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FEATURED Q&A

Does Colombia Need to Overhaul its National Police?



Police in Colombia have been accused of human rights violations during the country's recent protests. Colombian National Police officers are pictured in 2019. // File Photo: Colombian Government.

Q Colombian President Iván Duque on June 6 announced a police reform initiative in response to myriad accusations of human rights violations during anti-government protests that began in April. The announcement came after a national strike committee, which includes unions, student groups and other civil society organizations, halted talks with the government aimed at ending the demonstrations. Is an overhaul to Colombia's police system needed, and to what extent will the proposed reform have significant results? What are the most important components of Duque's proposal, and does it effectively respond to protesters' concerns? What else should the government do to curb human rights violations and instances of police brutality in the Andean nation?

A Humberto de la Calle, former Colombian vice president, interior minister and chief negotiator in the peace process with the FARC: "The needs created by guerrilla conflict and drug trafficking have moved the police toward an inevitable militarized spirit. The National Police was made dependent on the Ministry of Defense, which ended up permeating its doctrine and procedures. A new police code, issued in an environment of political pugnacity—one of whose vectors was a debate on freedom and order—began to be applied more rigorously. The use of force then began to intensify. Confidence in the police declined. With the massive mobilizations, there was great wear and tear on the police. They were the object of attacks, but there was also an obvious and unprecedented abuse of force. That's how the idea of reforming the police gradually began to come about. The central

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Bad Welds Faulted in Deadly Collapse of Mexico City Metro Overpass

A preliminary report on last month's deadly collapse of a Mexico City metro overpass faulted poor welds on support beams for the tragedy.

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ECONOMIC

World Bank Rejects Request by El Salvador for Help on Bitcoin

The World Bank rejected El Salvador's request for help on implementing the rollout of Bitcoin as legal tender in the Central American country.

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POLITICAL

Nicaraguan Agents Detain Bank Head in Crackdown

Nicaraguan authorities arrested Luis Rivas Anduray, the executive president of Banco de Producción. The arrest marked a widening of the crackdown on opponents of President Daniel Ortega.

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Rivas // File Photo: Banco Grupo Promerica.

POLITICAL NEWS

Poor Welds Faulted in Deadly Collapse of Mexico City Metro

A preliminary report investigating the collapse of a Mexico City elevated subway line that killed 26 people in May said faulty infrastructure was the main cause behind the incident, the Associated Press reported. Released Wednesday, the report by Norwegian certification firm DNV identified as a main cause the poor welds in studs that joined steel support beams to a concrete layer that bolstered the track bed. The city government had hired DNV

Twenty-six people were killed and dozens more were injured in the metro overpass collapse on May 3.

to look into the incident, in which a slate of the elevated line fell to the ground, bringing down two subway cars. The report also said there were not enough studs and that the concrete poured over them may have been defective. Additionally, DMV said the welds between stretches of steel beams also appeared to have been badly finished. "The studs showed deficiencies in the welding process," the report said. The elevated metro collapse stirred up political controversy in Mexico City as some of the ruling party's leading politicians have been linked to the incident. Current Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard was mayor of Mexico City when the construction of the metro line that collapsed was finalized. The current mayor, Claudia Sheinbaum, is also a member of the ruling Morena party. "The evaluation of the political and technical decision-making in the construction and operation of this line has brought the current government into scrutiny, with Mexico City being the key political and social bulwark of [President Andrés Manuel López

Obrador's] power," Vanessa Rubio-Márquez, former member of Mexico's Senate and former deputy government minister, told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published May 12. "One of the biggest problems of Mexico's current government is the disdain for science-based decision-making and a lack of rigor when tackling the country's main challenges," she added.

ECONOMIC NEWS

World Bank Rejects El Salvador's Request for Help With Bitcoin

The World Bank on Wednesday said it had rejected El Salvador's request to help it implement the rollout of Bitcoin as legal tender in the Central American nation, citing environmental and transparency risks, Reuters reported. "We are committed to helping El Salvador in numerous ways including for currency transparency and regulatory processes," a World Bank spokesperson told the wire service. "While the government did approach us for assistance on Bitcoin, this is not something the World Bank can support given the environmental and transparency shortcomings," the spokesperson added. Earlier on Wednesday, Salvadoran Finance Minister Alejandro Zelaya said the government had asked the multilateral organization for technical assistance in the implementation of the Bitcoin rollout. The country's ruling-party controlled Legislative Assembly last week approved a proposal submitted by President Nayib Bukele to formalize the cryptocurrency. "President Bukele has said Bitcoin will promote financial inclusion, facilitate remittances and attract investment to the country," Julia Yansura, program manager for Latin America and the Caribbean at Global Financial Integrity, told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published Tuesday. However, the "complex and volatile" cryptocurrency is "unlikely" to be a financial inclusion pathway for average Salvadorans "who find existing options with banking, community credit unions or mobile money too complicated or costly," Yansura added.

NEWS BRIEFS

Three Injured in Car Bombing at Colombia Military Base

A Colombian soldier was in intensive care and two U.S. military personnel were lightly injured after a car bombing in the city of Cúcuta that is believed to have been set off by leftist guerrillas, Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano said Wednesday, Reuters reported. The car bombing on Tuesday occurred at a military base near the border with Venezuela. General Luis Fernando Navarro said the leading theory suggests the National Liberation Army, or ELN, rebels were responsible for the attack.

Nicaraguan Authorities Arrest Bank Executive as Crackdown Widens

Nicaraguan authorities late on Tuesday arrested a prominent banker as the government crackdown against opposition figures expands beyond political leaders or potential challengers in the upcoming November election, the Associated Press reported. Luis Rivas Anduray, the executive president of Banco de Producción, was detained late on Tuesday. Police said Rivas was under investigation for inciting foreign interference and seeking military intervention, charges similar to those issued against 13 leaders of the political opposition that have been arrested since early June.

Brazil's Central Bank Hikes Key Interest Rate 75 Basis Points to 4.25%

Brazil's central bank on Wednesday hiked its benchmark Selic interest rate by 75 basis points to 4.25 percent, as widely expected, Reuters reported. Growth in Latin America's largest economy has been stronger than previously forecast, and inflation has been running above the central bank's target. Policymakers said they would normalize the policy rate "to a level considered neutral."

BUSINESS NEWS

Brazilian Exporters Allege Manipulation in Suit Against Banks

Some of Brazil's largest exporters are demanding 19 billion reais (\$3.77 billion) in a lawsuit against several domestic and foreign banks, alleging that they manipulated foreign exchange rates, Reuters reported Wednesday, citing court documents. The AEB exporters association originally filed the lawsuit in 2018 but did not specify the amount it was demanding from the banks. The association now alleges that Brazil-based exporters suffered losses of 107.4 billion reais due to the banks' purported manipulation of currencies in 2010 and 2011. Brazilian banks face a "real threat" of losses due to the lawsuit, XP Investimentos told clients Wednesday in a note, The Rio Times reported. AEB, which represents 50 companies, calculated that it represents 20 percent of exporters in the South American country, Reuters reported. Banks that are named in the lawsuit include Itaú Unibanco, Banco Santander Brasil, Citigroup and BNP Paribas, Reuters reported. Citigroup told the wire service that it follows the rules, Bradesco declined to comment, Santander said it had not been informed of the suit, and Itaú said it would contest the allegations. Other banks named in the lawsuit, which local newspaper Valor Econômico reported on Tuesday, did not respond to requests for comment by the wire service. AEB believes that a cartel of banks manipulated exchange rates from 2008 to 2012, but the organization has not yet been able to calculate the extent of alleged damages during that entire time, said AEB attorney Bruno Maggi. In a separate lawsuit filed in April, Brazilian state oil company Petrobras made similar allegations. Brazil's antitrust agency, Cade, is also investigating banks' potential manipulation of currencies, Reuters reported. A global foreign exchange scandal has resulted in banks being penalized billions of dollars worldwide. Alleged widespread manipulation in the spot foreign exchange market first came to light in 2013.

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element is recovering a civil spirit. It is necessary to eliminate the doctrine of an 'internal enemy,' which is an idea of the past. There have been proposals to separate the police from the Ministry of Defense. There are various options. All this is happening within a framework of improvements in recruitment, training and living conditions of police officers, which are sometimes miserable. The first thing to do is to achieve a healthy frame of reflection that ignores the current polarization. Those who speak of the need for reform are categorized as enemies of the police force; on the contrary. As a vestibule of the rule of law, citizen trust must be restored. Without such a change, peacebuilding will be very difficult. It is also a necessity of democracy."

A **Elizabeth Dickinson, senior analyst for Colombia at International Crisis Group:** "Reforming the police is the single most resonant demand emerging from Colombia's national strike and epitomizes protesters' broader frustrations over what they perceive as an aloof and indifferent state. Change is long overdue. Throughout decades of conflict with the FARC and other armed groups, it was generally taboo to question the role of the security forces in defending the state. The security forces were left untouched in the institutional transformations pledged in the 2016 peace accord. Still built to combat a wartime enemy, the police are ill-suited to the challenges of shepherding peaceful protests and protecting communities. The force is housed within the Defense Ministry and maintains a military culture and hierarchy. Career promotion structures incentivize work on counternarcotics and counterinsurgency operations, rendering citizen security a lower priority. Despite their constitutional subordination to elected local officials, the police act first on order from generals in Bogotá. President Duque's announcement of police reform is a nod in the right direction, but it is not enough. Most of the reform's tenets were

already underway before the protests began. While proposals to improve training and increase transparency through body cameras are welcome, the president's reform would keep the police in the Defense Ministry and continue to hold disciplinary hearings in an opaque military system. Rather than shifts around the margins, many Colombians are clamoring for a peacetime police force that can rebuild its tattered relationship with the public. First and foremost, the police should move to civilian control under the interior ministry. Cases of misconduct should pass through the regular judicial system. The institution should rejigger career incentives around the goal of citizen security. Only with this type of holistic transformation can the police reposition themselves as trusted protectors of the people they serve."

A **Adam Isacson, director for defense oversight at the Washington Office on Latin America:** "Among the police reforms President Duque proposed are improvements to human rights policies, stronger internal affairs and oversight, reformed use of force protocols, a switch from olive-drab to blue uniforms and the Defense Ministry's rechristening as a 'Defense and Citizen Security' Ministry. These reforms don't go far enough. The most overdue change is to end, after 68 years, the National Police's location within the Defense Ministry—regardless of its name. No other country in the Americas places its police force within the defense apparatus (though Mexico is taking unfortunate steps in that direction). The same official—the defense minister—should not be responsible for both confronting enemies and protecting and serving citizens. Police 'acts of service' that lead to civilian deaths or injuries must stop going to the military justice system, where accountability is rare. Moving out of the Defense Ministry must be part of a larger effort to get the force's organizational culture out of a rut dug by decades of armed conflict. The recent

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protests made clear how damaging this 'war mentality' is. Treating protesters and angry kids like internal enemies actually prolonged the protests by needlessly escalating them. Images of armed civilians firing their weapons while police looked on recalled the paramilitarism of the conflict's worst years. The National Police's approach to crowd control, exemplified by the brutal and feared ESMAD anti-riot unit, needs to be rethought completely, with priority placed on de-escalation and discriminate, gradual and nonlethal force used only as a last resort."

A **Juan Pappier, Americas senior researcher at Human Rights Watch:** "The Colombian police committed egregious abuses against mostly peaceful demonstrators in protests that began in April. Last week, Human Rights Watch released a [report](#) based on more than 150 interviews, expert opinion by forensic experts and information provided by Colombian authorities. We found that the police committed 20 killings, as well as multiple beatings, sexual abuse and arbitrary detention. These abuses are not isolated incidents, but rather the result of systemic shortcomings of the police. Colombia is the only country in Latin America where the National Police is under the authority of the Defense Ministry, and this has often blurred the distinct functions between the military and the police. The Colombian police also lacks an independent disciplinary system, and officers implicated in abuses are often tried in military courts, where there is little chance of accountability. On June 6, President Duque announced initiatives to 'transform' the police. Some, such as a proposed reform of the police's disciplinary system, could have a positive impact on police abuses if properly implemented. But, overall, the changes announced fall short. These fail to transfer the police to the Interior Ministry—and they don't limit the military justice system's ability to handle investigations into abuses. The Biden administration and the U.S. Congress should press for a

meaningful reform. Colombia's police have long been an ally of the United States in its efforts against drug trafficking. Precisely because the Colombian National Police is an important partner, the United States should be making sure it is a professional force that respects rights."

A **Hernando Zuleta, professor at the economics department of Universidad de los Andes:** "There is a legitimacy problem generated by at least two causes. First, some of the duties of the police generate tensions between youth and police officers. The persecution of drug users or carriers generate tension between youths and law enforcement officers, especially in marginalized neighborhoods. Second, there is a clear strategy of smearing the police. This has been clearly seen during protests, with attempts to create violent confrontation, followed by public denunciations of police brutality. An effort is needed to increase trust in the police and build legitimacy. A process of dialogue and review of proceedings is needed. Part of the problem lies in the popular perception that the voice of the common people is not taken into account when making the most important decisions. Openly raising the need for police reform and inviting so-called frontline groups can help defuse tensions. Without constructive dialogue, it is difficult for people who see police officers as enemies to change their perception. Opposition leaders must also have this willingness to engage in dialogue, even if it is not politically profitable. The perception that the system is unfair is a fundamental problem: there is no equitable distribution of wealth, and opportunities for individual wealth creation are very limited due to a lack of employment and little access to credit. Under this perception, the work of the police is to defend an unjust order. This causes anger, channeled against police officers in protests; some react with excessive force. Part of the solution involves a reform of the economic system."

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Erik Brand

Publisher
ebrand@thedialogue.org

Gene Kuleta

Editor
gkuleta@thedialogue.org

Anastasia Chacón González

Reporter & Associate Editor
achacon@thedialogue.org



Michael Shifter, President

Rebecca Bill Chavez, Nonresident Senior Fellow

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Subscription inquiries are welcomed at ebrand@thedialogue.org

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