

# Thinking Resistance: The National Strike in Cali

Via [Viento Sur](#)

[Pensar la resistencia: “mayo de 2021 en Cali y Colombia” is part of the special documents of the Centro de Investigación y Documentación Socioeconómica (Cidse). It is a compilation book containing ten academic texts by professors and students of the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences of the Universidad del Valle. It has the value of having been published almost simultaneously with the events it analyzes, since it was published in the first days of June and refers to the events of May, within the framework of a national strike that is already considered one of the most massive, long-lasting and influential in the history of Colombia. Below we reproduce the chapter dedicated to the National Strike in Cali. Below is the access to the book in pdf].

The aim of this text is to clarify what is happening in the city of Cali and, from my perspective as a sociologist, to describe and propose initial explanations to a set of violent collective actions in which different actors, motives and forms of action are linked and articulated, which together have different consequences for the city. What interpretation can be given to what is happening?

## **The general context**

As a starting point, I consider that we must take into account circumstances that contextualize what has been experienced in the city.

At the international level, but especially in Latin America, similar events have taken place in Chile, Ecuador and Venezuela in the last three years. In each case, new repertoires and new actors, especially young people, and a

very significant presence of women, have become manifest. There are issues of labor stability, environmental, sexual and reproductive rights. In general, they are demands for the democratization of society.

In Chile, as a result of an increase in public transportation, there were strong confrontations between demonstrators and public forces. The government of President Piñera did not insist on the very strong repressive strategy, with which he initially tried to confront the conflict, without managing to solve it. It opted to call for a change in the Constitution that had been in force since the Pinochet era. In Ecuador, in October 2019, it was the indigenous people who opposed a decree that eliminated the gasoline subsidy. They carried out very significant indigenous mobilizations, blockades and marches in which there were also strong confrontations with the public forces. The Government gave in, with the mediation of the United Nations, and put in perspective the change of Government, according to the electoral calendar, which contributed to the solution of the conflict. The existence of a polarized society and the significant role of the indigenous people in the conflict and in the solution of the problem became evident. In Venezuela, popular and widespread discontent with the Government led to strong confrontations in the streets. The Maduro regime reasserted itself, with the support of the Army, the Police and civilian militias, armed by the same regime. In this case, the violent repression of the population reaffirmed the regime and kept the problem latent until today, with an impoverished population that has chosen to migrate out of the country. In Colombia, then, we have to evaluate what is happening, what is at stake, the way the conflict is expressed, both by the demonstrators and the response of the Government and the State. In short, I suggest taking into account the international context of similar conflicts in order to understand our own problems.

2.- In the Colombian case, it is important to go back to the

mass demonstrations that took place in several cities in November 2019. At that time, similar themes and demands for democratization were manifested in a repertoire also agenciaded by young people and women. But the Colombian difference was that, once again, issues such as the unfulfilled Peace Accords and the need to advance in peaceful coexistence, agrarian and peasant land problems and free higher education were reiterated.

In Cali, a multitudinous demonstration took place, concentrated at the CAM: peaceful, enthusiastic with music and street theater scenes. The police were present, but did not intervene. However, in the afternoon, when the demonstrators were dispersing, there were situations of vandalism and looting. Mayor Armitage declared a curfew. During the early hours of the night from social networks it was said that vandals were taking residential units in different sectors of the city, especially in the south and residents were called to arm and defend themselves. The Police with their sirens on seemed overwhelmed in patrolling. There was a panic situation in the city, but the important fact is that the following day the massive acts of vandalism and invasion of residential units could not be documented. In the background, we witnessed a reality invented in its dimensions by the social networks.

In sum, in November 2019 a legitimate citizen mobilization became evident that led to vandalism, to the intervention of the networks fabricating false realities and showing a reaction in principle armed from the State and with the participation of armed civilians. The conflict, which occurred in other cities with similar characteristics, was not adequately channeled by the municipal, departmental or national governments in anticipation of future situations. Talks were convened without practical consequences.

3.- In March 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic arrives and has been affecting us for 14 months. In Colombia there is economic recession, as well as in Cali, although not as accentuated as

in other cities and regions. In the city, according to the Dane, monetary poverty increases from 21.9% to 36.6% from 2019 to 2020. There is also an estimated 22% reduction in the middle class, which is important to stop as citizen mobilization includes the middle sectors. The pandemic itself does not affect Cali as much as Bogotá, Medellín and Barranquilla, but in the popular sectors of the city there is opposition to the police way of controlling the isolation of citizens. Cali's Secretary of Security seems more like an agent of the Prosecutor's Office who talks about criminal behavior, than a strategist of citizen culture who seeks to strengthen citizen isolation. In the end, it is considered that the pandemic is reproduced with more strength in the popular sectors and force and not conviction is required to achieve isolation.

In this difficult national situation, the Government inexplicably proposes a tax reform that falls especially on a working and impoverished middle class, strata 3, 4 and 5. A National Strike is then called for April 28, 2021, which triggers a series of conflict events until today.

Although the situation in Cali has been particularly serious and difficult, the acts of violence have been repeated throughout the country, especially in the cities. I believe that we are in the presence, therefore, of a national problem, markedly urban. Cali synthesizes in a pronounced way the contradictions that are experienced in other regions and cities of the country.

The events in Colombia have had reactions at the international level, in organizations such as the United Nations, in governments such as that of President Biden, in citizen demonstrations in Madrid, London, Paris, Brussels, among other places, and in the most important media in Europe and North America. In all of them there is concern about the situation and a call to the Colombian Government not to go overboard with the use of force. As I said, this has been positive,

since the security agencies know that they are also being watched and carry out their tasks more carefully. Even in Cali it was possible to show, on May 19, the day of the strike, that there could be peaceful demonstrations with a minimum of police surveillance. This is also known internationally.

So there is a national problem in which the cities, especially Cali, play a leading role. But it would be very important to make a differentiation according to regional situations, in which urban and rural problems are articulated around a central city. The southwestern region, with its center in Cali, is key to understanding the conflict it is going through. Its immediate geography includes a south-north axis from Santander de Quilichao to Cartago and an east-west axis that starts on the western slope of the central mountain range, passes through Cali and reaches the city of Buenaventura on the Pacific. It is a region of diverse economies and ethnic populations. It has a history of armed conflict and violence that is present in today's events. The role played by the Peace Accords is important, as well as their inconclusive nature or their sabotage by various forces. This rural problem overlaps then in the southwestern region with the one that appears in the cities of the southwest, especially in Cali.

In the cities and regions they appear combined:

- Protests and peaceful demonstrations.
- Vandalism of various types.
- Presence of barricades in strategic sectors of the cities.
- Participation of social sectors differentiated from direct inhabitants, who lead and those who adapt and suffer the barricades and blockades.
- The intervention of civilian authorities of the State, the Armed Forces and the Police who openly use excessive and illegal force, in some cases.
- The presence of armed civilians, from various sides, who

use their weapons.

An interpretation of the whole and of what is happening in Cali is therefore required. I believe that the events can be explained by arguing that they are part of a social mobilization, especially by young people, who question the social and political order in force for a long time and with a sense of social injustice, who are facing a government that does not offer them alternatives, outside the police and military treatment of the conflict, and that considers them vandals, criminals and terrorists, without taking into account the legitimate manifestations of discontent. In my opinion, this movement has been taking shape for several years, it is articulated with peace agreements that have not been fully assumed and have encountered all sorts of stumbling blocks on the part of the government. These agreements reflect the feelings of a large part of rural Colombia, which today are combined with an agenda expanded by the young people of the cities, who represent 70% of the Colombian population, who live in unemployment and lack of education and protest against the murders of social leaders, especially in rural areas where the armed conflict has prevailed. The underlying issue in the social conflict is the long unheard voice of rural Colombia, which has lived through the armed conflict, combined with the voice of new urban sectors that feel excluded by the existing social and political order, represented by the Government.

### **The case of Cali and south-western Colombia**

In the following, I will dwell on some aspects that allow us to understand, in my opinion, why a national problem has more accentuated features in Cali and in the south-western region.

1.- Valle del Cauca and Cali society has had a history of fragmentation, both by class and ethnicity. In terms of class, inequality is very pronounced and is reproduced over time. It is reflected in opposing sectors, of haves and have-nots, with little upward mobility between them. Much of the social

mobility, when it has occurred in the last decades, has been agenciaded by the illegal economies and the social groups that emerge from them. From the ethnic point of view, a sense of superiority of the white population sectors over the black and indigenous population sectors has also been formed historically. This may have changed since the 91 Constitution, but very slowly. Racism persists today. The fact is that the sectors suffering the consequences of ethnic and class fragmentation have developed a sense of social injustice that consolidates and increases in the subaltern social sectors, in opposition to the privileged sectors of society. They demand respect, rights and identity. They increasingly organize more and better their citizen claims, which are justified.

The traditional way in which the social and political order was sustained in the city and in the region was philanthropic hegemony. This means that the business, agrarian and industrial social sectors that held the economic power, became involved in the functioning of the State and channeled part of their profits and personal efforts through NGOs, for the benefit of the citizenry. Public spending was reflected in the progress of the city and its population. This form of exercising power could be sustained until the first mayoralty of Rodrigo Guerrero (1992-1994) with his flagship Desepaz program for citizen security. But a crisis arose in the regional establishment when it became evident that drug trafficking was linked to politics from 1994 (Process 8,000) to the present day. During this period there are different moments and not all actors have the same responsibility, but over time a paramilitary sense of doing politics, winning elections and participating in profits from public contracting and access to state bureaucracy was enthroned. The negative impact of drug trafficking and money laundering has been very large in the economy and politics and in the spread of mafia behavior in the city and in the region.

The work of several years that I have done as an analyst of

urban and regional violence has its main explanation in drug trafficking and in the structuring of a paramafioso social order. How is it possible that from 1991 to 2021, that is to say for 30 years, Cali, Valle del Cauca and Norte del Cauca, have similar homicide rates that, on average, are 25 points above national rates? In 2019, the homicide rate for Cali was  $49.7 \times 100,000$  inhabitants, almost double the national rate (25.1). In 30 years, a para-mafia and armed society has been woven, in the different sectors of society and at all levels.

It is important to bear in mind that the regional elites are not homogeneous and that a civilian part has tried to recompose its power and role in society, with an alternative in which the business sectors, young in some cases, participate again, seeking a civilian alternative to solve the problems from the State. But what is certain and verifiable is that so far they have not been successful. Rodrigo Guerrero could not do it in his second mayoralty; Maurice Armitage did it partially, who managed well the municipal finances, invested in education and linked excluded Afro sectors to the administration. The current Mayor, for the second time in the municipal government, has the support of popular sectors but carries the Inri of corruption, since his first mayoralty, with contracts in favor of his relatives and political friends. In synthesis, there is a very weak social and political agreement on the basic rules to manage the local and regional State. The fact that hegemony is precarious and power is dispersed only encourages conflict and violence. In synthesis, the existing domination agreement in the city and the region does not counteract the dynamics of violence. There are cliques strongly tied to profit in the functioning of the State and the spending of the budget.

In addition to the previous factors that intervene in a structural manner, it is necessary to refer to the strike and its expression in the demonstrations and barricades at strategic points of the city. We must begin by talking about



the demonstrators. The participation of young people and women is remarkable. They come mainly from the neighborhoods surrounding the demonstration and blockade sites where they have had experience in neighborhood and youth community organization, some with religious influence or NGO's. They are present in the marches and barricades. They are present in the marches and peaceful demonstrations and participate in the barricades. They are the main actors. In their midst move organizations that have experience and defined political interests and oppose the Government, the Democratic Center and Uribism. They take up opposition political banners and show organization and experience in their mobilization. Militiamen who belong to armed organizations such as the ELN or the residual FARC also participate. There is no evidence that they dominate and direct the bulk of the actions. Youth groups linked to criminality, gangs and vandalism also participate. They do a lot of damage in public transport stations, but they cannot be confused with either the first or the second group. They do not represent nor should they be identified with youth protest.

There is then a heterogeneity of demonstrators who articulate the discontent and opposition to the Government, the Democratic Center and former President Uribe. They oppose what they call the fascist neoliberal system. These groups retake and vindicate the voice and the demonstration of the nonconformist sectors, they have citizen support in wide environments. But their strategy of blocking mobility also generates opposition in the same popular sectors where they come from. In the confrontation, the Peace Accords that the Government has opposed are revived and the spectrum of demands is broadened to include urban youth issues.

Given the polarization in the city, such demonstrations and blockades are understood, from the side of the Government and its party, as a Petrista, Castro-Chavista project, promoted by the guerrillas, or as a new molecular strategy of

international communism to take power through terrorism.

It is necessary to refer to the civil authorities. The support of the President has been requested in the city. But his response has not been clear during his few visits, beyond asking that the blockades be lifted and that economic activity be reactivated. It should be noted that the President is in a weak situation, as he has lost support from his own party, which considers that he has made inopportune proposals that have served the Petrista opposition to position itself for the next elections.

The Governor asks for the support of the national government, but fails to articulate a global regional approach to confront the problem. She has confusing proposals such as closing the borders of the Department, when the idea is to open mobility and reactivate economic activity with other departments of the country.

The Mayor has had interventions in which he indicates that he seeks dialogue and agreement with the different actors involved in the uprisings, strikes and blockades in the city. He has achieved precarious agreements and it should be recognized that he has sought to mediate so that blockades are lifted, food and medicine can be moved to the city. It should also be recognized that he is the only one who has spoken of the presence of death hawks in the conflict, referring to the intervention of armed civilians who shoot at demonstrators from white armored vans, perhaps with the support and/or knowledge of the Police. But, on the other hand, the Mayor has very little credibility among the citizens due to the corrupt management of the public budget, a matter that has been under investigation by the Prosecutor's Office since his first administration.

It is necessary to take into account the participation of the indigenous people, organized by the CR in a minga. Unlike other opportunities, the minga did not seek a mobilization in

Cali to present their demands to the central government. They came to the city to participate in the demonstrations, blockades and demands of the minga together with the inhabitants, in different sectors of the city. It should be noted that their intervention was essentially peaceful, although coercive with the citizens who demanded free mobilization. In the case of the Cali – Jamundí road, which I traveled several times, they chose to block the road, but allowing transit in one of the directions for an hour and successively changing the direction. The indigenous guard was present with their command staffs, without firearms. In the case of the blockade in the area west of Cali, where I live, the indigenous people openly participated in the blockade, but they facilitated the march of the white shirts, that is, of the citizens who asked to lift the blockade and put an end to the confrontations. I was also unable to confirm that they had firearms. In my opinion, the outcome of the interaction between indigenous people and the white T-shirt protesters in the West was positive. Some normality was brought to the place and precarious mobility arrangements were facilitated, unlike what happened in Pance.

The Minga had its place of concentration at the Universidad del Valle. The university authorities acted correctly in favoring the arrival of the Minga at the University, as this undoubtedly contributed to the easing of the atmosphere in the city. After serious confrontations between the Minga and residents of the Pance and Ciudad Jardín sectors in the south of the city, where there were various acts of violence on both sides (ten indigenous people were injured), the Minga decided to withdraw from the Universidad del Valle and from the city.

It is necessary to ask what is behind the change in tactics of the indigenous people when they arrive in the city to participate in the demonstrations and blockades of its inhabitants. One must also ask what has been their motivation and role in the region, especially in the northern part of the

Cauca, with the blockades on the Panamerican Highway in different places. The burning of sugarcane crops and the threats to sugar mills and companies in the northern part of the Cauca are very worrying. The companies have suspended production for several days. Certainly we must also take into account the demands of the indigenous people from long ago, which have to do with land and with the agreements they have reached and which have been unfulfilled by different governments. We cannot forget the assassination of indigenous, social and human rights leaders in the northern part of the Cauca. There are then justifications for the indigenous mobilization, but the agenda they manage is not clear and some of their actions are questionable and contribute to an escalation of violence that we do not know the consequences it may have.

For some sectors of the Cali elite and the national government, it is the indigenous people who are the cause of the current violence and this, in their opinion, merits that the Armed Forces respond with a firm hand. As in other moments, this is a consideration that has given rise to the appearance of paramilitarism. In my opinion, anti-indigenous racism has become evident in sectors of Cali society. It is necessary to show a face of dialogue and inclusion. Some of the decisions made by the Minga, or better, by indigenous people, organized or not by the CRIC, are worrying. It is necessary to develop the strategy of dialogue and agreements with the indigenous people. On the other hand, beyond the Minga and the CRIC, whoever knows the indigenous population of Northern Cauca, knows that a very large proportion of them depend on work in the zone, in and outside the reservations, and have had to suffer, on this occasion, the lack of income, food and medicines.

Militarization of public order. As has been argued, there are protests and demonstrations of different types, some violent and others peaceful. In Colombia there is support in the

Constitution for public and peaceful demonstrations. The problem is that in Cali it has been evident the presence in the protests and demonstrations of different forms of violence with different origins and typical of an urban uprising, from barricades to police and military repression. The serious issue is the appearance of armed civilians who have fired from the opposing sides. The vision of certain elites who affirm that the State is not capable of responding and calls for arms in private hands is of great concern. Only a few voices have argued that arms should be a monopoly of the State and that the State can only use them within the law, although this has not happened. In Cali, in the midst of the confrontations, police have openly used lethal weapons against demonstrators. Also policemen, out of uniform, appear armed in the confrontations. It is very likely, moreover, that they support armed civilians acting as urban paramilitaries.

The Government has decreed military assistance for the control of public order. This is a mistake from the point of view of the role of the Army in the control of public order and the security of citizens. It is worth noting that the denunciations that have been made in international organizations have helped the Police and ESMAD to better control their illegal actions with weapons. Paradoxically, on the other hand, there are no known open and illegal abuses by the military with weapons during urban patrols.

The legitimacy of the police in Cali is low, both among the elites who argue that they cannot trust their security, as well as on the part of many residents who refer to a corrupt police force in their neighborhoods, especially in relation to micro-trafficking. In some sectors of the city, the police cannot enter. In the popular sectors, the police tend to argue, for a long time, a criminalization on principle of young, poor and black people.

**What to do?**

I have argued that we are facing a complex national mobilization that has led in our city to a caleñazo that has lasted more than 25 days. We must pay full attention to its characterization and contribute to give answers that allow us to strengthen the welfare and collective coexistence. In the confrontation, the polarization of society has become evident, which frames and contributes to the escalation of violence. The opposing poles are the defenders of a neoliberal, exclusionary and authoritarian economic growth model, and the social sectors that seek to consolidate a new society, supported by rural and urban sectors, which have been traditionally excluded and which do not yet clearly express the form of economy and society they defend. They seek democratization with a new agenda. Between the extreme options, there is much scope for realistic social change.

In my opinion, the upcoming electoral debate has begun in a violent and hasty manner. It is important that this debate can take place in an atmosphere of peace and that the different proposals to move the Nation, the Region and the City forward can be heard. Between the poles, there are civil and democratic options that can give initial answers, from now on, to the basic demands of the present situation. It is necessary to have patience so that the demands and proposals to the different problems can be decanted. The following issues deserve attention:

1. José Antonio Ocampo, a prominent economist from Cali, in an opinion column has synthesized realistic and practical proposals on what could be a necessary tax reform, under the principle of progressively taxing those who concentrate wealth. Also on what could be a subsidized minimum income for those who persistently live in unemployment and poverty and on mechanisms to encourage economic reactivation.

2. At the local or regional level, it is necessary to side with dialogue between traditionally incommunicado sectors in order to reach agreements, even if they are initially unstable

between the parties, so as to reduce confrontations and violence. Also very important people, such as some ambassadors, have valued the role of dialogue. This means identifying the actors and seeking bridges of communication between them in order to reach agreements. The right to peaceful protest and freedom of movement must be made compatible at the local level at the same time. This is possible and the indigenous minga demonstrated it in practice, despite the barricades, which are clearly a coercion and have limits, as they also seem to have understood.

3. The blockades cannot contribute to worsen the situation of impoverishment of the population. This is a very strong argument, of a human nature and also based on rights, against those who persist in the blockades, surely citizens themselves in a situation of poverty. The blockades, in this paradoxical sense, are carried out by the poor against the poor, without knowing who benefits.

4. It is necessary to propose the disarmament of society and the use of arms strictly within the law, exclusively by the armed forces of the State. The excesses committed against the demonstrators must be condemned. We must also denounce the assassinations, several years ago and from various sides, of human rights defenders, community leaders, reinserted guerrillas, indigenous people who have promoted the substitution of illicit crops and of so many Colombians who today want society and the State to be recomposed in order to live in Peace and Coexistence.

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course, I am solely responsible for its content.