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COLOMBIA'S NATIONAL STRIKE

When social demonstration
fuels criminal interests

Felipe Botero

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Felipe Botero is the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime coordinator for Colombia, implementing strategies to strengthen community resilience to organized crime and crime prevention, and to expand the GI-TOC's presence in the country and the region. He has academic and professional experience in peace building, DDR, human rights, citizen security and civic participation. Previously, he was Undersecretary for Human Rights and Peacebuilding for Cali, Colombia. He served as regional coordinator for the implementation of the Full School Day Program at the Ministry of Education. He was advisor to the Vice Ministry of the Interior in the area of Human Rights. He worked at the Colombian Agency for Reintegration, monitoring the implementation of the public policy for the reintegration of ex-combatants.

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Design: Catherine Coetzer

Please direct inquiries to:
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland

www.globalinitiative.net

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SUMMARY

After more than a year of social unrest in Colombia, the eruption of a national strike on 28 April 2021 has led to outbreaks of violence among demonstrators, police and criminal actors. This comes after decades of social, political and economic turmoil in the country, which is manifest in high unemployment, rising inequality and high criminal activity in Colombia’s major cities. These patterns were only exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020 and subsequent reports of government corruption, driving citizens to the streets in 2021. Since the strike began, violent conflict has resulted in an estimated 74 deaths,¹ 111 cases of missing persons and numerous reports of police brutality, eliciting calls from civil society and the international community to respect

human rights. Although much of the focus to date has been on the role of government in quelling the violence, reporting and analysis of the strike have largely overlooked the role of organized crime in the protest action and the subsequent economic crisis.

The use of blockades by demonstrators, particularly in the south-western region of the country, created various opportunities for organized crime groups, petty criminals and opportunistic citizens to use the demonstrations as a pretence for criminal activity. In the meantime, the disrupted transportation system has created shortages of food, medicine and fuel, leading to an economic meltdown. As the national strike

continues, the Colombian government and its armed forces need a better understanding of the relationship between social protestors and criminal actors in order to curb crime and violence, and restore the economy.

This brief provides an analysis of the events that have occurred in the city of Cali, an economic hub in the south-western region and the epicentre of the strike and blockades. The case study of Cali shows that there are three key interfaces between crime and protest that stem from the strike: the criminalization of social protest, the criminality within the strike and the interests of criminal actors in prolonging

the strike. Based on this understanding of the relationship between crime and social unrest, it is necessary for authorities to take corrective action to ensure that future social protests are not considered innately criminal, and that criminal actors do not take advantage of social mobilization scenarios. To this end, five recommendations are put forth: immediate humanitarian action to address the missing persons, comprehensive police reform, strengthening of law enforcement, a serious dialogue between stakeholders about social protest and improved government policies for responding to social protest.

Key points

- On 28 April 2021, a national strike broke out in Colombia, triggered by an unpopular tax reform plan and fuelled by social unrest over rising unemployment, income inequality and class divisions.
- The city of Cali emerged as the epicentre of the strike-related violence and crime, due in large part to the city's strategic economic position in the country and its history of violence. Throughout the strike, three interfaces between crime and protest manifested.
- First, the mass mobilization drew a strong and forceful response against protestors from Colombia's militarized police. This effectively led to the criminalization of protest action, whether it was peaceful or not.
- Second, criminal activity within the strike emerged as organized crime groups, petty criminals and opportunistic citizens took advantage of the chaos and lack of law enforcement behind the blockades.
- Third, the use of blockades by protestors to protect demonstration areas effectively disrupted the flow of vehicles, people and goods in and out of the city. This created opportunities for organized crime groups to consolidate power and engage in illicit activities.
- In order to reduce violence, restore stability and ensure civic security in future, government authorities need to better understand the role of organized crime within social protests.
- Recommendations for ensuring a more effective response to mass mobilization in future include comprehensive police reform, strengthening law enforcement and creating multi-stakeholder policies for responding to social protest.



CALI: A HISTORY OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND VIOLENCE

▲ Anti-government demonstrators take to the streets of Cali, the epicentre of violent criminality since the start of Colombia's national strike that began in April 2021. © Gabriel Aponte via Getty Images

The emergence of Cali as the epicentre of violence and criminal activity during the national strike is largely due to the city's strategic economic and geographic position within the country, and its history of social strife. Cali is the third largest city of Colombia, with a population of 2.3 million. Cali connects central Colombia, with Buenaventura, the country's main port on the Pacific coast, and has become the logistical hub for shipping imports and exports, the headquarters of the regional sugar cane industry, the manufacturing home of many national and multinational corporations, and the nerve centre of a growing commerce and services sector. Over the decades, this has made Cali an economic destination for internal migrants seeking security and employment opportunities. Consequently, Cali is multicultural, influenced by migration waves from the Pacific coast, and has the second largest African-descended population in Latin America, after Salvador de Bahía in Brazil.²

Cali is also a very unequal society. Since the 1970s, armed conflicts between the state and guerrilla groups in rural regions have led to economic migration and internal displacements that have increased social and economic pressure on the city. A history of government failure to create strong and effective institutions has engendered a culture of civic-mindedness and activism among Cali's citizenry; civic engagement has always been high in the city.³ Meanwhile, the



Protestors clash with riot police on the anniversary of the formation of Colombia's mobile anti-riot squad. © Guillermo Legaria via Getty Images

government's inability to provide basic services to all inhabitants has opened the door to criminal governance dynamics and created a steady supply of youths willing to engage in criminality.

With a homicide rate of 47.6 per 100 000 inhabitants, double the national rate, Cali is much more violent than other cities, like Bogotá and Medellín.⁴ Much of this violence is the legacy of Colombia's internal armed conflict and drug trafficking, represented primarily by the notorious criminal organizations Cartel de Cali and Cartel del Norte de Valle, which began using Cali's strategic position to develop their illegal activities in the 1970s. Besides these mega cartels, the city has a local criminal structure of over 180 criminal gangs that profit from drugs, extortion, hitmen and theft.⁵ Over the decades, these criminal actors have fostered a culture of violence and normalized the use weapons among the city's inhabitants.



FIGURE 1 Road blockades in Colombia following the strike activity, as of 6 May 2021.

SOURCE: Adapted from <https://lasillavacia.com/historias/historias-silla-llena/paro-nacional-2021-%C2%BFel-estado-contra-la-sociedad>



▲ Civic unrest in Colombia came to a head in 2019, with criminal actors exploiting the fragile situation.

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THE ROAD TO STRIKE

Mass mobilization in 2019

Political failures and corruption at the national level of government in the 2010s added to local pressures, bringing civic unrest to a head in Colombia in 2019. Citizens were particularly distressed by how few advances the government had made with implementing the peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC) guerrilla group, signed in 2016. As a result, an underlying threat of criminality persisted in the country’s largest cities, especially Cali. On 21 November 2019, thousands of people across Cali and Bogotá peacefully took to the streets to express their disillusionment with their government and the state of the country, igniting a mass social mobilization effort.

Although the demonstrations were peaceful, by the end of the day, various criminal activities, such as looting, vandalism and checkpoints used for extorting tolls from residents, were taking place in different parts of the city. Subsequently, as police were deployed to curb destructive activities, armed confrontations broke out between citizens and the police, foreshadowing the events of the national strike. The day ended with the local Cali government declaring a curfew in an attempt to regain control of the city, which was apparently in a state of panic over the criminal violence. Social networks were flooded with thousands of messages warning against intrusion onto private property from ‘vandals’ and promoting the use of weapons for self-defence – messages that were later shown to be fake.

The arrival of the Christmas season and the COVID-19 pandemic put a temporary damper on civic protest while still adding to the socio-economic pressure on citizens.

The added weight of COVID-19

In a city already burdened by economic crisis and crime, the lockdown measures implemented by the government to prevent the spread of COVID-19 only increased local hardships. After the lockdown, 50% of the restaurants and bars in Cali permanently shut down,⁶ the unemployment rate rose to 19.3% and informal employment rose to 49.1%,⁷ all of which disproportionately affected youth. In Cali, one in five male youths and one in three female youths do not work or study.⁸

The fallout from COVID-19 also disproportionately impacted the most economically vulnerable populations in the city, increasing poverty and food insecurity. Monetary poverty in Cali increased from 21.9% in 2019 to 36.3% in 2020,⁹ while the number of households eating meals three times a day decreased from 95% before the pandemic to 76% after.¹⁰ Feelings of social discord among people also increased, with optimism about the city's future falling below 25% and the perception of security falling below 20%.¹¹

The governance failures during the pandemic were accompanied by a series of corruption scandals. Allegations of corruption had surrounded the Cali city government since the beginning of its term in 2019. Scandals related to COVID-19 include ongoing formal investigations of cabinet members regarding the high price of food packages delivered to vulnerable people during the curfews, as well as the irregular spending of over US\$4 million to finance a virtual version of the traditional carnival festival in December 2020, when COVID-19 cases were rising to a second spike.

As patterns of violence, poverty and inequality increased in Cali during the 2020 lockdown, this scenario created the perfect environment for organized demonstrators to channel social discontent through mass mobilization, and for criminal actors to take advantage of the situation. When the government introduced an unpopular tax reform in April 2021, it proved a breaking point.

From protest to economic meltdown

In mid-April 2021, following a difficult 2020 in which GDP had dropped by 6.8%,¹² the Colombian government announced a new tax plan that would broaden the tax base by lowering the minimum threshold of taxable salaries. Rather than increasing taxes on large corporations, the plan targeted the middle class and small businesses. In response, thousands of people, the vast majority of them youths, once again took to city streets in a national strike on 28 April. The widespread demonstrations forced the government to withdraw its tax plan from congress, accept the resignation of both the finance minister and vice minister, and face congress's rejection of government health-reform legislation.

These achievements for protestors have come at a high price. The violence and criminal acts surrounding the protests have led to over 74 deaths (45 of which involved state police forces¹³), 111 missing people and multiple reports of police brutality in the local and international media. In response, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has requested a verification mission to the country.

Reasons for the 2021 protest

Tax reform: The national strike was convened to oppose a tax reform plan presented by the government to the congress. The reform focused on taxing the middle class and small businesses, rather than large corporations or goods that currently enjoy tax exemptions, such as sugar-sweetened beverages. Considering the country's ongoing economic crisis, most Colombians rejected the reform and agreed to mobilize against the proposal.

Lack of governance: President Ivan Duque has been criticized for his unclear policy agenda, lack of experience in public administration and inability to create political consensus around key issues for the country. Political actors and citizens have disapproved of his administration's management, according to perception polls. Additionally, citizens perceive the president and the cabinet as being removed from the public and their interests. The discontent with national leaders became another reason for the people to take to the streets.

COVID-19: The social and economic crisis that resulted from COVID-19 increased poverty, inequality and vulnerability of historically excluded population groups, such as youth and ethnic communities. The despair and lack of hope among these groups moved them to take the streets and 'resist' by claiming their rights to education and employment opportunities.



FIGURE 2 Tweet from the executive director (Americas) of Human Rights Watch. Translation: President Ivan Duque, The situation in Cali is very serious. I beg you to take urgent steps to de-escalate, including a specific order prohibiting the use of firearms by agents of the state. Colombia cannot mourn more deaths.

SOURCE: <https://www.dw.com/en/colombia-deploys-military-in-cali-after-protests-leave-several-dead/a-57710343>



May 2021: A supermarket in Cali with almost empty shelves following food shortages caused by road and port blockades. © Gabriel Aponte viaGetty Images

Alongside the protest violence and police brutality, another crisis has emerged from the strike that directly impacts Cali and the south-western region of Colombia: the siege of the Valle del Cauca department. The primary strategy of strike demonstrators has been the sustained blockade of roads, which has impeded the flow of vehicles, people and goods. Most disastrous has been the blockade of Colombia's main port, Buenaventura, which has disconnected the central and northern regions of the country, triggering a scarcity crisis of food, medicines and gas. This has resulted in an economic meltdown.

The few legal and formal enterprises that survived COVID-19, including large multinationals and sugar cane agro-processors, are declaring bankruptcy. For more than a month, businesses were unable to access basic goods, employees were not allowed to attend their workplaces, and logistics services were halted, generating thousands of job losses. As a direct outcome of the blockages, the country's food insecurity and unemployment crises are increasing and feeding off one another.

In the midst of this chaos, there have been no effective responses from government bodies at any level, all of which are facing a historic drop in popularity. The current approval ratings are 22% for Cali's mayor and 18% for the country's president, the lowest for both positions in 20 years.

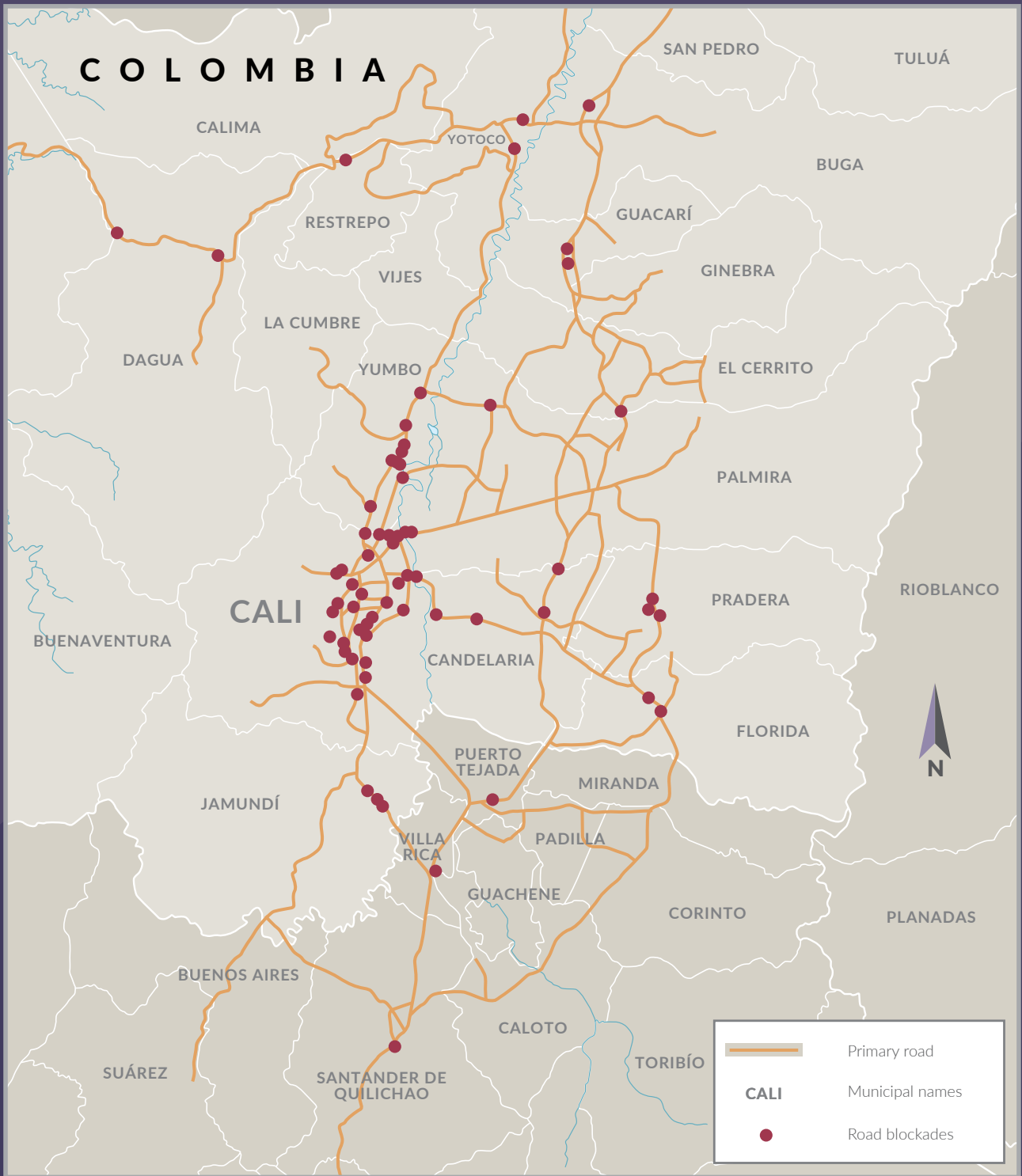
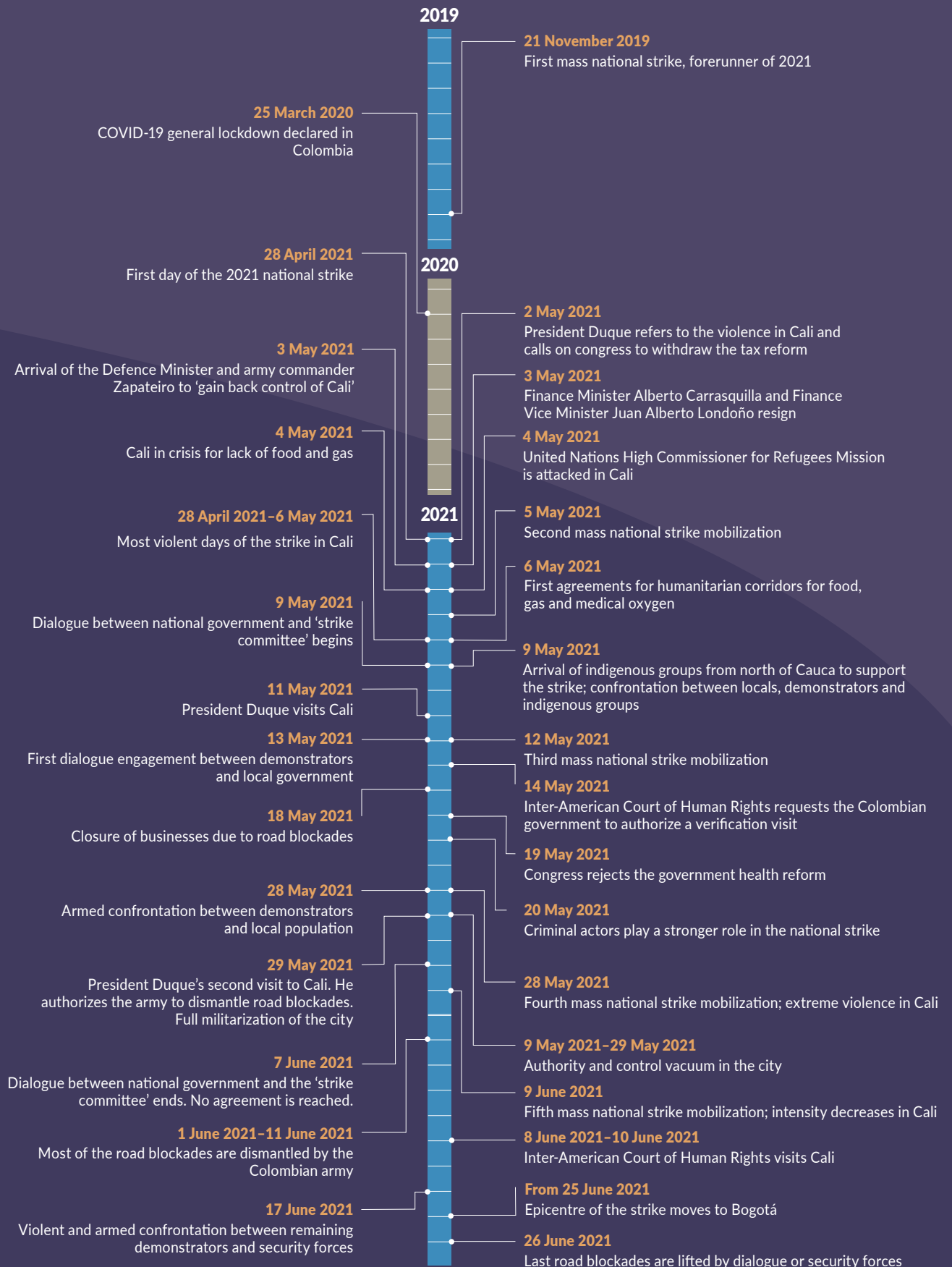


FIGURE 3 Road blockades in the Cali region set up by demonstrators, as of 6 May 2021.

SOURCE: Adapted from <https://lasillavacia.com/historias/historias-silla-llena/paro-nacional-2021-%C2%BFel-estado-contra-la-sociedad>

MAJOR HISTORICAL EVENTS TRIGGERING THE STRIKE





▲ What started out as peaceful anti-government mobilizations provided an opening for opportunistic crime groups. Here a demonstrator commemorates the death of a young boy killed by Colombian police in 2019. © Antonio Cascio/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROTEST AND CRIMINALITY

A closer examination of the events that followed 28 April in Cali highlights the interfaces between protest and crime in the national strike: the criminalization of protest, criminality within the strike and control of the blockades by criminal actors. These intersections of protestors and criminals demonstrate how escalated conflict between authorities and civilians created an environment that encouraged criminal activity from organized crime groups, petty criminals and opportunistic citizens. They also demonstrate the need for more effective policies and procedures on the part of government to respond to social mobilization efforts.

The criminalization of protest

A civilian army emerges

In Cali, the events surrounding the national strike followed the same pattern as the 2019 mobilization. A large peaceful demonstration on the first day of the strike was soon followed by store looting and attacks on banks and institutional infrastructure. The police anti-riot unit, the Mobile Anti-disturbance Squadron (ESMAD), was deployed and local authorities declared a curfew from 8:00 p.m., expecting that most of the people would return to their homes. This did not happen; protestors remained on the streets and criminal activity persisted.

However, police began erroneously focusing on demonstrators rather than on controlling criminal offences. This created a violent spiral that became the norm for the next six days, the most violent period of the strike.

During the first week of the strike, the protestors remained on the streets creating an organic riot army that was dubbed the Primera Línea, or First Line, and declared a frontal war against ESMAD. The civilian 'army' was supported by local inhabitants who provided food and first aid. Meanwhile, the Colombian police used indiscriminate force against peaceful protestors. Some of the events were recorded live on Facebook. The reactions from police only increased the general anger welling up against the state. In the words of one activist:

[The Primera Línea] created the barricade, and after each attack by the police, they extended it, until it reached two kilometres. The idea was self-defence. The [local inhabitants] saw the attacks, the excesses of the police, the violence around all this, and decided to support the extension of the barricades. [The youth] even discussed and created agreements with the [local inhabitants]. On the other side, the role of the [local inhabitants] was key; they provided the barricade with food and medicines, and during the toughest moments of the shortage, [the youth] continued to distribute food, legitimizing themselves.¹⁴

Members of the Primera Línea (First Line), a civilian anti-police 'riot army', which formed shortly after the national strike began. © Guillermo Legaria via Getty Images



A militarized police reacts to an ‘internal enemy’

The police reaction was in keeping with previous interactions between civilians and the police in Colombia. After 60 years of internal armed conflict in the country, the police are inclined to treat social protest and civic mobilization as a subversive threat. This attitude was evident in the public messages from the Ministry of Defence and the Attorney General, which alleged that FARC dissidents and the National Liberation Army (ELN), a revolutionary left-wing armed group, were behind the criminal acts of the protest:

Colombia faces a particular threat from criminal organizations that are behind these violent acts. They are not the peaceful marchers, they are not the citizens who have not marched and are in their homes. It is these vandals, who mimic and have carried out premeditated acts, organized and financed by dissident groups of the FARC and the ELN, that seek to destabilize some regions, with particular purposes.¹⁵

Although the role of criminal organizations within the strike cannot be neglected, the defence minister, Diego Molano, made this declaration just five days after the strike began without providing evidence. These types of affirmations demonstrate the government’s lack of understanding of the social crisis, as well as their desire to identify an internal enemy to hold responsible.

During the strike, criminal actors exploited the mass mobilization.

The logic of an internal enemy is further driven by the conflation of military and police power in Colombia. Although the national police service is technically a civilian force, the institution falls under the Ministry of Defence; the police follow military doctrine while being formally and legally led by civilian authorities. The militarized police presence was manifest during the first three days of the national strike in Cali when the head of the army, General Eduardo Zapateiro, went to Cali to lead the police operations himself and provide tactical support by deploying military forces on the streets. Zapateiro promised to take back control of the city in three days, positioning himself over civic authorities, such as the mayor of Cali and the city police chief, who quit days later. His promise was not fulfilled. The military intervention increased confrontation, heightened the levels of violence and negatively impacted public opinion towards the police, who were deploying indiscriminate force against demonstrators.

Protest as a criminal activity

Following the logic of the internal enemy, another tactic of the authorities was to portray the strike as a purely criminal activity, placing greater emphasis on the criminal acts that took place than on the socio-economic stressors that led citizens to protest in the first place. Notably, civic and police authorities responded strongly against the damages to infrastructure but were less vocal about the violence and reported police brutality meted out against citizens. Meanwhile, protesters asked why the police and military forces in the city were not preventing the attacks on infrastructure and the destruction of public assets, but were instead targeting peaceful demonstrations.

The heavy-handed response of the authorities in the initial days of the strike has left the city immersed in a conflict between those who support the status quo and armed forces, and those who support the national strike. It has created a precarious situation fed by social class divisions and income inequality, and fuelled by the availability of weapons in the city.

Criminality within the strike

Interference from organized crime groups

The second way in which crime manifested during the protests was within the strike itself as criminal actors exploited the mass mobilization. In Cali, the continuous demonstrations and the erection of barricades effectively promoted and prolonged the strike, drawing the attention of various actors looking to capitalize on the protests. Soon, criminal actors began appearing, facilitating logistics and offering money and operational advice to sustain the blockades. These included members of highly organized and subversive militia groups like the ELN, the FARC dissidents and the Gulf Clan, as well as members of local criminal gangs. In most cases, the protestors who had originally taken to the streets did not recognize these criminal actors as representing their movement.

Much of the mobilization effort was characterized by experiments in civic participation at 'concentration points' throughout the city. These areas provided a platform for social interaction and dialogue among protesters, as well as sport and cultural activities. After demonstrators installed barricades to guard against ESMAD, local organized criminal gangs supported Primera Línea by providing security when the confrontations with ESMAD turned violent. In doing so, these gangs gained support from the local community. 'They have behaved well during these days of the [strike],' mentioned a resident in a demonstration area in the western side of the city. However, soon the movement was infiltrated by more radical actors. Subversive militia groups began joining the Primera Línea in an attempt to radicalize the group's positions and provide operational support. As one local activist explained: 'When the first gun showed up, it was clear this wasn't right. The Gulf Clan and the dissidents made offers to arm the youth, the Primera Línea initially rejected those offers, but it has been increasingly allowed, and more and more weapons are available.'¹⁶

Consequently, criminal efforts to promote violent confrontation have been happening alongside civic participation experiments within the strike.

Looting by organized crime groups and opportunists

The downstream effects of the blockades have also fed criminal interests. As the strike progressed, the demonstration areas and blockades were continually extended, completely disrupting mobility within the city. After one week, Cali started to experience a serious shortage of food, medicine and fuel, which attracted organized criminal groups in different ways. First, looting became much more organized as



Cali, 12 May: motorcyclists queue to fill up their vehicles as blockades lead to fuel shortages. © Gabriel Aponte via Getty Images

gangs began targeting supermarket chains and arming themselves to combat authorities. Second, organized crime groups started stealing food and other goods from trucks held up outside the city or from vehicles using the humanitarian corridors to distribute food in the city. These incidents were largely led by criminal forces, but thousands of people took advantage of the situation. The mix of organized criminal groups and ordinary people on the ground complicated the situation and made it difficult for police to form an effective response.

Fuel scarcity provided another criminal opportunity as criminal groups took control over petrol stations, which were nearly empty, and started selling petrol directly. Employing dangerous make-shift methods, they pumped fuel from tanks to sell on the spot or stored it for later distribution to a market of desperate customers around the city, including ambulances and first responder vehicles, through informal vendors. During these days, it was common to see food and fuel trucks being escorted by military forces to avoid looting.

Finally, some organized criminal groups attacked police stations to liberate detainees. In Siloé, one police station was set on fire and more than 30 people escaped.¹⁷

Extortion by petty criminals

As organized crime groups took advantage of the situation, many petty criminals also used the vacuum of authority and police to indulge in crime. Some erected illegal checkpoints throughout the city, passing them off as small demonstration areas. In reality, the checkpoints were designed to extort money from people and vehicles,

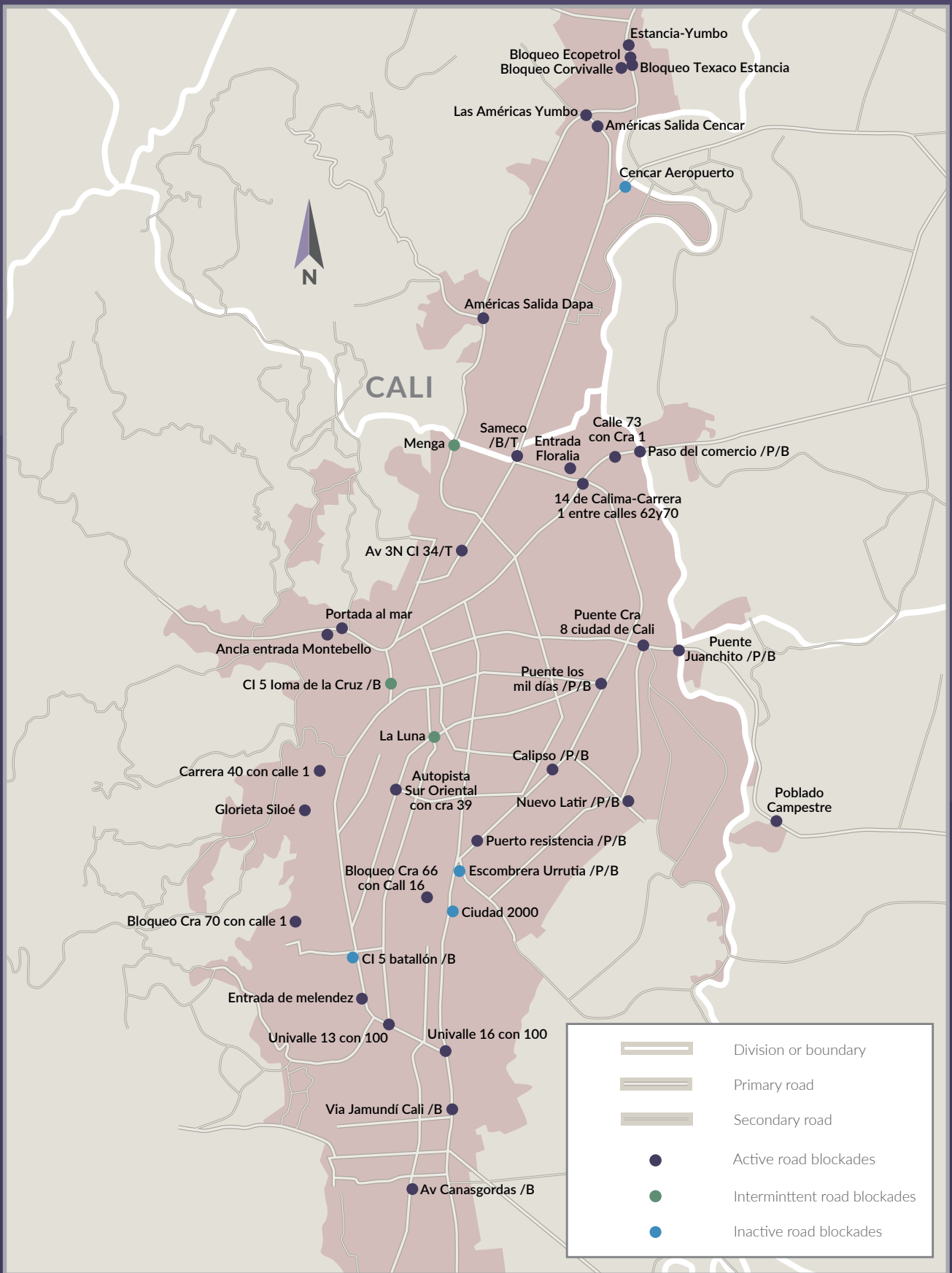


FIGURE 4 Road blockades in Cali, as of 6 May 2021.

SOURCE: Adapted from <https://lasillavacia.com/historias/historias-silla-llena/paro-nacional-2021-%C2%BFel-estado-contra-la-sociedad>

The protestors who had taken to the streets did not recognize these criminal actors as representing their movement.

including medical services, trash collectors and public transport. Those not willing to pay were threatened with violence. In a similar manner, cell phone and bicycle robbery has become commonplace in Cali, without any form of response from the authorities.

For more than two weeks after the strike started, the city of Cali had no control over criminality, and neither law enforcement agents nor civic authorities seemed to respond to the situation. As one community-based NGO leader explained: 'The criminal groups calculated that the police would not intervene, so they planned more organized actions, like robberies and looting, to compete for territories with other groups.'¹⁸ Absence of law enforcement interventions extended to incidents of homicide, missing persons and police brutality, which have yet to be thoroughly investigated. Even though the conflicts declined during weeks three and four of the strike, the incapacity of authorities to provide security opened the door for citizens to use weapons and take justice into their own hands.

Criminal control of the blockades

Looking ahead to the future stability of Cali, and Colombia more broadly, the demonstrations and blockades may have created opportunities for increased criminal activity over the long term. Although these opportunities remain hypothetical in what is an uncertain social, political and economic situation, they should be explored and tested in the aftermath of the strike to curb future violence and criminality.

Co-optation of a social movement

According to sources close to the blockades and demonstration areas, there has been a shift in the people who constitute the Primera Línea. One Resilience Fund grantee said that, over time, most of the local youths who had initially created the barricades have left and their places have been taken by other types of actors more disposed to organized criminality.

This shift in the constituency of the Primera Línea could be explained by the weariness of the members after a month of living the war on the streets. It might also be the result of the pressure that youth have received from both outside and inside the blockades. Externally, aggression from armed civilian groups was reported, with videos showing vehicles shooting at the barricades at night. From the inside, some of the spokespersons who participated in the initial dialogues with the municipality have complained about the presence of radical actors who try to spoil meetings. 'In the face of the sabotage of the dialogues, there are actors from both left and right who are benefiting from the increase of deaths, disappearances and violence. We're campaigning and we have to blame it on each other,' said one local activist.¹⁹

Another source near to the blockades said that youth are living in fear for their lives: 'There are people threatening to kill us and our families if we leave the barricades; there are people that do not want the blockades to finish.'²⁰ These interests suggest broader criminal motivations may be at play in the movement.



A blockade on a main road in Yumbo, north of Cali, 26 May. © Photo supplied

Increases in violence, theft and illicit trade

There are many criminal actors who benefit from maintaining the blockades. One is local pirates who provide an organized, illegal method of collective transportation and, presumably, illegal drug transport. On 28 April, all the cameras used by the traffic department to fine drivers were systematically vandalized. Meanwhile, since the strike began, almost 70% of the municipal bus system has been affected. The damage to transport infrastructure has created a space for pirates to operate without restriction, at least during the reconstruction process.

Another type of local actor likely to be benefiting from the blockades is local criminal gangs that operate in slums and vulnerable neighbourhoods. 'At the moment, there are no police in the Cali neighbourhoods, or judicial capacity. There is direct confrontation between the gangs who are reinforcing their criminal offering. This has generated widespread chaos that opens the door for crime to reign in the city,' said one Resilience Fund grantee working on a violence-reduction programme in the slums of Cali.²¹ Every day that the blockades persist, police cannot enter the neighbourhoods, which allows local gangs to strengthen and consolidate criminal markets and criminal

Broader criminal motivations may be at play in the movement.

governance. The month of May saw 177 homicides, a 45% increase on the figure for May 2020.²² Most of these homicides were not related to the protest, but to confrontations between criminal gangs in the neighbourhoods. As the director of a local community-based NGO explained:

The police have a very difficult relationship with the community, but in the end the police are the only ones who can stop an armed confrontation. The criminal groups were afraid of the presence of the police. Now, the frequency, intensity and duration of the confrontations have increased because the police do not arrive. There are continuous confrontations and the only thing that stops them is when the ammunition runs out.²³

At a structural level, the organized crime gangs running drug production and distribution operations had much to gain from sustained chaos in Cali and the northern regions. Cocaine, heroin and marijuana are all produced in the south-west of the country. Since the onset of the strike, the Colombian government has mobilized army troops, helicopters and planes normally reserved for the 'war on drugs' to support the security effort in Cali. Every day that the armed forces are deployed in the city, it becomes easier for gangs to move illegal drugs from the regions of production to the overseas distribution centres on the Pacific coast.

Capital flight and illegal cash injection

In the wake of the economic damage caused by the strike, criminal activity might also extend to the financial sector. The damage to the local manufacturing sector, first from COVID-19 and later the blockades, could lead to capital flight within Colombian industry. Such a vacuum of capital would create demand for new investors to restart the economy with large injections of cash. Considering that Cali is the headquarters for many organized crime groups and a city where both legal and illegal cash flows already drive the economy, this could create a golden opportunity for crime groups to launder money through the cash-strapped legal markets.

In light of these different criminal interests, it is possible that the maintenance of the blockades in the name of the national strike is part of a criminal strategy by highly organized criminal groups benefiting from the absence of law enforcement in their territories.



HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF

As the national strike continues, the Colombian government and its armed forces need a better understanding of the relationship between social mobilization and criminal interests in order to ensure public security, especially during protest demonstrations. Thus far, government's approach has been to treat all demonstrators as subversive and criminal, responding swiftly and with force. This approach follows a historical military doctrine used in Colombia to combat internal armed conflict over the last several decades, which allows for the deployment of 'heavy-handed' type responses. The events of 2021 – prolonged mass mobilization, the rise in violence and crime, and the economic meltdown – demonstrate that this approach has failed.

Recommendations

Amid much uncertainty, the thing Colombians know for certain is that history is taking place before their eyes. However, death and forced disappearances following social mobilization are part of a history that Colombia cannot afford to repeat. In the immediate term, de-escalating confrontations and making agreements on humanitarian actions, such as finding missing persons, should be the priority of all involved. Beyond the immediate humanitarian interventions, there are other strategic actions that should be included in the national agenda, such as police reform, the strengthening of law enforcement agencies and the implementation of policies for responding to social unrest. Based on what can be learnt from the case of Cali, the following recommendations apply:

▲ Police officers guard the Congress of Colombia against demonstrators. © Lokman Ilhan/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

1. Searching for the missing. Three aspects of the missing persons issue need to be addressed: information, investigation and family support.
 - The total number of missing persons is still unknown, as the data from institutional sources in the Attorney General's office and the Ombudsman's Office differs from the data gathered by human rights platforms in the city. Therefore, it is necessary to create a temporary body consisting of these three actors to share information, identify duplicates, identify those who are deceased and agree on a definitive number. This information needs to be centralized in the national missing persons' database for further investigation.
 - Following agreements on the definitive number, the Attorney General's office should create an elite team to work alongside civil society organizations to investigate the national strike disappearance cases. Acting immediately is crucial to saving lives. Every day that passes without locating missing persons diminishes the chances of finding them.
 - While information is being consolidated and the investigation phase begins, psychosocial and mental health support should be provided to the families of the missing people. Accompanying families helps them to avoid re-victimization and builds resilience among them. Civil society organizations in the country have been providing this type of community support for years. Therefore, they are the most prepared and trusted actors to implement this service, which should be financed by the government and donors.

2. Comprehensive police reform. Police reform has been a pending issue since the peace talks with the FARC in 2016. Despite the demobilization and reintegration of the FARC after the peace agreement was reached, other internal enemies and subversive threats have persisted in Colombia. This was the main reason given by authorities for stalling on coherent police reform. However, the events around the strike have confirmed that reform is a priority. Reform thinking and planning should centre on a consultative co-design process with civil society organizations that are experienced in this area. Three key aspects could help the police to become a fully civic body, following a human rights-centred doctrine, rather than a militarized body:
 - Removing the National Police from the Defence Ministry and transferring it to either the Ministry of Interior, or to a new ministry for citizen security, following Chile's example. This could ensure that mayors and governors have authority and command over the police service to focus on the security needs of the local region, rather than deferring to a centralized command to fight Colombia's internal enemies.
 - Modifying internal procedures. This includes the revision and modification of Law 1801 of 2016 (the 'Police Code') to improve the efficiency of assigning tasks and responsibilities to police. Similarly, internal procedures related to recruitment need to be improved with more stringent admissions criteria to ensure a steady inflow of new cadets with stronger backgrounds. Currently, those who join the police service often do so because they have limited professional alternatives. Finally, procedures related to internal investigations into

police misconduct, human rights violations and abuses of authority should be led by an independent and impartial body.

- Improving police training. Police officer training needs to be centred on preservation of human rights as the core of the police function, and an understanding that security is a right in itself. To complement this, officers should receive practical training in conflict resolution approaches for day-to-day situations, as well as training in restorative practices to avoid an overload of cases in the judiciary system.
3. The debate around social protest. The debate around decriminalizing social mobilization is key to defining the boundaries between civic expressions and criminal activities in order to ensure police act lawfully in both scenarios, and to restore confidence among citizens. The process could be developed in three steps:
- Step 1: Through dialogues, those involved in violent confrontation during the strike need to openly accept the legal and social responsibilities of their actions. This includes the police recognizing the misconduct and human rights violations from some of their members, and protesters recognizing the immediate and long-term impact of the blockades and of destroying infrastructure. This could help to improve public opinion towards both police and demonstrators. The justice system must be trusted to hold those responsible for legal violations to account.
 - Step 2: A commission should be created to clarify the events that occurred during the national strike, including police brutality and misconduct, as well as the criminal actions that took place within the strike. Understanding these events and developing a narrative about the strike from different voices and perspectives will allow society to comprehend what happened and facilitate reconciliation.
 - Step 3: A reconstruction of the events of the strike would facilitate a discussion about new ways to approach social mobilization. This new approach should include police procedures that focus on protecting the lives of those who are peacefully demonstrating and the clarification of the boundaries around what qualifies as a peaceful demonstration. The specifics of the new approach should be the outcome of a constructive dialogue between all stakeholders.
4. Strengthening law enforcement agencies. The Attorney General and the national police unit that focuses on criminal investigation should be strengthened in technical and financial terms. This would allow for the investigation of the multiple human rights violations that occurred during the national strike. It will also ensure that authorities are better prepared to react and prosecute criminal activities that take place during future demonstrations.
- Criminal investigation: Over 60 deaths, 3 000 injured people, 25 reports of sexual violence and more than 100 reports of disappearances necessitate effective and efficient criminal investigations. In a country where justice is not

recognized for its efficiency, the crimes that took place during the national strike nevertheless need to be prioritized to bring those responsible to swift justice. Without this action, any future social protest will be considered a criminal activity, while criminal actors will continue to take advantage of social mobilization scenarios.

- Intelligence and preparation: Intelligence bodies need to be better prepared for future calls for national strikes in order to identify where criminal actions might take place. Then, law enforcement agencies need to react quickly against looting, vandalism and other criminal activities that have become common during mass social mobilizations. When these bodies act in a coordinated and consistent manner, unnecessary violence and confrontation with peaceful demonstrators can be avoided.
5. Government response to protesters. The government needs to actively listen to social demonstrators, develop public policies tailored to youth in the streets and support the recovery of the private sector. If the government fails to respond to genuine social needs, the outcome will be the triumph of illegal economies and/or the encouragement of more mobilizations around the country, as has been the case in Cali. There are two policy interventions of highest priority:
- Opportunities for youth: It is fundamental to prioritize socio-economic opportunities for the youths of the country, as this segment has been the most affected by COVID-19 and is the primary driver of the national strike. The most common demands from young people on the barricades are mental healthcare, mentoring, education, labour inclusion and entrepreneurship, which would all be effective interventions to diminish the likelihood of their future involvement in criminality and violence.
 - Private sector recovery: The other stakeholders most affected by the strike are formal businesses in the south-west of Colombia. The 2019 strike, the COVID-19 lockdown and blockades created during the national strike have all stifled industrial activity. Without a thriving private sector, the economy of the region will collapse, throwing more people into poverty, increasing discontent and creating more opportunities for criminal actors. Temporary tax exemption, low-interest credit and public investments are needed to keep the economy afloat and to avoid a deeper socio-economic crisis. Maintaining the formal economic ecosystem can help support the labour market that young people need, while subduing criminal efforts to provide an alternative livelihood from illegal money.

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