

COLOMBIA'S INTERNAL UNREST A Cause for Regional Concern?

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INTRODUCTION

South America has been a region of unrest since 2019. The recent Colombian protests continued the wave of protests that began in the pre-COVID phase. The wave of protests in 2019 highlighted deep income inequalities and social disparities in South American countries with thousands of demonstrators coming on streets to retaliate against unfair government policies and practices. This came to an abrupt halt in 2020 due to COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed by governments to contain the virus. Although, the restrictions could not hold back protests for long as the deep rooted political, societal, and economic issues aggravated by the pandemic sprung back up again. The pandemic severely strained Southern American countries' economy, most of which were in already in debt. Moreover, presence of weak institutions, political divisiveness and extreme corruption that contributed to the mishandling of the pandemic triggered another wave of protests. This paper discusses the recent Colombian protests and analyses prominent protests that have occurred in South America since 2019 in Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Paraguay. It concludes by arguing that being a prominent regional player, Colombia's internal protests can bring instability to the region already marred by worsening economic crisis, political scandals and widening social disparities.

COLOMBIA'S PROTESTS

The Colombian protests were fueled by the government's incapacity to manage the pandemic which heavily impacted its already crippled economic and social apparatus. To mitigate Colombia's economic crisis, President Ivan Duque's government proposed a Tax Reform Plan that was extremely unpopular with the public. The Plan expanded the number of people, including lower- and middle-income workers, who had to pay income taxes, eliminated some tax benefits, added sales taxes on many basic staples, ended exemptions from value-added tax, and created a wealth tax. The tax hikes came when Colombians were already distressed with

national poverty rate jumping to 50% in 2020, unemployment rate being stuck at over 15%, the overall state GDP falling to 6.8% and over 90,000 deaths having occurred due to COVID-19. Major cities such as Bogotá, Medellín and Cali saw vast numbers of people being pushed below the poverty line. Women were among the hardest hit, with 46.7% of women, compared to 40.1% of men, living in poverty.¹ Young people were not only hard hit with low unemployment rates but also were forced out of education, because of the high cost of private universities, and a lack of capacity in the public system.² Unions and other opponents of Duque's plan thus called for a general strike to force the government to withdraw the plan.

The police responded to the protests with brutal force, deteriorating the already troubling relationship between the public and the police. There were routine instances of sieges, illegal detention, and abuse before the wave of protests began in Colombia. This worsened during the pandemic as the government granted additional powers to the security forces to enforce social distancing measures. With many people impoverished and confined to their homes in a situation where there seemed to be no light at the end of the tunnel, the police were increasingly coming to dominate public space.³ When the frustration of young people especially could no longer be contained, the resulting clashes showed a brutality that was unprecedented in Colombia's recent history.⁴ Human Rights group Amnesty International accused Colombian authorities of "excessive and unnecessary use of force against demonstrators, which has resulted in dozens of people being killed and injured, arbitrary detentions, acts of torture and sexual violence."⁵ Within a week, Duque withdrew his proposal but consequent waves of protests continued against police brutality amid human rights accusations. Moreover, years of frustration over wealth inequality and official corruption intensified the fury in the streets. The protestors' list of demands broadened to include health and educational reforms. The following sectors of Colombia were affected:

Economic: The unrest resulted in the destruction of public property, the blockages of roads creating a shortage of food and fuel. The route blockages particularly affected

¹ Borda, Sandra. "Why Colombia Has Erupted in Protest." *OpenDemocracy*. June 02, 2021. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/colombia-protest-why-erupted-en/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bremmer, Ian. "What Happens Next With the Protests Roiling Colombia," *Time*. May 17, 2021. Accessed July 02, 2021. <https://time.com/6048639/protests-colombia/>.

supply chains of critical products and resulted in the shutdown of many companies. This will negatively impact Colombia's economy which is dependent on exports and already burdened by a massive foreign debt.

Social: So far, Human Rights Watch has confirmed that 34 deaths occurred in the context of the protests, including those of 2 police officers, 1 criminal investigator, and 31 demonstrators or bystanders, at least 20 of whom appear to have been killed by the police.⁶ Moreover Colombia currently faces a third wave of pandemic with a shortage of hospital beds, ICU supplies, and vaccine doses. The protests posed a risk of creating contagion areas and protestors being super-spreaders.

Regional Security: There is a general sentiment of dissent against political and economic systems in Southern American countries that have pushed millions into poverty and continues to subdue the population using coercion. The vast income inequality and poor state infrastructure has forced millions of Southern Americans to protest the established status quo.

⁶ "Colombia: Egregious Police Abuses Against Protesters," *Human Rights Watch*, June 29, 2021. Accessed July 02, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/09/colombia-egregious-police-abuses-against-protesters>.

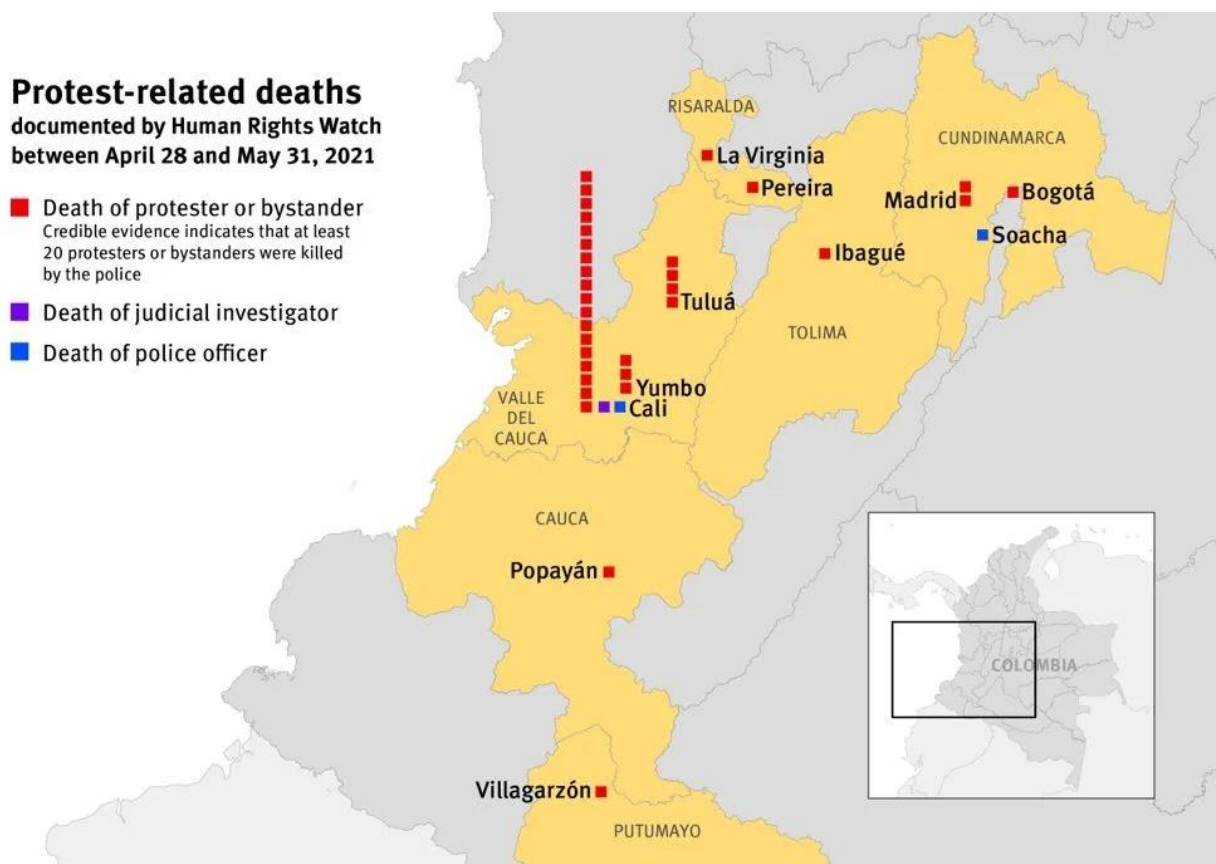


Figure 1.⁷

REGIONAL CASE STUDIES

CHILE

In 2019, Chile experienced its worst unrest in decades which turned into a nationwide uprising against the established political system and massive wealth accumulation by the country's elite. 1% of Chile's population earns 33% of the nation's wealth, making it the most unequal country in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development group of nations.⁸ Initially sparked by increased metro fares, the protests grew to address wider grievances over living costs and inequality. The violent protests, although subdued in the lieu of COVID-19, can be

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Franklin, Jonathan. "Chile Protesters: 'We Are Subjugated by the Rich. It's Time for That to End,'" *The Guardian*. October 30, 2019. Accessed July 02, 2021. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/30/chile-protests-portraits-protesters-sebastian-pinera>.

expected to spring back up if the government is inadequate in complying to the demands of the protestors to a sufficient extent.

The Chilean constitution has been cited as the source of deep-rooted social and economic disparities, and thus a struggle to bring about reform in the Pinochet-era Constitution ignited in the country. In a referendum held in 2020, the Chilean people overwhelmingly voted to draft a new constitution. However, a democratic rewrite of the Constitution will be a challenge. Chile's November elections will be a major decisive factor in determining the extent to which reforms in the Constitution will be taking place and whether it will have public support. Most of the demands raised by Chileans have been quite radical with respect to existing laws and Constitutional Article 135, which requires that the new document "respect" existing international treaties and judicial decisions. This will pose a problem due to its broad and open-ended phrasing which can be manipulated by leaders who are against the re-write. The right leaning coalition, for example, who tend to align towards the Piñera government are expected to block major structural changes to the existing constitution.⁹ This could fuel further protests in the future, especially in the light of an already unstable region.

BOLIVIA

Bolivia has been experiencing a political turbulence since 2019. The elected governments have had a past of abusing their power and repressing freedom of expression along with other fundamental human rights standards. In 2019, protests erupted against the MAS government led by Morales over allegations of electoral fraud. The Morales administration also had created a hostile environment for human rights defenders and promoted changes to the judiciary that posed a serious threat to the rule of law.¹⁰ Morales resigned due to military pressure post which an interim government with Áñez, a devout Catholic and conservative, was established. Instead of changing ways of governing, the Áñez government continued with the precedent set by previous government and abused the judiciary system. The interim government adopted policies threatening free speech, including an overly broad provision in a COVID-19 decree

⁹ Lynch, Sam. "Chile's Constitutional Rewrite: A Difficult Path Ahead, but a Recipe for Inclusion." *Council on Foreign Relations*. Accessed July 02, 2021. <http://www.cfr.org/blog/chiles-constitutional-rewrite-difficult-path-ahead-recipe-inclusion>.

¹⁰ "World Report 2021: Rights Trends in Bolivia." *Human Rights Watch*. January 13, 2021. Accessed July 02, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/bolivia>.

that would have allowed prosecution of government critics.¹¹ The government revoked this provision in May 2020 in response to public outcry when there were repeated protests by the medical personnel due to lack of personal protective equipment and medical supplies in hospitals. Doctors at the time announced that hospitals were at full capacity and not in the condition to admit more cases. In August, protests erupted again, this time against the postponement of general elections. In November 2020 a leftist government came to power led by Morales' ally and former economy minister Luis Arce and the case for misuse of power continued. Allegations of fraudulent elections sprung up when Áñez and other political opponents of the ruling socialist party were arrested in alleged participation in the coup of 2019. Tens of thousands of people in cities across Bolivia took to the streets protesting the use of such repressive means for political crackdown.

Continued corruption, weakened judiciary, political polarization, infringement on freedom of expression, and excessive and arbitrary use of pretrial detention has marred Bolivia since 2019. The conflict in Bolivia is an ongoing one since no definite action from the government has yet been taken to resolve the widespread problems faced by Bolivians. Thus, the state remains in a volatile state likely erupt in another wave of protests with the next political dispute.

ECUADOR

Protests erupted in 2019 against President Lenin Moreno's decision to cut decades-old fuel subsidies and implement tax and labour reforms. Taxi and bus drivers, student groups, and thousands of indigenous people took to the streets blocking roads and highways. The peaceful turned violent protests noted high cases of police brutality and mass-detention, resulting in the death of seven. The protests heavily impacted businesses and halved Ecuador's oil production, forcing a temporary halt to the country's most important export. After a 10-day confrontation the demonstrators and the government came to negotiate and signed an agreement ending the protests. In 2020 again, protests erupted in the capital city of Quito against the government's failure to manage the pandemic. Ecuador had been one of the worst-affected countries in South America. The demonstrators expressed dissent against the Moreno's economic measures, highlighting the underlying issue of massive income inequality which is a widespread issue in Southern America. The indigenous population is highly empowered in Ecuador, being the force behind the resignation of three Presidents in the past.

¹¹ Ibid.

In the recent elections held in May 2021, Guillermo Lasso, a candidate of the indigenous party won the Presidency. Although the change in governance is expected to bring calm in the state, Ecuador continues to face unresolved economic and social challenges ahead. The drastic impact of COVID-19 on various sectors and Southern American countries' economic inability to counter its challenges is expected to create a ripple effect and impact the regional stability.

PERU

Peru has seen the greatest degree of political atomization with five Presidents in the past five year. Tensions began again in 2019 when President Martin Vizcarra dissolved Congress in an attempt to force new parliamentary elections. While supporters of Vizcarra and his anti-corruption reforms staged a demonstration in solidarity, there were many that opposed the move and took to streets to express their frustration. What followed was a period of political uncertainty with constant dissent between the Congress and the Presidents. In 2020 massive protests broke out in major Peruvian cities after the President of Congress Manuel Merino ousted President Vizcarra and formed a far-right government. For many Peruvians the removal of the President was seen as an attempted coup and thus unacceptable. Furthermore, the authorities' response – police using excessive force wounding at least eleven – deepened dissatisfaction. Within days, due to surmounting pressure and existing cracks present between the Congress and the government, Merino administration resigned. This has been termed as Peru's "deepest constitutional crisis in nearly three decades" and has reflected deep political polarisation in the country. The disputed results of the 2021 Presidential elections have sparked fresh protests from supporters of rival candidates - with poorer rural voters rallying behind Castillo and wealthier urban voters from Lima supporting Fujimori, the daughter of jailed ex-President Alberto Fujimori.

PARAGUAY

In Paraguay's past dictatorship continues to undermine its social, economic and political spheres. In 2019, the protestors brought to light widespread corruption across the political spectrum and demanded their removal. Protestors targeted various governors, federal lawmakers and provincial officials by filing criminal charges against them and denouncing them. The situation aggravated in 2020, when Paraguayan demonstrators organised a series of vehicle caravans to protest corruption when several irregularities were reported in the purchase

of medical supplies to control the coronavirus pandemic¹². The protests continued in 2021 due to the government's poor management of the pandemic with protestors demanding the resignation of President Mario Abdo Benítez. Protesters point to numerous corruption scandals, questionable implementation of emergency funds, and a severe lack of hospital beds, medical supplies, and vaccines as evidence of the government's mismanagement¹³. The right-wing Colorado Party (ANR) has been in power almost uninterrupted for more than 70 years, including the 35-year dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner. The continuous rule has resulted in deep inequalities, endemic corruption, and inefficient institutions. During the recent protests, in March, Paraguay's young population played a key role in mobilising thus indicating widespread frustration and a possible change in status quo. Moreover, the presence of middle class during the protests was notable in-so-far that section of the society remains conservative and less supportive of student mobilisation¹⁴. In similar fashion to 2019 protests, the Abdo government attempted to repress protests with the security forces using disproportionate force against the demonstrators. There is deep dissent against the current Abdo government as well as the long running regime of ANR. In its decades of rule, the Colorado Party has overseen the development of multiple chronic problems in Paraguay, which the pandemic has only intensified.¹⁵ Paraguay is a volcano speculated to erupt in the coming years in Southern America.

CONCLUSION

Several South America countries have faced coups, military dictatorships, and social uprisings in the past century. Colombia, the second most populous democracy in the region, thus plays a vital role in balancing the region's political spectrum by maintaining stable governance and international relations. Colombia's friendly relations with the U.S. and Europe on one hand, and with its regional neighbours on the other, has resulted in it being a strategic player in uniting South America. Major inter-regional platforms where these countries collaborate are Pacific Alliance and Latin American Integration Association (ALADI). In addition to the economic stability it brings to the region Colombia is also a key partner in the US war on drugs. It has played a pivotal role in combatting violence between drug traffickers as well as in conducting

¹² "Protests in Paraguay amid Coronavirus Pandemic," *Civicus*, 9 September 2020.

<https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2020/09/09/protests-paraguay-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

¹³ Costa, William. "Protesters in Paraguay Question Pandemic Response and One-Party Rule." *NACLA*. March 22, 2021. Accessed July 02, 2021. <https://nacla.org/news/2021/03/22/protests-paraguay-pandemic-colorados>.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

peace talks with national guerrilla groups such as ELN and FARC. Thus, when the government's actions against demonstrators are questioned by human rights groups and internationally scrutinised, Colombia's long-standing presence as a stable, democratic country is discredited.¹⁶

The protests have drawn international attention to issues deep-rooted in Colombian society such as poverty, national health, and state violence, thus putting the country in a position of intense scrutiny.¹⁷ Across Southern America most protests started because of minor causes, like bus or subway fare increases, but pertain to broader public policy problems like corruption, access to education, health care or pensions¹⁸. There has been broad dissent against the government across South America which exemplified when attempts at stifling the protests were made by security forces with the use of excessive force. This has created an atmosphere of mistrust between the people and the government. The above-mentioned case studies have highlighted the fragility of the region. Colombia's internal unrest can embolden other Southern American countries and create a ripple effect. With worsening national debt, high unemployment rates, and an international health crisis, the situation in South America is deteriorating. The growing involvement of young and middle-class population in anti-government protests indicates widespread frustration and raises concerns about sustained peace in the region in the near future.

¹⁶ Latham, Holly. "How The Colombian Protests Threaten Regional Stability In Latin America." *Human Rights Pulse*. May 26, 2021. Accessed July 02, 2021. <https://www.humanrightspulse.com/mastercontentblog/how-the-colombian-protests-threaten-regional-stability-in-latin-america>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Lenin Cavalcanti Guerra Post-Doctoral Fellow. "What's Going on in South America? Understanding the Wave of Protests." *The Conversation*. June 15, 2021. Accessed July 02, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/whats-going-on-in-south-america-understanding-the-wave-of-protests-126336>.

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"World Report 2021: Rights Trends in Bolivia." Human Rights Watch. January 13, 2021.
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