Afro-Colombians and the national strike: indignation and resistance to racism and hate crimes

Racial inequality, the legacy of enslavement and colonialism, flourished in the intensity of the armed conflict and has become even more stark with the pandemic. Afro-Colombians who were forced to move from rural areas to large cities suffer discrimination and social ill-treatment. As traditional politics seems incapable of overcoming the conflict, the national strike is offering a space in which to express their indignation.

By Carlos Rosero - 1st June 2021

Colombia, a country of deep-rooted inequality, has been embroiled in a national strike since 28 April. The armed conflict that lasted more than 60 years disproportionately affected Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples. The subsequent Peace Agreement recognized us as the historical victims of colonialism, the slave trade and racism. While slavery officially ended 170 years ago, however, we inherited a racial inequality that flourished with the armed conflict and has become even more stark with the pandemic. Afro-Colombians may have faced a difficult situation prior to COVID-19 but the situation is even worse now.

There is an Afro-Colombian presence throughout the national territory. Our population has increased in the cities due to forced displacement: this has been caused both by the effects of the so-called “development” that afflicts our territories and by people leaving their homes in search of better economic and educational conditions. These new urban dwellers have ended up in settlements such as Aguablanca District (Cali), Ciudad Bolivar (Bogotá) or Nelson Mandela (Cartagena) where the housing conditions are extremely poor.

Unmet commitments to equality

The current crisis has exposed a failure to enforce the rights recognized in the Political Constitution, international treaties and Colombian legislation, for example Law 70/1993, Ruling 005/2009 and the Ethnic Chapter of the Peace Agreement. The failure to allocate economic resources to address this racial inequality is laid bare in the State's abandonment
of its responsibility to protect the Afro-Colombians’ rights to territory, identity, participation and their own development choices. This pattern of behaviour is condemning Afro-Colombians and their territories to repeated cycles of violence and to a perpetuation of structural racism.

In its list of demands, the National Strike Committee has again called for “no discrimination by gender, sexual or ethnic diversity”. Afro-Colombians are demanding compliance with the Peace Agreement and with prior consultation as set out in the National Development Plan (NDP). Indeed, back in 2019, the current government committed to allocating 19 trillion Colombian pesos (USD 5,076 million) to meet commitments made in relation to education, environment, justice, housing and infrastructure, information and communication technologies. We are also calling for special plans to overcome the pandemic and revive the economy in our territories. Once again, we are challenging the use of fumigation and forced eradication of coca crops.

Afro-Colombians are participating in the strike. Their presence has resulted in demonstrations in the cities of the Caribbean Coast, the interior and, in particular, the south-west of the country (Chocó, Valle, Cauca and Nariño). In addition to being the second most biodiverse region in the world, this region includes the cities of Cali, Tumaco, Buenaventura and the area of northern Cauca, known for its high concentration of Afro-Colombians. Many of these people have also ended up victims (killed, wounded or disappeared) of the violent repression with which the State has sought to return to so-called “normality” in Cali.

Cali is a highly-segregated city. The rich, white people call themselves the “good people” and live in exclusive neighbourhoods. It was precisely in one of these areas, on Cañasgordas Avenue, a name that harks back to an old and important slave hacienda, that rich whites shot at the Indigenous Minga, with the consent and support of the security forces. Conversely, in eastern Cali - a poorer area with a large Afro-Colombian population – the police use brutality to clear the roads, and injure, kill and disappear young people. Here, the “good people” move around in high-end cars, carrying firearms and shooting at those gathering at resistance points, especially at night.
As a result of these acts of violence, humanitarian corridors have been opened up at the blockade points to facilitate the movement of food, medicine, the sick and fuel. The national government has indicated that this is not enough and has issued a decree seeking to force eight governors and 13 mayors to prioritize military assistance over dialogue with the demonstrators.

The fire of indignation

The mobilization’s demands have begun to be discussed locally among protesters, authorities and businesspeople. On the Nariño coast, one of the largest and fastest-growing areas of coca cropping for illicit purposes, the protesters and security forces have signed an undertaking to ensure that the State complies with a protection order preventing forced eradication with glyphosate. A day earlier, the Ministry of the Interior had undertaken to consider a request to allocate one billion pesos to cover the demands of the strikers.

The novelty of the current civic strike lies not in its demands but in its ability to amplify the population’s indignation and capacity for resistance. As with fulfilment of the Peace Agreement, the current government will simply make new commitments that it will later fully or partially fail to meet.

Prior to the National Strike, it was common for black youths to suffer from racial profiling at the hands of the law enforcement agencies. Afro-Colombian organizations went to great efforts to explain to the Truth Commission that there was also a link between war and racism within the armed conflict.

Social protest is now being criminalized and treated like a war situation: protesters are attacked by the police and unidentified armed actors. The repression in Cali shows how racism and discrimination combine with violence. This behaviour by Iván Duque’s government could push us into a scenario in which hate crimes against Indigenous people, Afro-Colombians and the poor are no longer an assumption but a reality.

Carlos Rosero is a member of the Process of Black Communities in Colombia (PCN) and the Afro-Colombian National Peace Council (CONPA).