

Protests Against President Iván Duque Increase in Colombia

The national strike of 21 October was a real mark in the demonstrations, mainly due to the presence of more than 8,000 indigenous people

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Global Research, October 23, 2020

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

In Colombia, popular dissatisfaction with President Iván Duque's policies is growing day after day. Popular protests started late last year and peaked between September and October this year. During this period, the number of claims increased significantly, mainly due to the advance of the new coronavirus pandemic, which caused a serious economic and social crisis in the country - with which the government has been incompetent to mitigate the effects. Last month, 13 people died during the demonstrations due to the great police violence that has been used to suppress the demonstrations. Now, in October, the scenario is being repeated.

In this context of protests, the 21st of October was marked by an unusual agitation. Thousands political activists, students and indigenous people attended a national strike in Colombia on Wednesday to protest against the economic policies of Iván Duque, the murder of protesters and human rights activists and the police violence. Still, protesters are demanding a variety of government grants, including guaranteed income for those who lost their jobs in the pandemic and more funding for health and education and measures.

The national strike of 21 October was a real mark in the demonstrations, mainly due to the presence of more than 8,000 indigenous people. The indigenous protests are organized through long marches known as "La Minga". In fact, Colombian native communities have been the biggest victims of the insecurity that is taking over the country. Such communities live in the midst of conflicts between different paramilitary militias and drug trafficking organizations, having their rights constantly violated.

The indigenous people demand a personal meeting with Iván Duque to request their needs. In search of a dialogue with the president, the indigenous people managed to start some negotiations with Duke's advisers, but the president continues to ignore the requests. Days before the general strike, Commissioner for Peace, Miguel Ceballos, had announced that he would head a presidential delegation that would visit the department of Cauca, western Colombia, where a large part of that community resides. However, "La Minga" was already in Bogotá demanding to speak to Duque in person. Its members had been going to the capital for more than a week through the long marches. Thus, the indigenous people decided to join the protests in the capital.

The Colombian government has always wanted to stigmatize indigenous demonstrations.

Currently, the Colombian government's main rhetoric to undermine all social unrest is the

need to fight the pandemic. With the justification of “avoiding agglomerations” and “protecting the health of the population”, the government has repressed protests with extreme violence, while remaining silent about popular demands. The “Miga” organizers have already spoken out during the general strike stating that the pandemic will not cease the demonstrations. In the same vein, as the government fails to respond to the protesters requests, the turmoil tends to increase.

The most curious thing to note is that even in the face of this scenario, the Colombian government continues trying to make the country a South American NATO satellite and to invest large amounts of money in this project. Colombia is a key point in a strategic siege against Venezuela that is planned by Washington with the assistance of Brazil. Basically, the government’s priorities do not correspond to the basic needs of the population. While indigenous people are murdered by drug traffickers, the armed forces plan to invade a neighboring country; while unemployment and poverty increase exponentially, public spending on defense remains enormous. Colombia is the country that spends the most on defense in the entire South American continent, allocating more than 3% of its GDP to this sector. Obviously, defense spending and military alliances with foreign powers are important. But how can a country prioritize such issues to the detriment of internal public security and the material well-being of its people?

In parallel, the pandemic is indeed advancing in the country. Despite a small drop in the number of cases in the past month, the country is still severely affected by the virus, approaching the 30,000 dead. The protests tend to actually increase the number of cases and to reverse the recent decline. But how can the population remain silent and comply with social isolation standards when there is no income to supply their needs? Without government assistance, it will be impossible to keep the population off the streets and, consequently, the pandemic situation will worsen.

So, what will the Colombian government choose? If it maintains the strategy of simply suppressing protests with police violence, not guaranteeing any improvement for the population, there will be no change, as the demonstrations will continue and the cases of COVID-19 will increase.

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This article was originally published on [InfoBrics](#).

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