

Social Unrest and Democracy in Colombia Redux: New Protests and Their Political and Economic Effects

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Introduction

In late 2019, Colombia joined in with other Latin American countries steeped in large-scale social protests that lasted for weeks or even months. Despite a substantial reduction in participants, the protests in Colombia were still ongoing by early march 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world and lock-downs kept people in their homes. About a year later, in late April 2021, mass protests erupted once again in the country, this time around with more people taking to the streets and even harsher response by the government. A COVID-19-weakened economy was further hit by the protests and strikes. In a previous piece for the [EMERiCs Project](#), I suggested that the 2019 wave of protests was worrisome because it was a symptom of democratic erosion and a potential source of political instability. In this article, I further explore the newest outburst of citizen grievance, compare it with the 2019 protests, consider its implications for the national elections of 2022, and conclude by showing how the deepened dissatisfaction is not only bad for democracy, but also bad for business.

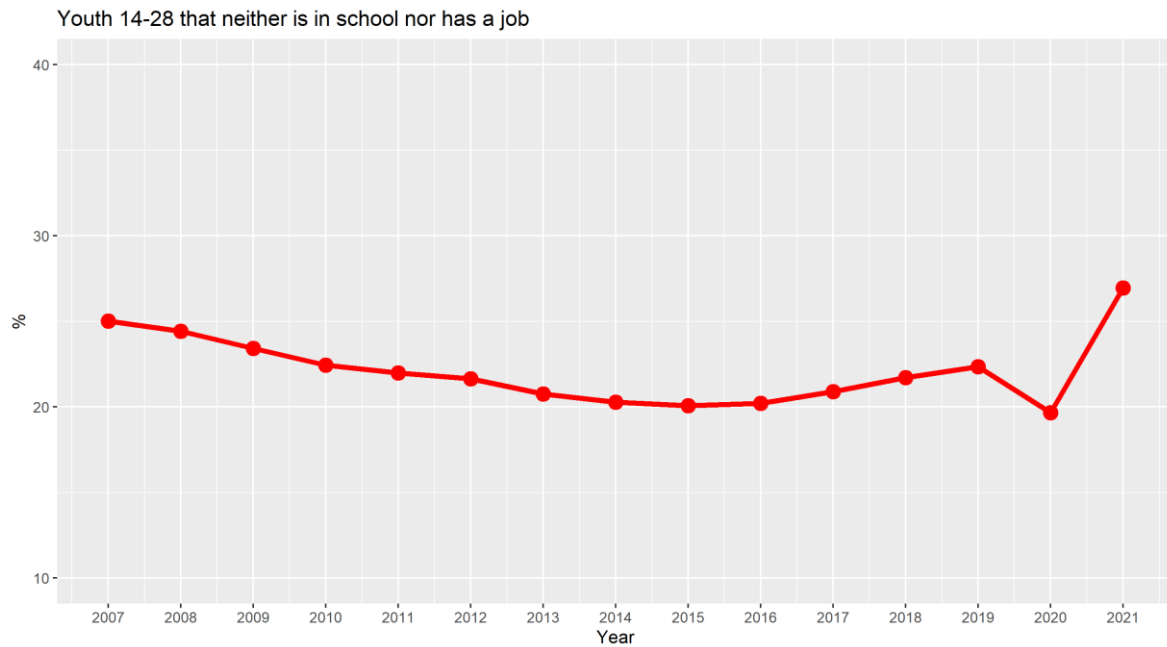
First Wave of Protests and COVID-19

The 2019 protests started on late November of that year. The upheaval continued for months but waned in their intensity. However, by mid-March the country entered in mandatory lock-down due to the pandemic thus ending any possibility for people to organize or take part in public demonstrations. While everybody's minds turned to the COVID-19 crisis, the causes of the protests were still present and remained unaddressed by Colombia's ruling elites.

Quickly after the protests began, President Duque announced the creation of a “Great National Dialogue” consisting in the development of an online platform for all citizens to voice their needs and concerns. The government also sought the organizers of the mobilizations and met several times. However, the results from both initiatives were rather scant. By their own reckoning, the government claimed that only about 20% of the issues presented by the organizers were unfeasible, 65% were already included in the government’s Development Plan and the remainder fell outside the realm of the executive branch and claimed that they were issues for Congress to address (Salazar Sierra, 2020). It appears as if the official response was to sweep the problems under the proverbial rug, and to hope that people forget the reasons that drove them to the streets in late 2019.

The 2021 Wave of Protests

However, Colombians did not forget. The first signs of continued citizen ire appeared in Bogota during September 2020. Protests ensued after the police brutally arrested an individual, who died because of his injuries. Protesters targeted police stations and officers themselves. During the first night of incidents, the police used lethal force to contain protests, which resulted in the death of ten civilians. The protests left more than 500 people wounded, about half of which were members of the police. Even though these events occurred in the context of the worldwide rejection of police brutality sparked by the death of George Floyd in USA, these protests can be connected to the 2019 upheaval. A key demographic of earlier protests lead the anti-police unrest: unschooled, unemployed, poor, young men. Indeed, Colombian youth have a hard time finding jobs or entering university. Youth unemployment is 23.1% (González Penagos, 2020); only about 50% of youths are able to attend university (Mora Cortés, 2016), and of those who make it only 10% come lower income brackets (Rodríguez, 2018). Figure 1 depicts the percentage of youth that does not go to school and does not have a job.



Source: Colombia's National Statistics Department, <https://www.dane.gov.co>

Figure 1: *Youth unemployment and schooling.*

Beginning in late April 2021, the newest round of demonstrations took place. The two mobilizations bear similitudes and differences. Like in 2019, labor unions convoked for mobilizations to protest mainly against a tax reform bill that the government had submitted to Congress aimed at increasing revenues. However, the reform charged middle and lower classes more heavily than wealthier Colombians, something that did not bode well with the populace. Protests persisted despite the fact that the government withdrew its infamous tax reform proposal. Indeed, within a week of the start of the protests, the tax reform failed and the finance minister quit his post (Quesada, 2021). There were protests and mobilizations in nearly every major city in the country. As in 2019, the initial response by the government was to confront the protesters with the police and the armed forces. Likewise, there were plenty of incidents of vandalism, violent acts, and confrontations with the police on the part of demonstrators.

Both sides have exhibited extraordinary levels of rancor, something that separates the events of this year from those of years past. Overall, protests left more than 2100 people wounded ("El saldo del paro", 2021), with a similar number of civilians and members of the police or armed forces injured. Dismally, about 75 people have been killed during the protests, 44 of which have been allegedly committed by governmental forces ("Reportan 75 asesinatos", 2021).

Ordinary citizens did organize to cause economic harm as a way to express their anger and frustration towards the government and their perception of an unjust society. Protesters mounted numerous road blockades, which effectively cut routes and caused food shortages in various cities and gravely affected supply chains in several industries.

Government forces deployed tactics typically associated with authoritarian governments in their handling of the demonstrations. As mentioned, government forces used lethal force on demonstrators, which resulted in multiple deaths. Furthermore, according to the government's own Attorney General, government forces have disappeared 84 people (Morales Sierra & Escobar, 2021); this number may be as high as 700 according to human rights organizations. Even internet service was disrupted amid anti-government protests ("Internet disrupted", 2021). Finally, news organizations and social media have documented various episodes of vigilantism in which armed civilians are clearly depicted firing weapons at protestors while accompanied by police officers.

Several international organizations raised concerns for the excessive use of force against protesters, including the UN and Human Rights Watch. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) sent a mission to the country. In its report, the IACHR condemned serious human rights violations (Pozzebon, 2021) and urged the Colombian government to comply with its obligations regarding freedom of expression and the appropriate use of force (OAS, 2021).

National Election Outlook

More than anything, the social unrest in Colombia has underscored the chasm between the haves and the have-nots in the country. During 2020, an additional 3.5 million people joined the ranks of those living under the poverty. According to official statistics, 42.5% of the population experiences monetary poverty—people whose income falls below the official definition of the minimum level required to meet basic needs including food and non-food items. Furthermore, 15.1% experiences extreme monetary poverty—people whose income does not allow them to meet basic needs strictly in food items (DANE, n.d.). This works out to be 21 million people living in poverty and 7.5 million people living in extreme poverty. Figure 1 depicts changes in poverty rates over time.

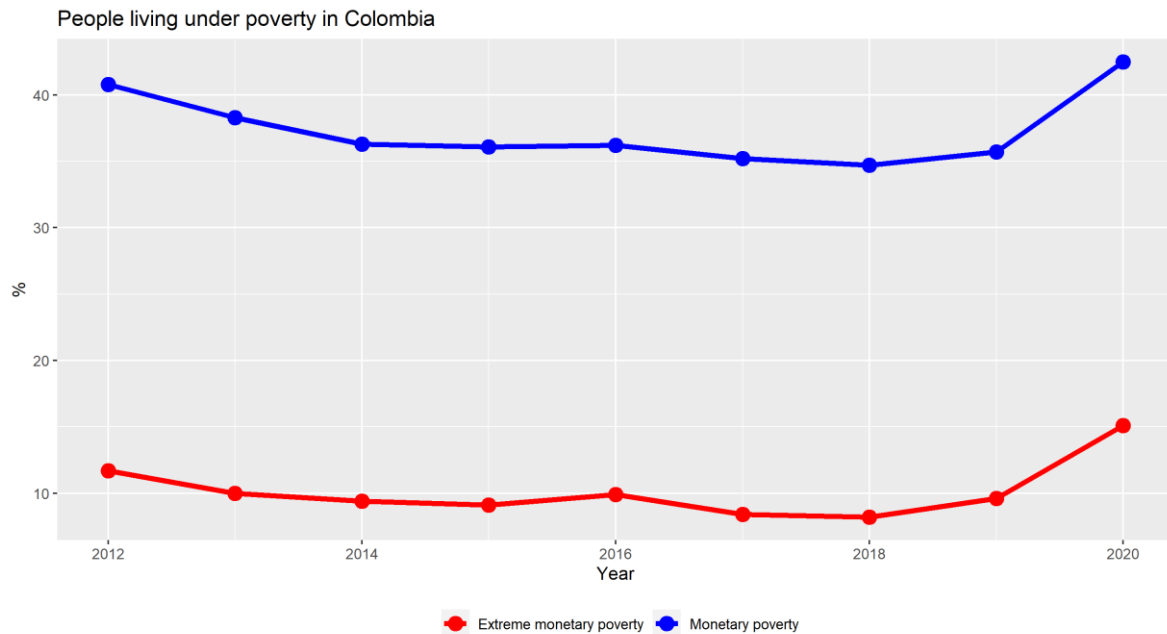


Figure 2: *Poverty in Colombia, 2012-2020*

There is an additional chasm: the disconnect between the harsh reality of many Colombians and their political representatives. Granted, Colombia's right wing government has put in place a number of programs aimed at alleviating the effects of the pandemic, including cash transfers and youth programs. Additionally, the government recently initiated legislative bills including a revised tax reform and one aimed at reforming the police. However, there is a year left in the presidential and congressional terms and the new elections are lurking around the corner. Thus, it is uncertain how much Congress can achieve in the busiest legislative period of the term, due both to the particular context of pandemic and social unrest, and that of an electoral campaign.

The opposition parties have also reacted and initiated several bills intended to meet the demands of those who took the streets, including emergency basic income, free university education, support for small-scale entrepreneurs and employment opportunities, increased political participation of youths, and their own version of police reforms. However, opposition parties account for less than 40% of Congress. Thus, due to their minority status, it is unlikely that their bills move through the legislative process.

Both presidential and congressional candidates are likely to campaign on the issues raised by the social upheaval. As mentioned, the current president, and parties in the governmental coalition and in the opposition have already submitted bills to address several of the claims made on the streets. However, protests were largely uncoordinated and fragmented affairs. That is, even though there were organizers such as labor unions, NGOs, and activists, no single organization or coalition was the sole responsible for the protests and the activities that spanned over months and across the

country. Therefore, political parties need to address multiple actors with their policy proposals and they will have to prioritize certain topics. Based on bills proposed to Congress, parties on the right appear to be more interested in economic recovery and growth, and security. Parties on the left may bring to the front issues related to poverty, inequality and exclusion.

Economic Outlook

In the midst of the turmoil, several specialized agencies downgraded Colombia's credit ratings to junk (Jaramillo & Medina, 2021). S&P and Fitch lowered it to BB+, while DBRS lowered it to BBB. After a decade in which the country obtained investment grade ratings, the economic outlook appears complicated due to the loss of confidence of international investors. S&P, in particular, cited the government's inability to raise taxes as a reason for its decision to mark down Colombia's rating. Higher revenues would have allowed the government to reduce the deficits produced by increased spending to address the COVID-19 crisis.

Despite that it may be impossible and futile to find a single responsible for the downgrade decision, there is plenty of blame to go around. As noted, unlike the 2019 protests, the recent uprising included actions that sought to affect the country's economy, such as road blockages or strikes. On the other hand, the government's response tried to negate the legitimacy of the demands of people in the streets, as if there were no objective reasons for their actions.

Even though the protests ceased, nothing in Colombia has really changed. In Chile, for instance, the social unrest quickly led to the election of a Constitutional Convention that will draft a new political charter for the country. Several of the organizations that participated in the demonstrations in Chile, morphed into political movements and were able to elect several delegates to the Convention. Unlike the Chilean experience, the grievance expressed by ordinary Colombians on the streets has not found an escape valve. Colombians do not want a radical change in their institutions, but instead a more just society in which they have real opportunities to thrive. Unless the political parties and ruling elites effectively address pressing issues such as poverty and inequality, the country cannot rule out the prospect of new protests, which may result in further instability and economic uncertainty.

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