

COLOMBIA 2021: BETWEEN CRISES AND HOPE

Colombia 2021: Entre la crisis y la esperanza

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ABSTRACT

Although in the last few years Colombia has faced significant civil society mobilization, 2021 represented critical juncture in social mobilization that was the result of three converging crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, a health crisis, triggered an economic crisis that exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities. Together they aggravated a pre-existing governability crisis. Unions and other actors convened a national strike on April 28 and the violent police response ignited the protest. The strike lasted almost two months and framed the legislative and presidential elections in 2022. This paper analyzes these events, their effects, and the perspectives for the future.

Keywords: Mobilization, activism, protest, pandemic, vaccination, COVID-19.

RESUMEN

En los últimos cinco años los y las colombianas se han movilizado en diversas oportunidades. Sin embargo, las protestas del 2021 fueron una coyuntura política, resultado de la convergencia de tres crisis: una crisis de salud consecuencia de la pandemia de COVID-19. Esta a su vez desencadenó una crisis económica que exacerbó las desigualdades sociales y económicas que existen en el país. Juntas, estas dos crisis agravaron la crisis de gobernabilidad que se dio durante el gobierno del presidente Iván Duque. Los sindicatos y otros actores convocaron a un paro nacional el 28 de abril y la violencia policial con la que respondió el gobierno desencadenó movilizaciones más grandes. El Paro duró casi dos meses y fue determinante para las elecciones legislativas y presidenciales de 2022. Este artículo analiza estos eventos, sus efectos, y las perspectivas para el futuro.

Palabras clave: *Movilización social, activismo, protesta, pandemia, vacunación, COVID-19.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The statue of Spanish *conquistador* Sebastián de Belalcázar, founder of Cali, was one of the most iconic symbols of this Colombian city. The statue was erected in 1937 to commemorate the fourth centennial of the city's foundation in 1536. On April 28, 2021 members of the Misak community took down the statue to protest the marginalization of indigenous peoples and raise awareness about their struggle for the recognition of their rights and historical memory (Pacheco 2021). Although this was not the first time the statue of a Spanish conqueror was knocked down in Colombia (Redacción El Tiempo 2020), the Misak people's protest caught much more attention and was part of a larger *Paro Nacional* or national strike that shook up Colombia for over a month.

The *Paro Nacional* was the most significant event in Colombia in 2021 and impacted the government of President Iván Duque, exacerbating the governability crisis already evident since 2020 (Muñoz and Pachón 2021), and shaping the legislative and presidential elections in 2022. The *Paro* mobilized thousands of Colombians in 77% of the country's municipalities. Although the protest was triggered by a tax reform, protesters' demands quickly became broader and more systemic. These included mobilization against police brutality, unemployment, and workers' rights, against violence, and for better distribution of state resources, including for healthcare. Among the groups who participated in the strike were workers, teachers, youth, students, women, Afro-Colombians, indigenous communities, and environmental activists. The broad spectrum of demands and actors shows that these protests were motivated by deeper dissatisfaction with the political and economic systems

Although the National Strike was the most significant event, it occurred in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, that reached critical levels despite the distribution of vaccines. The Pandemic also worsened economic and social inequalities, that fueled the protests. In this article, I argue that the 2021 *Paro Nacional* represented a critical juncture in social mobilization, not only because existing social and economic inequalities were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic but also because of the violent response of the government that led to a quick escalation of the social conflict. The *Paro* was the result of three convergent crises: the health crisis, the socioeconomic crisis, and the governability crisis. Civil society's demands shaped the legislative and presidential elections in March and May of 2022, and represent a challenge for Colombia's next president.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section of this paper will describe the data and methods of analysis, explaining the intersectional approach I will use, as well as the limitations based on the limited quality data. The second section, examines the context in which the National Strike exploded, including an analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccination efforts, and its impact on the Strike. The following sections explain the tax reform, the national strike, as well as the state's response, and the effects of the *Paro*. The final section reflects on the perspectives for the future, with a focus on the 2022 legislative and presidential elections.

II. METHODS

Given that some of the events analyzed in this paper are still in development, there are important contradictions in the data or missing or ambiguous information. To make an accurate as possible assessment, I thus use a variety of data sources including reports from civil society organizations, government institutions, as well as international institutions and non-governmental organizations. These include: the Defensoría del Pueblo (Ombudsperson's office), the Policía Nacional (National Police), the Departamento Nacional de Estadísticas (DANE – National Statistics Department), Ministries of Defense, and Health; the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In addition, I rely on data from Datexco, Our World in Data, and the Coronavirus Resource Center (John Hopkins University) as well as data from civil society organizations that documented and systematized information about the national strike, mobilization, and victims. These organizations include Temblores, Indepaz, Fundación Ideas para la Paz (Ideas for Peace Foundation), the Observatorio de Redes y Acción Colectiva of the Universidad del Rosario (Observatory of networks and collective action from the Universidad del Rosario), among others.

Using multiple sources, with sometimes conflicting information or interpretation of events, allowed me to triangulate the data to achieve a higher level of validity (Ackerly and True 2020). However, there are significant differences between official government data and civil society data. These differences are noted and analyzed in the paper.

To make sense of this data, I use an intersectional perspective, when possible, to understand the effects of the vaccination efforts, police brutality, and economic crisis on marginalized individuals and communities, and analyze their possible impact on the National Strike. Intersectionality theory is based on the insights of Black Feminist in the U.S. who have emphasized that racism, sexism, and discrimination based on socioeconomic status, are not mutually exclusive but co-constitutive of each other (Crenshaw 1989; 1991; Collins 1998; Hancock 2007; Cooper 2016; Viveros Vigoya 2016). For Black women, it is not possible to separate “racial discrimination” from “gender discrimination” because those different identities “intersect” (Crenshaw 1989). Scholars from the Global South have argued that, even though race dynamics and hierarchies are different across countries, the concept of intersectionality also helps explain relations of marginalization and privilege, adding that colonialism is also a key axis of oppression that must be taken into account to understand inequality (Yuval-Davis 1997; 2006; 2015; Viveros Vigoya 2016). Townsend-Bell (2011) explains that relevant categories for understanding discrimination and marginalization vary across time and in different contexts, and it is necessary to take this into consideration when analyzing sociopolitical issues.

For this article, an intersectional approach entails paying attention to how different groups are affected by specific policies and how they react. I will pay at-

tention to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's vaccination efforts and associated policies, the proposed tax reform, and the National Strike. It is important to note, though, that it is very hard to find qualitative or quantitative data and information disaggregated by sex, race or ethnicity, age, ability, location (urban/rural) and other relevant categories that would help provide an intersectional perspective and thus a clearer picture of the impact of the events. This lack of quality data is relevant to both government and civil society data, and concerns the Pandemic, the tax reform, and its effects, as well as the national strike. Thus, although I used multiple sources and triangulated the data, there are significant limitations and in many cases the sources, as well as media reports, rely on anecdotal information that makes it difficult reaching definite conclusions.

III. CONVERGENCE OF CRISES: HEALTH, ECONOMY, AND GOVERNABILITY

Although Colombia had high levels of socioeconomic inequalities, 2021 represented a critical juncture in which three crises converged leading to social unrest and state violence. The governability crises that became more evident during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Muñoz and Pachón 2021) continued due to the Government's response as well as the slow vaccine distribution. The health crisis aggravated, despite the vaccines, and became critical by July. Finally, the social and economic impact of the pandemic became much more acute, and their effects were more severe for already marginalized groups, including lower-income people, and urban youth. Citizens' dissatisfaction and frustration exploded in a National Strike, and the violent state response led to the escalation of the social conflict.

First Crisis: The Pandemic Worsens

Despite the government's efforts to control the pandemic, by the end of 2020, cases were increasing and reached what was, by then, the highest peak in early January 2021, as shown in Figure 1. Occupancy levels in intensive care units increased, and in the main cities reached critical levels, with 90% or more occupancy in Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali (Paz-Noguera 2020; Blofield et al 2021; Ramírez 2021; Alcaldía de Santiago de Cali 2021; Secretaría de Salud de Bogotá 2022). Deaths also increased, with around 400 COVID-19 deaths every day (Figure 2). The Ministry of Health blamed the peak on people getting together to celebrate the holidays and the finale of the national soccer league in December (Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social 2021a). At the beginning of the pandemic, the government had created numerous measures to try to contain it. These included, as in other countries, lockdown and stay-at-home measures, shifts to online schooling and telework, restrictions on mobility, social distanc-

ing, mask mandates, closing of airports and borders, as well as the expansion of the healthcare infrastructure (Paz Noguera 2020; Blofield et al 2021). Although the use of masks, social distancing, and stay-at-home recommendations had been promoted, the strictest measures to contain the pandemic had been lifted, with the government focusing on safe economic recovery This contributed to the increase in cases and deaths (table 1).

Figure 1 – New COVID-19 Cases 2020-2021

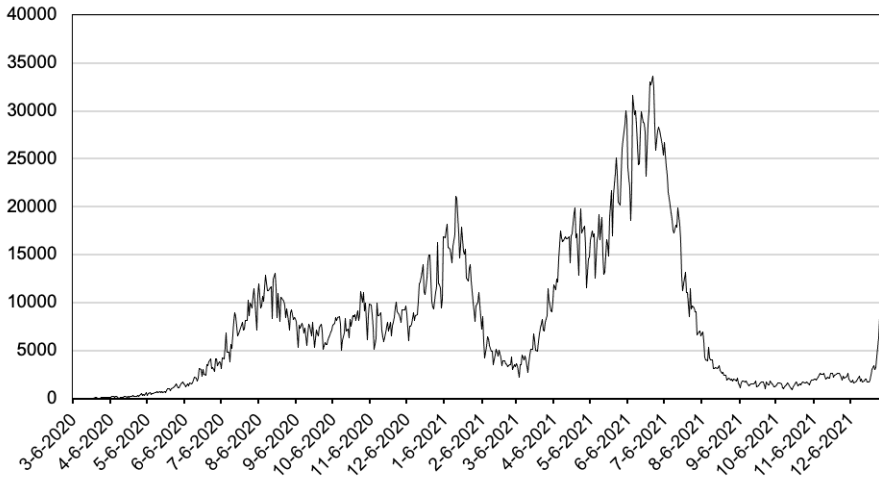


Figure 2- Daily COVID-19 deaths, 2020-2021

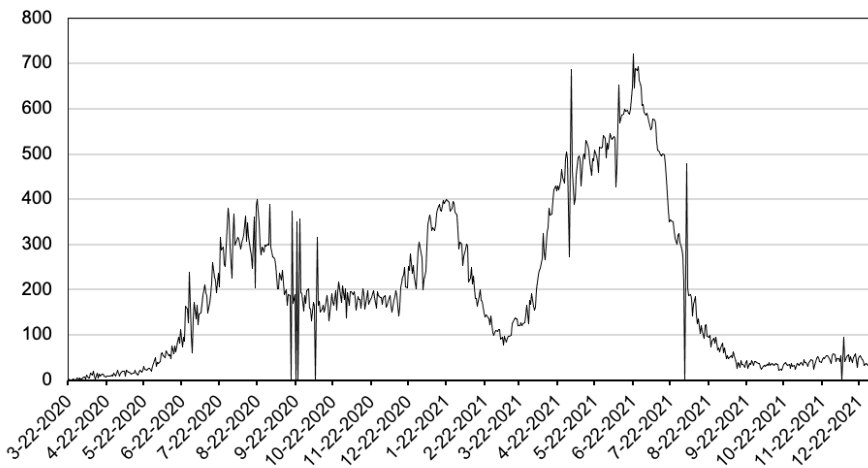


Table 1 – COVID-19 cases by department, ten highest

Department	Total Cases	Total Deaths
Distrito Capital	1,730,038	28,771
Antioquia	912,141	18,006
Valle del Cauca	534,579	14,727
Atlántico	398,789	9,999
Cundinamarca	311,616	7,059
Santander	278,204	7,955
Bolívar	195,936	3,216
Tolima	123,228	3,875
Boyacá	123,173	2,707
Córdoba	118,139	3,909

Source: Proyecto Rodillo. Accessed on 2/22/2022

Vaccine distribution: slow and unequal

With the development of the COVID-19 vaccines, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection launched the National Vaccination Plan (PNV) on January 29, 2021 (Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social 2021b). COVID-19 Vaccines started arriving in February, and the first doses were administered on February 17, 2021. The government negotiated directly with vaccine developers and obtained 51,5 million doses from pharmaceutical companies, and secured the remaining 18,5 million doses through the COVAX initiative. After healthcare workers were vaccinated, the vaccine was administered by age group starting on March 8 to people 70 years and older.

Vaccine distribution was slow and uneven, due, in part, to delays in the reception of the doses. Of the 2,066.400 doses Colombia should have received by May through the COVAX initiative, it had only received 58% by May 13. The situation was worse with vaccines acquired through direct agreements, as only 20% of the doses had been received by mid-May. There were also bureaucratic hurdles that slowed the distribution of vaccines. Authorities only approved the Moderna vaccine for emergency use in June. Due to these issues, only 12.5% of the population was vaccinated by June of 2021, and there were delays in the application of the second dose (Figueroa and Valencia 2021).

In addition to these problems, the opposition and civil society criticized the government for its lack of transparency because the agreements with the pharmaceutical companies were not public and not even members of Congress, who have the responsibility of overseeing the executive branch, were able to see those agreements (Figueroa and Valencia 2021). Furthermore, although Colombia has a history of adopting a gender and differentiated perspective in public policy (Figueroa and Franco Novoa 2020; Corredor 2021), the PNV did not adopt these frameworks. Although the PNV adopted the recommendations by the World Health Organization (WHO), prioritizing healthcare workers and older people given their exposure to the virus and the increased

death rate, the PNV, and additional policies, did not consider the broader impact of the Pandemic on vulnerable groups, such as informal workers, people in marginalized, peripheral neighborhoods in cities, where population density is higher, access to healthcare facilities is more complicated, people depend on mass public transportation for their everyday activities, and they cannot stay at home because they need to work for survival (J. Figueroa and Valencia 2021). In addition, the available data on vaccine distribution and application was not disaggregated by sex,¹ age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, and other categories, which makes it difficult to analyze whether vaccine distribution has been equitable (Guarnizo Peralta, García Ruíz, and León 2021).

Another group significantly impacted by the slow distribution of the vaccines was urban youth. Lockdowns and restrictions on face-to-face instruction in schools, universities, and technical institutions, had a differentiated impact on urban youth. Unemployment rates were significant for this group. Thus, even though the government followed the WHO's guidelines for vaccine distribution, the impact of delays in distribution was higher for younger people. Moreover, as was explained previously, it is impossible to analyze whether there was a differentiated impact based on multiple categories of marginalization such as gender, race, or socioeconomic status. However, given that 70% of Afro-Colombians² live in urban areas, they tend to be younger and poorer than white and mestizos, according to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE 2019), it is possible to conclude that this population was significantly affected.

In addition, despite adopting a temporary protection program to legalize the migration status of Venezuelans in Colombia in March of 2021, the implementation of this program was slow. Despite international norms requiring states to provide access to vaccines for undocumented populations, vaccines in Colombia, according to the PNV are only administered to migrants with legal status (Armocida et al. 2021; Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social 2021b). As of June 2021, there were an estimated 1,742,927 Venezuelan migrants and refugees living in Colombia. Only 43.6% (759,584) had legal status, making the remaining 56.4% (983,343) Venezuelans in Colombia vulnerable and their access to the COVID-19 vaccine more difficult (Refugiados y Migrantes Venezolanos 2021). Migrant populations are also more susceptible to the Pandemic due to preexisting inequalities, including lack of access to healthcare, living in densely populated buildings, relying on jobs that do not allow for social distancing,

¹ Available data is now disaggregated by sex and age, but the raw data is not readily available, nor is it disaggregated by multiple categories. In other words, it is not possible to know the number or percentage of Afro-Colombians women, for example, who have been vaccinated.

² Afro-Colombians include three differentiated ethnic groups: *Raizales*, living in the archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia in the Caribbean Sea; *Palenqueros* living or from the municipality of San Basilio de Palenque in the Northern Coast of Colombia, and people who self-identify as Black, Afrodescendant, or mulatto; sometimes abbreviated in official documents as NARP. It is estimated that there are around 3 million people who self-identify as belonging to these groups but ethnic identification varies according to the context (DANE 2019).

etc. Undocumented migrants might also be less likely to get vaccinated due to fears of deportation (Armocida et al. 2021; Teerawattananon et al. 2021;). The exclusion of undocumented Venezuelan migrants and refugees from accessing vaccines impacts not only those migrants and their families but contributes to the worsening of the Pandemic (Guarnizo Peralta, García Ruíz, and León 2021).

Besides the limited access to vaccines for these marginalized groups, an analysis of the data on vaccine distribution shows that the wealthier regions of the country have benefited the most from the vaccines, as data from the Ministry of Health and Social Protection show.³ Given that, as was explained earlier, urban centers were the most severely affected by the Pandemic, it is unsurprising that the largest cities received more vaccines more quickly. However, a year after the distribution of the first doses, the country is still behind in the administration of the vaccines. Official data from the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 National Vaccination Plan website, estimated this delay to be around 40% in early 2022. Moreover, twenty-one, out of thirty-two departments, have not fully vaccinated even 40% of their population, even though the country has vaccinated around 65% of its population. This suggests that vaccines have been concentrated in high population centers, at the expense of smaller cities, towns, and rural communities, where access to healthcare is even more difficult.⁴

More recent data includes information based on age and gender, showing that 53% of women and 46% of men have received the vaccine. However, there is still no reliable data that includes people's race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, migration status, or disability. Chocó, a department with a significant percentage of Afro-Colombians, has only vaccinated 21% of its population. Cauca, a department with important indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, has only vaccinated 30%. This suggests that vaccine distribution is highly inequitable for racialized groups. Given the lack of reliable data, it is hard to assess the depth of inequalities in vaccine distribution, especially for groups that have been historically excluded and have limited access to healthcare.

Although the distribution of vaccines was done according to the guidelines adopted by the WHO, and mimicked those adopted in other countries, the lack of sufficient additional measures to help those affected by the slow distribution of vaccines contributed significantly to increased social discontent and dissatisfaction with the response to the pandemic. Even though Colombia expanded and created government programs to help those who were most severely affected, these programs were insufficient, and only covered a small percentage of the population in need. Dissatisfaction and frustration with the government response, the slow distribution of the vaccines, as well as the continuation of

³ The Ministry of Health and Social Protection COVID-19 National Vaccination Plan has data available but it is not possible to download the data to conduct more granular analyses. The data is from April 2022, <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/salud/publica/Vacunacion/Paginas/Vacunacion-covid-19.aspx>

⁴ Ministry of Health and Social Protection COVID-19 National Vaccination Plan. Data from April 2022. <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiNTMmZTJmZWYtOWFhMy00OGE1LWFhNDAtMTJmYjM0NDAN-DA5NGY2fiwidCI6ImYjdiMTNHLTdmYjetNDANi04MzBjLWQzNzE2ZThkZDhiOCJ9>

a health emergency that many hoped would have ended by 2021, contributed to increasing social discontent. The following section will analyze the socio-economic crisis that would eventually lead to the National Strike.

Second crises: economic contraction and unemployment

The COVID-19 Pandemic exacerbated inequality. In 2020, Colombia's economy contracted 6.8% and lockdowns and travel and mobility restrictions impacted lower income, women, and younger people more severely. Unemployment reached 16% and informal workers, especially women, bore the brunt of lockdown measures (Alvarez and Pizzinelli 2021). The middle class shrank to 25%; 509,370 small businesses closed, and poverty increased to 42.5% of households (Muñoz and Pachón 2021). By late 2020 the focus of the government was on ensuring safe economic growth. Unemployment rates started to decrease slightly after reaching a high of 17.3% in January of 2021 but remained over 14%. By the end of 2021 Colombia's economy grew by 10.6%,⁵ but the distribution of economic growth was unequal, not reaching those more vulnerable who had been severely impacted by the pandemic (Salazar Sierra 2022).

To alleviate the effects of the economic crisis, the government adopted or expanded numerous measures, including conditional cash transfer programs and subsidies or loans for small companies. Before the pandemic, Colombia had three main conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs): Familias en Acción for low-income and vulnerable families with children, Jóvenes en Acción, for young adults, with a focus on technical and professional education, and Colombia Mayor for the elderly. All these programs target vulnerable populations based on a government's database. With the onset of the pandemic, the government also created the program Ingreso Solidario which targeted informal workers. A pre-existing unemployment program, as well as emergency policies that allowed people to retrieve money from their pensions, helped formal workers that lost their job or were furloughed (Blofield et al. 2021). The government also created subsidies for small and medium-sized companies to compensate for their loss of income. Although the programs designed in Colombia were better than in other countries, such as Mexico, these measures were insufficient in breadth and depth. According to Blofield et. al, the Ingreso Solidario only covered 20% of informal workers, and 1.9 million low-income and vulnerable households were left out of the program by minimal margins. The unemployment insurance, in addition, only covers formal workers, which are 39% of Colombia's workforce, and due to the large number of people who made claims, it was insufficient. Of more than 800 thousand claims, only 109.000 received the insurance by June 2020 (Blofield et al 2021). It is estimated that the Gini Coefficient, which was already high before the pandemic, at 0.55, will increase to 0.56 (Blofield et al 2021: 8).

⁵ OECD.stat: Available at <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryId=72654#>

Given the expansion of government expenditure to alleviate the effects of the pandemic, experts agreed that it was necessary to have a tax reform to increase the government's revenue. The government of Iván Duque, represented by the Ministro de Minister of Economy, Alberto Carrasquilla, presented the bill proposal "Solidaridad Sostenible" (sustainable solidarity) to reform Colombia's taxation system on April 15, 2021. The Minister drafted the proposal in consultation with the Asociación Nacional de Instituciones Financieras (National Association of Financial Institutions – ANIF) and other actors. According to the President of ANIF, Mauricio Santa María, this reform was "not an alternative but an obligation" to reduce poverty and inequality (Santa María 2021).

The April 2021 proposed reform would collect \$23,4 trillion Colombian pesos,⁶ extend the Ingreso Solidario program, reduce public debt, broaden a program to support the creation of formal employment, among other goals. Despite its stated goal of helping lower- and middle-income families, 66% of the revenue collected would come from individuals. The reform would increase the tax base incrementally, requiring people with a monthly income of COP \$2,4 million or more (about \$660 USD) to pay income tax starting in 2022.⁷ By 2023, people earning COP\$ 1,7 million would also have to pay income tax. The tax reform also removed sales tax exemptions for essential goods, including funerary services and utilities for middle and higher-income households. Colombia's sale tax (is already high, at 19% of the pre-tax price; the reform would increase the number of goods and services taxed. Additionally, the proposal would have increased taxes for gasoline and diesel and created a tax for single-use plastics to combat climate change. Although the government argued the reform would help redistribute wealth, and reduce inequality, it is unclear how that would happen, given that there were no clear redistributive goals, it focused on individuals, and did not address other sources of income inequality related to informal labor or minimum wage.

The third crisis: governability

The proposed tax reform and the generalized perception that it would significantly affect lower- and middle-income groups was the spark that lit the third crisis. Before the National Strike it was evident the government of Iván Duque lacked broad legitimacy and had difficulties governing the country (Muñoz and Pachón 2021). The governability crisis that was evident in 2020 became even more acute in 2021. According to a survey of the Centro Nacional de Consultoría (National Consulting Center – CNC), in March 2021, 72% of Colombians, regardless of sex, socioeconomic status, or age, thought the country was going down a wrong path. The same survey shows that 31% of Colombians (a

⁶ The estimate is usually given as COP \$23,4 billion. In Spanish, unlike in English, billion refers to a million million. The estimated revenue would be around USD \$6,300 million.

⁷ The minimum wage in 2021 in Colombia was around USD \$250 monthly.

majority of respondents) deemed Duque's administration as 'disastrous' (Pésima). This perception is worse for youth (36% for 18-25 and 39% for 25-40 years old), and it is similar controlling for socio-economic strata (35% high, 37% middle, 33% lower income levels). Further, 50% of Colombians had an unfavorable view of President Duque.⁸

Besides economic and pandemic-related concerns, the main concern for Colombians was safety and crime (42%). The homicide rate for 2021 increased to 26.8 per hundred thousand inhabitants⁹, an increase of 17% in comparison with 2020. Furthermore, although 2021 was the fifth anniversary of the Peace Agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, signed in 2016), there were 96 massacres¹⁰ with 338 fatal victims in 2021. Since the signing of the Agreement, over 1300 social leaders and 320 former members of the FARC have been murdered.¹¹

The Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, which evaluates the implementation of the peace agreement reported that only 30% of the 578 stipulations of the agreement have been completed, while 19% are at an intermediate level of completion, 37% at a minimum level of completion, and 15% have not been initiated. Of the 'ethnic stipulations' -those focused on indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, only 13% have been completed and 60% of them were at a minimum level of implementation. The numbers are similar for the gender provisions: only 12% have been completed while 21% of the gender stipulations have not been initiated (Echavarría Álvarez et al. 2022).

These results are not surprising because President Duque ran on a platform of opposition to the Agreement and limited implementation. Despite his win, a significant proportion of Colombians approved the agreement, thus the lack of implementation, as well as the inattention to increasing demands for security for social leaders and Colombians more broadly contributed to the governability crisis as his government was increasingly seen as illegitimate and unable to effectively deal with Colombian's most pressing issues.

Colombian's lack of trust in political leaders is not a new phenomenon but the COVID-19 pandemic increased citizens' dissatisfaction because it made evident the stark inequalities in the country (Rettberg 2021). A recent study found that Colombians have very negative perceptions of "the system" with corruption and inequality being major drivers of this dissatisfaction. At the same time, trust, and political participation suggests, these perceptions do not have a demobilizing effect. Instead, Colombians have very high knowledge of

⁸ https://www.centronacionaldeconsultoria.com/en/_files/ugd/c967c2_3462899b498648b7ade7e-99fe6013512.pdf

⁹ Data from Statista: <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/1289833/tasa-de-homicidios-colombia/#:~:text=En%202021%2C%20hubo%20aproximadamente%2027,homicidios%20por%20cada%20100.000%20habitantes>.

¹⁰ Defined as incidents in which three or more people are murdered.

¹¹ Data from INDEPAZ <https://indepaz.org.co/observatorio-de-derechos-humanos-y-conflictividades/>

human rights, and in the face of injustice and rights violations, engage in multiple forms of individual and collective action to demand the restoration of their rights. Engagement with state institutions to demand rights protections does not depend on socioeconomic status, gender, or race, even if women, displaced people, and lower-income Colombians recognize the system as biased in favor of the wealthy (Hilbink et al 2022). This rights consciousness and willingness to engage the system was an important driver for the National Strike resulting from the convergence of the health, socioeconomic, and governability crisis as the following section will show.

IV. NATIONAL STRIKE AND STATE VIOLENCE

The tax reform was the spark that triggered mobilization. The Comité Nacional de Paro (CNP), an association of different unions and other civil society organizations, that had organized previous strikes, rejected the proposal and convened another national strike for April 28. As shown in figure 1, COVID-19 cases increased since March, and intensive-care units in the major cities were reaching capacity. The day before, the Tribunal of Cundinamarca ordered President Iván Duque and the mayors of several cities to suspend the permits for the marches due to the Pandemic, arguing that it was not possible to guarantee the health of the participants because Colombia had not reached herd immunity (Semana 2021b). Political opposition to the protest, and the lack of recognition of the protesters' demands, added to the discontent and further mobilized people.

Despite the calls to suspend the strike, including from the President, unions rejected the ruling, emphasizing the constitutional right to protest, and inviting those reluctant to participate in-person to join virtually (Semana 2021a). As with the social protests of 2019 and 2020, a broad set of actors, including young people, students, women, local communities, teachers, labor unions and guilds, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups, peasants, environmental leaders, public transportation operators, truckers, and others joined the strike (Garzón Vergara et al. 2021). These groups are some of the groups more severely affected by the three crises.

The majority of the demonstrations were peaceful, with participants dancing, playing music, or banging *cacerolas* (pans and pots), and demanding not only the withdrawal of the tax reform but also calling attention to the increase of poverty and inequality, and claiming profound social transformations (BBC News 2021). Some of the protests destroyed public and private property, including public transportation (1324 affected), banks (460), and commercial buildings (472). Multiple state officials and politicians from the government party portrayed all participants as thugs, and terrorists, and the police responded with excessive and unnecessary force (Garzón Vergara et al. 2021). In Cali, the police killed two unarmed teenagers during the first day of the protest (Quesada 2021).

The protests continued for over a month and were especially disruptive in Cali, the third-largest city by population and an economic hub. As the largest city in the Pacific region, Cali has a significant Afro-Colombian and indigenous population and mirrors Colombia's economic and social inequality (González Posso 2021). The poverty rate in the city reached 36.3%, the number of lower-income people tripled, and the income for the poorest dropped 50% (Cabrera 2021). Although it is hard to find accurate and up-to-date data, it is possible to infer that Afro-Colombians were particularly affected by the economic effects of the Pandemic due to preexisting structural inequalities (DANE 2019).

Much of the protest was concentrated in lower-income neighborhoods. One of these neighborhoods, Puerto Rellena, was taken over by demonstrators who re-named it Puerto Resistencia (Port Resistance), highlighting their commitment to resisting police intervention in their community and continuing the protest until the government heard their demands. Changing the name of the neighborhood was not the only symbolic act of resistance. As was mentioned at the beginning, Misak people knocked over the statue of Sebastián de Belalcázar, bringing attention to the destruction of indigenous lives and cultures that started with the Spanish colonization and continues today. Demonstrators also toppled down the statue of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, founder of Bogotá (Redacción Bogotá 2021), and statues of Christopher Columbus in Barranquilla and Bogotá. In the capital, demonstrators destroyed the Monumento a los Héroes, commemorating soldiers fallen during the independence wars. Statues of other conquistadors and founding fathers were also destroyed in multiple cities. These statues' destruction represents the rejection of political and economic elites and the systems that have excluded the majority of the population and captured some of the sentiment that inspired the protests (Céspedes Mendoza 2021).

Although Cali was portrayed by the media as the epicenter of the protest, throughout the Paro there were also significant protests in other cities, including Barranquilla, Cartagena, Ibagué, and Bucaramanga (Garzón Vergara et al. 2021). There were also protests in Bogotá, Medellín, Pereira, Pasto, Neiva, Popayán, Santa Marta, and Villavicencio. According to data presented by the Ministry of Defense, there were 14,175 protest-related activities in 860 (77%) municipalities.

In addition to the geographical extension of the strike and the participation of multiple groups of organized citizens, the National Strike that started on April 28 was significant because "not in a long time [a national strike] was able to articulate so many different social sectors, generating massive and sustained protests for several months" (Garzón Vergara et al. 2021: 7). The Paro Nacional shook Colombians, changed the public discussion of inequality and poverty, and baffled political and economic elites who seemed unaware of the depths of Colombians' dissatisfaction with their political and economic system. Although the government of Iván Duque faced national strikes in 2019 and 2020, the 2021 Paro represented a critical juncture as the three crises converged and

because it highlighted widespread social discontent, which would become evident in the 2022 Congressional and Presidential elections.

Repertoires of Mobilization

In addition to toppling down statutes, participants in the strike used music, dancing, and, visual and scenic art as part of their repertoire of collective actions. In some of the concentration points, citizens discussed current events, their demands, and their expectations from the protests, allowing the exchange of information, life experiences, knowledge, and ideals among people from different socioeconomic classes, ethnic groups, neighborhoods, etc. These activities strengthen social relations between individuals and groups, building a more robust social fabric (Céspedes Mendoza and Acevedo Jaramillo 2021). These non-violent actions were the majority of the activities in the context of the protests and were responsible for strengthening ties between different groups that had not been articulated in previous strikes (Garzón Vergara et al. 2021).

As in other countries, activists in Colombia also used social media to mobilize the citizenry. The organizations that convened the strike invited those uncomfortable attending in-person protests due to the Pandemic to participate online. Social media also became a fundamental tool to raise awareness about the protests and the different demands, record and denounce police brutality, collect funds for medical brigades and *ollas comunitarias* (community soup kitchens), and call the attention of international actors, and pressure the government. Civil society organizations and movements used Instagram and Tik Tok to explain the tax reform and its impacts, in an accessible and engaging manner; while instant messaging systems, were used to distribute information about meetings (Céspedes Mendoza and Acevedo Jaramillo 2021).

The protest also took more confrontational and disruptive forms. Marches, *cacerolazos*, and blockades were frequent. These actions included taking over universities and other public spaces, blocking off roads, and suspending economic activities (Céspedes Mendoza and Acevedo Jaramillo 2021). As mentioned before, *manifestantes* destroyed statues and monuments, an action reminiscent of the repertoire of actions adopted in other countries, such as the movement against Confederate monuments in the United States that has taken place within and outside larger protests against police brutality and racism (Behzadi 2021). This is not to say that the destruction of monuments in Colombia is inspired or influenced by developments in the Global North. Toppling down statues is not new in Colombia, but it took new, more global dimensions with the 2021 National Strike.

Some activists also used violence. In Cali, some of the stations of the public transportation system were vandalized and there were riots in several neighborhoods. Road blockades turned violent, and in some cases, they impeded the circulation of ambulances and trucks carrying perishable food. The Office

of the High Commissioner on Human Rights of the United Nations confirmed that a pregnant woman had a miscarriage because people protesting threatened to set her ambulance on fire (Alto Comisionado 2021). There were reports of food and fuel shortages due to blockades, but the information available is anecdotal, without specific data about its extent and reach. Most of the violent actions were in response to police violence or armed civilians who attacked the protest. There were also reports of plainclothes police officers instigating and perpetrating violence (Camargo Sánchez et al. 2020; Céspedes Mendoza and Acevedo Jaramillo 2021; Garzón Vergara et al. 2021).

The State Responds with Violence

From the first day of the 2021 Paro Nacional, the National Police responded violently. In Cali, police officers killed two unarmed teenage boys. There were also two other reported police killings. The police also used tear gas, rubber bullets, and beatings to undermine protests and open blockades. Although, as the Ministry of Defense has recognized, most of the demonstrations were peaceful, the ESMAD (a militarized branch of the police) intervened in 65% of the protests on April 28, 85% on April 29, and 56% on April 30. This data is evidence of the government's rejection of protest—even non-violent—as a valid form of civil society activism (Ministerio de Defensa 2021).

In response to the protests for Labor Day on May 1st, President Ivan Duque informed that the military would be deployed in cities to curtail protests. This announcement raised indignation among citizens and the international community. The mayors of Bogotá and Medellín rejected using the military in their cities—even if they called out the violent actions during the strike. The different attitudes toward military intervention highlight the divided governmental response and Duque's difficulty in presenting a united front to the protests.

Rather than undermining the protests, the police reaction incited them, and more people joined the demonstrations rejecting police brutality and state violence (Garzón Vergara et al. 2021). This marks a significant contrast with other instances of state violence. For example, there was no massive rejection or protest of the extrajudicial killings perpetrated by the Armed Forces. Some people responded to police brutality by organizing the Primera Linea (First Line) a group of young people that initially formed in Bogotá and sought to protect other demonstrators in 2019. The Primera Linea is not an organized, centralized group, but formed spontaneously in different neighborhoods and used strategies developed by activists in Hong Kong and Chile to face the police (Deutsche Welle 2021; Rivera Rueda 2021). A sub-group of the Primera Linea is the Madres de la Primera Linea (Mothers of the First Line) a group of women who also went to protests to protect other demonstrators. Like other women's groups, such as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, they took advantage of traditional ideas about motherhood to resist and confront the government and

the police, knowing that they would not receive the brunt of the police force because they were mothers (Bouvard 2004; Bonilla 2021).

Besides using physical force to undermine the protest, civil society organizations and international institutions documented other human rights abuses. These violations included sexual violence and abuse, arbitrary detention, false imprisonment, violence against medical and humanitarian missions, and the press. Although these actors agree that there was also violence on the part of activists, the consensus among these institutions and organizations is that violence perpetrated by activists responded to police abuse and primarily targeted property. At the same time, the police response was unnecessary and disproportionate (Alto Comisionado 2021; Céspedes Mendoza 2021; Céspedes Mendoza and Acevedo Jaramillo 2021; Garzón Vergara et al. 2021).

Even though a majority of Colombians expressed that they had been affected by the strike (60%), and they did not know the demands of the different social actors who participated in the strike (78%), they were also overwhelmingly in favor of social protest (73%), and marches (76%), and a significant proportion (47%) believed that the protests should continue. Furthermore, despite rejecting blockades as a tool for social mobilization (79%), 61% of Colombians rejected the use of the police and armed forces to disperse blockades and 79% believed the government's response to the strike was negative (Centro Nacional de Consultoría 2021).

Despite widespread national and international rejection of police brutality, the government insisted on using the police and the armed forces to disperse protests. Although there were efforts to achieve a negotiated resolution, the government made lifting road blockades a precondition for negotiation and deployed the police and armed forces to lift the roadblocks in mid-May. Local-level governments, however, had been more effective in reaching agreements with activists blocking specific roads. These deals allowed for the creation of safe passages for humanitarian missions, food, and medicines, without completely dismantling the blockades (Garzón Vergara et al. 2021). Data presented by the Ministry of Defense shows that out of 661 roads blocked between April 28 and June 27, 430 (65%) were re-opened through negotiation (Ministerio de Defensa 2021).

It is important to note that even in light of documented human rights violations, the government prioritized 'public order' over citizen's right to non-violent protest and continued arguing, without presenting any evidence, that members of the National Liberation Army (ELN) and dissidents from the FARC infiltrated the protests (Garzón Vergara et al. 2021). The government and political and economic leaders have also been slow in recognizing the validity of the demands raised by the different movements involved in the protests and the right of civilians to protest and political elites were skeptical that the protest would take place, let alone become as massive and sustained as it did, given the pandemic (Pardo 2021). Different politicians from the government and other parties, labeled the people protesting as 'vandals', 'thugs', and 'terrorists' but

the stigmatization of social protests due to its past association with left-wing guerrillas is not as widespread as it used to be, and, as shown above, most Colombians support social protest as an expression of democratic citizenship (Centro Nacional de Consultoria 2021; Rettberg 2021).

Besides the government's justification of state violence against civilians during the national strike, there are significant inconsistencies between the data collected by civil society organizations and the government. Table 2 compares data on the protests collected by Indepaz and Temblores, two civil society organizations that have documented state violence, with data collected by the Ministry of Defense. An important difference between the data is the emphasis the government gives to the destruction of property. Although the government does show some data on state violence, it does not disaggregate the data by sex, age, location, or perpetrator, which complicates the analysis.

Table 2 – Comparison of data on police violence during National Strike

Form of violence	Data by Indepaz and Temblores	Data from Ministry of Defense
Murder	75 (44 confirmed by the police ; 31 unclear)	54 (24 related to the protests , but not attributed to the police; 11 unclear; 19 unrelated to the protests)
Eye lesions	83	No Data
Sexual violence	28	11 (including 1 case of sexual violence against a woman police officer)
Arbitrary detentions	1832	No data
Other forms of physical violence	1468	1147

Source: Prepared by the author with data from Temblores and Indepaz, and the Ministry of Defense.

Although both sets correspond to roughly the same time frame (April 28-June 28 for the Temblores/Indepaz data vs. April 28 to June 27 for Ministry of Defense data), the Ministry of Defense significantly underestimates state violence. Further, official data does not recognize certain forms of violence, such as eye lesions, which are forms of violence perpetrated explicitly by the police. As was mentioned earlier, the report by the Ministry of Defense also emphasizes the destruction of property over human rights violations, documenting violence against twenty-two different types of structures, including vehicles, and destruction of fourteen different types of *police* infrastructure. Even though the Ministry of Defense has recognized 1147 “wounded civilians,” the report does not explicitly acknowledge the role of the state armed forces, and there have only been 218 official investigations (Ministerio de Defensa 2021).

Besides blatant human rights violations perpetrated by state forces, international actors and civil society organizations have documented violence perpetrated by civilians against other civilians participating in the protests. During

the Paro, social media captured instances of this violence, including a man in Medellín who opened fire against demonstrators and the armed response that indigenous authorities faced when they organized in the Minga in Cali (Garzón Vergara et al. 2021). In the neighborhood of Ciudad Jardín in Cali, armed civilians fired against people participating in the protest “for several hours” while the police refused to stop the attack and even mingled with armed civilians (Alto Comisionado 2021).

V. THE AFTERMATH OF THE PARO AND ITS UNRESOLVED TENSIONS

The National Strike was the longest sustained event of social protest in Colombia’s recent history and represented the convergence of three separate but interrelated crises: health, socioeconomic, and governability. Although some sectors expressed dissatisfaction with the strike, the blockades, and the destruction of property, a significant number of people supported the mobilization and rejected the state’s response (Centro Nacional de Consultoría 2021; Moreno Soto and Muñoz Lopera 2021). Cases and deaths from COVID-19 increased dramatically in late June and early July (figures 1 and 2), and Intensive Care Units reached capacity in the largest cities. The National Strike Committee suspended the Paro due to the health emergency, but reactivated it on July 20, Colombia’s Independence Day. Since then, there have been sporadic mobilizations and marches throughout the country, but they have not reached the levels of the April-June strike.

The Paro had significant effects. The most immediate was the withdrawal of the tax reform proposed by President Duque and the subsequent resignation, on May 2, of Alberto Carrasquilla, the Minister of Economy who was the architect of the reform. Opposition senators and members of the House of Representatives called for a vote of no confidence on the Minister of Defense, Diego Molano, in connection to the response of the police to the protests. Although Molano was able to remain as Minister (the vote in the Senate was 31 votes in favor and 69 against the no-confidence motion), this was the third time a Minister of Defense in the Duque administration had to face a no-confidence vote. Before Molano, Guillermo Botero and Carlos Holmes Trujillo had also faced –but survived– no-confidence votes, and Botero was forced to resign.

The disputes between the government of Duque and mayors in several cities regarding the control of the Pandemic and the response to the protests show a deepening of the governability crisis evident since 2020 (Alto Comisionado 2021; Muñoz and Pachón 2021). Further, several corruption scandals have tainted the Duque administration, including one involving the current Minister of Defense. Other members of Duque’s cabinet have faced accusations of corruption, and then Minister of Information and Communication Technologies, Karen Abudinen, resigned due to allegations of illegal contracting. These

corruption scandals have raised questions about his ability to govern and the future of his party, Centro Democrático, which already had significant electoral losses in the subnational elections of 2019 and suffered further setbacks in the 2022 Congressional and Presidential elections (Dávila 2020; Suesca 2021; Caracol 2021; Redacción Política 2022).

Eventually, the Duque administration presented a revised tax reform that was less ambitious. Congress passed this bill, but this reform will not raise the revenue the Colombian state requires, especially given the increased social needs because of the Pandemic. Although according to data by the DANE, Colombia's economy grew 10.6% in 2021 (Portafolio 2022) the unemployment rate remains high, at 14.6% (DANE 2022) and it is unclear whether economic growth has contributed to reducing poverty and inequality or, as has occurred historically, has worsened socioeconomic disparities.

The state response to the protests brought international attention and several international organizations condemn human rights violations perpetrated by state actors in the context of the protests. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights visited the country between June 8 and 10, presented a report bringing attention to human rights violations by state actors during the *Paro*, and criticized the criminalization of protest that guided the police and government response to the strike. Among others, the Commission recommended the Government "Take the necessary measures to immediately stop the disproportionate use of force by security forces in Colombia in the context of social protests" (CIDH 2021: 42).

Calls for police reform were echoed by civil society organizations (Camargo Sánchez et al. 2020; Garzón Vergara et al. 2021). The government responded by making some changes, professionalizing the police, and providing education and training in human rights. The reforms also included new technologies, such as body cameras and uniforms that have QR codes to access the identifying information of the police officers. In addition, the President presented two bill proposals to address professionalization and a new disciplinary code and created the Mesa Nacional de Evaluación de Garantías with government and civil society representatives (Garzón Vergara et al. 2021; Herrera Rosas 2021; Semana 2021c). These reforms, however, do not address structural problems within the police, nor do they address state responses to protest, because as was evident during the National Strike, Colombian political elites do not see civil society mobilization and peaceful protest as a legitimate form of democratic citizenship and engagement.

Continuity and change in the National Strike

Social protest and the majority of repertoires of mobilization used in the 2021 National Strike are not new. Unions and other civil society actors mobilized against the government of Iván Duque in 2019 and 2020 using similar tactics,

and the government also responded by criminalizing protests and deploying militarized police.

The impact of the Strike, and what makes it a critical juncture, is its breadth and duration, its immediate impact, as well as the evident disconnection between political elites (including but not limited to the President) and regular people. The strike was over a month-long, and protests have erupted since then at different moments in the major cities. Protest also extended to a significant portion of municipalities and cities in the country, this also represents a rupture with past moments of mobilization as it is evidence that social discontent is not limited to urban dwellers, and that there is significant overlap between the interests and demands of those living in rural areas and peoples in the cities. Furthermore, the reaction to police brutality, and the fact that it ignited even more social mobilization represents an important break from past cycles of protest. In the past, police and state violence was met with justification or indifference, such as in the case of the False Positives.

In addition, the government's decision to withdraw the proposed Tax Reform is an important rupture from past protests where the government engaged in negotiation with demonstrators but the process was long and not as effective (Pardo 2021). The government also created the Mesa Nacional de Evaluación de Garantías para las Manifestaciones (National Board for the Evaluation of Guarantees for Social Protest) with representatives of different government institutions and demonstrators. The Decree by which the Mesa was created criminalizes road blockades as well as the use of violence by protesters, and there have been questions about the Constitutionality of the Decree (Semana 2021c).

The reaction of political elites, continuing to stigmatize social protest and accusing protesters of being vandals and terrorists while underplaying their demands for a more just and equitable country, shows their disconnection with Colombian citizens and it is evidence of the crisis of representation that has occurred in the country for long. This disconnection and the National Strike had a significant impact on the 2022 Congressional and Presidential elections as will be shown in the next section.

VI. PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

Even though the National Strike lost steam by the end of the year, the impact will be significant moving forward. The protests were multi-sectorial, and even though the tax reform was the trigger, the demands for change were much more profound and systemic. The minimal changes made by the Duque administration are unlikely to have any significant effect and will certainly not demobilize civil society.

Recent scholarship has shown that a lack of trust in institutions does not drive engagement with political, judicial, and other systems. Rather, citizens' deci-

sion to participate in politics and engage with political institutions is driven by their expectations of the state (Kruks-Wisner 2018; Boulding and Holzner 2021; Hilbink et al. 2022). This is especially the case in Colombia, where citizens have high levels of consciousness and knowledge of human rights, even among marginalized groups (Gallagher et al 2019; Hilbink et al 2022). A critical element driving the protests is the perception of police brutality as a symptom of a more significant problem. Rather than understanding police abuses as incidental, Colombians see them as a more systemic problem. This includes not only police brutality and human rights violations but also unequal access to justice and political institutions, inequality and poverty, lack of opportunities, corruption, inefficacy, and a political system that favors the political and economic elites (Hilbink et al. 2022).

The national strike shaped the 2022 legislative and presidential elections and define their results. Inequality, poverty, and social inclusion were broadly discussed in the electoral cycle. This was reflected in the candidate's decision to nominate more women as well as Afro-Colombians as vice-presidential candidates. For the first time in Colombia's history a Black woman from the rural regions of the country, single mother, and victim of the conflict, Francia Márquez Mina, was nominated as a running mate, with real possibilities for winning.

Citizens' dissatisfaction with the political and economic system gave way to surprising results in the first round of the presidential elections. Gustavo Petro, the nominee from the Left-wing Coalition Pacto Histórico was the winner of the first round with 40% of the popular vote. The center and center-right were divided among two candidates with possibilities (Federico Gutiérrez, and Sergio Fajardo) none of whom received enough votes to move on to the runoff election. Instead, a relative newcomer, Rodolfo Hernández, the former mayor of a medium-sized city, obtained 28% of the popular vote, moving on to the next round of the election. The dynamics and results of the election will probably be analyzed more in-depth in a future issue of the Yearbook, but they signal that Colombia's dissatisfaction with the political system did not wane with the protests. Instead, the frustration and discontent were carried to the ballot boxes and will shape Colombia's next four years.

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