Ethnicities, bodies and freedoms destroyed in social protest in south-west Colombia

Peaceful and anonymous protests have broken out simultaneously in hundreds of cities and towns around Colombia. The main protagonists are young people of different origins and backgrounds who have decided to form the mouthpiece for the widespread malaise of a country ravaged by an immutable government that has distanced itself from democracy and created an unprecedented social, economic and political crisis. Although people initially took to the streets in reaction to a regressive tax reform, they have ended up identifying with the collective outcry regardless of their profession, class or ethnicity, demanding an end to violence, corruption, inequality, and a poverty that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Faced with the magnitude of this mobilization of bodies and minds, it did not take the Colombian government long to demonstrate its authoritarian and repressive nature and, with particular viciousness, it attacked the young people of Cali, in Valle del Cauca department.

By Diana Mendoza – June 1st, 2021

After Bogotá and Medellín, Cali is the third largest city in Colombia and, besides being a massive epicentre of the protest, is also a vibrantly multicultural city. Valle del Cauca is not only an enclave of ethnic and cultural diversity, it also epitomises the consequences of slavery, exclusion and racial discrimination. Despite this, black and Indigenous people have stood strong, demonstrating the vitality of their “otherness”, the sign of a failed development model that perpetuates an accumulation of land and capital in the hands of socially and politically predominant power groups, achieved at the expense of these ancestral human groups.
During the first days of the protest, the *Minga Indígena* [a collective of Indigenous organisations] decided to travel to Cali to join the protesting youth and use their guards to protect them, who the police were beginning to brutally repress. Rejecting dialogue or understanding, the government's reaction has consisted of an experimental repression and exhaustion of the popular mobilization, using racial and discriminatory stereotypes already adopted by the mass media and by certain urban social and business sectors. Intent on fostering a national animosity, it has thus smeared the Indians as vandals and terrorists who are blocking vital corridors into the city and attacking residents, especially those in wealthy neighbourhoods. This version of events, belied by video footage, statements by Indigenous people themselves, residents, independent journalists and medical teams (who have also been attacked), has served as a cover for the party in government to justify a master plan aimed at quelling the national protest. It thus legitimised an urban militarization and the use of weapons in “self-defence”, with the collaboration of the security forces, a manoeuvre that threatens to escalate the confrontation and increase the killings of unarmed civilians.

**Scorched earth democracy**

Although it boasts the most solid democracy in Latin America and an advanced Political Constitution, Colombia is a highly conservative country, with secular elites who maintain their substantial influence at the cost of their subordination to Álvaro Uribe’s power project, consolidated in the shadow of drug trafficking and paramilitarism. In fact, Iván Duque is a continuation of this project, as was his predecessor Juan Manuel Santos, heir to elites of a more liberal bias. It is also a Catholic and clerical country, more recently invaded by evangelical churches linked to the most recalcitrant of political groups, and to whom thousands of followers have been lost, thus obtaining several seats in both heaven and the Congress of the Republic.
In contrast to this powerful religious fervour, however, the State education system is seen as increasingly fragile, even non-existent or inaccessible in rural areas. This ideological climate, together with a ubiquitous mass media that is deferent to the government and the most powerful economic groups, has fostered the construction of a legally-ambivalent, economically-unequal and socially-subdued State.

And yet the Colombian population have hardly been calling for an “anti-system” option: neither the protests that took place in 2019 but were truncated by the pandemic nor those taking place today have called for radical transformations. The protesters’ demands revolve largely around fundamental human rights, tax justice, a deconcentration of land, income support throughout lockdown, employment, health services, access to education, justice for the victims of the armed conflict, agricultural support and environmental protection. These are thus scarcely protests aligned with some socialist, communist or “Castro-Chavista” project, as the party in power (Centro Democrático) and its allies would have us believe.

**Peace Accord in the eye of the storm**

The protests in Colombia must be seen within the context of the Peace Accord signed between the former FARC guerrillas and the previous government of Juan Manuel Santos. This process had an unwitting consequence in that it dismantled the narrative which, for decades, had attributed all of the country’s problems to the FARC. It thus resulted in the fall of the “enemy within”, a construct which the extreme right had made use of to maintain the war and consolidate itself in power.

Paradoxically, the Peace Accord marked a “before” and an “after”, despite the governing party openly stating its desire to “tear it to shreds”, something it is in fact trying to do. In this sense, this crude ambushing of peace has become another reason to discredit and fiercely reject the government and is expressed in all contexts of popular protest.
In addition to the pitfalls of peace, there are countless reasons for the indignation that began to emerge following the Accord: obscene corruption (the OECD ranks Colombia second most corrupt of 37 countries); the dismantling of public health; immense inequality (it is the second only to Haiti as the most unequal country in Latin America); the plundering of public resources through mega-projects; the extraordinary tax handouts to bankers and large national and foreign corporations; unemployment; the destruction of peasant production, and the lack of opportunities for young people. These ever-present problems were highlighted and brought to the fore following the signing of the Peace Accord.

One eye less for Latin American youth

In addition to the fact that demonstrators in recent protests in Chile, Ecuador and Colombia all share a dissatisfaction with social injustice, corruption, and the weakening of our democracies, there is also a harsh coincidence in the methods of repression used by all of these States. We have clearly been witnessing an unbridled deployment of the security forces, backed up by increasingly sophisticated and effective “non-lethal” weapons. Never before, however, has this “pedagogy” of submission, which consists of the ocular mutilation of young people, been used to such an extent.

In the 2019 protests in Colombia, some 33 young people were recorded as having lost an eye, and a further 40 victims have already been recorded in the current protests. The statistics from Chile are even more shocking: over 200 young people have suffered this mutilation. In Quito, while the numbers are smaller, several cases have been reported.

It is a fact that this macabre police practice, imported from Israel, is aimed not at the eye itself but at what it means to lose it: it destroys the gaze of injustice to ensure that freedom will fail.
The international community’s statements in this regard have been cautious and ambiguous and this, in itself, speaks volumes.

**Social protest marked by drug trafficking**

In conclusion, we should note the roots of this whole situation: drug trafficking runs deeply and decisively through Colombia’s recent history and yet this reality is viewed ambiguously because, while the upper echelons of the public and private sectors reject it as an historical misfortune, it is in fact something that has free rein within the intimacy of politics and business. The truth is that drug trafficking has penetrated all levels of the State, but it also influences the feelings and opinions of thousands of people.

*Colombia is the world's largest cocaine producer (some 950,000 kilos per year).* These crops are grown particularly on peasant, Indigenous and Afro-descendant territories, where processing laboratories have also been set up and where battles are fought for control of areas and trafficking corridors. And yet the anti-drug policies implemented by different governments under U.S. guidelines are affecting the rural communities just as much as the horrors of drug trafficking itself because they focus on eradicating crops and prosecuting growers while barely touching the supply channels, trafficking, money laundering and illegal armed actors operating in the territories.

The Duque government is currently intending to resume the most aggressive and conflictual methods of forced eradication, with a return to crop spraying with glyphosate and the repression of small producers in rural areas. This strategy is not only in contravention of the Peace Accord and the jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court but results in a relocation and expansion of the crops into new areas without really affecting the structure of the business or constraining the paramilitary and guerrilla groups that protect and run the trafficking networks, with the complicity of State officials.
But how is drug trafficking related to the protests? Well, in Cali, the attacks on the *Minga Indígena* were carried out by armed civilians in vehicles bearing no licence plates. This *modus operandi* is typical of paramilitaries linked to drug trafficking and extreme right-wing groups in different regions and has given rise to the conclusion that they are now part of a strategy to annihilate the *Minga* and the young people who are participating in the protests.

Attacks by armed civilian groups have also continued in other cities, often in full view of the security forces. Protesters, human rights organisations, academics, independent journalists, and some mayors and congresspeople have raised the alarm internationally, warning of the dire consequences of a concerted attack on the part of the forces of Iván Duque’s authoritarian government and paramilitarism against a population that is protesting tirelessly, unarmed, in the hope of achieving peace, democracy and freedom with both eyes intact.

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