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Analysis Features

Colombia erupts in struggle against police murder

Walter Smolarek • September 11, 2020 🔥 610 📖 2 minutes read

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A popular uprising against police violence has broken out across Colombia following the shockingly brutal murder of Javier Ordóñez in Bogotá on September 8. In footage taken by witnesses that quickly spread and outraged the nation, Ordóñez was pinned to the ground and shocked over and over with a taser. Ordóñez, who was unarmed, repeatedly begged the officers to stop but the police showed no mercy. He was eventually taken into custody and beaten further before dying in the early hours of September 9.

Since the killing, large protests have taken place every night. While the uprising began in Bogotá, the capital city, the movement quickly spread to other major population centers to become a truly nationwide phenomenon.

Police responded to the demonstrations with deadly repression. At

least 7 protesters have been confirmed killed by police, and more than 200 have been injured. The cops' violence was so over the top that their actions were even denounced by the mayor of Bogotá, who remarked that by shooting live ammunition into crowds the police "disobeyed express and public instructions from the Mayor's Office, so who do they obey? Justice, action and reform are urgently needed!"

People have fought back with militant action. 17 police outposts were burned down on Wednesday night alone, and 194 cops were reportedly injured. The revolt poses a serious challenge to the rule of President Ivan Duque, who represents a far-right current in Colombian politics connected with the country's notorious death squads and supported by the United States.

Revolt a response to long history of brutality

The intensity of the rebellion caught the country's ruling elite by surprise, but deep public anger towards Colombia's brutal and corrupt authorities has been steadily building. Liberation News spoke with a U.S.-based Colombian activist who wished to remain anonymous, who argued that the uprising was rooted in, "the increase of acts of police brutality in the entire country during the quarantine; the 50 massacres executed by narco paramilitary organizations that have happened all around the country ... the 152 killings of social leaders and human rights activists and the lack of response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the pandemic at the same time that the state is providing "recovery" funds to rich private companies."

There are a range of different police bodies in Colombia, many of which are highly militarized. The activist explained, "Historically, the National Police in Colombia is a very corrupted institution ... allied with drug cartels and right wing death squads. However, the worst unit in the National Police in terms of systematic violation of human rights is the ESMAD, which is the riot police. Since its creation in 1999, with funds from the [U.S.-sponsored] Plan Colombia, members of this unit have committed all kinds of acts of brutality, like murder, torture and sexual abuse."

She noted that, "Some of the most relevant cases of the ESMAD brutality is the murder of Nicolas Neira, a 15 year old who was killed during a May 1 march in Bogotá in 2005, and the murder of Dilan Cruz, a high school student, during a demonstration of Bogotá in the context of the national strike last year. Several police officers have been also accused of committing rape of women and young girls in police stations."

Neither empty apologies from government officials nor the brutal crackdown by authorities has hindered the development of the movement. The uprising has shown no signs of slowing down as protesters express their determination to continue the struggle for justice for Javier Ordóñez and an end to the police's reign of terror across the country.