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## FEATURED Q&A

# Will Social Unrest in Colombia Lead to Political Reform?



Protests, which have sometimes turned violent, have wracked Colombia for four weeks. A protester is pictured washing tear gas from his eyes last month. // File Photo: Humano Salvaje via Creative Commons.

**Q** As protests raged on in Colombia, with demonstrators taking to the streets to voice discontent over a range of social issues, President Iván Duque announced that authorities would clear the roadblocks that have become a hallmark of the demonstrations, and reports emerged that Colombian troops had killed FARC rebel leader Jesús Santrich in an operation in Venezuela. In April, Duque's approval rating fell to 33.1 percent, down from 48.2 percent last August. How well is Duque managing the crisis, and what accounts for the decline in his popularity? How politically stable is his government amid the protests and the recent resignations of his finance and foreign ministers? What must he do to bring peace to the country?

**A** Francisco Santos Calderón, Colombia's ambassador to the United States: "As the second-oldest democracy in the Western Hemisphere after the United States, Colombia is demonstrating right now the remarkable resiliency of our institutions and our people. As President Duque has reiterated, we have always defended and guaranteed the fundamental right in our constitution for peaceful protest. This will not change. Protecting the right to protest peacefully means keeping our citizens safe from violence and keeping critical infrastructure and supply chains open for the free flow of food, medicine, Covid-19 vaccines and other necessary supplies. This is why restoring public order is a top priority for our government right now. We must also restore public order if we are to create the space for the solutions already announced and others yet to come in order for them to have a chance of taking hold and alleviating concerns. For example, President

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

## Dozens of Political Candidates Killed in Mexico in Recent Months

At least 34 candidates for office have been killed in Mexico in recent months, ahead of the country's June 6 midterm elections.

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### ECONOMIC

## U.S. to Announce Investments in Central America by Companies

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is expected to announce agreements by 12 companies and organizations for investments in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

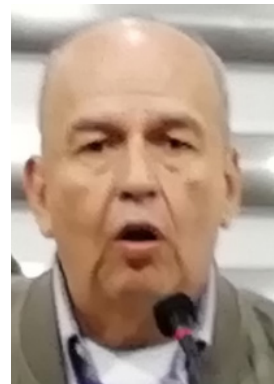
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### POLITICAL

## Former Bolivian Interior Minister Arrested in U.S.

Former Bolivian Interior Minister Arturo Murillo was arrested in the United States in connection with an alleged bribery and money laundering scheme, the U.S. Department of Justice announced.

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Murillo // File Photo: Bolivian Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Former Bolivian Interior Minister Arrested in U.S.

Former Bolivian Interior Minister Arturo Murillo has been arrested in the United States in connection to a bribery and money laundering scheme, the U.S. Department of Justice said in a statement on Wednesday. Murillo was charged with a single count of conspiring to commit money laundering. He was Bolivia's interior minister during the government of former interim President Jeanine Áñez, who took office in the South American nation after former President Evo Morales went into self-exile in November 2019 following protests in response to a contested election that he claimed he had won, the Associated Press reported. Another Bolivian and three U.S. citizens were also arrested as part of the case on criminal charges for their alleged roles in the scheme between November 2019 and April 2020, the DOJ said.

## At Least 34 Political Candidates Killed Ahead of Mexico Vote

At least 34 political candidates seeking office in the country's June 6 midterm elections have been murdered in Mexico, the Associated Press reported Wednesday. Among the latest was Alma Barragán, who was killed Tuesday while campaigning in Guanajuato state for the mayorship of the city of Moroleón, the wire service reported. The small Citizen's Movement Party, for which Barragán was a candidate, denounced the killing. "It is unthinkable that participating in political life means putting one's life at risk," the party said in a statement. "This is the most violent election in Mexican history, and in Citizen's Movement we are not willing to act as if that is normal." Moroleón has been pummeled by violence from drug cartels. The Jalisco cartel has been battling local gangs that have the backing of the Sinaloa cartel for

control of Guanajuato state. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said the murder was "without doubt" the work of organized crime. López Obrador added that gangs are killing candidates in an effort to prevent Mexicans from voting. "When there is a lot of abstentionism, the mafias dominate the elections," said the president, the AP reported. The vast majority of the 34 candidates slain were running for local offices or seeking nominations, according to the Etelekt consulting firm. Drug trafficking gangs want to place candidates who are favorable to them in local offices in Mexico so that they can operate freely without police interference and so that they can extort money from governments and businesses. Several elected officials have also been killed this year in Mexico. In a count that includes both sitting officials and candidates, 46 politicians were killed in Mexico between February and April, a 44 percent increase as compared to Mexico's 2018 elections, according to Mexican political consulting firm Integralia, The Wall Street Journal reported Tuesday.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## U.S. to Announce Firms' Investments in Central America

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris today is set to announce agreements of 12 companies and organizations that plan to invest in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador as part of the U.S. administration's efforts to target the root causes of migration from the so-called Northern Triangle countries, The Wall Street Journal reported. Among the firms is Microsoft, which agreed to expand Internet access to as many as three million people in the region by July of next year and to establish community centers focused on digital skills training to women and youth, according to the report. The group also reportedly includes Mastercard, which aims to bring five million unbanked people in the region into the financial system and provide one million micro and small businesses with access

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Courthouse in Colombian City of Tuluá Burned Down During Protests

The emblematic courthouse of the southwestern Colombian city of Tuluá was burned to the ground on Tuesday during a violent night of protests, which have continued across Colombia for a month, EFE reported. "With profound sadness, I roundly reject the acts of vandalism that [occurred] this Tuesday afternoon and night," Mayor John Jairo Gómez said in a statement Wednesday. The fire destroyed nearly the entire courthouse, which is located about 100 kilometers north of Cali, which has been the epicenter of demonstrations against President Iván Duque's government.

## Cuban Baseball Player Prieto Defects During Trip to Florida

César Prieto, one of Cuba's most popular baseball players, has abandoned his national team while in Florida, BBC News reported today. Cuban athletes have been known to defect from their teams to leave the Caribbean country. Baseball journalist Francys Romero said Prieto, 22, got into a vehicle shortly after disembarking the team bus and was reportedly driven away while the team was in Florida for a qualifying event for the Olympics. The Cuban Baseball Federation blasted Prieto's move.

## Azul Reportedly Seeking to Buy LATAM's Brazil Unit

Brazilian airline Azul has expressed interest to Chile's LATAM Airlines Group to buy its Brazilian operation, Reuters reported Wednesday, citing a source with knowledge of the matter. The news led Azul's shares to rise more than 5 percent in trading in São Paulo. LATAM filed for bankruptcy protection last year, though it has not yet filed a formal restructuring plan. Azul is controlled by JetBlue Airways Group founder David Neeleman.

to electronic banking, the newspaper reported. Other companies include yogurt maker Chobani and Nespresso, a unit of Nestlé that centers on coffee brewing. U.S. officials have said the initiative seeks to increase private sector involvement to have a longer-lasting policy toward the Central American nations that does not shift significantly from administration to administration, The Wall Street Journal reported. Earlier this year, the White House announced \$4 billion in aid to address the causes pushing thousands of people to flee Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. "While \$4 billion in aid is a substantial investment, it will require significant partnership from the private sector to accomplish the desired impact in addressing poverty, insecurity and other underlying factors of migration," Katya Rimkunas, regional deputy director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the International Republican Institute, told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published March 12.

## BUSINESS NEWS

### Credit Suisse's Brazil Head Stepping Down After 17 Years

José Olympio Pereira, the chief executive officer for Brazil at Credit Suisse, is leaving the financial services company after more than 17 years, Bloomberg News reported Wednesday, citing an unnamed person with knowledge of the matter. Olympio will reportedly remain at Credit Suisse until the end of the year to assist with the transition, the source told the news service. Credit Suisse, which this year is ranked seventh in Brazil for equity underwriting, declined to comment to Bloomberg News about the report of Olympio's departure, which was also reported by the website Pipeline and local business newspaper Valor Econômico. Reuters also reported Olympio's departure, citing an internal memo signed by the board of Credit Suisse's Brazilian unit. Olympio has worked for financial institutions for 36 years and had "expressed his wish to leave the bank," according to the memo, Reuters reported.

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Duque has already announced several initiatives to support young people, including free higher education for low-income students, wage subsidies to help boost employment for those aged 18 to 28 and a homeownership program for young people, to name a few. The national dialogue and the solutions will continue. Colombia and Colombians are resilient. We will continue to hold dear and respect our citizens' democratic rights, and we will protect those rights from violence that threaten them. We will come out on the other side of this difficult time, and we will be a stronger nation for it."

**A Peter DeShazo, visiting professor of Latin American, Latino and Caribbean Studies at Dartmouth College and former**

**U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs:** "Colombia faces a daunting array of linked challenges. Resolving the protests now convulsing the country is the most pressing matter, but the measures taken to make this happen will not fix Colombia's longstanding problems. The health crisis and accompanying economic distress caused by Covid-19 set the stage for the protests, and President Duque's inadvisable decision to launch a major tax reform package in the midst of the pandemic—although understandable in economic terms—stoked the fire. However, longer-term factors are in play: unemployment levels that were very high even before Covid—especially among youth—dissatisfaction with education and health care, Colombia's legendary unequal distribution of wealth, land and income, the still-gaping urban/rural divide, persistent levels of violence and impunity for crimes, and the growing alienation of young people. The criminal acts of the ELN, FARC holdouts and drug gangs are a further, destabilizing factor. The immediate objective must be to negotiate an end to the protests, requiring dialogue and compromise all around. The Duque government must address the serious accusations of police violence

during the protests as well as the broader issue of the militarization of policing. Progress on Covid-19 and a reviving economy will create a more stable atmosphere as public attention begins to turn to next year's

“**The immediate objective must be to negotiate an end to the protests, requiring dialogue and compromise all around.**”

— Peter DeShazo

elections, an exceptionally timely opportunity for national self-examination. Then comes the biggest challenge: for the new administration to build consensus around an agenda of real change to confront the longstanding problems afflicting Colombia."

**A Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, director for the Andes at the Washington Office on Latin America:**

"Duque and his government are managing the crisis by presenting an alternative narrative to the realities taking place on the ground. Rather than de-escalating the violence, reining in police abuses and showing empathy for the protesters, youth, working class, poor, Afro-Colombians and Indigenous Colombians, he is producing videos in English blaming the opposition for the country's problems. This is only deepening the polarization and the anger felt by many in the country. While there is vandalism and criminality as people take advantage of the chaos of the crisis, there is no justifiable explanation for the high incidence of police-committed homicide, sexual violence, use of deadly force and misuse of crowd dispersal weapons taking people's eyes out. The concerns of the Colombian populace—lack of implementation of the 2016 peace accord, corruption, police abuses and criticisms of the government's

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reform policies will not be addressed with blunt force. Duque needs to get the country back on the 2016 peace agenda and govern for the entire country, not just for those who voted for him.”

**A** **Andrés Martínez-Fernández, senior analyst for Latin America at FrontierView:** “Despite the social unrest, the risks to the integrity and stability of the Colombian government remain low 12 months out from the election. However, the Duque government’s missteps around the tax reform and police violence in the initial protest response have taken a toll on the administration’s popularity. In his rhetoric, Duque would do well to more clearly differentiate between unpopular roadblocks and broader peaceful protests. While the latter is a legitimate expression of rising discontent, roadblocks are designed to cause harm to the Colombian people and deny the right to employment, health care and basic goods. The unrest is unlikely to end with a grand bargain between the government and protest leaders. Demonstrators

and their supporters are motivated less by Duque’s policies than by Colombia’s long-standing societal inequities, amplified by the conditions of the pandemic, which pushed 3.6 million Colombians into poverty. Duque can make some progress in his remaining months through expanded assistance to the poor, police reform and by fostering an inclusive economic recovery. However, the government is greatly limited in its capacity to resolve decades-old societal failings in the midst of a pandemic. The new tax reform will also cut the government’s new revenue target by 42 percent, reducing options for new social spending. Ultimately, the protests will likely end due to a mixture of protest fatigue, increasing public backlash and effective enforcement against roadblocks, and limited concessions in negotiations with protest leaders. However, the discontent behind the unrest will largely remain, promising to shape next year’s elections.”

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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Inter-American Dialogue Online Event:  
A Conversation with Iván Duque Márquez,  
President of the Republic of Colombia

Today - Thursday, May 27

11 a.m. - 12 p.m. EDT  
(10 a.m. - 11 a.m. Bogotá time)

To RSVP, click [here](#)