AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

It’s a mistake to assume Colombia protests same as protests in US

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Fifty-five House Democrats recently signed a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken arguing that the U.S. response to the protests, riots and national strikes that have taken place in Colombia in recent weeks must focus on the “unleashed” and “brutal response” of the Colombian National Police against protesters. The missive was an impassioned plea, but one that reveals a misunderstanding of a complex situation. That’s because the ongoing crisis in Colombia is not a result of systematic abuse of power by law enforcement authorities. Rather, it is borne out of the disastrous economic effect of the country’s COVID lockdowns, political rivalries in a presidential campaign season and internationally supported non-state actors who are actively working to destabilize the country.

How did Colombia get here? On April 15, the administration of President Ivan Duque Marquez announced a tax reform proposal which included income and sales tax hikes intended to help alleviate the devastating economic effects of COVID-related lockdowns. Last year, the Colombian economy suffered its greatest contraction in decades. Unemployment rates have increased significantly, and the government needs money. However, the timing of the proposal was politically tone deaf, and generated a groundswell of popular opposition.

The Duque administration was relatively quick to recognize its error. Just days after protests began, the administration withdrew its proposal and the country’s minister of finance resigned. Nevertheless, the protests continued to spread and, in many cases, devolved into riots, vandalism and violent clashes with police. Groups set up roadblocks in major thoroughfares across the country, preventing the transport of food, fuel and other goods. Thousands of campesino farmers are still unable to bring their goods to market. Blockade enforcers continue to break the law, demanding that citizens pay a steep toll in order to pass through.

Criticism of the situation has tended to focus on the governmental response to this disorder. The Congressional letter to Secretary Blinken, for instance, references videos which “show aggressive, indiscriminate use of lethal and non-lethal weapons [by the National Police] against citizens.” The letter goes on to cite that, as of May 12, 42 people had been killed as a result. Yet it fails to mention a number of relevant facts: that fewer than half of the aforementioned fatalities have been confirmed as being a direct result of the protests; that scores more police officers have been injured than have civilians; that the Ministry of Defense reported the confiscation from protesters of 16,000 “sharp” weapons, 292 gas-based weapons and more than 600 firearms; and that scores of police stations have been set on fire, along with five policemen in the city of Pasto.

To be sure, instances of the unlawful use of force by members of the police should be thoroughly investigated. But defunding the Colombian police, a measure the letter suggests, is unwarranted. It is also dangerously misguided, because U.S. assistance has long been instrumental in the efforts of the Colombian Military Police to combat transnational crime, eradicate coca crops, and fortify a state presence in poor, remote villages via community relations and infrastructure refurbishment projects. Thus, while it might be tempting for American politicians to view Colombian law enforcement through the lens of U.S. domestic politics, doing so would be profoundly unwise.

Most egregiously, Congressional advocates have rejected outright the Colombian government’s claims that members of radical groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) might be participating in the unrest. Yet, it is highly likely that these charges are accurate. FARC dissidents have in fact publicly called for the protesters to take up arms. Likewise, foreign governments such as Venezuela and Cuba have been vocal supporters of the unrest, and promoted narratives that have helped to stoke the violence. As such, Bogota’s claims of foreign or terrorist involvement should be taken seriously.

The situation continues to evolve. While the government’s proposed tax increase plan was the proximate cause of the protests, the subsequent evolution of the situation makes it clear that Colombia’s political opposition is now in charge of the collective dissent. For its part, the Duque administration has said that it’s willing to negotiate — but not until the hundreds of road blockades are lifted. As of this writing, the army and National Police have cleared some, but the remaining blockades are effectively holding the nation hostage.

How long this state of affairs will persist is anyone’s guess. What is abundantly clear is that Colombia is in crisis, and that the damaging effects of protracted unrest could well impact future generations of its citizens.

To successfully navigate the situation, Colombia needs its allies to better understand the situation on the ground — and to offer constructive support, rather than blanket condemnation.