of the current resistance. On 11 December, members of the same squadron, using an unmarked car, attempted to kidnap two students who were taking part in a rally outside the buildings of the National University. A bystander, alerted by the cries of the young people, started to record the scene, got into his vehicle and followed the “ghost car” until he was forced to stop. He forced the occupants to identify themselves. Many demonstrators were beaten and brought to justice, others, like in Chile, lost an eye. Faced with these despicable acts, one of the central and unifying demands of the strike, as well as of the democratic movement as a whole, is the dissolution of ESMAD, which this time failed to put an end to mobilizations in the streets.

The economic “package”

The current international economic crisis has highlighted the fragility of the extractive financial model in Latin America. The sharp fall in international commodity prices during the period 2013-2017 led to trade and budget deficits in the countries of the region, leading to an increase in public and private debt. Under these conditions, and as happens in peripheral economies in times of decline, foreign direct investment (FDI) has decreased. This downturn is directly linked to the fall in investments in the extractive sectors which are becoming less profitable and in that of portfolio investments because the “risk premium” increases, causing capital flight. Like a self-closing vicious circle, the reduction in foreign investment produces a monetary devaluation and an increase in debt which, by the standards of the macroeconomy of neoliberal domination, leads to adjustment plans

whose purpose is to contract demand. But the people, tired of enduring the constant deterioration of their living conditions, rose up to reject them. The October mobilizations in Ecuador and Chile are a demonstration of this. Those in Colombia are part of the same discontent with neoliberal adjustments.

A few weeks before the strike, the Duque government presented to Congress a proposal for tax reform in line with a policy which, since the beginning of the implementation of neoliberalism in the early 1990s, has increased tax exemptions on big capital, while transferring most of the tax burden to the middle and poor layers. This in a country which since 2000 has had to undergo 13 tax reforms of this type, one every eighteen months. And in a country where the concentration of wealth is one of the highest in the region.

The government added to this proposal a reform of the employment code which aims to introduce more flexibility, to the point of establishing hourly contracts and wages; a pension reform favourable to private pension funds, on the recommendation of the OECD; the creation of a state financial holding company which would centralize all the resources of the public financial sector in order to position itself as a competitor on the financial market.

The demands of transnational capital to stabilize an economy in crisis after the fall in the price of oil, the main export, explain the “package” proposed by the government. Colombia has a deficit exceeding 4% of GDP, which increased considerably from 2013 with the fall in the international price of oil as well as the fall in FDI. During the 2013-2017 period, there was a sharp drop in international oil prices and, as a result, oil exports fell by 60.4% and FDI in this sector decreased by 41.3 %. Despite the partial recovery in world oil prices in recent years, the deficit continues to grow, as does the reduction in FDI, which has precipitated short-term capital flight, statistically represented in the decline in portfolio investments.

In this recessive scenario, the devaluation of the currency has reached one of the highest levels of the international average, with the exchange rate against the US dollar now at 3,500 pesos as against 1,800 in 2014, bringing with it the growth of foreign debt, particularly serious in the case of public debt which is already reaching 51% of GDP, with the aggravating circumstance that the country is subject to legislation, imposed by the IMF, according to which the payment of interest is a priority in the establishment and execution of annual budgets). [4]

According to neoliberal ideology, economic adjustment would be inevitable. Therefore, while protesters on the streets are calling for a fairer society, the president and the parliamentary majority continue to introduce draft bills into Congress that are demanded by transnational capital, which highlights the divide between people and institutions, as well as the narrowness of a “representative democracy” based on political clienteles, business lobbies, and secret negotiations, like neoliberalism. In Colombia and South America in general, we are witnessing not only the crisis of neoliberalism as an economic model based on dispossession, but also the crisis of its forms of political representation.

The challenges posed by the new political situation

Since 21 November, the country has seen the emergence of a pluralist movement involving workers, residents of neighbourhoods, the middle classes crushed by taxes and banking usury in the cities. In this social convergence, it is necessary to underline the role of the youth movements which asserted themselves in the confrontation, to demand rights and to make explicit their distancing from a war which does not concern them anymore.

These expressions of youth have a history in the university resistance movements of a few years ago. In 2011, the National Students Council (Mesa Nacional Estudiantil) succeeded – thanks to a very broad mobilization – in defeating a university reform project promoted by the government of Juan Manuel Santos. And last year, another movement of the same kind managed to obtain additional budgetary resources compared to those planned by the current government.

But today, the range of youth engagement is much broader. It includes the presence of young people who do not have access to university, or those who, having obtained a degree, cannot find a job. [5] It also includes students from private universities forced to go into debt. The same applies to those who, in technical and vocational high schools, have received offers of precarious employment contracts before the end of their studies, as well as for young people who, because of their poverty, cannot complete secondary studies and do not have access to privatized health services, and cannot aspire to a minimum of comfort in their life.

As has happened in other parts of the world, with similar social movements, this youth movement spontaneously takes to the streets to protest using social networks, with the aim of denouncing the consequences of neoliberalism but without knowing its causes. [6] These young people reject the institutions and parties of the establishment, but neither do they feel represented by the left parties or by traditional popular organizations. This youth movement does not accept vertical decisions or authoritarian directions. It seeks to democratize decisions, which gives a lot of strength to its actions. At the same time, the movement expresses a broad ideological pluralism amidst the depoliticization to which neoliberalism has condemned them, hence also their weakness.

Within this ideological plurality, it is necessary to underline two questions which highlight the crisis of civilization to which contemporary capitalism has condemned us: that of the destruction of nature and that of the preservation of patriarchal society, strongly contested by young female university students and employees.

The plural social movement which supported the demonstrations of 21 November could not establish a balance of forces allowing it to envisage institutional ruptures, such as the resignation of the president or the convening of a constituent assembly, as in Chile. However, during its short existence, it has already achieved the following objectives:

- Overcoming state terror which, for decades, has considered the actions of popular organizations to be illegal by enforcing the state of emergency and equating protesters with appendages of guerrilla warfare.
- Refocusing social resistance in the cities, both by the way it started and by the themes it offers in its platform of demands.
- Strengthening a human rights movement that denounces the recurrent assassinations of social leaders and demands a democratic policy guaranteeing the definitive end of the armed conflict.
- Putting social inequality at the centre of the national political debate as an expression of the crisis that neoliberalism is going through on the international scale.

The National Strike Directorate, which called the demonstration on 21 November, maintains dialogue with the government. But the sectors of the population which act spontaneously, or which belong to an enormous diversity of social organizations, do not submit to this organization. However, they are dispersed and do not have the capacity to become a different political option.

For the moment, coordination is taking place in neighbourhood assemblies, a territorial form of direct democracy that responds to the dispossession caused by neoliberal town planning, described as “urban extractivism”. [7] These neighbourhood assemblies can become superior expressions of democracy if they manage to centralize and articulate with nationwide movements that resist

government policies. This will obviously depend on the continuation of the strike in the first weeks of 2020, which seems possible under the current circumstances, and on the challenges that confrontation with the government poses to the movement. The battle for a political alternative will continue, but in a new context. There is an urgent need for unitary coordination between those of us who are convinced of the need to preserve an anti-capitalist strategy.

Daniel Libreros C, 15 December, 2019

P.S.

- International Viewpoint, Saturday 15 February 2020:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6407>
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Footnotes

[1] The human rights department of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) union federation estimates that 3,000 of its activists have been killed since the mid-1980s.

[2] The levels of land concentration in the country are very high. 1% of large rural owners monopolize 60% of cultivable land while two and a half million peasant families live on the rest of the land.

[3] During Alvaro Uribe's second term in 2008, it emerged that members of the armed forces had killed defenceless civilians by posing as victims in combat (see "El jefe del Ejército de Colombia dirigió una brigada acusada de matar a civiles", *El País*, 5 June 2019). This was one of the most notorious military scandals under the first government of Alvaro Uribe. In order to obtain salary bonuses or compensatory rest days, according to the manuals recognized by the Ministry of Defence, taken in their turn from the manuals of the US army, members of the army arbitrarily arrested poor young people at the outskirts of cities, including some with disabilities. Then they would take them to conflict zones, don guerrilla uniforms and shoot them down in order to obtain the promised compensation. The number of executions, according to social and human rights organizations, could reach 10,000.

[4] This is called the compulsory "primary surplus", before payment of debt service, not only in the conception of public budgets, but also in the formulation of development plans and public policies.

[5] About 60,000 graduates apply every six months to the National University, the country's largest public university. Only 7,000 of them are admitted. Youth unemployment has reached levels of around 22%, according to official statistics and methods.

[6] These movements which are trying to emerge from the social marginality to which they have been subjected by neoliberalism have been characterized as movements of "emerging citizenships".

[7] The term is employed because the spatial reorganization of cities by big real estate and

financial capital in search of rents leads to the expulsion of populations, just as in the territories where the exploitation of hydrocarbons and minerals takes place. This is why it has been called “urban extractivism”.