

Colombia: inside the resistance

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Long one of Latin America's most conservative countries, Colombia is undergoing a sea change. The second general strike in as many years evolved rapidly into a nationwide urban insurrection. 'La Resistencia' has endured for a month in the teeth of ferocious repression (remember that Lenin celebrated the Bolshevik Revolution once it had outlasted the Paris Commune). Soon after the protests started on 28 April, the proposed tax reform package that had triggered the strike was withdrawn, proposed healthcare reforms died in committee, and the finance minister and the foreign minister were forced to step down. There were (toothless) calls for dialogue and de-escalation from the international community. Yet the overwhelmingly non-violent protests have continued, as has the government's response using deadly force.

Ninis (young people without education or job prospects) from urban peripheries have been the leading force on the barricades and they have faced the brunt of police terror – some of it captured on cell phone videos, including sexual assault, torture and murder – in Bogotá, Medellín, Pereira, Cartago, Buga, Tuluá, Cali, Popayán, Pasto, Bucaramanga and Barranquilla. They and their families account for perhaps half the population, and on the rare occasions they are interviewed, they say things like: 'We have no future because they have taken everything from us, even fear. We have nothing left to lose.' This was already true before Covid-19 hit, but lack of basic income support during the pandemic has made daily life impossible.

Urban middle-class university students, whose families account for a further third of the population, have not been far behind in 'the resistance'; they went on strike in 2018 and again the following year, helping to trigger the general strike. During the pandemic, confined to their homes, they have seen their job prospects and educational opportunities dry up, bills arrive that their families can no longer pay, and small and medium family-owned businesses close.

Although figures vary depending on the source, and much remains to be verified, preliminary records list 3155 incidents of police violence, including 43 homicides, 1388 arbitrary arrests, 22 cases of sexual violence and 42 blindings. The victims include minors. Two police officers have been murdered; one of them fired on unarmed demonstrators first. The number of people that have been disappeared is harder to specify. The new foreign minister, Vice President Marta Lucía Ramírez, said in Washington that only one person is missing. Embroiled in corruption scandals concerning jobs and contracts, the Ombudsman's Office has not been tracking police violence. The Attorney General's Office lists 129 missing persons; Indepaz, an NGO, puts the number at 346. A student of mine says the bodies of young men have been seen in the rivers where she lives in the Antioquian countryside. Dozens of dead bodies have been spotted floating down the Cauca River in the southwest.

Whatever legitimacy the government may have had is gone. Transparent lies, manipulation, conspiracy theories and deadly force are all that remain, even as the health system collapses and vaccination proceeds at a turtle's pace. President Ivan Duque, a protégé of former president Álvaro Uribe, had a 33 per cent approval rating before the strike; it is now 18 per cent. Uribe's own

popularity is at 20 per cent; he is on trial for bribery and witness tampering. Though still capable of inflicting great violence and harm through the police, armed forces and para-state gunmen, uribismo seems largely spent as political force.

Ahead of next year's elections, former right-wing allies have deserted Duque in droves, although their votes can still be relied on in the Senate when necessary. On 27 May, the opposition called a motion of censure to hold the defence minister, Diego Molano, responsible for the police violence. It failed by 69 votes to 31. Outside Congress, protesters laid flowers, a wreath for every person murdered by the police.

Before the vote, Senator Iván Cepeda – whose father was gunned down by right-wing paramilitaries in 1994 – ceded the floor to victims of police violence and their relatives. The student leader Lucas Villa was murdered by an assassin in Pereira at the beginning of May. His sisters spoke of their loss; one was angry, the other in tears. Both sought to hold Congress accountable for stopping the slaughter. Two young men who had lost their eyes also spoke. Paola Holguín, an uribista senator and the daughter of a leading narco-trafficker from Medellín, told one of them to 'stop crying over a lost eye'. Another uribista congressman called for the use of 'lead' to 'defend good people' – i.e. the propertied – with state violence against 'terrorist vandals'.

No one believes the government's claims that the protests are being secretly directed by Gustavo Petro, the progressive senator and former mayor of Bogotá who won 42 per cent of the presidential vote in 2018 and is favoured to win in 2022. Early on, Petro called for the lifting of the blockades, to no effect. The union leaders' national strike committee doesn't have the power to call off the protests either. There is a general crisis of leadership and political representation.

Young Colombians are demanding a different kind of democracy, based on the rule of law, robust social welfare provisions and institutions, and regional and local autonomy. They want the best parts of the 1991 constitution to be implemented. They also want to dismantle the riot police, de-fang the military, and put those responsible for the ongoing massacre on trial. With their homemade shields, goggles, gas masks, hoods and helmets, the courageous young men and women of the front line, as well as the multiple rearguard lines that support it, insist on representing and speaking for themselves: they are against politics as currently practised and mistrustful of existing institutions; only a handful of congresspeople have made contact.

The government strategy is to stigmatise them as vandals and terrorists in cahoots with the remnants of the FARC and the ELN. Without evidence, the national security adviser, Rafael Guarín, accused them of setting fire to the municipal justice building in Tuluá on 25 May. Their numbers have increased dramatically since the general strike of 2019, as has their geographical reach. They are to be found in all cities and many towns, in middle-class as well as working-class districts.

In urban insurrections, micro-sovereignties proliferate. A friend who lives in Aguablanca, in the east of Cali, has to pass through 18 blockades to get to work in the city centre. The leaders do not generally communicate or co-ordinate with one another. Many if not most blockades have communal soup kitchens. They also have music, dance, theatre, painting and neighbourhood assemblies: direct democracy as well as cultural production is flourishing amid the disaster.

There have been improvements in community healthcare and security through direct action and mutual aid. *Empatía, amor, solidaridad* and *dignidad* are watchwords. So is dolor. In Medellín, Parque de los Deseos, across from the University of Antioquia, has been renamed Resistance Park. In Bogotá, the Gateway to the Americas has been renamed the Gateway of Resistance; 'mothers of the front line' have faced direct tear-gas assaults from riot police. When police officers sexually assaulted minors in Popayán, there were feminist resistance marches across the country the next

day, and feminist activists lead a number of community assemblies.

Supply lines have broken down, leading to shortages in cities and small towns. In Cali, people line up for hours to get petrol, and the transport system has largely stopped working. Prices of staples such as tomatoes, onions and eggs have skyrocketed, and supermarket shelves are bare. In Medellín, the mayor has taken a conciliatory approach from the outset, which has mostly avoided bloodshed and led to a campaign – orchestrated by local uribistas – to revoke his mandate. It remains to be seen whether neo-paramilitary groups become active there, as they have in Pereira, Tuluá, and Cali.

Ultimately the Ministry of Defence, which commands the police as well as the armed forces, remains in charge. The spectre of authoritarian centralism haunts the protest movements and the political opposition. The government and the national strike committee reached a preliminary agreement stipulating the dismantling of the riot police and a visit from the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, but the government has refused to uphold it. The strategy, such as it is, appears to be to stall for time, declare that the protesters are violating citizens' rights to work and the free movement of goods, services and people, and unleash further police violence against the unarmed demonstrators. There is no provision for dialogue and negotiation.

Both the UN and the IAHRC have demanded an independent investigation of police and para-police violence in Cali. On Friday, fourteen young men – including two indigenous community activists – were murdered and 98 people were injured, 54 of them sustaining gunshot wounds. President Duque was in town to give a law and order speech, in which he declared he would use maximum military force to clear the blockades. Civilians joined the police in firing at demonstrators in Ciudad Jardín, a wealthy neighbourhood near the University of the Valley. One of the shooters was an off-duty law enforcement officer; he was caught and lynched. An Afro-Colombian French horn player and student at the University, Álvaro Herrera Melo, was detained and tortured by police after a concert, but freed thanks to popular pressure. Over the weekend, seven thousand soldiers patrolled city streets across the country. Duque announced that he would militarise thirteen cities in eight departments; a number of mayors and governors have said they won't allow it.

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