

## **FARC Ex-Combatants and the Right to Non-violent Social Protest.**

### **A New Social Outburst in 2021**

In recent years, economic and social reforms proposed by President Ivan Duque's government have triggered unrest in Colombia. In November 2019, people from various sectors of society mobilised against planned reforms to labour, pensions, and education. As poverty and inequality in Colombia deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic, President Duque proposed a tax plan that sought to lower the income tax threshold and add a 19% value-added-tax on basic foods, medicines, and electronics. The announcement in April 2021 brought social discontent to a boiling point, sparking weeks of mass civilian protests across various Colombian cities, in particular Cali and Bogotá.

The National Strike brought together the voices of protest groups, including students, health professionals, women's organisations, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian movements, groups for victims of the armed conflict, and FARC ex-combatants (or peace signatories, as former members of this guerrilla refer to themselves). From April, the demonstrations became urgent spaces for civilians to protest against corruption and state violence, and to compel the government to proactively implement the Peace Agreement, amongst other demands. However, the excessive use of military and police force in response has resulted in many injuries, deaths, and cases of arbitrary detention and torture. These have been documented by various NGOs and denounced by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights following their visit to Colombia in June. The violence has exacerbated tensions on the streets, particularly in Cali, where 44 protesters have been killed by anti-riot police (ESMAD), civilian police and armed civilians.



## The Participation of FARC Ex-Combatants

For FARC peace signatories, exercising the right to express disagreement and participating in non-violent, democratic protests are essential steps towards reincorporation into political life. Their involvement in the National Strike signals that space is opening for democratic participation, as was agreed in [Point 2.2.2 \(page 44\)](#) of the Peace Agreement.

In this context, some have mobilised collectively through their affiliation with the Comunes Party, the political party formed through the peace agreement. In other cases, peace signatories have joined protests collectively with others within the reincorporation process - as they did in October 2020 within the 'Mass Pilgrimage in Support of Life and Peace' - and some have participated individually.

Representatives of the party Comunes expressed support for the National Strike as a space to urge the government to make progress on the implementation of the Peace Agreement, to restart dialogues with the ELN, and to investigate the killings of FARC ex-combatants since 2016. The Comunes Party also denounced the Colombian government's approach to negotiations with the National Strike Committee and other sectors of society participating in the protests. They see it as confirmation of the current administration's "lack of interest in the country's critical problems".

The recent protests have shown that, both as individuals and collectively, FARC peace signatories have joined spaces of non-violent political participation. This demonstrates their commitment to non-violent peaceful action and their willingness to contribute to democratic discussion, both key components of the political reincorporation process.

## Stigmatisation: A Risk for Political Reincorporation

During more than 40 days of protests, the Colombian government refused to acknowledge the political motivations behind the participation of different sectors. Instead, it employed rhetoric condemning the protesters as vandals and violent. By arguing that armed groups such as FARC dissidents and the ELN had organised and infiltrated the protests, the government justified the intervention of the army and police through national security concerns.



These claims aggravate post-conflict tensions and ignore the willingness of FARC peace signatories to participate in non-violent democratic debate. A number of ex-combatants who played active roles in the protests have received threats or been harassed. These new acts of violence against this population endanger the political reincorporation process, a process still in its early days, and more generally, undermine efforts to realise sustainable peace and reconciliation in the country.

*Embrace Dialogue recognises the commitment of FARC peace signatories to participate in non-violent democratic discussions, during the National Strike and in other political spaces. We call on the Colombian government to see the mobilisation of FARC ex-combatants as an essential step of their political reincorporation and as the opening of democratic political space. Moreover, we urge the government and its institutions to guarantee both the right to peaceful protest and the security of FARC ex-combatants, as well as that of all Colombians who exercise their right to protest. These are crucial steps for national reconciliation and for the broader peacebuilding process.*

