

**Case study**  
December 2020



# **The rise of the far right: Colombia**

## Introduction

After more than 50 years of armed conflict, which claimed 220,000 lives and displaced more than seven million people, in 2016 the Colombian government signed a historic peace agreement with the country's largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP). The agreement is organised around six key points: 1) comprehensive rural reform; 2) political participation; 3) an end to conflict including a ceasefire and a laying down of arms, the social, economic and political reincorporation of former FARC combatants and security guarantees; 4) a solution to the illicit drugs problem; 5) victims – comprehensive system for truth, justice, reparations and non-repetition; and 6) implementation and verification.

The Colombian Peace Agreement has been celebrated for tackling the causes of the conflict, including the widespread inequality and lack of access to land and the absence of space for political participation with the historic violent repression of progressive opposition and organised civil society. The agreement is ground-breaking in that it incorporates provisions to address issues of gender, race, land and sexual orientation. However, support for the peace process among the political and economic elite is divided. Certain parts of the political establishment have seen it as a vehicle for modernisation and development, whereas parts of the landowning class and those linked to some of the worst atrocities have fiercely opposed the agreement. Their opposition is thought to stem from the fact of them having benefited from the conflict, and from concerns that their crimes may be exposed by the truth and justice process.

President Ivan Duque comes from the Democratic Centre Party, a party that led opposition to the Peace Agreement. He was elected in 2018 on a promise to 'modify' the peace deal,<sup>1</sup> and under his leadership the government's progress on fulfilling its commitments has stalled. The Kroc Institute reports that implementation of the agreement has slowed down in the past year, noting that a quarter of its 578 provisions have not begun to be implemented, and that 'minimal' progress has been made on another third. They also note that commitments on rural reforms "made little progress in the last year".<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Duque government's National Development Plan for rural areas is based largely on the privatisation of land for industrial agriculture and mega-extractive projects. Since Duque's election, there has been a boom in 'mercenary mining' – that is, mining operations by subcontractors working for multinationals. Land grabbing and deforestation has also increased under this government. Duque's doubling down on this model of development is driving environmental degradation, entrenching inequality and exacerbating militarisation and violence in marginalised rural communities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Burnyeat G, Engstrom P, Gómez-Suárez A and Pearce J (2020). "Justice after war: innovations and challenges of Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace". *LSE Blog*, 3 April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Alsema A (2020). "US monitors urge Colombia to accelerate slowed down peace process". *Colombia Reports*, 17 June 2020. Available at: <https://colombiareports.com/us-monitors-urge-colombia-to-accelerate-slowed-down-peace-process/>.

<sup>3</sup> Volckhausen T (2019). "Land grabbing, cattle ranching ravage Colombian Amazon after FARC demobilization". *Mongabay*, 30 May 2019. Available at: <https://news.mongabay.com/2019/05/land->

The Peace Agreement also linked the reform of the rural sector with the voluntary substitution of illicit crops (such as coca). According to the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), crop substitution had been producing positive results, responsible for a low replanting rate of on average 0.2 per cent.<sup>4</sup> But, under pressure from the US, Duque's government has turned to forced eradication and has talked about reintroducing aerial crop fumigation. The Duque administration has recently cancelled the contract with UNODC to follow up and assess the process, and signalled an escalation of the 'war on drugs'. In return for this, Trump doubled the budget for Colombia's war on drugs to \$237.5 million.<sup>5</sup>

Another key element of the peace deal was the establishment of a transitional justice system that would seek to provide truth and justice to the greatest possible extent for the country's victims. In relation to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), which forms part of the Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-Repetition, Duque has objected to the statutory law that governs the JEP, which has served to "undermine the legal security" of those intending to appear before the JEP, even though he was overruled by Congress and the Constitutional Court.<sup>6</sup> He also cut the Truth Commission's budget for 2020 by 30 per cent.<sup>7</sup> This attack on the transitional justice process looks set to continue into 2021, with the JEP issuing a statement in October expressing its concern at further government cuts to budgets deemed "essential for the care and protection of victims, witnesses and interveners".<sup>8</sup>

## The end of conflict?

Closely linked to the lack of progress in each of these areas is the persistence of violence against activists, ex-combatants and political representatives, which directly threatens the sustainability of the peace process. The Colombian NGO Indepaz reports that 254 social leaders and human rights defenders (environmentalists, farmers, lawyers, indigenous and Afro-Colombian activists, trade unionists, LGBT+, civic and community leaders) and 56 former FARC combatants undergoing a reincorporation process in line with the Peace Agreement were murdered in the first 11 months of 2020.<sup>9</sup> As of November 2020, around 241 former FARC combatants have been killed since the signing of the agreement. Fourteen trade unionists have been assassinated between 2019 and 2020, with another four murder

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[grabbing-cattle-ranching-ravage-colombian-amazon-after-farc-demobilization/](#); King E and Wherry S (2020). "Colombia's environmental crisis accelerates under Duque". *nacla*, 20 April 2020. Available at: <https://nacla.org/news/2020/04/20/colombia-environmental-crisis-duque>.

<sup>4</sup> UNODC (2020). *Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos*. Informe No 22 (October 2020). Available at:

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/colombia/2020/Octubre/Informe\\_Ejecutivo\\_No\\_22.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/colombia/2020/Octubre/Informe_Ejecutivo_No_22.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Aguirre M (2020). "Colombia's President Duque at a crossroads". *Chatham House*, 17 March 2020. Available at: <https://americas.chathamhouse.org/article/colombias-president-duque-at-a-crossroads/>.

<sup>6</sup> Burnyeat *et al.*, *op cit*.

<sup>7</sup> Foggin S (2019). "JEP budget for 2020 to reduce by thirty percent". *Latin America Reports*, 13 July 2019. Available at: <https://latinamericareports.com/jep-budget-for-2020-will-reduce-by-30-percent/2656/>.

<sup>8</sup> JEP (2020). "JEP, preocupada por no aprobación de recursos adicionales en presupuesto". 20 October 2020. Available at: [https://twitter.com/JEP\\_Colombia/status/1318619506818846720](https://twitter.com/JEP_Colombia/status/1318619506818846720).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.indepaz.org.co/lideres/>.

attempts, one case of enforced disappearance and 198 death threats recorded in the same period. Like Turkey and Brazil, Colombia has been identified as one of the 10 worst countries for workers.<sup>10</sup> UN Special Rapporteur Michael Forst has said that those most at risk of violent attacks and murder are social leaders “promoting the implementation of the Peace Agreement and defending land and environmental rights and the rights of ethnic communities against the interests of criminal groups, illegal armed groups and state and non-state actors, such as national and international corporations and other powerful interest groups”.<sup>11</sup>

Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International have criticised the government for failing to use existing mechanisms to ensure the safety of social leaders.<sup>12</sup> These concerns have been echoed by former FARC leaders, who have not only highlighted the government’s failure to provide adequate protection but also noted that the failure to progress key social provisions of the agreement, designed to address the inequities that gave rise to the conflict in the first place, are contributing to the growth of organised crime and disillusionment with the peace process.<sup>13</sup>

Duque’s administration has also come under criticism due to the actions of the military. Among the incidents that attracted public attention last year was the extrajudicial killing of FARC ex-combatant Dimar Torres in April. The military’s conduct was called into further question in May, when the *New York Times* revealed that senior army officials had pressured soldiers to increase the number of militants killed or captured, with standards of engagement lowered to help improve performance figures. This raised major fears of a policy reminiscent of the days when soldiers were encouraged to increase combatant casualties in order to gain benefits, which resulted in up to 5,000 civilians being murdered and falsely presented as combatant casualties between 1988 and 2014.<sup>14</sup> The final straw came with the revelation that the bombing of an alleged dissident FARC camp in August had killed at least eight children, with Senator Roy Barreras accusing the government of trying to hide the victims’ identities. With the army’s credibility severely dented, Colombia’s Defence Minister Guillermo Botero was forced to resign, making way for former Foreign Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo.<sup>15</sup>

However, things have gone from bad to worse in the 12 months since Trujillo took over. Not only has public security failed to improve, but his tenure has been defined by scandals

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<sup>10</sup> ITUC (2020), *op cit*, p 25.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Aguirre, *op cit*.

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International (2020). *Why Do They Want to Kill Us? Lack of safe space to defend human rights in Colombia*. London, 2020. Available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AMR2330092020ENGLISH.PDF>.

<sup>13</sup> Rueda M (2020). “Colombia Farc: the former rebels who need bodyguards to stay safe”. *BBC News*, 3 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-54778291>.

<sup>14</sup> “El informe de ‘falsos positivos’ que entregó la Fiscalía a la JEP”. *Mundo El Herald*, 27 May 2019. Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.co/mundo/el-informe-de-falsos-positivos-que-entrego-la-fiscalia-la-jep-635858>

<sup>15</sup> Justice for Colombia (2019). “Colombian defence minister resigns over multiple army human rights scandals”. 15 November 2019. Available at: <https://justiceforcolombia.org/news/colombian-defence-minister-resigns-over-multiple-army-human-rights-scandals/>.

and a failed terror campaign to quell anti-government protests. The National Army commander Nicasio Martínez was forced to resign after the Supreme Court discovered that the army had been spying on journalists, legislators and the Court itself. With violence raging in rural parts of the country, Trujillo appears to have concentrated much of his energy on silencing protest. The minister's reign hit a low point in September of this year when he ordered the militarisation of Bogotá in response to protests against a fatal incident of police brutality. This violent response led to a further 13 deaths and dozens of injuries at the hands of the police. The defence minister initially defied a Supreme Court order to issue a formal apology for the police's actions, and said that he would challenge a ruling to curb violent repression through reforms of the country's notorious riot police.<sup>16</sup>

## Shifting tides

Colombia stands out in the region as having had only right-wing governments, and having resisted the Pink Tide with a largely uninterrupted process of neoliberalisation. But there are signs of disparate social forces beginning to coalesce around the vision of a transformative peace that challenges Colombia's decades-long right-wing hegemony. It is significant that, for the first time in Colombian history, a left-wing candidate – Gustavo Petro – advanced to the second round of the 2018 presidential elections, winning 41.8 per cent of the vote. The legitimacy of Duque's presidency has since been called into question by the discovery of a multitude of alleged irregularities in the election campaign, leading the national electoral commission to begin an investigation into the president and his team for alleged financial violations.<sup>17</sup> Results from the regional and municipal elections held in October 2019, the first since the Peace Agreement, also indicate a shift in popular opinion in favour of peace and social progress. The outcome of these elections revealed the overwhelming defeat of Duque's Democratic Centre Party, which lost several cities to progressive factions within the traditional parties or to candidates from the left.<sup>18</sup>

This shift has also manifested itself in sustained mass protests, which first broke out in November 2019, organised by a coalition of trade unions, indigenous groups, student organisations and LGBT+ activists. The strike was originally planned to resist a number of regressive tax, labour and pension reforms known as the *paquetazo* or the 'package', but eventually mobilised 250,000 people onto the streets around a broader agenda. A lack of support for public education, the failings of a privatised health system, environmental destruction, corruption, police brutality, the prevalence of gender violence, the killing of

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<sup>16</sup> Castrillón D (2020). "Suprema que ordena medidas para garantizar derecho a protesta pacífica". *CNN Español*, 24 September 2020. Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2020/09/24/revuelo-en-colombia-por-fallo-de-la-corte-suprema-que-ordena-medidas-para-garantizar-derecho-a-protesta-pacifica/>.

<sup>17</sup> Reuters Staff (2020). "Colombian electoral commission launches probe of Duque campaign". *Reuters*, 11 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-colombia-politics-idUSKCN2572K3>.

<sup>18</sup> "Peace, neoliberalism, and political shifts in Colombia". Dossier no 23. *Tricontinental*, 3 December 2019.

social leaders and the sabotaging of the peace process – all of these grievances came together under a unified banner.<sup>19</sup>

The peace process has opened up space for more visible anti-neoliberal struggle and encouraged unity among opposition forces. The coronavirus pandemic has sharpened these tendencies and exacerbated Duque's legitimacy crisis, in large part due to the government's response. A doubling of unemployment to 20 per cent has left millions of people facing an uncertain future, with young people and women particularly impacted. Public money has been directed towards banks and corporations at the expense of struggling SMEs, which account for almost 80 per cent of total employment in the country. Isolation and social distancing measures have been put in place without proper income supports for the country's poorest, most precarious workers – some 38 million in total. A recent government decree has left many workers in even more precarious conditions, enabling employers to contract workers on an hourly basis and without ensuring that their income meets the minimum wage. Trade unions have also criticised Duque for attempting to resurrect his package of labour reforms under the cover of the emergency and made counter-proposals. In addition, the pandemic has accelerated the crisis of Colombia's privatised healthcare system, which denies this basic right to millions and has been on the brink of collapse for more than a decade. As of November 2020, Colombia has passed 32,000 deaths from Covid-19, 70 per cent of which have come from the poorest strata in society.<sup>20</sup>

These conditions have led to a sharp decline in the popularity of Duque and his government. Recent events have left the president with an approval rating of just 38 per cent, a downward trend that is set to continue. In October and November 2020 Colombia was engulfed in fresh demonstrations and strikes organised by a coalition of trade unions, students, LGBT+ groups, human rights organisations and the indigenous movement.<sup>21</sup> An impending economic crisis and the likelihood of austerity linked to the extension of an IMF loan will have the effect of pushing only greater numbers of people towards resistance.

Despite this growing momentum behind Colombia's pro-peace and anti-neoliberal forces, there remains the challenge of building a coherent and effective political project. This task is made all the more difficult by the anti-democratic practices of the Duque administration and the violence. Transparency International has expressed "deep concern" at the growing

<sup>19</sup> Peñaranda I and Gómez-Delgado J (2019). "Colombia's new awakening". *Jacobin*, 8 December 2019.

Available at: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/12/colombia-protests-paro-nacional-ivan-duque-farc/>

Franz T and Suárez AG (2019). "Why is Colombia striking for change?". *LSE Blog*, 16 December 2019.

Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2019/12/16/why-is-colombia-striking-for-change/>.

<sup>20</sup> Justice for Colombia (2020). "Coronavirus: what is the impact in Colombia?". 5 November 2020. Available at:

at: <https://justiceforcolombia.org/news/coronavirus-what-is-the-impact-in-colombia/>; Zoe PC (2020). "Two

years of Duque's Colombia: deepening neoliberalism, increased violence and a public health crisis"

(interview with Milena Ochoa). *Peoples Dispatch*, 11 August 2020. Available at:

<https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/08/11/two-years-of-duques-colombia-deepening-neoliberalism-increased-violence-and-a-public-health-crisis/>.

<sup>21</sup> Bamrah G (2020). "Colombian protests culminate in national strike". *PSU Vanguard*, 3 November 2020.

Available at: <https://psuvanguard.com/colombian-protests-culminate-in-national-strike/>; Campo Palacios D

and Dest A (2020). "Empty seats and full streets in the Colombian Minga, *nacla*, 23 October 2020. Available at:

at: <https://nacla.org/news/2020/10/23/empty-seats-and-full-streets-colombian-minga>.

concentration of power in Duque's hands during the pandemic, noting that the state of emergency has made the president a temporary legislator. Local decentralised authorities under the control of the opposition have been weakened in relation to central government, and there have been government actions that affect freedom of expression, citizen participation and access to public information. Added to this, people close to the government have been chosen to head the Office of the Attorney General, the Office of the Inspector General and the Office of the Ombudsman, reducing the independence that these bodies should possess.<sup>22</sup>

International and Colombian civil society organisations have meanwhile suggested that the judiciary's independence is at risk due to the government party and president ignoring several court orders. Most significantly, in response to the arrest warrant issued to former president Álvaro Uribe, Duque was among Democratic Centre Party figures to publicly criticise the Supreme Court.<sup>23</sup> Uribe is currently being investigated for alleged witness tampering and fraud, but is also alleged to be linked with murders, massacres, displacements and the activities of right-wing paramilitary groups. He remains a dominant voice in Colombian politics and his arrest has formed a rallying point for far-right forces, which regard him as a hero for taking an aggressive stance towards the FARC and the ELN during his time as president.

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<sup>22</sup> Transparency International (2020). "Alarm over concentration of power in the presidency in Colombia", 3 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/alarm-over-concentration-of-power-in-the-presidency-in-colombia#>.

<sup>23</sup> ABColombia (2020). "Independence of the Colombian judiciary at risk". 2 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.abcolombia.org.uk/independence-of-the-colombian-judiciary-at-risk/>.