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Language

The people of Colombia suffered from over 50 years of chaos and political violence by right wing paramilitaries and government forces in conflict with left wing guerrillas. Political conflicts were exacerbated by the role of a flourishing trade in drugs. Many local communities attempted to protect themselves from these conflicting forces by adopted a strategy of 'civil resistance', based on commitment to nonviolence and non-cooperation with all the armed groups, including state forces. (See [Vol.1.E.IV.6. Colombia](#) [1] for more detail and references.).

This period of extreme disruption and violence ended in 2016, when a peace deal was agreed between the government, led by President Juan Manuel Santos, and its main opponent, the left wing FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla movement. The initial deal was then rejected in a referendum. The opposition was led by the former president, Alvaro Uribe, and his Democratic Centre Party, who wanted revision of some terms of the deal, such as immunity for guerrilla leaders accused of war crimes. But a further agreement with the FARC was reached in November 2016 and sent to Congress, where the government had a majority, and was duly approved. The FARC had agreed to demobilize and to hand over all its weapons to the United Nations within 150 days after the agreement had been endorsed by Congress. There were, however still concerns, for example over the eligibility of those who had committed war crimes to run for office.

Three years after the peace deal was signed, many in Colombia mobilized in opposition to government policies and conduct. The trigger for the strike and mass demonstrations of November 2019 was the economic reform package passed by President Ivan Duque's right wing government, which had been elected in 2018. The reforms were condemned by the unions for exacerbating the already extreme economic and social inequality in the country. The movement extended, however, far beyond the unions. University and school students to the fore in the December demonstrations throughout the country, but the movement was also supported by a very broad coalition ranging from indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians to green, feminist and LGBTQI campaigning groups, as well as to public employees such as teachers and pensioners, the liberal professions and individual mayors and senators. The demonstrations also drew on peasant as well as urban dwellers. The protests were the first mass civic mobilization against a government since 1977.

The government's economic reforms and anger about the level of inequality were not the only focus of the protests. The movement also demanded that ESMAD, the mobile anti-riot squad, should be disbanded after the squad on 21 November fired tear gas at peaceful marchers who then erected barricades. The death of a 19 year old student and ESMAD's violence against protesters after 21 November (recorded on cell phones) provided further evidence of ESMAD excesses. A third factor causing popular anger was how the government had been implementing the peace deal with FARC, in the light of assassination of some of its former fighters and also of activists for social justice and the scope allowed to the army to engage in extra-judicial killing. Duque had rejected many aspects of the 2016 peace agreement, including its promises of funding for rural development and reduction in social inequality.

The 2019 movement had no central political leaders and after two months of major protest had not coalesced around a clear policy goal. It was then effectively disbanded by the impact of Covid-19 and lock-downs. But the mass protests were resurrected in April 2021, in immediate response to a government tax reform that raised the cost of basic goods. The demonstrators' demands soon extended to reform of the police in response to police violence, including firing of bullets at peaceful protesters, which had by mid-May led to an estimated 46 deaths. There was international condemnation of the police and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights arranged a visit to Colombia for early June. The coalition of demonstrators revived from 2019 also made further socio-economic demands: a basic minimum income and the scrapping of the government plan for health care, which they saw as inadequate.

President Duque's government felt obliged by May 2021 to talk with strike leaders and respond to some of the protesters' demands. He announced police reforms, including use of body cameras and the creation of a human rights directorate within the police. He also agreed to scrap his planned health measures. Demonstrations continued with the aim of maintaining pressure on the government, but critics on the right condemned a rise in the use of violence by some protesters, who according to Amnesty International set up roadblocks and did in some



cases damage property. Strike leaders called for a pause in public protests, which lasted nearly two months.

Al Jazeera reported in July that, after the pause in protests, they renewed in resistance to a tax reform bill before Congress, even though it was less harsh than the earlier proposal that had reignited protest in May 2021. The government then responded with violent repression of the demonstrations leading to more deaths, and a wave of arrests. The arrests of prominent protesters continued into August.

The references below cover both 2019 and 2021 protests and also provide some political context.

[The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests](#) [2], International Crisis Group, 2021, pp. 34

The report examines the significance of the mass strikes and demonstrations in Colombia in 2020-21, examines the government's response, and also suggests some of the dangers involved. It notes that far right vigilantes supporting the police had fired on demonstrators, and that in some areas criminal gangs were taking advantage of the social disorder.

Glotsky, Genevieve, [Colombian Protests: Poverty and the Pandemic Collide with Conflict and Migration](#) [3], The New Humanitarian, 10/05/2021,

An informative survey of the protests that broke out in April 2021 and the immediate government responses. The article suggests the demonstrations were essentially a revival of the 2019 movement that was interrupted by Covid-19, but notes differences - for example the much greater protest in rural areas in 2021. Glotsky also situates the protests in the context of Colombia's social and economic problems, which have been exacerbated by the impact of Covid.

Hylton, Forrest, [Something is Happening in Colombia](#) [4], OpenDemocracy, 14/01/2020,

Hylton discusses the sudden emergence of nation-wide protests mostly led by young people, but uniting diverse sectors of society in opposition to neo-liberal government measures. The article looks back at the historical context, and suggests the protest could strengthen 'new movements of the progressive centre'.

Noriega, Christina, [As Colombian Protests Dissipate, Activists Hit by Wave of Arrests](#) [5], AlJazeera, 14/08/2021,

The article begins with the arrest of Alejandro Gaitan, who had led peaceful marches during the recent national strike. He was accused of belonging to 'Primera Linea', a protest collective singled out for attack by President Duque. The collective attacked the government for trying to weaken the movement for change through arrests and court cases.

Peñaranda, Isabel ; Gomez-Delgado, Julian, [Colombia's New Awakening](#) [6], Jacobin, 2019, pp. 6-6

This article, written at the beginning of the mass protest movement that began in Colombia in November 2019, examines the political and economic context of the emergence of socio-economic protest and discusses its possible future significance for Colombia and the left.

Turkewitz, Julie, [Why Are Colombians Protesting?](#) [7], New York Times, 18/05/2021,

This article provides a useful overview of the immediate and longer term causes of the May 2021 protests, the responses by the government and the international reactions. It notes that *New York Times* videos showed police firing on demonstrators, as well as gas canisters and other 'low lethal' devices, but also considers briefly whether the protesters too have used violence and the impact of road blocks.



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