

Colombia's president orders crackdown on national protests as US Reaper drones arrive and IMF cuts loom

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Hours before teachers, students, Indigenous organizations and trade unionists marched Wednesday in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla and other cities in the first national protest against his government, Colombia's President Abelardo de la Espriella signed a decree freeing the police to unleash repression against demonstrations without first exhausting dialogue and mediation.

The decree rewrites the protest protocol adopted in 2021 under a Supreme Court order. Dialogue becomes only "a rule of preference" and "not a prerequisite that conditions, suspends or postpones" police action against individuals accused of violence. In such cases, officers may skip the first three steps of the escalation ladder.

In a video address, De la Espriella said the decree gives the state "the teeth it needs" against "urban terrorism disguised as protest." On Monday he called the protest organizers "instigators of evil" and warned: "If they intend to set Colombia on fire, they will run into the determination of the Tiger and his government."

The Bogotá march was called as a "preparatory day" for a national strike by the Unitary Workers Central (CUT), the Colombian Federation of Educators (Fecode) and former president Gustavo Petro's Pacto Histórico (Historic Pact) coalition. The presidency warned public employees of "consequences" if they missed work. In Cali, 600 soldiers joined 1,200 police at the city's entrances.

"There is a lot of accumulated indignation, a hopelessness among people toward this reactionary government," Gabriela Delgado of the National Association of Youth and Students told *El País*. "We cannot limit ourselves to the agenda in Congress."

By the early afternoon, marches in Bogotá, Tunja, Cali, Bucaramanga, Prerira, and Santa Marta involved tens of thousands and were reported as calm. The decree is not a response to violence but an act of intimidation.

In just ten weeks, the government has opened Colombia to US military operations and sought IMF backing by accepting massive social cuts. The government's "Rescue Law" would cut spending by 45 trillion pesos a year, 2.2 percent of GDP,

toward the president's pledge to shrink the state by 40 percent.

The government estimated the cost of rebuilding after the magnitude 7.4 earthquake of August 10 at 30 trillion pesos. The planned annual cut is one and a half times that figure.

The quake killed 331 people, left 240 missing and affected 361,353. Families whose homes were destroyed receive 875,452 pesos a month for three months, exactly half the minimum wage. Under "assisted reconstruction," survivors supply the labor. Fecode is demanding repairs to quake-damaged schools.

The last IMF rescue package, \$2.7 billion in exchange for austerity, was signed in 1999 by the same Pastrana government that signed Plan Colombia with Washington that year.

The Colombian ruling elite knows these measures will provoke mass resistance. The union federations and the Pacto Histórico are working to keep this movement within the bounds of "dialogue" with the government preparing to crush it.

The protocol being gutted by the new decree was implemented to contain anger over the killing of demonstrators on the last mass upsurge.

In its September 22, 2020 ruling, the Supreme Court found "systematic, violent and arbitrary intervention" by security forces in demonstrations. Two weeks earlier, protests had erupted in Bogotá and Soacha over the death of Javier Ordóñez, who was repeatedly tasered by two officers. During the 2021 national strike, the UN human rights office found reasonable grounds to hold police responsible for at least 28 of 46 verified deaths. Hundreds of demonstrators were reported "disappeared" by the Colombian Missing Persons Search Unit at the time.

Today, Bogotá's teachers' union has denounced wage deductions and disciplinary proceedings against teachers who joined earlier marches. On September 2, riot police broke up a student protest at the National Pedagogical University.

The president has announced that police will enter campuses. Indigenous organizations warn that an Interior Ministry database on Indigenous guards "could become a mechanism of surveillance, stigmatization and judicialization."

The "Anti-Terrorist Statute" creates a national registry of

terrorist organizations and a High Commissioner against Terrorism appointed by the president for five years. De la Espriella has said he will not accept “terrorism pretending to disguise itself as opposition.”

Interior Minister Rodrigo Lara said the US State Department and the UN drugs office were reviewing the draft, which he boasted was drawing attention “in Washington and Vienna.”

In fact, the category of “narco-terrorism,” under which US boat strikes had killed at least 227 people across the region by early September, is now being extended by decree, statute and presidential speech to teachers and students.

At a July 16 State Department summit with international ministers on “political terrorism,” Rubio grouped “anti-capitalists, or anti-imperialists, Communists, or anarchists, or Marxists” as a single threat. “Urban terrorism disguised as protest” is the Colombian edition.

In August, the Pentagon announced that Bogotá had authorized joint US-Colombian military operations on Colombian soil. On August 27, US Marine Corps helicopters flew over the Pacific port of Tumaco during a visit by Southern Command chief Gen. Francis Donovan. The Senate never authorized it, as the Constitution requires.

After hosting Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Barranquilla on September 9, De la Espriella boasted of authorizing 105 extraditions in 53 days. On October 6, the *New York Times* reported that MQ-9 Reaper drones had been moved from Africa to Colombia and Ecuador.

A Defense Ministry source told CNN the drones would be used for surveillance and “possible precision strikes against high-value strategic targets.”

Getting in front of the social anger to hold it back

The CUT set the October 14 date for the demonstrations at its national board meeting on September 9 and 10, together with a national strike “in the first days of November.” No date has been fixed.

After the election, the CUT denounced the incoming government as “fascist.” Its president, Fabio Arias, now speaks of “the broadest front for life to oppose this government.”

However, a significant section of the bureaucracy and the protest groups around the Pacto Histórico are openly aligning with the new administration. On October 1, 11 of the 21 members of the CUT executive formed a new majority. Arias’s faction says it includes the leadership of the agricultural workers’ union Sintrainagro, which “proclaimed its adhesion” to De la Espriella.

The smaller General Confederation of Labor (CGT) refused to march. “We resolve the problems of workers... directly through institutional channels with the government,” said its

president, Jorge Iván Díez Vélez. Interior Minister Lara praised the decision as “democratic and independent.”

Gerardo Jumí of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, a fixture at marches backing Petro, stayed home and called for a national dialogue that “guarantees coexistence.”

The Pacto Histórico, the largest bloc in both chambers of Congress, answered the repressive decree by announcing a lawsuit before the Council of State. Petro called for a “peaceful and forceful” march, centered on the defense of the minimum wage.

Petro promised to dismantle the ESMAD riot police and in 2023 renamed it the UNDMO, keeping its roughly 4,800 officers and armored vehicles. On Wednesday, UNDMO units were deployed at the Congress, accompanying troops with sniper rifles.

Petro’s record is of a piece with that of the entire “pink tide,” and it repeats the lesson of Chile. On July 20, Petro hailed the armed forces as “an army of the people and for the people,” echoing former Chilean President Salvador Allende’s “people in uniform.” Twelve weeks later, the same forces stand ready under De la Espriella’s decree to move against teachers and students.

Allende, at the head of a “left” Popular Unity government, signed the Arms Control Law of October 1972, which troops used in 1973 to raid factories and Popular Unity offices for workers’ weapons. On August 23, 1973, he named Augusto Pinochet army commander. Nineteen days later, Pinochet led the coup that killed more than 3,000 people.

In Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador told 32,000 troops that “the soldier is the people in uniform,” then placed the 130,000-strong National Guard under army command. His successor, Claudia Sheinbaum, sent 10,000 of its troops to the US border at Trump’s demand. In Bolivia, Evo Morales’s own armed forces commander “suggested” his resignation in November 2019, opening the way for the Áñez coup regime.

US imperialism and its client elites in the region are turning rapidly toward fascistic forms of rule. Fascism will not be stopped by lawsuits before the Council of State or by appeals to the loyalty of the army.

It can be defeated only by the independent political mobilization of the working class to take power and end the capitalist profit system, under a new leadership armed with an internationalist and socialist program.



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