

# Social Protest, Colombia's flip side



Two analysts from Universidad del Rosario present some of the reasons for the “social outbreak” in 2021 and point out differences with the 2019 demonstrations. They found that the young population is not homogeneous and that conflicts must be addressed in a different way from the habits adopted given the decade-long armed conflict.

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Photos: Milagro Castro, Juan Ramírez, Alberto Sierra

**“T**he great risk is that social mobilization may start a new cycle of violence in the country.” This phrase by **Juan Carlos Guerrero**, associate professor at the Faculty of International, Political, and Urban Studies, and director of the Observatorio de Redes y Acción Colectiva (Orac) from Rosario, which keeps track of social protests in Colombia, reflects upon the dimension of the social outbreak lived in the country this year.

“What is happening is that we are undergoing a governance crisis, triggered by the government’s inability to address a series of social demands that have been building up for a long time in the country. A number of demands that have not been well-attended got worse with the impact caused by the pandemic, particularly in the most vulnerable populations,” he says.

A good deal of those demands occurred during the events of November 2019, which were more focused on education, health, retirement, and labor reform. In that view, he agrees with **María Angélica Prada**, professor at the Faculty of Law at Universidad del Rosario and lawyer with master degrees in International Law and Anthropology from Universidad de los Andes.

She joins the voices of those who pointed to social inequity, a lack of future, and the stigmatization of the young, as a clear source of mobilization. “The young feel that Colombia is not offering them a perspective of a



↑ “Colombia must learn a lesson and recognize that we are a country with differences and violence arising from structural inequalities that are too huge to heal. We must stop stigmatizing populations who have been historically oppressed and impoverished,” indicates professor María Angélica Prada from the Faculty of Law at Universidad del Rosario.



↑ Juan Carlos Guerrero, director of the Observatorios de Reads y Acción Colectiva (Orac), stresses: “A society that aims at moving towards the post-conflict era must understand that the end of the armed conflict does not mean the end of conflicts, but their transformation. Conflicts are inherent to any society, the problem is how they are managed and solved.”

Another dominant feature of the social protest in 2021 in Colombia was vandalism, with the destruction of public infrastructure and private property, just like the state repression, which in many cases was exaggerated. Such facts caused a spiral of violence in the streets.



good life in the future, in the terms of opportunities for working, studying, or personal development” she claims.

To those two reasons, the professor adds a massive anger arising from the State’s indifference and violence towards what is happening in a sector of society that has been severely affected by the pandemic. This quarantine “deepened poverty, hunger, inequality, unemployment, and the gap of unequal rights between men and women,” she points out.

In 2019, professor Guerrero explains, a very particular round of protests occurred in which different social sectors got together and managed to express demands and formed the Comité Nacional del Paro (CNP) with its chart including more than a hundred claims and the materialization of a large-scale national strike. “It broke again in 2021 because the strike lost strength when the pandemic appeared. The government had opened some dialog channels, which did not get anywhere, and did not pay much attention to what had been discussed then. We have already seen what happened,” he states.

For professor Prada, the differences between the two strikes are plain to see. In 2019, the mobilizations were urban and manifested in the main cities of the country; it was not quite rural.

“In 2021, on the other hand, we see a greater decentralization of the strike; we see it on the roads, on the sidewalks. Much more active in cities like Cali, Pereira and Popayán.”

For Guerrero, that decentralization lies in the fact that the 2021 strike is much more popular, less linked to the formal organizations that traditionally pushed the mobilizations in Colombia.

Another clear difference is the role of the (CNP). In 2019, the committee still held some legitimacy before the organization of the mobilizations. In 2021, although they kept on calling for the protests, their legitimacy was questioned, which made the mobilization much more spontaneous and less organized than two years ago.

“In 2020, the CNP set assemblies through which a break was caused with the social, youth, and indigenous movement, because it has a very hierarchical perspective of representative democracy, whereas the young and women are ask-



ing for much deeper and more horizontal democratic spaces,” observes professor Prada.

### The young, the protagonists

Precisely, the third examination of the *Study of perception of the young* presented by Universidad del Rosario, the Publishing House El Tiempo (Casa Editorial El Tiempo) and the company Cifras y Conceptos (Figures and Concepts), in the first semester of 2021, revealed that the young were an important element in the marches. For instance, 63% of them had manifested in some way during the strike, whereas in 2019, 43% had taken part. They did it given the lack of trust in the institutions and the concerns they had, such as unemployment, difficulties to have access to education; in summary, their fear to personal safety.

“The generalized feeling of unrest, sadness, or lack of hope is more a sensation of no future and stigmatization. It is the fear of not being offered a life worth living in our society,” clears up professor Prada.

According to the survey, the most predominant emotion at that moment among the young was sadness with a 33%,

followed by anger and fear. Regarding topics like their emotional health, employment, and economy, most of them felt it got worse.

“The figures of the survey explain, in some way, why sometimes the young turn to violence, although they do not justify it. Many young people think that, on occasions, there is no other option. If we, as a society, do not take the revindications of the young seriously, we are going to have a lost generation,” the lecturer explains.

From Guerrero’s perspective, it is important to begin distinguishing that category of young people who are not a homogeneous social sector. He assures that in a country with such large inequalities as in Colombia, there are young people who have the chance of studying or going to college, who get organized in student movements, but there are also marginalized young people, who do not have access to education, do not study, or work. Young people with a very strong social resentment, a restrained social anger, and difficulty organizing themselves. In short, they give vent to their anger, many times, with acts of vandalism.

“There is some hopelessness which has led them to manifest, but without resignation,”

he claims. For that reason, he believes that in future actions, it is critical to distinguish between those population sectors that require diverse solutions; one at a national level, and others at a local level, as a result of more decentralized dialogs.

### The year 2022, a note of optimism

Another interesting fact from the survey is the one related with the 89% of those polled plan to vote in the 2022 elections for Congress and Presidency.

“They are willing to continue taking part, and not only through social mobilizations, but with their vote in the elections as well. They feel downhearted, but anxious about a change in the country, and aware that, to a large extent, such a change lies in their hands,” states professor Guerrero.

In this regard, professor Prada believes that what happened in 2021 will have an effect on the electionary processes of the next year. **“These manifestations will definitely have an impact on the 2022 elections, and that will likely reduce abstention among the young.** I do not know if that will lead to a new social contract, but it will certainly impact on the minimum programmatic documents that will be required from all the candidates.”

From his conceptual point of view, the candidates’ agendas will have to revindicate rights in the labor, social, and economic dimensions. It will have to attend to the rights of minorities, of women, and reinforce the defense of the environment and life.

“What we are seeing is young people who seem to have some credibility in those forms of representation based on the

exercise of voting, and that is important. That fact generates a note of optimism,” affirms Guerrero.

### Violence, the other problem

Yet another predominant feature of the 2021 social protest in Colombia was undoubtedly the vandalic acts, with the destruction of public infrastructure and private property, as well as state repression, which in many cases was excessive. Those facts triggered a spiral of violence in the streets.

For professor Prada, the word “vandal” must be used with utter care as it has a relationship with the way different States around the world have dominated their internal enemies to build security policies. “These are terms that give rise to the ‘otherness’ of people. In Colombia, words like ‘insurgents’, or ‘terrorists’ have been used throughout history, and now it is ‘vandals’,” she asserts.

And adds: “Once you term a population with that concept of otherness (meaning they do not belong to a community), you are legitimating the use of violence by the State against that group; it is like taking their citizenship rights away from them,” she affirms.

This lawyer and teacher from Rosario also propose to make a difference between violence and disruptive acts. “Blocking a road is neither vandalism nor violence. The Constitutional Court established that the blockage of routes is not a crime *per se* because it is a legitimate mechanism for protesting when the institutional tools have been exhausted, as long as it is not illegal,” she says.

The excessive use of force by the police, which has been documented by many NGOs, like **Temblores ONG**, professor Guerrero thinks is a worrisome issue to which we must pay attention.

From his perspective, the existing problem is a lack of preparation of the public force in view of a new context, the post-conflict. **“Controlling manifestations is very different to fighting guerrillas or drug traffickers. The Peace Agreement would not put an end to conflicts, because there are many structural problems in the country which would originate by social mobilizations.** This is a form of expression of social conflict.” Additionally, as the **Orac** director goes on explaining, the public force has been excessive which led to a “snowball” effect, provoking a growing lack of confidence in the citizens and bringing about larger scale violent reactions.

In this sense, the two analysts coincide on the fact that the discussion about the structural reform of the police and the **Es-mad** (mobile anti-disturbance squadron) is very important and must be addressed. “We must have a different vision of security in Colombia, a more human vision, which includes the reduction of poverty or greater working opportunities. It is not just a matter of repression,” Prada states.

### What’s next for the country?

According to professor Guerrero, “the flowering of participative democracy and social mobilization is, to a large extent, attributed to the crisis of representative democracy.” In this regard, he considers the State must focus on the structural problems of the country, which are especially evident in the regions, and build trust with the population with sincere acts of forgiveness, together with a deep respect for human rights.

“The escalation of violence has to be stopped, and those excesses of violence committed by the public force must be recognized. Investigations must be conducted and the Government must give a message that lets citizens have more trust in the State,” he says.

For her part, professor Prada believes that Colombia will be a different country after the historical mobilizations of 2021. “Not necessarily because they lead to a structural change, but I do believe it is something that will remain in the collective memory of our society and will have an impact on the way society establishes relationships among themselves and with the State.” ■

## The studies on social protest

Professor María Angélica Prada has recently elaborated a research titled: *Going on a strike to move forward: feeling and acting the 2019’s National Strike*, jointly with Andrea Lopera Lombana, a philosopher from Universidad Nacional de Colombia, as part of a research work financed by the Rosa Luxemburgo Foundation, in many countries, on mobilizations during 2019 in Latin America. This article looked to understand three main issues: the role played by young people in 2019’s strike, the affective relationships that kept the strike alive during those weeks (fear, anger, solidarity, hope) and the role women played. Likewise, together with Alexandra González, former coordinator of the area of Democracy and Protest of the Committee of Solidarity with Political Prisoners, published the article *The State does not care for us: atmospheres of (in) security in the exercise of the right to protest in Bogotá*, where they underscore the trend towards contradictory regulations in Colombia regarding the right to protest, because of opposing affective relationships with respect to social mobilization. “We explain that these contradictions in the rules occur because there is an affective contradiction in our society as to social protest, and depending on what the predominant affective atmosphere is about a mobilization, there will be more or less repression by the forces of the State,” Prada asserts.

