

## Political Use of Protest

By Fernando Mora<sup>1</sup>

Social protest has long served as a legitimate tool for citizens to confront injustice and demand reform. From Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. to the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter, peaceful mobilization has advanced democracy, human rights, and accountability. However, when protests are co-opted by political elites, they cease to represent the people's will. Instead, they become instruments of manipulation—used to destabilize institutions, consolidate power, and erode public trust.

Between 2019 and 2022, Colombia experienced this transformation. Under the influence of then-opposition leader Gustavo Petro and his political allies, mass demonstrations erupted in Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín. Though portrayed as spontaneous, these mobilizations were in fact carefully orchestrated, with defined objectives, logistics, and sophisticated digital propaganda. The goal: to weaken state legitimacy, provoke official response, and shape public perception through disinformation and spectacle.

Local mayors aligned with Petro–Claudia López, Daniel Quintero, and Jorge Iván Ospina—enabled the unrest, legitimizing and empowering radical groups such as *Primera Línea*. Beneath the surface of civic activism operated a coordinated network designed to sow chaos and generate international sympathy for Petro's political aspirations.

In 2019, Colombia Humana and its affiliates reportedly relocated portions of their digital operations to Caracas, aligning with Nicolás Maduro's propaganda networks. Their messaging cast the Colombian state as oppressive and violent—a narrative later discredited but effective in undermining confidence in democratic institutions.

The 2021 *Estallido Social* marked a dangerous escalation. What began as opposition to a tax reform quickly evolved into organized blockades, sabotage, and violent confrontations. Behind claims of spontaneity was a paramilitary-style structure designed to provoke security forces, exploit

casualties for political gain, and fuel Petro's electoral momentum.

As police responded, Petro's network launched a coordinated media offensive, portraying Colombia as an authoritarian regime. Unverified allegations of abuse flooded social media, amplified by bot networks and sympathetic outlets. Masked militants were reframed as “peaceful protesters,” while vandalism and violence were systematically excluded from dominant narratives.

A key moment of controversy arose with a 2021 human rights report co-authored by Bogotá's OHCHR office and Mayor Claudia López. Critics questioned its impartiality—especially as López was at the time lobbying for her wife's Senate presidency with Petro's backing. The report was accused of bias and political motivation. While OHCHR spokespeople and Maduro-aligned media later downplayed the UN's role, the political maneuvering behind the scenes raised serious concerns.

Although López and her allies failed in their immediate goals, Petro's subsequent government rewarded the OHCHR with an unprecedented nine-year mandate extension—an act reportedly celebrated within its Bogotá office.

During the protests, López, Senator Angélica Lozano, and Representative Juanita Goebertus (all from *Alianza Verde*) openly supported illegal blockades in Bogotá. They even funded “cultural performances” to rebrand the unrest as a “democratic festival.” The origins of the funding remain opaque.

A second major controversy emerged when Mayor López allegedly signed a contract with the NGO *Dejusticia*, tasking it with documenting incidents of discrimination against minorities—particularly those based on gender or identity—by police or the public. However, the execution of this initiative quickly drew scrutiny.

In numerous cases, young activists were seen intentionally provoking police officers—especially women—through aggressive physical contact and

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<sup>1</sup>Fernando is a world-renowned expert in international humanitarian law and international human rights law, specializing in conflict zones and high-risk environments. He leverages his legal and diplomatic expertise to strengthen civilian protection, promote peace, gender equality, and prevent conflicts linked to natural resources. With experience across four continents, he has advised heads of state, senior policymakers, and major institutions such as the UN,

UNDP, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and the International Crisis Group. He has also collaborated with the ICRC, OECD, WHO, and various governments. Recognized for his sharp analysis and intercultural understanding, Fernando provides clear and effective guidance in complex political and humanitarian contexts.

verbal abuse. When officers responded, *Dejusticia* selectively edited video footage to depict law enforcement as the aggressors. More alarmingly, López's team and *Dejusticia* allegedly dispatched activists to public areas like malls and parks, where they engaged in inappropriate behavior—including mutual genital touching—in front of families and children.

When bystanders reacted with shock or disapproval, those reactions were filmed and framed as evidence of societal aggression toward LGBTQ+ individuals. These actions blurred the lines between advocacy and provocation, raising legitimate questions about the ethical boundaries of activism and the use of public resources for political ends.

What unfolded in Colombia was not civic protest<sup>2</sup>—it was political theater. A calculated campaign to delegitimize democratic institutions, destabilize governance, and pave the way for Petro's rise to power. Subsequent academic studies—many authored by universities now aligned with Petro's administration—have whitewashed the violence, reframing it as a peaceful youth rebellion and omitting critical evidence of coordination, armed cells, and political engineering.

Upon assuming office in 2022, Petro inherited the full political dividends of this campaign. Since then, his administration has governed through division, coercion, and disregard for the rule of law.

Under the banner of “Total Peace,” the Petro government has extended political recognition to criminal and insurgent groups, aligning Colombia with regimes and organizations such as Maduro's Venezuela, Hezbollah, and Hamas under the guise of solidarity.

Public rejection is now overwhelming: nearly 80% of Colombians disapprove of Petro's government. In response, the administration has attempted to manufacture public support through state-funded mobilizations. Despite significant expenditures—including the appointment of a coordinator within the Presidential Office reportedly tasked with

organizing aggressive demonstrations—turnout has been minimal. The message is clear: coerced loyalty cannot substitute for legitimacy.

Violence has become policy. *Primera Línea* and its armed factions—emerging from Petro's own political movement—continue to lead attacks on law enforcement and critical infrastructure, operating under the false banner of democratic resistance.

This pattern reemerged on October 2, 2025. Following public calls from Petro's former Minister Muhama and ex-Chief of Staff Saade, violence erupted in Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín. State-aligned media outlets incited attacks on infrastructure and security forces.

On October 7, the government itself encouraged further nationwide mobilizations targeting strategic sites. Mayors who attempted to protect their cities were vilified through coordinated online harassment led by Petro-Maduro bot networks and the *Pacto Histórico* media apparatus. This was not civic protest. It was state-orchestrated destabilization, designed to consolidate power through fear, confusion, and misinformation.

Transparency around financing remains absent. Millions of dollars flowed during the 2019–2022 protests, and now through government-sponsored rallies, with no oversight. Evidence suggests public funds are being used to pay organizers, agitators, masked militants, and propagandists. Colombia's democratic institutions now face a defining test.

The October 2025 unrest highlights a recurring pattern: violence disguised as activism, propaganda disguised as journalism, and a government weaponizing civic space to weaken democracy from within.

Two essential questions remain:

1. Who financed the protests of 2019–2021?
2. Who funds the orchestrated mobilizations since 2022?

And ultimately: What is the cost of a peace built on deception, violence, and political manipulation?

The first answer lies within the origins of the “Total Peace” policy—conceived not in government offices,

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<sup>2</sup> During the 2021 protests, Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín – epicenters of the nationwide unrest – became flashpoints where peaceful demonstrators were caught in violent confrontations between law enforcement and masked militants from the *Primera Línea*, allegedly involved in orchestrated acts of vandalism and chaos under the cover of protest.

but in the cells of *La Picota* prison. During the 2022 campaign, Petro's son, his brother, and his future Peace Commissioner met with top criminal leaders to forge this pact. It was a peace negotiated with the underworld—not with Colombian citizens.

On September 4, 2025, First Lady Verónica Alcocer's symbolic visit to *La Picota* reaffirmed the government's alliance with this power structure, setting the stage for *Pacto Histórico's* 2026 ambitions.

Petro, his coalition (*Pacto Histórico*), and their *Total Peace* partners in Colombia and Venezuela have instrumentalized protest—exploiting youth and vulnerable communities to generate unrest, control narratives, and consolidate power. Supported by the regimes of Nicolás Maduro, Hezbollah, and Hamas, this alliance is not democratic. It seeks to entrench itself through force, not legitimacy.

Bogotá, Colombia, 12 October 2025.