The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests

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Principal Findings

What's new? Colombia has seen a wave of unrest triggered by an unpopular tax reform, fuelled by massive inequality and police brutality, and inflamed in large part by the health and economic effects of the pandemic. Protests are likely to simmer at least until the May 2022 presidential election.

Why does it matter? Violence has flared, with police believed to be responsible for dozens of deaths. Although the number of protests has dropped, more are scheduled for late July. The government and strike organisers remain at loggerheads. The risk of continuing disturbances in poverty-stricken cities and rural areas is high.

What should be done? In the long term, Colombia needs to reduce its extreme inequality if it is to overcome vulnerability to unrest. In the short term, the government should embark on comprehensive police reform, support efforts at national and local dialogue, and invite international observers to negotiations as a trust-building measure.

Executive Summary

Colombia has been in the throes of its most serious public unrest in recent memory. Since an unpopular tax reform sent people into the streets on 28 April, tens of thousands of protesters across the country have joined a strike to vent frustration over rising inequality – laid bare by the devastating impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable communities – and police brutality. While the great majority of protests have been peaceful, vandalism and looting have damaged public transport, businesses and state buildings. Roadblocks inside and between major cities have also exacted an economic toll. Although President Iván Duque's government has engaged in halting negotiations with strike leaders, it has also responded with a heavy hand. As of 7 June, the state ombudsman said it was aware of 58 deaths during the strike, including many apparently at the hands of police. Although protests have tailed off in recent weeks, the government should press ahead with talks with strike organisers, who have called for further demonstrations on 20 July; embark on comprehensive police reform; and intensify efforts to combat deep inequality.

The protests reflect the "accumulation of decades of injustice", in the words of one 28-year-old protester in Bogotá. During five decades of armed conflict between the government and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas, most political forces pushed aside fundamental questions about the distribution of wealth, income and economic opportunity in deference to the scale of the insurgent and criminal threats facing the Colombian state.

Since the 2016 peace accord with the FARC, however, the stigma of association with the guerrillas no longer constrains left-leaning activism, while longstanding rifts and resentments in Colombian society have grown more pronounced. Colombia is the region's second most unequal country after Brazil according to the World Bank, and its elites tend to be entrenched and protective of their entitlements. With strong economic, ethnic and geographic barriers to good education and the formal job market, Colombia's social mobility is the lowest in any of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 38 member states. A year of on-and-off lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic have only served to intensify the experience of inequality, particularly among the urban poor who disproportionately work in informal jobs and were hit hardest by movement restrictions. In rural areas, which were promised sweeping transformation in the 2016 peace accord, protesters say their lives have seen little improvement; instead, they have been left waiting for promised government support as expanding armed groups have made their livelihoods and physical safety even more precarious.

The government was late to acknowledge the extent of discontent, and even still it struggles to recognise what is driving people into the streets. Top officials have described protesters as troublemakers, vandals and urban terrorists while signalling scant empathy with their grievances. Together with documented police misconduct, the government reactions have at times added fuel to the fire. What began as a single national strike has become an array of local actions, anchored in numerous demands but united by a thirst for political change.

Amid the unrest, potentially worrying trends have emerged. On several occasions, armed vigilantes in cities such as Cali and Pereira have been filmed, often side by side with police, shooting directly at or attacking demonstrators. Armed and criminal groups also appear to be taking advantage of chaotic local circumstances to boost their social and economic control. Rural zones are particularly vulnerable: in places such as Meta, Putumayo and Catatumbo, armed groups appear to have on occasion nudged residents to participate in protests and roadblocks in order to cordon off swathes of territory and tighten their grip.

Although protests waned in mid-June after strike leaders called for a temporary standstill following a month and a half of constant mobilisation, Colombia is far from having resolved these tensions. The pandemic is proving relentless, with close to 700 people dying per day on average, and security conditions could worsen in the run-up to the 2022 presidential election. The next mass demonstrations are slated to take place on 20 July, and in the interim, smaller protests have continued to flare. Bogotá and Cali see clashes between demonstrators and police several times a week, if not more, particularly in areas where those in the streets say they do not feel represented by official strike organisers. The country remains on edge, and an egregious act of violence could kick off a fresh bout of unrest. The onset of electoral campaigning, long associated with peaks of violence in Colombia, could deepen the country's polarisation and impede the prospects of an agreement to end the strike.

Dialogue between government representatives and the national strike committee, which began in May but has since been suspended, will need to feature several components if it is to be fruitful. A strong diplomatic presence at talks by international partners like the UN, the Organization for American States, and the European Union and its member states will be vital to help overcome mistrust between government and demonstrators, while the government will need to extend its political support for negotiations between authorities and strike committees at the regional and municipal levels. The Duque administration can also help pave the way out of the crisis by holding abusive officers to account and committing to meaningful police reform. No such reform has been carried out since the peace accord. The force remains an appendage of the military; its command structures and general approach to protests are ill suited for protecting civilians. Beyond police reform, the country needs to address the great disparities in wealth and opportunity that the pandemic has thrown into stark relief and that lie at the foundation of the unrest.

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The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests

I. Introduction

Colombians are no strangers to social protest. For at least half a century, unions, small-hold farmers (*campesinos*), students and left-leaning movement have used strikes to press their demands on successive governments.[1] Mass mobilisation has marked major political turning points, such as the protests culminating in the drafting of a new constitution in July 1991.[2] Crowds also massed on several occasions in reaction to decades of far-left insurgency. After accounts of the living conditions of hostages seized by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) became public, around four million people took to the streets in 2008 to express their outrage.[3] Thousands also marched in support of a peace accord with the FARC after voters narrowly rejected the initial agreement in a 2016 referendum; Congress adopted a revised version.[4] Protests across rural Colombia have erupted with some regularity, occasionally met with violence: as many as 50 protest leaders were killed after an estimated 120,000 *campesinos* blocked roads in five north-eastern departments in 1987 demanding rural development and basic services.[5]

Mass demonstrations again enveloped the country in late 2019, in a prelude to today's unrest. Students and unions headed mass marches across big cities in November of that year to demand an array of improvements in state social support, access to education and employment opportunities. Protests cooled when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Colombia in March 2020, but tensions flared again in Bogotá in September when police were filmed brazenly attacking a civilian, who later died of his injuries.[6]

[1] Mauricio Archila Neira, "El Paro Cívico Nacional del 14 de septiembre 1977: un ejercicio de memoria colectiva", *Revista de Economía Institucional*, vol. 18 (2016), pp. 313-318.

[2] Between August 1989 and April 1990, three presidential candidates were assassinated: Luis Carlos Galán (of the New Liberalism party and favoured to win), Carlos Pizarro (leader of the demobilised guerrilla M-19 faction) and Bernardo Jaramillo (of the leftist Patriotic Union party). Demanding changes to address the roots of violence, the student movement mounted a write-in ballot campaign in support of a constituent assembly in the mid-term elections of March 1990. Although those votes were not tallied, this symbolic act spurred widespread support for the proposal. A popularly elected constitutional assembly convened for four months in early 1991, and finalised a new constitution that remains in force today. Francisco Leal Buitrago and León Zamosc, *Al Filo del Caos: Crisis Política en la Colombia de los años 80* (Bogotá, 1990).

[3] "Diez años del comienzo del fin de las Farc", *Semana,* 4 February 2018.

[4] "Miles de Colombianos salieron a marchar en nombre de la paz", *The New York Times,* 6 October 2016.

[5] "Letter to the International Observer Mission", National Coordinator of Civic Movements, 1 March 1988; "Memorias de Vida y de Dolor", Centre for Historic Memory, n.d.

[6] Elizabeth Dickinson, "Police Killing Rouses Colombia's Lockdown Furies", Crisis Group Commentary, 24 September 2020.

Although the history of mass public mobilisation in Colombia is voluminous, the 2021 protests stand out. Rarely before have thousands of people from such diverse urban and rural constituencies joined a single national protest. The young people who make up the core of the demonstrations, and have proven their most earnest supporters, are the first in decades to come of age in a country that is not gripped by armed conflict. They are bolder in their demands and less wary of repercussions. As a young single mother protesting in Cali put it: "If we hadn't woken up [now], we would have been submissive forever. … People no longer have fear".[7]

Although protests dwindled in mid-June, they are far from disappearing. Even at the trough in the strike between 8 and 24 June, the defence ministry still counted 823 fixed-location protests and 139 marches.[8] Roadblocks are few in number, but could easily re-emerge, especially in the most troubled and emblematic sites of the strike, including one major point each in Cali and Bogotá. Some protesters say they are intentionally taking a break in order to strengthen internal organisation ahead of future marches.[9] The COVID-19 pandemic also began rising for a third time in April, reaching a plateau of over 30,000 new cases and close to 700 fatalities a day at the time of publication.[10] Intensive care and regular hospital wards are stretched beyond capacity and oxygen is in short supply in some areas, adding to the sense of despair that underlies the strike.

If steps are not taken to address the strike's causes, the protests are likely to resurface and could become more acrimonious. This report delves into the reasons behind the eruption of unrest, the conditions that have given rise to lethal violence amid disturbances in several big cities, the effects on armed groups in rural areas and the character of the government's response. The report concludes with suggestions as to how the government and strike leaders could scale back hostilities, begin to address sources of acute public ire in the short term and tackle the grievances that affect Colombian society over the long term. It is based on roughly 60 interviews conducted in Bogotá, Cali, Guaviare and Catatumbo, as well as remote conversations in Putumayo and Cauca, between April and June 2021. It also draws upon Crisis Group's body of previous work on the protests and security conditions throughout Colombia.[11]

[7] Crisis Group interview, Cali, May 2021.
[8] "Balance General: Paro Nacional", Ministry of Defence, 8 June 2021 and 24 June 2021.
[9] Crisis Group interviews and correspondence, protesters in Cali, May and June 2021.
[10] "Covid-19 en Colombia", Colombia National Health Institute, 24 June 2021.
[11] See Elizabeth Dickinson, "Pandemic Gloom and Police Violence Leave Colombia in Turmoil", Crisis Group Commentary, 2 May 2021, as well as the past reports and briefings cited below.

II. The Triggers of Unrest

Colombia's national strike was prompted by a controversial tax reform that critics perceived as leaning too heavily on a struggling middle class to raise revenue.[12] The fiscal reform proposal presented in Congress on 15 April would have increased the value-added tax on public services for middle- and upper-income households. It included a number of redistributive measures aimed at helping the poor, but would have extended the income tax to those earning more than roughly $650 per month, whereas previously only people who made over $1,050 were taxed.[13] Although President Iván Duque withdrew the measure within days, the protests swelled, pointing to a deeper seam of frustration. "The tax reform was what uncovered our eyes", said a 26-year-old protest organiser in Cali. "We have lived for years with the realities of violence, poverty [and] lack of education. We stayed silent for so long".[14]

Many of those who joined the marches were protesting for the first time. Unlike the 2019 demonstrations, which were dominated by labour unions and university students, today's protests include young people who neither work nor study, as well as a cross-section of the urban and rural population. Polling data has consistently shown high levels of approval for the strike, especially among young people. A mid-May survey showed that 84 per cent of those between 18 and 32 years old said they felt represented by the protests.[15]

Protesters name two broad motives bringing them into the streets: socio-economic concerns and anger at the security forces. Likewise, demonstrators identify both immediate and longer-term goals. A national strike committee, formed in 2019 and made up of more than twenty groups, mostly trade, labour and student unions, has become the government's primary interlocutor. This committee has released a set of eight sweeping demands ranging from a universal basic income to free university tuition to an end to gender discrimination and to revisiting forced coca eradication policies. Each organisation within the national committee also has its own list of specific demands, while local strike committees from each of Colombia's 32 departments also funnel their petitions up to the national level; most have now drafted documents spelling out what they want.

Aside from the shelved tax reform, street protests have prompted Congress to vote down a health reform bill that, according to its critics, would have further privatised health services without guaranteeing better working conditions for medical staff, many of whom work on precarious temporary contracts.[16] To appease students, the government also pledged one semester of free education to low-income students at public universities.[17]

[12] See the tweet by the Colombian Ministry of Finance and Public Credit, @MinHacienda, 3:08pm, 15 April 2021. See also "Iván Duque promete una subida de impuestos para cubrir el hueco fiscal de la pandemia en Colombia", *El País*, 16 April 2021.
[13] "Declaración de renta 2021: así puede saber si le toca declarar o no", *El Tiempo,* 26 January 2021.
[14] Crisis Group interview, protest organiser, Cali, May 2021.
[15] "El 84 % de los jóvenes se sienten representados por el paro nacional", *El Tiempo,* 14 May 2021.
[16] "Reforma a la Salud ¿maquillaje de la Ley 100?", Universidad de Antioquia, 10 May 2021.
[17] On 3 May, Finance Minister Alberto Carrasquilla presented his resignation to the government over the failed tax reform. On 11 May, President Duque announced that public universities would charge

The second main object of protesters' ire – police violence – has ebbed and flowed throughout the demonstrations. It has often been at its highest level at charged moments such as on 28 May, a month after the strike began, when thirteen died in Cali alone. Human Rights Watch has documented police using live ammunition in protests, resulting in at least sixteen deaths.[18] The same report found that police arbitrarily dispersed gatherings, used non-lethal weapons such as tear gas in ways that jeopardised protesters' safety, and perpetrated sexual abuse and beatings. National strike representatives insist that before they will negotiate, they want to see accountability for police misconduct and "guarantees" of no more crackdowns on peaceful protest.

Not all Colombians support the demonstrations. Many critics cite the economic damage caused by the strikers' roadblocks, while others share the government's perception that some demonstrators have criminal links. Acts of violence by protesters against the police also receive wide condemnation, including from strike organisers and others who back the marches. Attacks on security forces have left two officers dead and more than 1,450 officers injured, according to the defence ministry.[19] Social media have been central in publicising the comportment of police and protesters alike. Videos of alleged police abuse and protester violence have spread among polarised audiences, widening a gulf in perceptions of the strike between those who see a legitimate mass movement and others who suspect that criminal schemes or subversion are afoot.[20] According to polls, the latter are smaller in number. Their clout is greater, however: mainstream media, which lean heavily toward the government, have largely backed official accounts of events and focused on crime and the economic damage done when protesters block streets.

Nevertheless, the protesters' agenda remains broadly popular, with a poll on 31 May finding that 76 per cent of Colombians of all ages have a favourable view of the protests and 79 per cent an unfavourable view of how the government has responded.[21] In combination, the strikers' demands represent a wide-ranging call for a new relationship between the Colombian state and its citizens, not unlike the clamour for a new constitution in Chile in late 2019. The security forces are the most obvious and immediate target for reform. Protesters want a police force focused on bringing security to their neighbourhoods rather than one trained primarily to fight crime and insurgency. The riot police, or ESMAD, which has been implicated in cases of abuse of protesters, comes in for particular scorn. "Without the dismantling of ESMAD, we

no tuition in the fall semester for students in the lowest three (of six) income brackets. On 19 May, Congress voted down the government's health reform proposal.

[18] "Colombia: Egregious Police Abuses Against Protesters", Human Rights Watch, 9 June 2021.

[19] "Balance General – Paro Nacional", Ministry of Defence, 25 June 2021.

[20] For example, social media posts – which later proved to be taken out of context – were key to inciting anger among wealthy residents of Ciudad Jardín, Cali, before some of them shot at indigenous protesters on 9 May. "Qué pasó en el sur de Cali el 9m?", Colombia Check, 11 June 2021. Similarly, a number of widely circulated videos of supposed police abuse have subsequently proven to be fake or taken out of context. "Las noticias falsas que no debe creer en medio del paro", *El Tiempo,* 28 May 2021.

[21] "Encuesta: ¿Está en riesgo la democracia?", *NotiCentro 1,* 31 May 2021. A previous poll reported similar results: "Paro nacional | El 75 % de los colombianos apoya las manifestaciones", *Semana,* 11 May 2021.

are not leaving the streets", a 26-year-old demonstrator in Bogotá said. "They cannot act as they once did, because citizens are taking on the role of monitoring their behaviour".[22]

Public indignation extends to the entire political and economic elite, which ordinarily stands aloof from the rest of society. Demonstrators describe Duque's government as distant and indifferent to the struggles of most Colombians in daily life – an impression reinforced during the pandemic.[23] In an interview aimed at reassuring the public that new value-added taxes on food, envisaged as part of the tax reform, would be affordable, the finance minister incorrectly estimated the price of eggs, giving a figure roughly three times lower than the real cost.[24]

Poorer citizens, meanwhile, have few opportunities to participate in politics, leaving them to rely on community organisations and local activists, commonly known as social leaders, to amplify their concerns. Yet social leaders, who often operate under the threat of violence from armed actors, tend to have limited access to state institutions, and struggle to navigate a cumbersome bureaucracy in advocating for themselves and those they represent.[25] As one demonstrator in Cali put it: "It shows the lack of democracy in Colombia that our only chance to participate is this way".[26]

Economic opportunity, whether through higher education or formal jobs, is generally reserved for those with family wealth and/or political connections. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it would take eleven generations for descendants of a poor family to reach the average income.[27] Local government jobs and contracts are divvied up in part based on who has supported an office-holder's campaign.[28] These patterns of discrimination have long been visible in economic statistics, but their effects have grown far more alarming during the pandemic. In 2020, the bottom of five income groups experienced a 24.6 per cent drop in earnings, while the top group lost only 10.1 per cent. In cities, the lowest income group lost even more – roughly 50 per cent in Bogotá and Cali. As of 2020, 42.5 per cent of Colombia's population was living below the poverty line, and the unemployment rate for those under 28 in Bogotá was hovering at 27.6 per cent.[29]

[22] Crisis Group interview, protester, Bogotá, May 2021.

[23] Crisis Group interviews, protesters, Bogotá, Cali and San José del Guaviare, May and June 2021. In May, disapproval of President Duque rose to 76 per cent, the highest level in his term. "Encuesta de Invamer revela que aprobación de Duque se mantiene en el nivel más bajo", *Asuntos Legales,* 24 May 2021.

[24] "$1.800, lo que cuesta una docena de huevos, según el ministro Alberto Carrasquilla", Infobae, 18 April 2021.

[25] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°82, *Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace*, 6 October 2020.

[26] Crisis Group interview, young protest organiser, Cali, May 2021.

[27] "OECD Economic Surveys: Colombia", OECD, 2019, p. 34.

[28] "Informe: Elecciones & Contratos, 2018-19", Transparencia por Colombia, 2019. "There is a problem of politicisation of jobs within the public sector: you have to work on a political campaign in order to get a job". Crisis Group interview, Community Action Committee member, San José del Guaviare, May 2021.

[29] "Caracterización pobreza monetaria y resultados clases sociales", National Statistics Agency of Colombia, 6 May 2021; "La vida de un joven afectado por la crisis que ha dejado el covid-19", *El Tiempo,* 14 June 2021.

Few if any politicians escape anti-elite sentiment unscathed, and the plurality of many protesters insist they do not support any one party or candidate heading into the 2022 elections.[30] One enemy common to almost all protesters, however, is former President Álvaro Uribe, who continues to wield enormous influence in the ruling Democratic Centre party, and has given rise to a strain of right-leaning political thought called *uribismo*. Throughout the marches, he has expressed zero tolerance for disruptions and argued in favour of "the right for the police and military to use their arms" during protests.[31] Young protesters associate Uribe's time in office from 2002 to 2010 with a heavy-handed security policy that – while effective in weakening the FARC – produced thousands of civilian casualties and was plagued by human rights abuses.[32] Vitriol for Uribe is ubiquitous in protest chants. "Our medium-term goal is to put *uribismo* in crisis", one protester explained.[33]

[30] In one recent election poll, for example, the number of people who said they would not vote for any of the current candidates or would submit a blank ballot (36 per cent) surpasses backing for the front runner, Gustavo Petro (25 per cent). "Intención de voto y percepciones sobre el paro nacional", *Semana*/Centro Nacional de Consultoria, 15 May 2021.

[31] "Apoyemos el derecho de soldados y policías de utilizar sus armas para defender su integridad y para defender a las personas y bienes de la acción criminal del terrorismo vandálico". Tweet by Álvaro Uribe, ex-president of Colombia, @AlvaroUribeVel, 8:51am, 30 April 2021. Twitter later deleted the tweet, arguing that it violated its policy against promoting violence.

[32] Among the most serious abuses were security forces' complicity – and, at times, open cooperation – with paramilitaries in extrajudicial killings intended to demonstrate progress in quashing the FARC insurgency. Between 2002 and 2008, Colombia's military killed at least 6,402 civilians, known as "false positives", so that it could count them as combat deaths. "La JEP hace pública la estrategia de priorización dentro del Caso 03, conocido como el de falsos positivos", Special Jurisdiction for Peace, 18 February 2021.

[33] Crisis Group interview, protest leader, Cali, May 2021.

III. The Heartlands of Protest

28 April marked the first large-scale demonstrations in Colombia since the pandemic arrived in March 2020. Nearly all of Colombia's large and mid-size cities hosted protests that day, with the largest in Cali. By evening, clashes had broken out there and in parts of Bogotá, leading to four deaths attributed by civil society groups to the riot police.[34] In the wake of these first casualties, peaceful daytime protests as well as nightly confrontations between protesters and police grew in scale and intensity, driving up the toll of deaths and injuries.[35]

Demonstrators in Cali and Valle de Cauca initiated what became a nationwide wave of roadblocks. Trucking unions and farmers' associations led many of the intercity blockades, cutting off transport in and out of major metropolitan areas throughout early May. By the second week of May, Cali was experiencing serious shortages of fuel and food. Other big cities, as well as smaller rural towns, saw some food staples disappear temporarily from the shelves while prices rose for basic goods. The defence ministry counted nearly 3,400 blockades between 28 April and 10 June.[36]

Pressure on transport began to ease in mid-May, largely through negotiations between individual groups carrying out the blockades and local authorities, who managed to set up humanitarian corridors or temporary passageways to allow food, petrol and medicines to pass through.[37] The strike committee announced in early June that it would call for gradually lifting the blockades as a good-will gesture, but also in recognition of the tactic's growing unpopularity, and on 15 June it pledged to temporarily pivot its strategy toward political organising. While calling for a fresh round of mass demonstrations beginning 20 July, the committee said it would in the meantime hold a series of assemblies and engage with Congress to propose new legislation.[38]

Protests are expected to gain force again, possibly as soon as early July, given the hardships faced by the public and the threat of violence against local demonstrations. At the time of writing, Colombia continues to suffer its worst bout with COVID-19 to date, with the total death toll now exceeding 106,000.[39] Despite the surge in cases, and prompted by demonstrators' economic concerns, mayors of Colombia's two

[34] "Listado de las 75: Víctimas de Violencia Homicida en el Marco del Paro Nacional al 24 de Junio", Indepaz, 24 June 2021.
[35] In Cali, demonstrators reinforced their roadblocks after a 3 May confrontation left three dead and more than a dozen injured in the neighbourhood of Siloé. Crisis Group interviews, protest organisers in Siloé, Cali, May 2021. "El grito del barrio popular de Siloé en la noche más trágica de protestas en Cali", France 24, 5 May 2021. Data from civil society groups show that protester deaths increased steadily until roughly 7 May, after which they hit a plateau. See tweet by Adam Isacson, director for defense oversight, Washington Office on Latin America, @AdamIsacson, 10:16pm, 16 May 2021.
[36] "Balance General: Paro Nacional", Ministry of Defence, 10 June 2021.
[37] See, for example, "Levantan bloqueo y abren corredor humanitario en Cali en día 13 de protestas", EFE, 10 May 2021.
[38] "Los líderes de las protestas en Colombia anuncian la suspensión temporal de las movilizaciones", *El País*, 15 June 2021. See tweet by Diego Molano, Colombian defence minister, @Diego_Molano, 2:28pm, 21 May 2021.
[39] "Covid-19 en Colombia", Colombia National Health Institute, 13 June 2021.

largest cities have promised that they will not reimpose lockdowns.[40] At the same time, President Duque has said that congressional debate on a renegotiated tax reform bill aimed at plugging Colombia's fiscal deficit will restart on the same day mass protests have been called in July.[41]

A. *Cali*

Colombia's third-largest city of Cali, in the south-western Valle de Cauca department, has been the epicentre of urban protest and remains the place where unrest is most intense. Many of the grievances that fed protests across the country reach an extreme in the city. Inequality is marked not only by income but also race and geography. As the de facto capital of the Pacific coast, Cali has also absorbed the effects of a reconfiguration of conflict in the nearby regions of rural Valle de Cauca, Cauca, Nariño and Chocó resulting from the 2016 peace accord. The city is the last refuge for beleaguered displaced persons, threatened social leaders and the desperate poor.[42] Valle de Cauca is also home to the country's largest Afro-descendant population, yet this group has barely a toehold among Cali's economic and political elite.[43]

Discrimination on the basis of social class is brazen and is commonly felt by young people who live in certain poorer neighbourhoods. Although the low-income community of Siloé is just 5km from city hall, residents sense that they live far away from municipal power and often say they are "going to Cali" when they leave for the day.[44] These stark divisions grew even more profound during the pandemic: the number of people living in extreme poverty grew 280 per cent in the span of just one year.[45]

Long before the strike, residents of Cali's poorer neighbourhoods endured a troubled relationship with the police. Young people in Siloé say they are assumed to be criminals because of where they live, reflecting the fact that four rival criminal groups based in the area have divided control of city blocks and micro-drug-trafficking networks among one other. At the same time, community members accuse the police of corruption, making spurious arrests as a way to extract bribes while also taking a cut of drug-trafficking profits.[46] In the words of one local religious authority: "The police are not guaranteeing security but rather are a threat to security".[47]

[40] "Alcaldesa presentó propuesta para reabrir Bogotá responsablemente desde junio 8", press release, Mayor of Bogotá, 27 May 2021; "Medellín, sin restricciones covid desde el 8 de junio: Quintero", *El Colombiano,* 1 June 2021.
[41] "Duque aspira a que la nueva reforma tributaria se discuta desde el próximo 20 de julio en el Congreso", *Semana*, 15 June 2021.
[42] In 2020, more than 7,000 people were victims of forced displacement in Valle de Cauca, of which the largest share were Afro-Colombian. Buenaventura and Cali absorbed the majority of these internally displaced persons, most of whom fled rural violence. Displaced people from Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, Putumayo and elsewhere also live in Cali. "Briefing Regional: Valle de Cauca, Diciembre 2020", Equipo Local de Coordinación, December 2020.
[43] "Población Negra, Afrocolombiana, Raizal y Palenquera: Resultados del Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda 2018", Colombia National Satistics Agency, 6 November 2019.
[44] Crisis Group interviews, residents of Siloé, Cali, May 2021.
[45] "Pobreza monetaria y pobreza monetaria extrema: Presentación de resultados", Colombia National Statistics Agency, 29 April 2021.
[46] Crisis Group interviews, Siloé and Calipso residents and humanitarian officials, Cali, May 2021.
[47] Crisis Group interview, religious official, Cali, May 2021.

These hostile conditions primed Cali for protests, which evolved into an ecosystem of roadblocks and checkpoints stretching the length of the city. From 28 April, Cali saw some of the largest demonstrations as well as the most serious acts of vandalism, prompting the defence and interior ministers to deploy to the city, together with an additional 700 police and 300 soldiers, where they vowed to show zero tolerance for vandalism and roadblocks.[48] As the police became more visible, particularly in the evenings, roadblocks began to proliferate, either to cut off connections between parts of the city or to barricade neighbourhoods to police entry. Young protesters used stones, ropes, burned tires and any other materials they could find. Demonstrators also identified their primary demands, including "demilitarisation" of their neighbourhoods – meaning removal of police and military presence – and reparations and accountability for police violence.[49] Other petitions are for better access to education, jobs and political participation.[50] (See Section IV.B for more on police activity in Cali during the protests.)

By the end of the first week of May, roadblocks had become fixtures in 26 areas, with dozens more temporary barriers popping up daily. These "resistance points" were not merely means of protest; they also served to carve out local autonomy in places where residents say they previously had little control over their lives. Local "community representatives" (*voceros*) coordinated shifts of workers to staff the barricades, set rules to regulate behaviour and collected donations for communal soup kitchens. For security, they relied on a "front line" (*primera línea*) of shield-wielding protesters who said their role was to keep the riot police away from civilians.[51] Protesters asserted that the police's use of force to dismantle the barricades only expanded community support for the cause: "It is not only that we are fighting for education, to topple the health reform and so forth. Here there is also pain for what we have lost".[52]

Throughout May, these new forms of resistance grew deeper roots and developed leadership cadres that showed signs of persisting even after roadblocks eased. Local representatives determined who entered an area, who was allowed to speak to outsiders or the media, and how to allocate community aid. In some areas, front-line protesters started to take on community policing. "The front line should become the reference point for security within the community", an organiser in Siloé said.[53] This transformation has created tensions within poor neighbourhoods, particularly between protesters and both elderly residents, who grew irritated by the constant confrontations, and those who struggle to travel to jobs they depend upon and find it difficult to navigate the street closures.[54]

[48] See tweet by Diego Molano, Colombian defence minister, @Diego_Molano, 10:18pm, 29 April 2021; and tweet by Daniel Palam, Colombian interior minister, @DanielPalam, 7:18pm, 29 April 2021.
[49] Crisis Group interviews, community organisers, Cali, May 2021.
[50] "Solicitud Barrial", Portal Colombia nos Duele, Universidad de Javeriana Instituto de Estudios Interculturales, 25 June 2021.
[51] Crisis Group interviews, barricade spokespersons, Cali, May 2021.
[52] Crisis Group interview, front-line member, Cali, May 2021.
[53] Crisis Group interview, front-line organiser, Cali, May 2021.
[54] Crisis Group interviews, Siloé residents, Cali, May 2021.

Contrary to government claims, criminal groups active in these areas of Cali neither organised the protests nor compelled city denizens to join them, but the splintering of the urban environment has suited them well. Urban criminal groups thrive when they are able to entrench themselves in the community, exerting social control and facilitating collaboration with locals, both voluntary and forced. Neighbourhood blockades created a web of grey zones outside of government purview, where non-state interests could operate unhindered.[55] Moreover, criminal groups have allowed and at times offered solidarity to protesters as a means to gain local credibility.[56] In Siloé, rival criminal groups formed a non-aggression pact in support of the strike, winning them the appreciation of some locals and allowing residents to breathe a momentary sigh of relief:

> The [criminal] groups have behaved well. … We have to live with them because this is the reality of what we have here. … They have provided help to people during the pandemic when no one else did. They bought bread from the bakeries to give them business, and they offered people food. They are the only ones who don't steal.[57]

In other areas, protesters sought to nudge criminals' opportunistic attacks and theft toward the targets they preferred. As of late May, local small businesses in Siloé and Puerto Resistencia had not been vandalised or looted, whereas larger commercial outlets in the same areas were burned and ransacked.[58] Businesses considered not to be local also suffered more extensive looting, suggesting the involvement of criminal groups.[59] As of 25 May, the defence ministry reported that 90 gas stations – which in Colombia belong mostly to big oil companies including multinationals – had been vandalised nationwide, of which the largest number were in Cali.[60]

Simultaneously, Cali has been at the centre of anti-strike mobilisation, some of it violent. Regardless of the protesters' selection of targets, the blockades caused serious harm to the city's economy, with Cali suffering shortages in basic food items and fuel in early May.[61] Several thousand counter-demonstrators dressed in white held a "march of silence" on 25 May to call for an end to the roadblocks.[62]

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[55] Crisis Group interviews, residents and local authorities, Cali, May 2021.
[56] Crisis Group interviews, community and protest leaders, Cali, May 2021.
[57] Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Cali, May 2021.
[58] "No one can touch local stores; we have this level of social control internally", said one protester. Crisis Group interview, front-line member, Cali, May 2021.
[59] For example, heavy equipment has been stolen from gas stations that were subsequently burned down. Crisis Group interviews, residents in blockade area, Cali, May 2021.
[60] "Balance General: Paro Nacional 2021", Ministry of Defence, 25 May 2021.
[61] "'No podemos permitir que lleguemos a la alerta roja por desabastecimiento de comida': Alcalde de Cali", press release, Cali mayor's office, 11 May 2021. Cali's chamber of commerce estimates that businesses in Valle de Cauca and neighbouring Cauca together lost $1.1 billion in the first month of the strike. "Enormes costos de paro en Valle: al día se pierden $ 100 mil millones", *El Tiempo*, 29 May 2021.
[62] These marches have subsequently found echoes in other major cities such as Medellín and Bogotá. Oliver Griffin, "Thousands march in Colombia's Bogota to demand end to protests, roadblocks", Reuters, 30 May 2021.

Violent opposition has also emerged and established alarming links to the official police response. Civilians, at times organised into armed vigilante bands, have fired upon protesters without police intervening to stop them. In the first such episode, on 9 May, white-clad civilians shot at members of Cauca's unarmed indigenous community who had travelled to Cali and blocked access to a wealthy neighbourhood, Ciudad Jardín.[63] On 28 May, armed civilians were filmed standing next to policemen and firing at crowds. The police said it is investigating ten policemen for appearing to allow the shootings.[64] In another case the same day, vigilantes captured a music student from the University of Valle de Cauca after he had performed at a protest. The student later emerged in police custody, bloody and beaten. He was released after a public outcry.[65]

Meanwhile, plainclothes police officers were filmed in May exiting a police van and clashing with protesters; the police subsequently confirmed that the men were on active duty.[66] On 28 May, a plainclothes off-duty officer of the Attorney General's Office shot a protester before being chased down and kicked to death by demonstrators.

In part because of the rising violence, both from anti-government demonstrators as well as from local criminal groups, by the end of May some community activists who supported the barricades reported a growing perception that things were "getting out of hand", as one put it. On one hand, protesters and their families were weary of the toll of violence against young demonstrators. On the other hand, as one leader put it: "We need to lower the tone [among young demonstrators] because it is starting to get out of our control. Here there's also an issue of the criminal bands, and you cannot control them".[67] Local leaders' determination to prevent blockades from falling under criminals' sway helps explain why protesters in Siloé announced on 11 June that they would lift most roadblocks and enter a perpetual "popular assembly".[68]

Although most blockades have now been similarly lifted, local authorities worry that it may be difficult to regain control over swathes of the city. Residents appear unlikely to welcome the police's return. The mayor's office has expressed particular alarm over incidents of vigilante violence due to the widespread ownership of firearms in the city as well as their resemblance to acts of paramilitary violence, familiar from recent Colombian history.[69] These groups could grow more organised and una-

[63] Santiago Torrado, "Civiles armados disparan a grupos indígenas y el caos se apodera de Cali", *El Pais,* 10 May 2021; "Qué pasó en el sur de Cali el 9m?", op. cit.
[64] "Investigan a 10 policías por permitir que civiles dispararan en medio de los disturbios en Cali", Blu Radio, 30 May 2021. Siloé residents filmed civilians shooting at protesters and allegedly taking one front-line member into their custody on 4 June.
[65] "Cuando la Policía se alió con hombres armados vestidos de civil", *Cuestión Publica,* 16 June 2021.
[66] "Paro Nacional: Policía admite que camión con hombres vestidos de civil es suyo", *El Espectador,* 6 May 2021.
[67] Crisis Group interview, social organiser, Cali, May 2021.
[68] "Comunicado Conjunto La Glorieta de la Lucha Siloé & Punto Resistencia La Nave", 11 June 2021.
[69] Crisis Group interview, senior official, Mayor's Office, Cali, May 2021. Beginning in the 1960s, landholders and others opposed to the FARC guerrilla movement formed self-defence groups that would later morph into violent, right-wing paramilitary organisations, the largest of which was the United Self Defence Forces of Colombia, formed in 1997. Paramilitaries were responsible for atrocities across the country, and were involved in drug trafficking, until their demobilisation beginning in 2003. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°8, *Demobilising the Paramilitaries in Colombia: An Achievable Goal?*, 5 August 2004.

bashed in their use of violence against left-leaning activists. Simultaneously, criminal and trafficking groups have almost certainly grown more entrenched. Security officials privately report a significant increase in the seizure of heavy arms trafficked into Cali since the start of the strike.[70]

B. *Rural Mobilisation*

Although less visible than urban demonstrations, rural protests have formed an important part of Colombia's strike, and their impact in reshaping the security landscape may be even more enduring. *Campesinos*, Afro-Colombians and indigenous people, transport companies and other rural dwellers have protested across the country. As in cities, economic hardship and mistreatment by security forces are the primary concerns. Protesters decry the slow fulfilment of the 2016 peace accord, particularly the chapters on rural reform – intended to provide better access to roads and markets and address land inequality, among other things – as well as the failing program for voluntary substitution of illicit coca crops.[71] The continued killing of community leaders is another grievance that has enraged protesters for several years, notably in the 2019 wave of unrest.[72]

Food security is a common theme, with protesters calling for price guarantees for local agriculture and better commercial infrastructure to enable local farmers to earn a consistent living.[73] A demonstrator at one rural roadblock explained: "*Campesinos* have their own production of chickens, and they should be able to sell in the city centres, but it turns out that it is cheaper to bring chickens from outside than to buy locally. This should not be the case".[74]

In regions historically affected by armed conflict, abiding distrust of the armed forces also shapes demonstrators' concerns. Most pointedly, *campesinos* and coca growers seek an end to all forced coca eradication, which they argue destroys their livelihoods without offering alternatives. Protesters in Catatumbo, site of Colombia's largest concentration of coca crops, said the end of eradication is the "heart" of their demands and a "minimum condition" to end demonstrations. They want the government and security forces to promise not to restart aerial fumigation until they attempt to negotiate voluntary coca substitution agreements.[75]

Other frustrations with the military have also surfaced. People from southern Meta and northern Guaviare travelled to Villavicencio, the closest mid-size city, to demand an end to the military's anti-deforestation operation, Plan Artemisa. This program,

[70] The munitions, including new U.S.- and Russian-made heavy weapons, arrive in parts to be assembled. While this influx of weapons predates the strike, the amounts seized have increased. Crisis Group interviews, local and international security sources, May 2021.
[71] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°87, *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, 26 February 2021.
[72] Crisis Group Report, *Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace*, op. cit.
[73] Crisis Group interviews, protesters from Huila, Bogotá, June 2021.
[74] Crisis Group interview, protester at roadblock, San Jose del Guaviare, May 2021.
[75] Crisis Group interview, protest leader from Catatumbo, Bogotá, June 2021. "Mínimos para la Distención", Mesa Campesina, Agraria, Minería Artesanal y de Paz, perteneciente al Comité Departamental de Paro, Norte de Santander, 26 May 2021.

they contend, disproportionately hurts long-time residents of protected lands without harming the logging companies responsible for most deforestation.[76]

Rural protests use a variety of strategies to catch government attention. In some cases, demonstrators have gathered in small and medium-sized cities to join existing marches. Truck drivers and *campesino* associations have also blocked inter-city roads, interrupting the flow of key supplies.[77] Indigenous protesters in Cauca have intermittently shut off the primary artery from Cali to Popayán, while in Putumayo, demonstrators said their only way to pressure authorities was to block transit routes for tanker trucks taking crude oil out of the region or even to enter oil extraction sites directly.[78] For this reason, smaller cities were among the hardest hit by shortages and price speculation in early May.[79] Department-level strike committees, which feed into the national committee, scrambled throughout May to develop a collective set of demands that represent the range of rural grievances, though at least some local protests remain outside the control of any national organisation and could continue to press their own demands.

In areas where armed groups and criminal organisations are engaged in contests for territorial and social control, they have sometimes sought to use the rural strikes to their advantage. For example, in an effort to assert control over local residents to advance their interests, pamphlets in the name of some of these groups, ordering residents to back or oppose the demonstrations, have proliferated.

Conflicting real and fake pamphlets are sometimes issued in the name of the same group, leaving residents both confused and fearful that they will misstep and get on the wrong side of local power brokers. For example, in May, a seemingly false pamphlet purporting to be issued by Comandos de la Frontera, a criminal group based in Putumayo, initially called on all protesters to abandon their roadblocks. Several days later, on 15 May, the group issued a pamphlet proclaiming that past pamphlets were false and offering support for the strike.[80] Similarly, after several apparently fake pamphlets purportedly issued by the National Liberation Army (ELN) circulated on social media calling for an armed strike, on 19 May the ELN distributed a real one through its official accounts saying that it supported peaceful popular mobilisation and accusing the government of using dialogue as a way to divert attention from its alleged military crackdown.[81] False pamphlets have appeared claiming to be signed by various FARC dissident fronts, the Gaitanista drug cartel and an array of local groups.

Although armed and criminal groups appeared to be urging residents to join the protests in at least some areas, many demonstrators would have marched regardless

[76] Crisis Group interview, member of Local Action Committee from Meta, San José del Guaviare, May 2021; "Pliego de Exigencias", Coordinación de Paro del Meta y Guaviare, May 2021.
[77] Two weeks into the strike, the finance ministry estimated that the daily cost of blockades and other disruptions was in the order of $134 million. "El paro le ha costado $6,2 billones al país", *Portafolio,* 12 May 2021.
[78] Crisis Group correspondence, civil society groups in Putumayo, April and May 2021.
[79] For example, several small towns in northern Cauca, Guaviare and central Putumayo experienced crippling fuel shortages for much of May. Crisis Group interviews, May 2021.
[80] Pamphlets seen by Crisis Group. Crisis Group correspondence, Putumayo-based civil society and community leaders, May 2021.
[81] "La Solución es Negociar con el Pueblo, no Militarizar", communiqué, ELN, 19 May 2021.

of this nudge. A local security analyst in the department of Meta explained that "*campesinos* in [the region of] Guayabero don't need anyone to tell them to march". A delegation of protesting *campesinos* reportedly included individuals with ties to a FARC dissident front, perhaps because these guerrillas have assumed a role as quasi-authorities in the places where they live.[82]

In other areas, for example the Catatumbo region, some parts of civil society have hoped to use the strike as a means to strengthen their resilience in the face of the armed groups' intimidation. There, a coalition of roughly eighteen civil society groups banded together in support of the strike; this rare unity has given them greater negotiating power when up against rival armed groups including the ELN and FARC dissidents, each jostling for influence.

The decision by demonstrators in early June to lift most of their roadblocks due to their growing unpopularity was not well received by FARC dissidents in the region. "There was tension when we decided to lift the blockade", a protest leader said, adding that the dissidents had supported the limits on transportation because, in effect, it cordoned off the territory they control from the state. "We have had to make clear to them: this *paro* (strike) comes from us, it is not theirs".[83]

[82] Crisis Group interview, local security analyst, San José del Guaviare, May 2021.
[83] Crisis Group interview, Catatumbo protest leader, Bogotá, June 2021.

IV. Government Responses

The Duque administration has struggled to acknowledge the protesters' legitimate complaints and has repeatedly described the strike as a conspiracy against the government. As such, top officials have treated the turmoil primarily as a law enforcement challenge requiring a robust response from the security forces. Although Bogotá started negotiations with strike organisers on 10 May, it never abandoned its accusations that a mix of political rivals and organised criminals lay behind the protests.[84] These claims have contributed to undermining trust between the government and protesters.[85]

A. *The Blame Game*

Duque and his cabinet have been steadfast in arguing that a malicious hand is manipulating violence at demonstrations, though they have struggled to clarify who is responsible for specific acts or provide more than circumstantial evidence.[86] Defence Minister Diego Molano has repeatedly ascribed his claims of ELN and FARC dissident participation in the unrest to "military intelligence" and pointed to the arrest of eleven people in the strike's first month on charges of being members of these groups.[87] He has also asserted that these larger armed groups are paying networks of local criminal bands in neighbourhoods where protests are located.[88]

The conviction that criminals or other troublemakers are responsible for acts of violence underlays the government's initial predilection for using aggressive crowd

[84] Officials in the Duque government have blamed a wide range of actors for stirring up protests, including criminals, opposition politicians, and Venezuelan and Russian government agents. In a 22 May video released in English, Duque blamed the protests on opposition figure Gustavo Petro, without naming him directly. Justice Minister Wilson Ruiz spoke of an "organised international plot to discredit" Colombia. "Colombia is Rising Up", *Vice Media*, 28 May 2021. Defence Minister Molano has accused an array of armed groups, including FARC dissident factions and the ELN, of being behind premeditated vandalism; he said Russia was behind cyberattacks and misinformation implicating the security forces in wrongdoing. "Rusia responde a Mindefensa por decir que ese país interviene en redes", *El Tiempo,* 21 May 2021. On 6 May, the president's commissioner for security, Rafael Guarín, appeared to claim that the Venezuelan government was paying vandals. See tweet by Rafael Guarín, @RafaGuarin, 11:37am, 6 May 2021. Former President Andrés Pastrana accused Petro of being Venezuela's preferred candidate in Colombia's forthcoming election, going on to charge Caracas with perpetrating "funded vandalism". "Duque me ofreció la Embajada en Washington y le dije que no: Andrés Pastrana", W Radio, 31 May 2021. Government-aligned media outlets have amplified these elaborate conspiracy theories. See, for example, "Paro nacional: ¿A qué juega Gustavo Petro?", *Semana,* 8 May 2021.

[85] As an indicator of the low trust, the strike committee's proposed pre-accord with the government, which aims to pave the way for substantive talks, includes a demand for a government guarantee not to stigmatise protesters or make claims about armed group infiltration without evidence. "Propuesta de Preacuerdo de Garantías a la Movilización Social en Colombia Entregada por el Comité Nacional de Paro al Gobierno Nacional, Punto A.2", 30 May 2021.

[86] "Colombia is Rising Up", op. cit.

[87] "Ministro de Defensa de Colombia vincula vandalismo en las protestas con las FARC y el ELN", CNN Español, 7 May 2021; Tatiana Duque, "El paro está cosechando toda la violencia que hay en Cali", *La Silla Vacia,* 8 June 2021

[88] "'Terrorismo de baja intensidad en protestas es financiado por disidencias y el ELN': Diego Molano", La FM, 3 May 2021.

control methods.[89] After police reported looting on 28 April in Cali, Molano temporarily relocated to the city, where he remained throughout much of the strike. Two days later, Duque joined Molano as well as his attorney general, Francisco Barbosa, in arguing that vandalism of public property was equivalent to "low-level urban terrorism" and proved the existence of "an orchestrated plan because there are structures [in place] that could be part of and financed by armed groups".[90] Shortly afterward, Duque authorised the military to assist the police in controlling protests.[91] On 5 May, the president offered rewards of up to 10 million pesos ($2,750) for information about individuals involved in vandalism.[92]

B. *Security Force Deployment and Police Violence*

As the protests continued, police settled into a pattern of confrontation with demonstrators in major cities. With some exceptions, marches held during daylight hours tended to pass without incident. The police were strikingly absent from the streets of Cali until late afternoon, when they began to fan out toward roadblocks where they expected tension, for example Puerto Resistencia, Siloé, Calipso and Loma de la Cruz. In these settings, the police response included documented cases of violence, resulting in scores of injuries and more than a dozen deaths. Police in Cali and elsewhere – notably other parts of Valle de Cauca as well as small cities around Bogotá such as Facatativá and Madrid – fired live ammunition at protesters, as well as tear gas and rubber bullets at close range; a number of demonstrators were injured or killed with lethal weapons.[93] Protesters at barricades in Cali have collected 9mm and 20mm bullet casings.[94]

As of 25 June, the defence ministry said it knew of 24 deaths related to protests, with another eleven instances undergoing verification.[95] Two of the confirmed dead are police officers, while the rest are civilians. Civil society groups, however, put this number far higher at 75 as of the same date.[96] Also as of 24 June, the Inspector General's Office had opened 217 disciplinary actions to investigate misbehaviour by public officials during the protests, including 172 against members of the security forces.[97]

Despite acute concerns about police abuse among the Colombian public as well as foreign governments, the government has backed the security forces unequivocally.[98]

[89] "Colombia: Egregious Police Abuses Against Protesters", op. cit.
[90] "Duque dice que el vandalismo durante el paro nacional es 'terrorismo urbano de baja intensidad'", *Semana,* 30 April 2021.
[91] "Artículo 170: Asistencia militar", Código Nacional de Policía y Convivencia, Colombia, 29 July 2016.
[92] Tweet by Ivan Duque, Colombian president, @IvanDuque, 2:13pm, 5 May 2021.
[93] "Colombia: Bachelet llama al diálogo y al respeto de los derechos humanos tras nuevas informaciones sobre muertos y heridos en Cali", Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 30 May 2021.
[94] Crisis Group observations, Cali blockades, May 2021.
[95] "Balance General: Paro Nacional 2021", Ministry of Defence, 25 June 2021.
[96] "Listado de las 75: Víctimas de violencia homicida en el marco del paro nacional al 24 de junio", op. cit.
[97] "Balance General: Paro Nacional 2021", Ministry of Defence, 25 June 2021.
[98] Colombia's major allies – as well as international bodies including the Organization of American States, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and others – have expressed

Duque has repeatedly denied that police abuse is a systemic problem in the force.[99] The defence ministry has released dozens of videos hailing ESMAD, the police and the military as professional and patriotic, and expressing approval of their behaviour.[100] At the same time, the authorities have firmly condemned instances in which protesters have acted violently against officers; according to defence officials, such attacks had wounded 1,454 officers by 24 June. By contrast, it took Duque until 11 May to acknowledge – let alone express regret over – casualties among protesters, which he did in the emblematic case of a peaceful demonstrator shot by armed civilians in Pereira.[101]

As demonstrations escalated, the president turned to the military for additional support. On 9 May, he promised a major troop deployment to Cali. Following a resurgence of violence on 28 May, his government issued a decree mandating local authorities in eight departments and thirteen cities to remove all blockades, with the assistance of police officers and soldiers if needed.[102] Throughout the crisis, members of the governing party, aligned with former President Uribe, clamoured for Duque to declare a state of exception, which would give him extensive powers to pass or suspend legislation unilaterally, extend surveillance and use force to disperse demonstrations and clear roadblocks.[103]

Duque did not take this step. Overall, while the military has deployed to some areas, including roads to airports and other key transport nodes, local authorities as well as the military itself have been reluctant to let soldiers take on a larger or more visible role.[104] The governor of Caquetá and mayor of Bucaramanga, for example,

concern about violence during protests. The European Commission said, for example: "Excessive use of force in repressing such protests … and any further disproportionate use of force by the security forces must stop". "Colombia: Statement by High Representative/Vice President Borrell on violence during social protests", press release, European Commission, 6 May 2021; "Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Colombian Vice President Ramírez", press release, U.S. State Department, 28 May 2021. Fifty-five members of the U.S. Congress also wrote a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken calling for an end to certain types of U.S. assistance due to police brutality. "Reps. McGovern, Pocan, Schakowsky, Grijalva Lead 55 Members of Congress Urging State Department to Clearly and Unambiguously Denounce Police Brutality in Colombia", press release, Office of Jim McGovern, 14 May 2021.

[99] "Iván Duque: 'No voy a aceptar que nadie desangre a Colombia'", *El País,* 31 May 2021.

[100] Speaking to Congress, for example, the defence minister said "those who generate violence" – not the police – were to blame for deaths during the protests. "Diego Molano: 'La responsabilidad no es de la Policía, sino de quienes generan violencia'", CNN Español, 26 May 2021. Several days later, Molano asserted that the police were "always acting within the law" while containing the protests. "Gobierno colombiano sobre reforma policial: 'Los cambios no son cosméticos'", EFE, 6 June 2021.

[101] "Presidente Duque lamenta la muerte de Lucas Villa", *El Espectador,* 11 May 2021.

[102] Decreto Número 575 de 2021, Ministry of Interior, 28 May 2021.

[103] "Uribistas piden a Duque declarar la conmoción interior en Colombia, qué significa tomar ese camino", Infobae, 4 May 2021. Articles 213 and 214 of the constitution state that the president can declare a state of exception when there are extraordinary challenges to public order; it allows the executive, among other things, to suspend existing laws. This means, in practice, that the president could restrict social protest, limit what the media is allowed to report on, intercept private communications and suspend local authorities. In some cases, it would even allow home searches to take place without a warrant. "¿Qué es la conmoción interior que piden sectores del uribismo?", *El Tiempo*, 5 May 2021.

[104] Crisis Group interviews, local authorities and senior military officials, May 2021.

separately argued after the 28 May decree that military deployment was neither necessary nor productive. They said they would favour talks with protesters to lift blockades.[105] Some senior military officers fear the protests could distract the army from other priorities, such as disrupting illicit trafficking routes, and risk tarnishing its reputation, which is better than that of the police.[106]

C. *Reforms and Negotiations*

The government's political efforts to address the turmoil have run in parallel – and at times in sharp contrast – with the emphasis on force. In the first two weeks of unrest, Duque sought no national-level dialogue with the protesters. Instead, he made a series of concessions that largely failed to quell demonstrations. On 2 May, the president withdrew the tax reform that had sparked protests. Congress then nixed a second reform bill for the health system, which critics said would have strengthened the role of private firms in health care. Aiming to placate student unions, on 11 May Duque announced that the lowest three (of six) demographic classes, known as *estratos* and based on housing quality, would pay no tuition at public universities during the fall semester of 2021. While strike leaders claimed these moves as victories, they did little to calm protests, partly because the government undertook them without negotiation, but also because the measures addressed only a fraction of protesters' concerns. Free tuition, for example, applies only to the minority of college-age students who have gained access to public university.[107]

Duque went on to unveil an "integral transformation" plan for the national police, intended to come into force through a mix of presidential decrees and proposed legislation, although the latter would be unlikely to pass Congress before the 2022 presidential election.[108] The plan, if carried out, would aim to improve training for the police, increase transparency through the use of body cameras and other technology, and change the police uniform and its public image. But the reform would also keep police command within the defence ministry's ambit; cases of abuse would also remain within the military justice system, albeit with some modifications.

Progress in negotiations has been slow. Duque met with the national strike committee for the first time on 10 May, with the latter exiting saying they had felt no "empathy" from the president.[109] To help establish confidence, the Catholic Church, UN Verification Mission in Colombia and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia subsequently sent representatives to the talks. Negotiations stumbled

[105] "Comunicado de Prensa", Governorship of Caquetá, 29 May 2021; tweet by Juan Carlos Cárdenas, mayor of Bucaramanga, @JCardenasRey, 6:36pm, 29 May 2021.
[106] Crisis Group interviews, May 2021.
[107] As of 2018, public universities accounted for just over one third of the roughly 1,250,000 places available in the higher education system. Combining public and private institutions, Colombia has places available for roughly half of university-age students. At public universities, those from lower-income groups make up a significant percentage – 94 per cent – of the student body. "Sistema Universitario Estatal de Colombia: Características de las Universidades Públicas del SUE y de la Educación Superior en Colombia", Sistema Universitario Estatal, December 2018.
[108] "Presidente Duque lanza proceso de transformación integral de la Policía Nacional", communiqué, Colombian Presidency, 6 June 2021.
[109] "Protestas en Colombia: el Comité del Paro da por fracasado el primer intento de diálogo con el gobierno", BBC Mundo, 10 May 2021.

along until early June. The national strike committee insists that it cannot negotiate with the government until the two parties agree on basic guarantees for peaceful protest. On 27 May, the two were apparently close to a text laying out these basic guarantees. Duque declined to ratify it without a promise that all roadblocks would be lifted, however. The strike committee agreed on 1 June to begin removing some roadblocks, partly as a gesture of good-will, and partly in light of the growing unpopularity of these means of protest.[110]

Days later, however, the negotiations broke down. The strike committee accused the government of using delaying tactics and inserting new language into previously settled text that demands a permanent end to all blockades.[111] The government-appointed leader of talks called the committee's decision to step back from talks a "disappointment to the country".[112]

Both sides have weaknesses that hinder compromise. Duque is politically isolated and lacks a stable coalition in Congress. He faces criticism from his own party, the Democratic Centre, for not declaring a full state of exception and using force to decisively end blockades.[113] With elections looming in 2022, Duque's party will not want to offer major concessions. Indeed, some in the party may view protests as a boon, given how public opinion has turned against roadblocks due to their economic impact.[114] For its part, the strike committee may struggle to assure protesters' compliance with any agreement it reaches. Composed of more than twenty organisations and 30 departmental subcommittees, its constituency is too broad to speak with a single voice. Yet it is dominated by older union leaders and thus not representative enough to speak for all the protesters. Younger protesters complain that they are not represented in the talks and will not adhere to agreements that are made. "We are fed up with all of the formal forums for participation, where all of the promises are just on paper", one youth in Guaviare explained.[115]

At the same time, as national talks got under way, Colombia's regions began hosting dozens of dialogues at the city, municipal or departmental level. Some of these have borne fruit, first by creating humanitarian corridors to allow food and medicine through barriers and later by setting up working groups to tackle demonstrators' larger demands. In Cali, local authorities managed to lift 22 of the city's 26 roadblocks through dialogue, with only four requiring police intervention.[116] Although Bogotá has at times sent delegates to these discussions, its representatives are not

[110] "Encuesta: ¿Está en riesgo la democracia?", NotiCentro 1 CM&, 31 May 2021; "Propuesta de Preacuerdo de Garantías a la Movilización Social en Colombia Entregada por el Comité Nacional de Paro al Gobierno Nacional, Punto A.2", op. cit.

[111] "Ante el incumplimiento del gobierno de la firma del preacuerdo de garantías, Comité National del Paro decide suspender negociación", communiqué, National Strike Committee, 6 June 2021.

[112] "Que comité del paro se haya levantado de diálogos es decepcionante para el país: Emilio Archila", Blu Radio, 7 June 2021.

[113] See footnote 103.

[114] Weighing in on the protests, Democratic Centre members have emphasised the economic damage caused by blockades and described the left as being sympathetic to or even actively supportive of armed groups among the protesters. See, for example, "La Reunion con la CIDH", press release, office of Senator Paloma Valencia, 14 June 2021.

[115] Crisis Group interview, protester, San José del Guaviare, May 2021.

[116] Crisis Group telephone interview, senior official, Cali mayor's office, June 2021.

authorised to take decisions, and local authorities say the national government has not empowered them to do so, either.[117] Nor do mayors or governors have oversight over some issues that protesters wish to discuss, such as police behaviour. The constitution says mayors are the primary authorities over police in their municipalities, but it also establishes the police as a national institution, consolidating a chain of command emanating from the defence ministry in Bogotá.[118] In practice, the ministry's orders often supersede mayors' instructions.[119]

A series of events around Colombia's largest port of Buenaventura demonstrated the peril of this disconnect between local and national authorities. After weeks of work stoppages at the port, Duque visited Buenaventura and asked members of his cabinet to join talks to negotiate an agreement with the departmental strike committee, local authorities and religious officials to enable greater shipping movement.[120] A day after the agreement was signed, however, the interior minister retracted support for the accord, arguing that one of its provisions – allowing departmental strike committee members to help inspect cargo – was a violation of national sovereignty. The apparent miscommunication with Bogotá set back negotiations significantly and may cloud future agreements.[121]

[117] Duque has sent various members of his cabinet to sit in on conversations, though they are not always present in local talks and are not able to take key decisions. In Huila, for example, the ministers of transport and agriculture, as well as the head of the national infrastructure agency, have attended some dialogue sessions.
[118] "Constitución Política de Colombia 1991", Articles 218 and 315.
[119] One local official described his level of de facto influence as being able to "offer recommendations, orientation, but not decision-making". Crisis Group interview, senior local official, May 2021.
[120] "Acta de Concertación suscrita entre el Comité Distrital del Paro Nacional y el Gobierno Nacional", 27 May 2021.
[121] "Polémica por pactos firmados entre Gobierno y Comité del Paro en Buenaventura", *El Espectador,* 28 May 2021.

V. Risks of Escalation

Even though blockages have eased and protest activity has slowed, the yawning gap between the sides threatens instability in several ways. Perhaps the most likely scenario is slow-burning unrest that erupts at regular intervals, at least until the country holds the first round of presidential voting in May 2022. Although the strike is not linked to any single political party, the fact that the vote is now visible on the horizon complicates efforts to dampen tensions.

The ruling party, seeking to appear strong, has painted the protests as a wellspring of leftist chaos, connecting the turmoil to guerrillas, the Venezuelan government and the leading left-wing candidate for the 2022 polls, Gustavo Petro. The allegations against Petro – that he and his allies are funding the protesters and fuelling their militancy – are particularly politically charged and will certainly play a role in the forthcoming campaign.[122] While the leftist leader, who lost to Duque in the 2018 polls, has called for demonstrations at various points during the strike, he has also kept some distance from them, seemingly in recognition of the right's attempts to paint him as a harbinger of disorder.[123] At least publicly, Petro has argued against roadblocks, and he only belatedly marched himself.[124] He has accused Duque of wanting to exploit the protests for his party's electoral benefit.[125]

Long-running political and economic uncertainty, as well as the pandemic's continuing ravages, could also drive more significant escalation, including the risk of increasing violence both by and against the police. The police have faced few repercussions for misbehaviour and instead continue to hear unequivocal support for their approach from their chain of command in the country's political leadership. If protests spike again, tensions with protesters and a lack of accountability might embolden the police to skirt the law and use additional force, provoking retaliatory violence. Protesters, especially younger ones, express a fatalistic sense that they have nothing to lose, given their scant prospects to make a dignified living as adults; at some tense roadblocks, they have actively sought confrontations with the security forces.[126] On several occasions, they have directly attacked or detained police officers, at times violently.[127] Frustration and recurrent clashes may increase the frequency of such incidents.

[122] The government-aligned media outlet *Semana* has published an array of articles and accusations that Petro is set upon creating chaos on the streets. See, for example, "Gustavo Petro, ¡Basta ya!: editorial de SEMANA", *Semana,* 22 May 2021; "Petro sí tiene que ver con el paro: Néstor Humberto Martínez", *Semana,* 12 June 2021.

[123] Petro also held a series of meetings with business leaders throughout the month of May apparently aimed at alleviating concerns about his economic policies. See, for example, "Gustavo Petro se reúne con altos empresarios judíos en Colombia", La FM, 15 May 2021.

[124] See, for example, tweet by Gustavo Petro, @petrogustavo, 10:39am, 9 June 2021. Although he had called on demonstrators to take to the streets, Petro did not join protests in person until 19 May. "Gustavo Petro se suma a los manifestantes en Colombia", *El País Colombia,* 19 May 2021.

[125] "Gustavo Petro asegura que Duque está prolongando el paro nacional a su beneficio", *Semana,* 28 May 2021.

[126] Crisis Group observations, Cali, May 2021.

[127] In one instance in May, protesters in Siloé detained and attempted to interrogate two policemen who had entered their neighbourhood, but local human rights monitors were able to secure their release. Crisis Group interviews, protesters and local social leaders from Siloé, Cali, May 2021.

In cities such as Cali, the risk of armed vigilante violence remains significant. Local officials and analysts fear that prolonged damage to the city's economy could fuel the trend toward civilian attacks upon demonstrators and left-leaning activists. One of those filmed shooting at protesters on 28 May later told media that his neighbourhood had formed a group to defend their property.[128] Vigilante violence and police violence against protesters have raised intense concerns over the reported number of disappearances during the national strike. The civil society group Indepaz reported on 15 June that 539 people had gone missing, though the Attorney General's Office says most of the reported cases (335 of 419 as of 15 June) have been located.[129] A total of 84 people remain unaccounted for.[130]

Non-state armed groups have not been the main forces behind rural mobilisation, but they may prove to be the beneficiaries of prolonged unrest. As noted, some groups felt they benefited from inter-city roadblocks that temporarily cordoned off parts of the countryside where they operate. As a senior military officer put it: "There are protests for many legitimate reasons. … [But] armed groups have discovered that protests are a good shield to hide behind".[131]

Indigenous authorities in northern Cauca who strongly oppose the presence of armed groups said that threats against them have increased, as FARC dissidents in the area try to exploit the distraction of armed forces and the government's unpopularity to consolidate social control.[132] Residents in Tibú, Norte de Santander, said that the strike had emboldened the various armed groups to compete with one another and state forces. The Gaitanista drug cartel, which emerged from the remnants of the disbanded, violent paramilitary groups that once contested the FARC, have issued pamphlets threatening to attack demonstrators and social movements. Locals reported that the unrest has emboldened the cartel's push northward from Cúcuta into Tibú, now dominated by the ELN and FARC dissidents.[133] Blockades along all major highways for nearly six weeks paused forced eradication operations in the municipality, which has the highest concentration of coca crops in Colombia.

Security forces in Tibú have also faced an onslaught of attacks from the ELN and FARC dissidents in recent months, such that they rarely conduct urban patrols and cannot venture far from well-barricaded rural checkpoints. Elected neighbourhood councils have come under pressure to organise residents in line with armed groups' demands.[134] A number of local leaders facing threats to their lives have had to leave

[128] "'No soy paramilitar': aparece Andrés Escobar, uno de los civiles que accionó un arma contra manifestantes en Cali", *Semana,* 31 May 2021.

[129] "Boletín Paro Nacional 2021: Cifras de Violencia", Indepaz, 15 June 2021; "335 personas han sido localizadas y se mantiene activo el mecanismo de búsqueda urgente en 84 casos", press release, Office of the Attorney General, 15 June 2021.

[130] On 20 June, the decapitated head of a 22-year-old who had been reported missing was found in Tuluá, Valle del Cauca. Some accounts indicate he was part of the protest movement there. Authorities argue that he was killed in a micro-drug-trafficking dispute, while his family said he was uninvolved in either crime or the demonstrations. "Detector: Santiago Ochoa no fue detenido por el ESMAD ni era de la Primera Línea", *La Silla Vacía*, 24 June 2021

[131] Crisis Group interview, senior military official, May 2021.

[132] Crisis Group correspondence, indigenous authorities in northern Cauca, May and June 2021.

[133] Crisis Group interviews, security sources and social leaders, Tibú, June 2021.

[134] Crisis Group interviews, religious authorities and social leaders, Tibú, June 2021.

the municipality in recent weeks.[135] Armed groups in this area and elsewhere could benefit further if the military is asked to assume a more prominent role in policing urban areas.[136]

Criminal groups' support for the blockades in Cali, meanwhile, has strengthened their local reputation, which they are also likely to exploit to their advantage. Already, the protests have in effect expelled the police from a number of areas. Local social leaders worry that these groups could take advantage of desperation among younger demonstrators who want to move toward taking up arms.[137] Similarly, whispers about right-wing vigilantism are now omnipresent on social media, feeding a dangerous cycle of mutual perceptions that the "other side" is preparing for a more serious confrontation in the city. This fear could easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy and result in more outright violence.

[135] Crisis Group interviews, social leaders and elected local council officials, Tibú, June 2021.
[136] Crisis Group interview, senior military official, Bogotá, May 2021.
[137] Crisis Group interviews and correspondence, social leaders, Cali, May and June 2021.

VI. Moving Forward

Colombia's mass protests are to a great extent being driven by the economic distress affecting many of its people, and the grievances created by socio-economic inequality that begins at birth. One's place in the hierarchy colours one's life choices and largely determines one's opportunities, as well as experiences of interaction with the state. While inequality is not new, the pandemic, which has affected poorer people's health, life and livelihoods far more than those of the better off, has rendered it intolerable to demonstrators. As one protester from Valle de Cauca put it: "We are the generation that is fed up with injustice and such deep inequality".[138]

Some activists propose a new constituent assembly, of the sort established after months of protests in Chile, to thrash out the terms and conditions for a fairer society.[139] Others, particularly those who participated in the process that led to Colombia's 1991 constitution, argue that instead of a new text, the country needs the government to abide by the existing one.[140] Authorities could, they say, employ the mechanisms outlined in the charter, such as popular consultations, referendums or open councils, either to address specific grievances or to build consensus around reforms aimed at greater social equity.[141]

The 2016 peace accord offers another comprehensive framework for reform aimed at transforming the conditions underlying Colombia's conflict, including rural inequality, coca cultivation and limited political participation, while also seeking to reduce violence against social leaders and ensure redress for victims.[142] Robust implementation of the accord would likely address many of the protesters' concerns, above all in the countryside. Critics, however, have questioned the government's commitment to fulfilling key provisions of the accord, such as the voluntary substitution of coca, which has been replaced by a drive to eradicate the crop by force, exacerbating community estrangement from the state in certain areas.[143]

To reach a point where real dialogue can take place, however, de-escalating immediate tensions is crucial. That will be difficult. Trust between the government and protesters has been shattered. Some protesters point to a history of local accords with government, many of which have fallen by the wayside, as grounds to be wary of official promises.[144] Officials, for their part, argue that they cannot negotiate effectively un-

[138] Crisis Group interview, protester from Valle de Cauca, Bogotá, June 2021.
[139] "¿Por qué se ha empezado a hablar en Colombia de una constituyente?", *El Tiempo*, 18 May 2021.
[140] "La salida de la crisis pasa por aplicar la constitución a plenitud", *El Tiempo*, 30 May 2021.
[141] See proposals in "Universidades y academia proponemos democracia local frente a la crisis", Dejusticia, 16 May 2021; José Manuel Acevedo, "¿Y si hacemos un referendo?", *El Tiempo*, 31 May 2021; Fernando Carillo, "Consulta popular: una salida democrática para Colombia", *El País*, 30 May 2021.
[142] For recent analysis of the peace accord and its implementation, see Crisis Group Report, *Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace*, op. cit.; as well as Crisis Group Latin America Reports N°s 76, *Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia's Coast,* 8 August 2019; and 67, *Risky Business: The Duque Government's Approach to Peace in Colombia*, 21 June 2018.
[143] Crisis Group Report, *Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia*, op. cit.
[144] Protesters from Cauca, Catatumbo, Putumayo and Meta all cite among their grievances the state's failure to honour past agreements with residents. See also "'Este es un Gobierno experto en no negociar y en no cumplir los acuerdos'", Caracol Radio, 9 June 2021.

less the demonstrators renounce the future use of economically harmful roadblocks. Building trust and a spirit of compromise is made all the more challenging by the electoral calendar. The president's Democratic Centre party may have an incentive to portray the protests as a threat to public well-being, requiring a strong-handed leader to restore order. Meanwhile, unions have vowed to continue protesting throughout 2021 to keep grievances in the spotlight during the presidential campaign.[145]

A. *Police Reform*

An immediate end to police brutality is the single most concrete demand emerging from the strike, and action on this issue could help lower tensions on the streets. Demonstrations tend to intensify after incidents involving excessive use of force against civilians; conversely, strong political signals that the security forces will be held accountable – and prevented from future misbehaviour – could help pave a way out of the crisis.

Although the government has consistently praised the police as highly professional, ample evidence demonstrates that abuse is not restricted to a few isolated cases. Colombia's police were built for a different security environment from the one they are confronting today. The force remains part of the defence ministry and for decades has played an active role in counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics efforts.[146] Officers tend to distrust civilians in areas where armed or criminal groups operate, assuming that they may be agents or sympathisers of these outfits. As a result, today's police are ill prepared to face unarmed protesters who are not antagonists, but citizens whom they have a constitutional duty to protect. An over-reliance of force that can bleed into brutality emerges from this mismatch, as the police are primed by their training to look for and neutralise armed enemies of the state.

Various political constituencies – including the president's own party – have opposed any questioning of the security forces' role and status. Taboos around security sector reform are another relic of past conflict, in which the army and police represented the last bulwark protecting a fragile state from armed adversaries. Duque's 6 June proposal for an "integral transformation" of the police is a nod in the right direction, though it is partly a repackaging of initiatives that were already under way prior to April.[147] The plan would strengthen police training, which today includes only minimal instruction on dealing with protests.[148] The proposed use of body cameras and other efforts to improve transparency would also be welcome.

Yet the president's proposal falls short in at least two aspects, both of which are vital to re-establishing public trust in the institution. First, the government appears intent on conducting disciplinary procedures entirely under military jurisdiction, which limits victim participation as well as public transparency. Secondly, the plan would keep the police within the defence ministry, rather than responding to widespread calls to move it to the interior ministry. The latter would enable the force to

[145] "Esto es de largo aliento, con miras a llegar a 2022", *El Tiempo,* 10 June 2021.
[146] Alejo Vargas Velázquez, "Reforma policial: urgente y estructural, pero poco probable", *Periódico Digital*, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 18 September 2021.
[147] Crisis Group interview, international official involved in reforms, June 2021.
[148] "Colombia: Egregious Police Abuses Against Protesters", op. cit.

take operational orders on how to manage protests from locally elected authorities rather than commanders in Bogotá.

Moreover, while the government's plan may have worthy components, it has failed to draw on input from crucial constituencies in Colombian society. The ten points of reform it comprises were presented without prior consultation with political allies, police associations or civil society. For the reform to gain broader support, the government should commit to working with Congress to draft more comprehensive legislation.[149] Some such proposals are being drafted with support from centrist and left-leaning parties. They should aim to give the police a more civilian character, including shifting the force to the interior ministry, changing benchmarks for promotion to de-emphasise counter-narcotics work, restructuring disciplinary procedures and improving training.

Fixing the broken relationship between the police and certain communities will likely be long and arduous. The challenge is particularly acute given that Colombia is still not free of armed conflict, especially in rural areas, despite the peace accord.[150] The security forces need to maintain the capacity to combat armed groups and illicit trafficking networks. In doing so, however, they need to also prioritise safeguarding the well-being of local people who now bear the brunt of the armed groups' violence. One way to do this may be to reinvigorate longstanding plans to create a specialised rural police force that would undertake day-to-day policing roles while leaving conflict-related operations to the military. Showing commitment to these changes could send a signal that there is a pathway out of tensions between protesters and the police.

B. *Layered Talks*

Colombia's strike is both national and local, and negotiations to end it will need to match that reality. National-level talks can set the tone for the rest of the country and should address issues such as guarantees of the right to peacefully protest or broad socio-economic grievances. Yet a single conversation cannot address the diverse demands bubbling up across the country. Authorities outside Bogotá are already stepping in to establish local discussions. These conversations, however, will have a limited effect if they are not authorised and coordinated at a national level.

The national government should empower mayors and governors to establish dialogues with protesters. It is important that it commit to participate in department-level meetings at a decision-making level and guarantee that the deals signed by government representatives will stand, in contrast to recent events in Buenaventura. Because even seemingly local issues often include components that require Bogotá's green light, negotiations cannot take place if the central government may later veto part of what is being agreed upon.

The government and the strike committees – both national and local – will also need to work to build support for these discussions so that both sides are able to make commitments and concessions that they can fulfil. For the strike committees, that means winning over young demonstrators who are clamouring for greater rep-

[149] A number of legislators are working to put together a coalition bill, which they aim to propose by the end of July.
[150] Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: Peace Withers amid the Pandemic", 30 September 2020.

resentation. The Duque administration faces the similar challenge of ensuring that it has the political backing in Congress it needs to be able to comply with accords. Given the state's history of reneging on local commitments in the eyes of protesters, the government may need to be the first mover in offering concrete confidence-building gestures such as showing progress on police accountability.

C. *An International Role*

International observers can play a vital role in shepherding negotiations both at a local and national level. With trust between protesters and the state in short supply, international oversight is key to "making it some percentage more acceptable" for protesters to sit down with the government, as one religious official put it.[151] The government has also welcomed the UN, Organization of American States and religious authorities' participation in discussions in Bogotá as well as in numerous departments and cities. Their presence has been an important factor in reaching local humanitarian agreements as well as in assuaging public concern over deal-making behind closed doors.[152]

The government should continue to allow international oversight and independent monitoring visits to assess allegations of abuses, similar to that undertaken by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights between 6-10 June. That visit provided all sides, including government ministries, NGOs and protesters, with the opportunity to share their experiences from and perspectives on the turmoil. The Commission's forthcoming recommendations could also contribute to shaping a degree of consensus as to the most important reforms to undertake.

[151] Crisis Group interview, senior religious figure, Cali, May 2021.

[152] Local authorities in Cali are adamant that vocal international support for dialogue with protesters in early May was crucial to avoiding an escalation and a harsher crackdown. Crisis Group interviews, officials, Cali mayor's office, May and June 2021.

VII. **Conclusion**

Colombia's protest wave reflects deep-seated grievances affecting much of society, rooted in economic need and sky-high levels of inequality that the health and economic devastation caused by COVID-19 flagrantly exposed. Although protests are likely to ebb and flow over the coming months, Colombia risks perpetual cycles of instability if it fails to address the underlying causes of unrest. Political dialogue and negotiation are crucial to allay the immediate tensions between government and protesters, notably police violence and the use of protest roadblocks, and work out how Colombia can extend economic and educational opportunities to far more of its citizens than it does at present.

On the surface at least, most political forces say they are committed to reducing Colombia's inequalities. But a month and a half of protests, street battles and deaths of protesters and police officers have inflamed anger on both sides and undermined trust between them. There is a real danger of violent escalation by civilians seeking to take the law into their own hands. Meanwhile, criminal and armed outfits will continue to take advantage of public discontent and turmoil to advance their own interests, to the detriment of civilians.

Politicians should be wary of letting the looming 2022 presidential polls thwart progress toward substantive reforms. No party or president will find it easy to manage the discontent that has driven the 2021 demonstrations without making a meaningful commitment to reform. The country needs to negotiate a new form of social contract. Five years after the signing of a historic peace deal, Colombia's future stability may depend on it.

Bogotá/New York/Brussels, 2 July 2021

Appendix A: Map of Colombia

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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July 2021

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Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19, Latin America Briefing N°42, 16 April 2020 (also available in Spanish).

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