

COLOMBIA ADDED TO CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS
TO CIVIC FREEDOMS





On 28th April 2021, nationwide protests erupted in Colombia, [sparked](#) by a tax reform proposed by the Iván Duque Márquez government. The [controversial reform](#) included measures that would heavily impact the lower and middle classes, compounded by an existing backdrop of social discontent over growing inequality and poverty. The government's response to the coronavirus and the lack of implementation of the country's Peace Accord have further added to the general discontent.

Thousands [joined](#) "Paro Nacional" ("National Strike") demonstrations against the bill, convened by Colombia's biggest unions. While the government withdrew the controversial tax reform bill in early May, protests continued and grew to encompass multiple grievances. Response to the protests in various cities across the country was characterised by heavy repression. In the weeks since the demonstrations began, civil society organisations in Colombia have [denounced](#) serious human rights violations, including disproportionate [use of force](#) by the police, violent [suppression of protests](#), the killing and disappearance of protesters, sexual abuse and arbitrary detentions.

This is taking place in a context of [increasing violence](#) in Colombia as government [divestment](#) from post-conflict programmes continues to undermine the implementation of the 2016 peace accord. Community leaders, land and environmental rights defenders and members of ethnic groups have been left particularly vulnerable, with local civil society organisations recording hundreds of killings in recent years.

EXCESSIVE FORCE

Members of security forces, including the police and the military, have consistently used excessive force against demonstrators. Civil society organisations have [documented](#) 187 instances where agents used firearms against protesters between 28th April and 31st May 2021. Militarised police forces have made [indiscriminate use](#) of teargas, water cannon and other less-lethal weapons. In some instances, security forces have used high-speed [projectile launchers](#) to shoot dozens of cartridges directly at demonstrators simultaneously.

As [reported](#) by human rights monitoring organisation Temblores, by 31st May 2021 there were 45 verified killings of protesters and passersby, presumably committed by law enforcement, with another 29 deaths in the process of verification. The organisation also recorded 1,248 cases of physical violence, 65 people with eye injuries and 25 victims of sexual violence.

DETENTION, STIGMATISATION AND UNREST

Over 1,500 protesters have been [detained](#) during the weeks of demonstrations. The Working Group on Enforced Disappearances [received](#) hundreds of reports of disappearances, with at least 300 people still missing by 27th May 2021. Government authorities have often [adopted](#) a narrative stigmatising those taking

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The CIVICUS Monitor is a research tool that provides quantitative and qualitative data on the state of civil society and civic freedoms in 196 countries. The data is generated through a collaboration with more than 20 civil society research partners, and input from a number of independent human rights evaluations.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#) rates civic space – the space for civil society – in [Colombia](#) as "Repressed".



to the streets as “vandals” or “terrorists” to [justify](#) the use of force against them.

While the vast majority of demonstrations have been peaceful, unrest [escalated](#) as the crackdown on protests continued over the first few weeks. There were cases of looting and local police centres were vandalised and [set on fire](#) – in one case with 10 police officers inside. Civil society [reported](#) incidents in which armed people in civilian clothing intimidated and attacked demonstrators, including Indigenous protesters. In addition, the Foundation for the Freedom of the Press has also [documented](#) 159 attacks against journalists covering the protests, perpetrated by security forces as well as protesters.

SPIRALLING VIOLENCE AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

For years, Colombia has topped lists of the most dangerous countries in the world for rights defenders. The pace of [implementation](#) of post-conflict programmes has been slow and their funding limited. Resulting violence has left community leaders and human rights defenders vulnerable. In 2020, Colombia saw a [resurgence](#) in mass killings, particularly in rural areas, as criminal groups escalated territorial disputes. Amid the [pandemic](#), armed groups also sought to enforce their own COVID-19 restrictions in several departments, leading to further abuses.

According to Frontline Defenders, Colombia accounted for [over half](#) of all killings of human rights defenders worldwide in 2020. The scenario this year looks eerily similar. At the end of January 2021, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) [warned](#) that Colombia had the most violent start to a year since the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016. By 30th May 2021, the Institute of Studies for Development and Peace (Indepaz) had [recorded](#) the killing of 68 social leaders and human rights defenders.



RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT:

- Recognise and condemn human rights violations, investigate police abuses and hold to account officers who have used excessive force against protesters.
- Ensure meaningful civil society participation in the announced efforts to reform security forces, including in the design and implementation of such measures.
- Redouble efforts to implement the Peace Agreement to improve conditions for those who defend human rights and communities.
- Involve social organisations in any efforts to develop a comprehensive public policy on prevention and on protection of human rights defenders and social leaders.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Urge the government of Colombia to comply with and implement any recommendations presented by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in the framework of their visit to the country in June 2021.
- Raise human rights concerns on developments in Colombia in appropriate multilateral fora, including during relevant debates at the Human Rights Council's 47th Session, such as in response to the High Commissioner's Annual Report and the report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of association and peaceful assembly.
- Provide material and diplomatic support to civil society, journalists and activists at risk.
- Support multilateral initiatives which ensure international scrutiny on Colombia and further accountability and justice for human rights violations.