

Amid mounting political crisis, Colombia faces world's highest COVID-19 death rate

By Julian James
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The political and social crises wracking Colombia entered a new phase in August, as the country's most powerful political figure, current senator and former president Álvaro Uribe, was placed under house arrest and barred from participating in politics on charges of witness tampering.

The orders were issued by the Supreme Court in the course of an ongoing investigation centered on Uribe's role in founding a far-right paramilitary group and ordering massacres of leftists during the country's civil war in the 1990s. Uribe currently faces a host of other legal investigations, including into the illegal wiretapping of activists, journalists, politicians and the Supreme Court itself during his tenure as president (2002-2010). In January, the Supreme Court announced it would be inspecting its own premises after finding a listening device in the office of Cesar Reyes, the judge currently overseeing the witness tampering case.

The multiple allegations facing Uribe are of a piece with successive scandals that have dogged him throughout his political career, centering on his decades-long collaboration with paramilitary groups and drug cartels, including close ties with the now-deceased Pablo Escobar when Uribe was mayor of Medellín in 1982. Even given past investigations, the Supreme Court's recent order for Uribe to be detained and banned from politics is without precedent, as the former president is considered the most powerful politician in the country and commands total loyalty from members of *Centro Democrático* (Democratic Center), the ruling party he founded and to which current President Iván Duque belongs.

Duque, a loyal political protégé of Uribe, has also come under investigation by the Electoral Commission for campaign finance violations during the 2018 presidential election. A guilty verdict in this case would

have major implications for the balance of power in Colombia. An August 11 *Reuters* article pointed out that "If irregularities are proven, the governing party could lose its legal status, preventing it from fielding candidates in future elections, in addition to fines and criminal penalties that may affect its leaders. In an extreme outcome, Congress could also declare Duque's presidency invalid, according to procedures for investigating and trying political crimes." Whether or not Duque and his political cronies would accept such an outcome is by no means clear. Like the United States, escalating conflicts between sections of the ruling class are calling into question the entire political framework of the country, which serves as a key base for US military and foreign policy machinations across South America.

The political crisis in Colombia is unfolding against the backdrop of a massive increase in coronavirus infections, fueled by low levels of testing, ineffective lockdowns and little if any contact tracing. Over the past few weeks, the country has been registering the highest per capita COVID-19 death rate in the world. According to Johns Hopkins University, over a seven-day period, Colombia saw 43.1 deaths per million people, compared to 32.9 per million for Brazil and 24.4 for the US. During the first week in August, 2,139 Colombians died from the virus.

Meanwhile, per capita testing levels as of August 12 were 40,000 per million, a low figure even compared to the 210,000 tests per million carried out in the United States, a country with over 170,000 COVID-19 deaths, accounting for 22 percent of all deaths resulting from the pandemic.

Figures compiled in mid-July in Colombia showed that nationwide, the health care system was either at capacity or in a state of collapse, with intensive care

unit (ICU) occupancy rates in the high 80 and 90 percentage range in much of the country. In the capital city of Bogotá, population 7.5 million, 91 percent of ICU beds were occupied, while some mid-sized cities, including Riohacha and Quibdó, reported fewer than 10 units available on a daily basis. These figures have likely grown even more dire in the month since they were compiled, as total infections have continued to skyrocket.

While millions of citizens in different regions of Colombia have been subject to stay-at-home orders of one kind or another, cities and regions with lower infection rates have been allowing restaurants, theaters and gyms to reopen at the request of local mayors. In Bogotá, stay-at-home orders are being issued on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis, while in Medellín, a city of 2.5 million, citizens are told to remain at home on weekends and may leave their homes Monday through Thursday for essential purposes. However, these measures are increasingly ignored, as the impoverished masses, over half of whom work in the informal economy, are leaving their homes to seek a means of survival. A government assistance scheme known as “Solidarity Colombia” equaling payments of 160,000 COP (around US\$42) is so inadequate that even those lucky enough to receive the money cannot sustain their families. Millions of others, including 1.5 million undocumented Venezuelan refugees, who are ineligible to receive any relief whatsoever, face the prospect of starvation.

As for the drive to reopen schools, Duque and Education Minister Maria Victoria Angulo announced on July 19 that schooling would resume on a rotating basis in 34 of the nation’s 96 districts. As is the case in the United States, this homicidal policy has been met with fierce resistance as thousands of educators and parents have declared they would engage in civil disobedience by refusing to return to the classroom. Many school districts have also declared they would not participate in the reopening, as the lack of additional funding, infrastructure, and in some cases running water has made implementing preventative health measures impossible.

In the face of this broad-based opposition of teachers and communities, the Colombian Federation of Education Workers (FECODE) called a 48-hour strike this past week.

Rising opposition from thousands of teachers comes on the heels of an unprecedented uprising of the working class that broke out in Central and South America in 2019. In Ecuador and Chile, austerity protests held in October of that year were so broad-based and militant, they took on the character of popular rebellions, while in Colombia, hundreds of thousands of workers launched a series of general strikes and protests demanding an end to the assassination of activists and organizers by government-aligned death squads, as well as a halt to the privatization of health and education, massive austerity packages, and efforts by the current regime to resume the long-running civil war with breakaway insurgent groups. Nine months later, none of these issues have been resolved, portending a further intensification of the class struggle.

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