Debate / Controversy

Right-wing populism and the mainstreaming of protests: The case of Colombia

Populismo de derecha y la normalización de la protesta social en Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Unlike other Latin American countries, Colombia has consistently been governed by centre-right or right-wing political parties. The absence of political space for the Left in this country allowed governments to portray protests as subversive and criminal. However, starting in 2008, right-wing politicians have embraced, supported and used the protest as a tactic; undertaking, calling for, and giving support to various protest movements across the country. This has had an unexpected consequence: right-wing parties, government institutions, and even some sectors within the security and armed forces now see protests as valid and normal. Drawing on a brief historical analysis of protest movements in Colombia since 1948, and particularly after 2002, this article argues that to understand the recent normalization of this form of political expression we should look at changes in the dynamics of competition within the Right.

Keywords: populism; protests; protest movements; social movements.

RESUMEN

A diferencia de otros países Latinoamericanos, Colombia ha sido gobernada tradicionalmente por partidos de derecha o centro-derecha. La ausencia de espacio político para la izquierda, permitió que los gobiernos presentaran a la protesta como subversiva y criminal. Sin embargo, a partir de 2008, políticos de derecha han adoptado, apoyado y usado la protesta como una táctica; organizando, convocando y dando sustento a varios movimientos de protesta. Esto ha tenido una consecuencia inesperada: partidos de derecha, el gobierno, e incluso sectores de las fuerzas armadas y de seguridad ven ahora a las protestas como algo válido y normal. A partir de un breve análisis histórico de los movimientos de protesta en Colombia desde 1948, y en especial después de 2002, este artículo sostiene que, para entender la reciente normalización de esta forma de expresión política, debemos prestar atención a cambios en las dinámicas de competencia política dentro de la derecha.

Palabras clave: Colombia; populismo; protestas; movimientos sociales; protesta social.

A COLOMBIAN PARADOX: RIGHT-WING PARTIES AND PROTEST

The recent election of right-wing populist presidents in several Latin American countries presents a change from left-leaning populist leaderships considered to constitute a "left-wing block" in the subcontinent. Yet, this trend is not fully generalizable across the subcontinent, as illustrated by the case of Colombia, which has, since independence, never been governed by a left-wing government. Not only has the left not been in power in Colombia, but the use of particular repertoires through which dissent is usually expressed by left-wing organizations, such as nationwide protests, has remained limited until recently.

The absence of nationwide protests in Colombia relates to the stigma that has portrayed protests as subversive and criminal (Archila Neira, 2012). Surprisingly, the rise to power of right-wing populism in 2002 presented a shift in which protests and the support of protest movements became instrumental to those politicians in power. As right-wing organizations and populist politicians started to call for and support protests and strikes, the political space for protests widened. This widening was an unexpected consequence of the instrumental use of protests by politicians in Colombia.

Protests can take different forms. The forms in which protests manifested in the literature are referred to as repertoires of contention or as forms of collective action. Following Taylor & Van Dyke, protests are understood in this paper as "sites of contestation in which bodies, symbols, identities, practices, and discourses are used to pursue or prevent changes in institutionalized power relations [in a particular state]" (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004, p. 268).

Colombia thus presents an interesting counterexample to the regional rise of right-wing populism within Latin America and in the world more broadly. The arrival of President Iván Duque (a right-wing politician) to power in 2018 was preceded by the centre-right government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) and the right-wing populist government of Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010). In the years during which several countries in South America elected left-leaning populist presidents, Colombia consistently remained positioned at the other end of the political spectrum. Yet, despite this inclination towards the right, the presence and legitimacy of protests has widened since 2002.

Despite Uribe's authoritarian style and hostility towards protests that criticized or opposed his government, he supported protests that buttressed his policies and gave him political capital. The period between 2010 and 2018 saw a centre-right government in power that was more open to protest and undertook a peace negotiation with guerrillas. The far-right used protests as a means to oppose the peace negotiations and the peace accords. Protests supported or called for by politicians from the right helped to consolidate the legitimacy of protests as a valid repertoire of contestation. Though historically supported by left-wing political parties, support for protests from right-wing parties has helped shift the perception of protests and protest movements among conservative segments in the country and the establishment.

The consolidation of protests as a valid repertoire is also due to protest movements' persistence in mobilizing citizens, despite the risks faced by protestors (Romero Zúñiga, 2012). The use of non-violent tactics, harnessing of social media, and organizational skills by protest organizations' enabled them to take advantage of the small window of opportunity provided by the Santos government (2010–2018) to consolidate protests as legitimate. Now, protests are seen as legitimate expressions of discontent: 77% of Colombians were supportive of protests before the emergence the mass protests which took place since November 2019 (GALLUP, 2019a), and were supported by 74% of the population GALLUP, 2019b). Yet, this process of the widening of the right to protests has taken place in parallel with attempts at political closure and the reduction of different actors' rights. For example, while the use of protests by the right has contributed to the increased credibility of protests, some of the

demands made by these mobilizations are in fact exclusionary, aiming to limit the rights of different groups in society, illustrated by the threat to the rights of the LGBTI community posed by some charismatic Christian church protests (Cosoy, 2018).

To discuss these ideas, the article presents a brief history of mobilization and protests in Colombia, highlighting the limited space for social mobilization in the country between 1948 and 2002 (section two), and then offers an analysis of protests during Uribe's presidency (section three). The emergence of social movements in 2010 with the arrival of Santos in power and the use of protests by populist politicians from both the right and left, leading to the "normalization" of protests, is discussed in section four. The widening of the right to protests in Colombia takes place in the age of social media and fake news, as politicians can more effectively mobilize citizens to pressure governments and change particular policies. These mobilizations rely on the right to protest, yet have the possibility of constraining others' rights and the ability to protest, a tension within democracies.

A HISTORY OF FEAR AND SILENCING: 1948–2002

Despite high levels of violence related to the Colombian armed conflict, protests have consistently taken place in Colombia (see Figure 1). Armed conflict and protests have coexisted, and have often been assumed to be the same due to the use of "the conflict" category to describe the political turmoil in Colombia after the civil war began in 1948.

Because of this false assumption, protests have been read by different governments as the projection of political force by armed organizations, rather than as a political expression of discontent in a society in which an armed conflict also takes place. Because of this, Colombian governments have largely ignored the presence of protests, protest movements and protesting organizations, ignoring the importance of protests in providing feedback to the political system. The neglect of protests has reinforced the importance of armed conflict within the politics of the country.

The emergence of armed conflict in Colombia is usually traced to 1948,[1] following the assassination of the populist leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitán. His assassination triggered protests and riots across the country along party lines that fuelled the already existing violence between the liberal and conservative parties (Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas, 2015). The violence that unfolded afterwards involved the use of armed conflict as a modus operandi by self-defence organizations, liberal guerrillas and regional elites.

In an attempt to stabilize the country, military rule was established between 1953 and 1958. The dictatorial regime led to a reduction in violence, but also limited the space for protest movements. The end of the dictatorship in 1958 saw a power-sharing agreement being reached between the liberal and conservative parties: the National Front ("*el Frente nacional*").

The National Front provided political stability between 1958 and 1974, reducing violence along party lines, but limiting the entrance of new voices beyond the political duopoly between the conservative and liberal parties (Archila Neira, 1997). The emergence of new armed groups in Colombia in the three subsequent decades informed a discursive justification for the limitation of protests. Although the space for protests was limited due to the emergence of guerrillas and different armed groups, protests increased during these decades (see Figure 1). The state has met this increase in protests mostly with repression, particularly between 1978 and 1982, illustrated by civilians being judged in military courts and the limitation of human rights (Jiménez Jiménez, 2009).

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1 For a debate on the different theories that explain the origins and the prevalence of the Colombian armed conflict see (Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas, 2015).

Figure 1. Number of battle-related deaths and protests in Colombia between 1948 and 2016
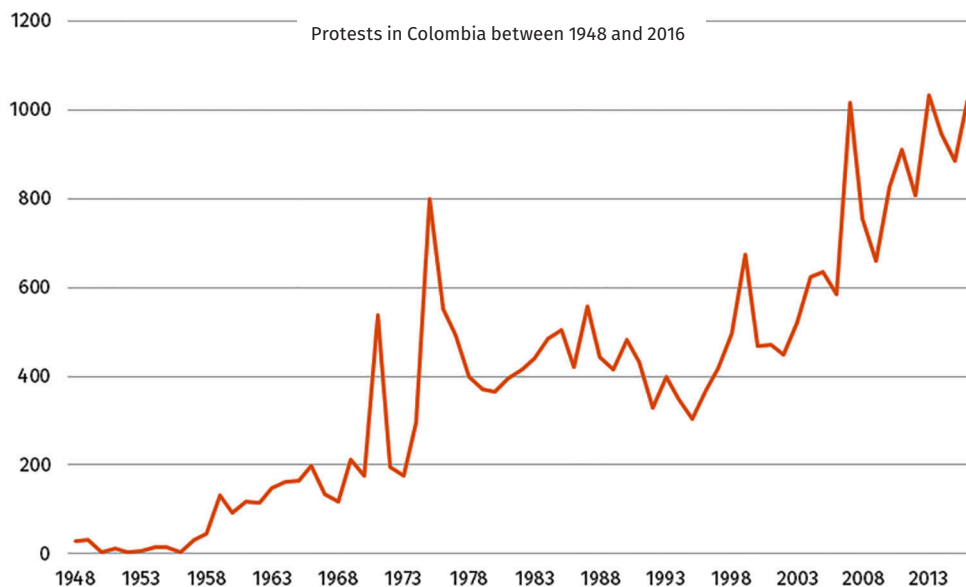
Source: For the number of protests see Cruz Rodríguez (2017) and Archila Neira (2002).

Despite the frequent use of repression, the space for political participation and protests has been conditioned also by the possibility of ending armed conflict via peace negotiations. Yet, despite different peace processes and the demobilization of several armed organizations, the stigma around protests has remained as armed conflict has continued even after the new constitution in 1991 recognized the right to protest.

The political openings by new constitutions and peace processes have been limited by the violent response from armed groups and elites that either were not part of these peace processes or opposed reforms. These groups have limited the implementation of different peace agreements.

While armed conflict stifled the emergence of protests, by the end of the 1990s protests increased again despite an escalation of armed conflict.

The escalating violence made peace a central objective for the government assuming office in the late 1990s. A failed peace process with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia- Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) took place between 1998 and 2002 as armed conflict continued. Despite the continuing violence, protests increased during these years as well. Some of the biggest protests during this time were those against the FARC-EP and other armed actors between October and November 1999. These protests mobilized millions of citizens across the country (Rohter, 1999). Protests remained central in the new millennium, reflecting public discontent following the failed peace process with FARC-EP, the economic crisis and the escalation of violence in the early 2000s, which preceded the election of a right-wing populist president to office.

ENTER THE POPULIST RIGHT WING: 2002–2010

The Uribe governments (2002–2006 and 2006–2010) undertook a peace process with paramilitary groups, remaining adversarial to protests and strikes by social organizations, while deploying a populist discourse. In several ways, Uribe resembled Alberto Fujimori's populist style and rise to power: the use of folk symbols, popular gatherings resembling town hall meetings, capitalizing on citizens' distrust of political parties after a decade of violence and economic crisis.

Uribe's rise to power illustrates how populism is not only deployed by politicians from the left in Colombia. Once in power, Uribe used populism as a way to mobilize public support for his policies when political support from political parties was insufficient. For Uribe, populism was a tool to leverage his policy proposals.

Although Uribe undertook a peace process with right-wing paramilitaries (Pizarro Leongómez & Valencia, 2009), peace negotiations did not mean the government accepted protests or mobilizations for peace. Protests that aimed to pressure the government to negotiate with left-wing guerrillas, or that demanded the fulfilment of the mandates of the 1991 constitution, were denounced as subversive or illegal. As the government securitized the state, the space for political dissent was limited (Fierro, 2014).

Several organizations and unions staged protests across the country. Despite the crossfire between paramilitaries, guerrillas and stigmatization and repression by the government institutions, organizations took to the streets under different banners (Archila Neira, 2012). Approximately 643 protests took place annually during Uribe's first term (see Figure 1) (García Segura, 2013).

As Uribe initiated his re-election campaign for presidency, a series of protests against his possible re-election took place across the country. Despite the great number of protests taking place during his government, the increased perception of security across the country and support from elites enabled Uribe to be easily re-elected for a second term in 2006. Uribe continued his security policy and populist style in his second term, ostracizing political opponents by accusing them of supporting or being linked to armed groups (López de la Roche, 2014).

Despite the support for Uribe by elites and the nationwide media channels, social organizations managed to raise their voices. An example of this were the organizations representing the victims of the conflict, which received wider public attention. They chose to air their grievances at venues which had been created during the peace process for detailing accounts of violence perpetrated by paramilitaries; these were leveraged by organizations to air their grievances and mobilize demands against the state. Other organizations managed to garner visibility due to the sheer magnitude of their mobilizations, such as in the case of the marches across the country by indigenous nations to Bogota in 2008 (Virginie, 2010).

The "*No más FARC*" protests in February 2008 are also of interest. As opposed to other protests taking place in Colombia, these mobilizations were not denounced as illegal by the government as they provided the government with political capital. By contrast, protests led by the victims of paramilitary forces later in the year were not supported by the government, which accused them of being rallied by the FARC-EP (EL PAÍS, 2008).

When the Colombian Constitutional Court ruled that the second consecutive re-election being sought by Uribe was against the Colombian Constitution, critics of Uribe and his government were allowed and given more visibility in mass media, and the space for protests opened up. Still, the securitization policy of the state was supported by the majority of Colombian voters, as indicated when Uribe's then Minister of Defence, Juan Manuel Santos, was elected president.

THE "NORMALIZATION" OF PROTESTS BETWEEN 2010 AND 2018

When Santos was elected president, it was expected that he would continue Uribe's vision of the state. However, Santos differed from Uribe in two ways: Santos is no populist, nor a right-wing politician. Santos is a darling of the establishment: part of the family that owned the biggest newspaper in the country, cousin of a former vice president, and family to a former president. Also, Santos is a centre-right politician. He presented a discourse more open to protests, officially recognized the existence of an armed conflict in Colombia, and implemented a series of measures intended to bring justice to victims of the armed conflict. He also initiated a peace negotiation process with the FARC-EP (Nasi, 2018).

The main differences between the Santos governments and those that preceded them was their greater openness towards dissent, leading to attempts to moderate the use of state force against protestors, as well as the political support given by right-wing politicians to protests. These two factors combined to consolidate an institutional avenue for protests and dissent in Colombia. The increase in protests between 2010 and 2018 was due to a number of reasons (Cruz Rodríguez, 2017): the wider political space for protests during peace negotiations, the efforts of protesting organizations to consolidate their voice and the contribution of right-wing politicians to the legitimation of protest movements.

Despite the increase in protests during his first government, Santos was re-elected. Citizens who had protested against Santos on other matters and who still opposed some of his government policies voted for his re-election in order to support the peace process with the FARC-EP.

As soon as Santos initiated formal negotiations with the FARC-EP, right-wing politicians like Uribe gave visibility and political support to protest movements and organizations opposing either the peace negotiations or the Santos government.[2] The opposition aimed to bolster the opposition to the Santos government and affect his ability to govern, while offering discursive political support for different protests.

The support from right-wing politicians to protests provided social organizations and protests across the country support within a different segment of society and helped to shift perceptions as protests and protestors were legitimized by politicians from the political right. The peace process was also definitive in enabling the emergence of public voices. As the peace process between the FARC-EP and the government gained momentum, violence decreased, and protestors seized the opportunity to air their grievances. The absence of the armed conflict of the FARC-EP could no longer be used as a straw man to delegitimize protests and protestors.

Santos' second term (2014–2018) was met by protests from diverse organizations. Whereas most of the protests in Colombia could be depicted as belonging to the left and the centre of the political spectrum, protests by the political right against the Santos administration and the peace negotiations also took place, illustrating the embrace of protests as a political tool and the mainstreaming of protests across the political spectre. The protests taking place during Santos' second government indicated the lack of legitimacy of the peace negotiation for a segment of the Colombian population. Due to this, Santos submitted the peace accords to a plebiscite, aiming to gain political capital to support the peace agreements (Nasi, 2018). The plebiscite results were negative as 50.2% of voters rejected the peace agreements and 49.7% of voters supported the agreements (Díaz Pabón, 2016). In response to the rejection of the agreements in the plebiscite, mobilizations in support of the peace agreements took place across the country. Protests both against and in support of the peace agreements took place during these years.

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2   See for example the number of protests supported by Uribe via his Twitter account. The search was made using the advance features of the Twitter search engine, using the terms "protesta", "marcha", "movilización", "protestas", and "calle", excluding the terms "venezuela", "Venezuela", for the period between January 2013 and December 2017 (Twitter, 2020).

Colombia remains a country in which violence is used against representatives of civic organizations and against actors who propose the widening or the consolidation of democracy across the country (Díaz Pabón & Jiménez Jiménez, 2018). Despite the continuous violence, for the first time in Colombian history, protests receive nationwide media coverage across the political spectre (Osorio Matorel, 2018). However, the rise of right-wing populist protests and the resilience of armed conflict presents a long-term threat to protests and protesting organizations.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the mainstreaming of protests in Colombia is partially due to the role right-wing populist politicians have played in supporting protests in recent years. As an unexpected consequence, this has legitimized protests. While we assume that the occurrence of protests implies a political opening and the strengthening of democracy and institutions, we must not ignore the uses of populism and protest to promote limiting the rights of segments of society. Protests and their use by populist politicians can also serve to delegitimize state institutions, and even constrict the rights of several constituents in the country. In the age of social media and fake news, politicians can more effectively mobilize citizens to pressure governments and change particular policies, such as the mobilizations that influenced voters against the peace agreements with the FARC-EP. The use of marches by right-wing politicians in Colombia after 2018 consolidates the use of protests by the right and illustrates the normalization of mobilization as a political tool in Colombia.

Protests are a way to sway the asymmetries presented by existing systems of political participation – they give power to people's voices. However, protests can also become a tool to promote and normalize the constriction of different groups' rights, as when Indian nationalists deploy protests against Muslims, or White nationalists protest to deploy racist rhetoric in the USA. In Colombia, some Christian organizations use protests to mobilize a political agenda that seeks a reduction of the democratic rights for specific groups, such as the LGBTI community.

The Colombian case illustrates the unexpected consequence – the widening of political rights – of the instrumentalization of protests by the right, and warns of the looming risk populist protests may pose to institutions. Democracy is based on the assumption of informed citizens, but in the age of social media and fake news, democracy now coexists and competes with an ochlocracy (rule by the mob), a category we should keep in mind when considering the normalization of the use of protests by populist politicians.

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