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In Colombia, a Shrinking FARC Leaves Greater Space for Rural Dissent

By [Catherine Cheney](#), on 23 Aug 2013, [Trend Lines](#)

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Protests [spread across Colombia](#) this week, with poor rural workers blockading highways and [clashing with police](#) and numerous labor unions declaring a national strike to express a wide range of grievances.



The protests, which now involve farmers, miners, teachers and health care workers all putting forth different demands, are linked by a sense that the economic growth Colombia has experienced over the past decade has not been distributed fairly.

The protests are occurring while the government of Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos seeks to conclude a peace deal with the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's largest guerilla group, which has fought Colombia's government for nearly five decades.

"Now everyone feels more free to voice their demands without being framed as puppets of the guerillas," said [Jorge Restrepo](#), director of the Conflict Analysis Resource Center and an associate professor of economics at Universidad Javeriana in Bogota, Colombia. "It's a byproduct of the fact that we are moving slowly toward a post-conflict situation, and in those areas of the country in which security has been consolidated, communities have the possibility of becoming much more vocal in their demands without being labeled as part of the FARC machinery."

[Adam Isacson](#), senior associate for regional security policy at the Washington Office on Latin America, told Trend Lines that the government needs to see the connection between this week's protests and the peace talks. "One of the government's messages to the guerillas has to be that their choice of using violence was wrong, that Colombia does have room for those who have a protest, and that if you protest, you will no longer be thrown in jail, beaten up or killed," he said. "They need to take those arguments away from the guerillas. So when protesters come out they need to treat them more gently than they might have had there not been a peace process going on."

The protesters' awareness of this dynamic is likely tied to the spread of rural protests in the past week, Isacson said. "The peace process—the government being under this pressure to

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be tolerant of dissent—probably created more space for the dissent to present itself,” he added.

Isacson also emphasized that while Colombia’s protests display some parallels to Brazil’s [widespread protests in July](#), there are important differences. Whereas Brazil’s protesters were largely middle class and urban, with grievances growing out of rising expectations and frustration over the quality of government services, in Colombia, Isacson said, the protest movement “is not middle class and it’s not urban at all. It’s the poorest people, people who are agricultural, and angry not about the quality of services but about being ignored by the government.”

The protests are linked among other things to a crackdown on illegal mining and to agrarian reforms. The protesters’ demands vary from region to region and depending on the protesters’ occupations.

“On one side they are basically asking for a substantive package that will compensate for the losses due to structural changes, in part due to free trade agreements, which have indeed created strong pressure on the Colombian countryside,” Isacson said. “On the other side they are basically protesting in favor of wider political participation now that the armed conflict has subsided in many areas.”

Colombia experienced protests earlier this year involving coffee growers, who ultimately [successfully petitioned for a subsidy](#).

Given the coffee growers’ success, other workers sought similar benefits through protests in an “almost transactional” manner, Isacson said. More recently, however, a broader range of protesters have turned out with “a grab bag of demands,” Isacson said, linked by the distribution of Colombia’s economic growth.

“Economic growth has been consistently pro-urban and against rural areas, and that is behind the protests,” Restrepo said.

While certain commodities have done very well in Colombia, Isacson explained, they are largely products like bio fuels, timber and large-scale cash crops that benefit people with a lot of capital to invest. “If you’re growing rice, cotton, fruit on small scale or are barely subsistent and selling a few extra plantains in local markets, you’re doing badly; [growth is] not trickling down to you at all,” he said.

Santos, who is from the wealthy Bogota political elite and lacks deep roots in the countryside, draws support the urban middle class. “The poor in rural areas and in the streets now see him as an out of touch aristocrat,” said Isacson.

Isacson noted, however, that the protests have seen relatively low turnout, in the tens of thousands but not hundreds of thousands, and do not appear to be mushrooming into anything larger as Brazil’s protests did. “Right now it’s more at the level of a slow steady political headache for the Santos administration but not really a national crisis,” he said.

Still, Restrepo said the protests could empower the rural left ahead of the national elections next year, in which Santos is expected to run for re-election.

“As guerillas disappear from political landscape, these groups on the left are trying to capitalize on these demands and frustrations,” he said.

Photo: Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos (photo by the Presidency of Argentina, licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 License](#)).



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