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COMMENTARY



Colombia protests amidst the COVID-19 pandemic: implications and recommendations

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Introduction

Colombia reported the first coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) case on 6 March 2020 (Colombian Ministry of Health and Social Protection (Minsalud) 2020). Since then the numbers have been increasing. In a prompt attempt to contain the virus, the government declared nationwide lockdown on 22 March 2020. This, in turn, is now being interpreted as the cause of the deepest recession the country has witnessed in centuries. The economy has been seriously shattered, which made the government implement a bill to increase taxes, generating a wave of anger and repulsion amongst the population against the government. A nationwide protest movement broke out, which has worsened the COVID-19 situation. In this context, food and fuel prices have been on the rise due to roadblocks and the economic impact of the pandemic. The protests have also witnessed a violation of human rights by the government to curb the agitation (BBC 2021). Here we discuss the implications of protests in Colombia as well as propose recommendations.

Commentary

Colombia has been widely affected by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. On 23 December 2021, the number of confirmed cases of the disease exceeded 5.1 million, totalling 129,000 fatalities (Colombian Ministry of Health and Social Protection 2021). In response to the pandemic's socioeconomic implications, the Colombian government introduced a tax increase bill to further invest in the expansion and maintenance of vital social programmes (BBC 2021).

However, the Colombian Trade and Workers' Unions have been concerned that the tax reform would further reduce the tax thresholds and increase tariffs on goods and services, which may increase the levels of financial inequality and poverty. As a result, a series of protests against the proposed tax increase bill have been ongoing. Many protesters argue that only the introduction of a universal basic income and free public education can cushion the current economic crisis (BBC 2021).

In response to this, the tax reform bill presented was withdrawn by Colombian President, Iván Duque, amid a violent clash between the protesters and heavily armed security forces, and opposition lawmakers. From there, the bill was revised, reaching a consensus with the lawmakers, so that it eventually passed on 8 September 2021 (Medina 2021). The government argues that the revised tax reform is necessary due to rising debt risks, increasing fiscal deficit, and worsening socioeconomic impact of the pandemic.

Implications of Colombia protests

COVID-19 spread and the Colombian health system

Since the protests began on 28 April 2021, daily confirmed COVID-19 cases have increased from 12,839 cases on April 28, to 30,566 cases on June 30, and daily deaths from 448 deaths to 677 deaths on June 27. As at the time of writing this article, the total number of COVID-19 confirmed cases in Colombia was over five million. With a total of over 129,000 fatalities, only Brazil, Mexico, and Peru have recorded more deaths in Latin America compared to Colombia (Colombian Ministry of Health and Social Protection 2021; Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2021).

Dr. Juan, a medical Doctor in Cali said in an interview: 'We are in the middle of the third COVID-19 peak in Cali. For the last three to four weeks, we have had 85–95% occupancy in ICUs. My work has been hugely affected by the blockades erected in the city. My hospital was forced to cancel ambulatory consultations and surgeries indefinitely. We are operating at perhaps 10% capacity and prioritizing only emergencies' (Otte 2021).

Moreover, at least 26 people died and over 800 were injured in mass protests and riots that continued in 247 municipalities across the country, overwhelming an already congested health system (Pozzebon and Hu [2021](#); Suárez and Cano [2021](#)). Coupled with the low vaccination rate, the COVID-19 burden in Colombia continues to worsen (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center [2021](#)).

Human rights

Despite the global condemnation, militarized response and police brutality on mostly peaceful protesters continued in Colombia (Guevara-Rosas [2021](#)). On 4 May 2021, the United Nations human rights office accused Colombia's security forces of using excessive force, amid the 'deeply alarming' reports that police shot at protesters (BBC [2021](#)). According to Amnesty International, on 4 May 2021, security forces threatened, tortured and shot directly at demonstrators in Cali's neighbourhood, Siloé (Guevara-Rosas [2021](#)).

As of 6 May 2021, Temblores, a non-governmental organization, reported 1,708 victims of abusive use of force, 26 cases of eye injuries, 234 cases of physical violence, 934 cases of arbitrary detentions against demonstrators, 11 cases of sexual abuse by security forces, and violent death of 37 people. Furthermore, the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia declared over 87 people missing (Guevara-Rosas [2021](#)), while protesters destroyed public and private facilities, including the vandalization of over 20 buses, and attacks on 25 police stations in Bogotá and 800 policemen (BBC [2021](#); Guevara-Rosas [2021](#)). Although some protesters have engaged in unacceptable acts of violence, it is the duty of the Colombian government to protect the right of its citizens to demonstrate peacefully.

Food insecurity

The World Food Programme has established a connection between protest and food insecurity (Brinkman and Hendrix [2011](#)). According to the BBC ([2021](#)), Colombia protests are widespread, and roadblocks and interruption of transportation by protesters have affected the produce, supply, and trade of food. Traders in Colombia's markets have reported shortage of potatoes with a purchase price 30% higher than usual (Pardo [2021](#)). Consequently, many households in Colombia cannot afford three-square meals a day (Daniels [2021](#)).

Continental diffusion of political & health crises in South America

Colombia borders Peru, Venezuela, Brazil, and Ecuador. With over 22 million confirmed cases and 617,000 deaths, Brazil currently records the highest burdens of COVID-19 in South America (World Health Organization

(WHO 2021). It is likely that similar events may ensue in these neighbouring countries, where poverty, police brutality, and extreme socioeconomic inequality, exist as in Colombia (Pozzebon 2021). Previously, similar events occurred in Chile in 2019, and in Peru and Mexico in 2020 (Pozzebon 2021; Zabludovsky 2021). These factors highlight an imminent political and health crisis in the region.

Future recommendation

Owing to Colombia's overburdened health system and socioeconomic inequalities, it is paramount to examine all social and healthcare policies before their implementation by the Executive. Tax increases, although implemented to finance State activities, have worsened the Colombian economy and health system.

With the recession, the government needs to increase employment opportunities to prevent increased mobilization in search of jobs and finances. Instead of a national lockdown, partial curfews, involving shops, eateries, construction works etc. should be allowed to function at reduced capacity. This may stabilize the national economy, lower food and fuel prices, as well as ensure regular employment. In this context, further improvements to the health infrastructure also need to be initiated so that there are sufficient resources to provide prompt treatment for COVID-19 cases, thus leading to a reduction in the mortality rate.

Public participatory engagement in policy reform, transparency, accountability and diplomacy are other good measures that can be implemented to increase the public confidence in policy reform. Moreover, the Colombian government needs to ensure that only authentic information is disseminated to the public, so regulation of journalism becomes of great importance at this time. Instead of panic-creating data, public awareness and educational information about social distancing, mask-wearing, hand-washing, and self-isolation should be made available to control the COVID-19 spread. This may also help prevent cross-continental diffusion of the political and health crises.

Lastly, the Colombian government must protect the right of its citizens to demonstrate peacefully. In this sense, the government should provide human rights training for its security forces while bringing officers guilty of human rights violations to justice. Likewise, violent protesters and criminal groups should be held accountable for their atrocities.

Authors' contributions

All authors have sufficiently contributed to the study and agreed with the results and conclusions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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