

Reflections from Colombia: protests and two years of unfinished mobilization

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We have completed more than two weeks of violent protests in Colombia. Fundación Ideas para La Paz supports participatory, pluralistic, and respectful debate, not only because it is in the DNA of our mandate to contribute to building peace in our country, but because the social, economic and political crisis in Colombia requires us, as Colombians, to get involved, generate spaces for reflection, build bridges, and propose ideas for peace. Yes: ideas for peace. We reject all forms of violence and mourn the death of all those who have lost their lives in the midst of the demonstrations. Nothing justifies shooting a citizen or trying to burn police officers alive. Life must be protected above all else.

How did we get here?

- What Colombia is experiencing today is the accumulation of unresolved tensions between the government and civil society and the and the accumulation of incomplete national dialogues or dialogues across national spaces.
- The protests at the end of 2019 were met by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which deepened Colombia's existing social problems and worsened violence in some regions of the country.
- There are several policies for conflict management and social dialogue in the country that have either been left pending or have been implemented inadequately. For example, the Social Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution of Social Conflicts Policy has yet to be drafted despite being an essential part of the Development Plan of the current government to address citizen needs. Also, there was the National Conversation of 2019 to address citizen demands for better labor and education rights, as well as the implementation of the Peace Agreement, of which FIP was part and which remains unfinished.
- Finally, despite ongoing protests, the government and other authorities have failed to denounce the violence committed at the hands of the police with as much vigor as they did the attacks and vandalism committed at the demonstrations.

Understanding what is happening

- The non-concerted tax reform, which was proposed at a time of economic crisis and confinement, was the catalyst for citizen discontent and mobilization.
- However, the driving force behind the protests goes beyond specific claims. They are a call to the State to address the discontent and feeling of “no future” by various segments of the population, especially youth. There has not been a moment of greater need for a State that works and guarantees the rights of all like the one caused by the pandemic.
- In the midst of the protests, violence, and acts of vandalism have escalated. At FIP, we categorically reject all forms of violence. It is necessary to break away from the justification of violence based on the reciprocity of the aggressions or the need to defend oneself from both sides. There are no “good dead” and “bad dead.” It is urgent to de-escalate aggressions to interrupt the cycles of retaliation.
- It is important to understand that using law enforcement to meet social demands is not the best alternative. As we have already seen, this will only deepen the crisis. By declaring a state of inner turmoil (estado de conmoción interior) would be to deny the social character of the demands and to radicalize the protest. We do not deny that those interested in destabilizing the country have infiltrated the marches, but to focus attention on conspiracy theories while there are so many citizens in need is to turn our backs on those citizens.
- We must also bear in mind that the eyes of the world are on us.

What do we propose?

The search for alternative and concrete solutions requires several efforts:

- First, it is urgent to put an end to the strike and stop the spiral of violence in order to meet citizen demands. This will require specialized negotiation strategies with mediation teams. We encourage the National Government to implement these strategies and to engage in direct dialogue with the National Strike Committee and the sectors that are protesting.
- At the same time, we support the invitation made from different sectors—social organizations, universities, businesspersons, local authorities—to

dialogue and seek alternatives to the deep issues that this situation brings to the forefront. This implies agreeing on an agenda with those who are going to dialogue. The agenda cannot be something pre-established or imposed.

- One of the difficulties we face in advancing a national dialogue is not only the diversity of demands, but the fact that many demands are not necessarily articulated through movements or organizations. Youth are taking to the streets, in particular those who are not studying or working, and are trying to find new forms of expression. We must know how to engage with these groups in order to attend to their demands and needs.

- A few words about the debate on police and security sector reform, which has repeatedly been brought to the fore as a result of the acts of police violence at protests in recent years. The initiatives recently launched by the National Government to reform the police and military have important technical foundations, but it is essential to open the debate to the public. The relationship between law enforcement and citizens is broken, and there is growing loss of credibility with the police. Today, many sectors perceive law enforcement as an institution opposed to society rather than one that is a part of it. FIP has been insisting on the need to “civilize security.” This has to do with a contemporary debate that proposes rethinking security beyond law enforcement and incorporating other institutions and tools that, depending on the circumstances, may be more appropriate to meet the security needs of citizens and their communities.

- We must learn from the challenging lessons of the 2019 National Conversation, so that the next version of this conversation that the government is currently proposing can generate the effective dialogue that Colombia needs. Above all, dialogue must be understood as a process and not as an event, this requires method and patience. And, it is essential that there is a genuine posture of listening on the part of the government.

- Finally, it would be wise to look to and learn from other initiatives focused on peaceful dialogue, such as the Platform for Improbable Dialogues^[3] and the Dialogue Group on Mining^[4], which were promoted by civil society, or the Social Dialogue Summits, promoted in past years by the Attorney General’s Office and from which the Valiente es Dialogar Group emerged. At the international level, the Citizens’ Assemblies^[5] for citizen deliberation around sensitive issues has

inspiring lessons in Ireland, the United Kingdom and France. In Latin America, the experience of “We have to talk about Chile^[6]” came about after the protests in Chile with the aim of fueling the constitutional process already underway. Another possibility is to go tap into the participatory approaches or debates that are ongoing at the local level, such as the Municipal Peace Councils, made up of representatives from very diverse sectors and in which deliberative dialogues could be encouraged.

● At FIP we believe that we can build sustainable peace in Colombia if we lean into the transformative power of dialogue, recognizing other perspectives as valid, legitimate, and helpful.

Imprimir documento^[7]

Referencias

- 1.^Humanity United (humanityunited.org)
 - 2.^spanish version (www.ideaspaz.org)
 - 3.^Platform for Improbable Dialogues (dialogosimprobables.net)
 - 4.^Dialogue Group on Mining (gdiam.org)
 - 5.^Citizens’ Assemblies (citizensassemblies.org)
 - 6.^“We have to talk about Chile (www.tenemosquehablardechile.cl)
 - 7.^Descargar (utils.gestorsutil.com)
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