

Narrative Dynamics in Polarised Contexts: A Case Study of the 2021 National Protests in Colombia

ALISON CASTEL, JALE SULTANLI AND SARA COBB

In the spring of 2021, Colombia experienced the most widely supported and violent national protests it had seen in decades. These events marked a historic moment, as people from different sectors, classes, political affiliations and ages came together to protest the government, then headed by Iván Duque of the Democratic Centre party. The protests were catalysed by proposed legislation on economic reform, which included a tax increase to fund basic income support introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ While some saw it as ground-breaking, critics argued that the weight of the reform would fall on the already burdened working and middle classes. Lasting nearly two months, the protests converged around grievances that extended well beyond the legislation, including the need for political reforms, anti-corruption measures, and improvements to the country's pension, health and education systems to address deeply rooted socio-economic inequality.

The 2021 protests did not emerge in a vacuum. They were embedded in a complex narrative landscape full of stories about how the protests formed, who the main actors were, and which values justified the actions they took. This narrative landscape is the legacy of over 50 years of armed conflict in Colombia, which the signing of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and the rebel *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP) was intended to end.² The 2021 protests provide a lens into the narrative dynamics in post-agreement Colombia and shed light on the mechanisms of polarisation and violence that continue to affect the country.

This case study illustrates the ideas and practices in IFIT's [narrative framework](#) for managing conflict and supporting peace by putting them in a specific country context. It examines the narrative dynamics surrounding the 2021 protests in Colombia and how they either contributed to further conflict or managed to promote peaceful engagement.

The study focuses not on the facts of the events themselves, but rather on the way that different individuals and groups have described the protests and made sense of their own stories and the stories of ‘others’ with whom they disagree. The narratives are not only representations of what happened, but also a mapping of dynamics that relate to the overall national context. These stories draw on older narratives that have been in circulation for decades.

Research for the case study began with a workshop with members of the [IFIT national and territorial brain trusts](#) and IFIT staff in Colombia, who are experts in conflict dynamics and peace efforts in the country. Considering different national events that would give insight into the narrative dynamics in Colombia, the participants chose the 2021 protests for this case study because they: 1) have clear temporal boundaries and observable characteristics; 2) showed changes in relationships between social groups over time due to narratives; and 3) were part of a narrated sequence of events, with a beginning, middle and end, including an origin story with subsequent episodes.

The workshop gave rise to an initial set of stories about the protests, as well as recommendations for additional actors to interview, including nongovernmental organisation representatives, human rights activists, experts affiliated with government institutions, businesspeople and academics, who have diverse expertise in Colombian politics and direct experience with the protests. This resulted in nine in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions, in addition to analyses of videos, speeches and posts from traditional news sources and social media that emerged as resources from the stories told by the interviewees. The study is thus based on this particular set of narratives, which constitute the dynamics of the events. It does not include a comprehensive media analysis, but rather draws on media to elaborate the interviewees’ stories.

The study identifies two main opposing narratives that emerged about the 2021 protests: “the protests were peaceful and the protesters had legitimate grievances” and “the protesters were violent criminals and terrorists who were a threat to the state”. This paper will show that as violence escalated in the protests, the narrative portraying protesters as criminals became more visible, fitting as it did the dominant, government-supported narrative about the need for law and order in Colombia, which is itself rooted in the country’s long experience of violence. This dominant narrative quickly overshadowed alternative narratives about the protests in the public eye.

According to interviewees, violence was reported in the traditional and social media far more than efforts at peace, which served to obscure the more complex stories that formed through interactions between people on opposing sides at the local level and initiatives that helped de-escalate violence. To highlight this, the study discusses stories about dialogue and narrative transformation that emerged in the city of Cali, one of the main settings of the protests.³ While they have not been widely circulated, these stories made different kinds of speaking and hearing possible by humanising opposing actors, which disincentivised violence and enabled them to collaborate on finding solutions to their grievances.

Dominant and Concealed Narratives in the 2021 Protests

Narratives are systems of stories that shape people’s understanding of the world, themselves and others, which make possible and justify certain actions. The stories people tell about the protests in Colombia illustrate how narratives position who and what is legitimate, revealing the contours of power and how it operates. Privileged stories that become dominant are often taken for granted as legitimate and as ‘truth’ because they circulate more widely and are anchored by historical understandings. As IFIT has shown elsewhere, such stories are spoken repeatedly by [people in power](#) and amplified by [the media](#). Ever present, they seep into and become anchored in local, everyday conversations.

Narratives are considered dominant when they are commonly known and used to make sense of events by multiple parties in a conflict. They tend to be simplistic, as they provide a shorthand for characterising people as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Dominant narratives can become dangerous when they normalise stories that delegitimise and even dehumanise certain groups of people and actions. They make alternative narratives difficult or impossible to hear. Lee Anne Bell refers to these silenced stories as ‘concealed narratives’, which are pushed to the margins, ‘forgotten’ and repressed, such that they are unable to surface, precisely because of the ways that dominant narratives shape and structure meaning, life experiences and opportunities.⁴

Dominant and concealed narratives are central to understanding the narrative dynamics of the 2021 protests in Colombia, during which two main narratives were widely circulated. The first – circulated by protesters and their supporters – held that people were acting out of anger about the government’s proposed tax increase in the context of economic hardship. The narrative also related dissatisfaction about the government’s perceived failure to adequately implement the 2016 peace agreement and follow through on dialogues after similar protests erupted in 2019. According to one participant, “People need jobs, healthcare, education, et cetera, and they are feeling neglected and ignored by the government and demand justice, fairness”.⁵ This narrative garnered support from diverse populations, largely mobilised by unions, guilds, organised student groups and less formally organised non-student youth. Underlying it was a drive to change the status quo, with the protesters indicating they were willing to continue until they felt heard.

The second narrative – maintained by the Duque administration and its supporters – charged that the protesters were bandits, vandals and terrorists. According to this narrative, the protests were instigated by opposition politicians and armed groups.⁶ It held that the protesters were attempting to destabilise the government and that they were paid to protest and working with Russia and Venezuela. In this narrative, the protests needed to be shut down by any means available to preserve law and order, opening the way for the use of force.

As discussed in IFIT’s [narrative framework](#), overly simplified narratives lead to the escalation of violence as groups cling to their own moral superiority, attributing ‘good’ intentions and traits to themselves and ‘bad’ ones to others. Throughout the 2021 protests, this was seen in both main narratives. The protesters’ grievances garnered

unprecedented support and elicited stories about the protests as a peaceful movement for justice against an unsupportive and callous government. The state-sanctioned narrative, meanwhile, drew on historical fears of violence and paved the path for an articulated government response to preserve law and order that positioned the state as peace-keeper. Our research shows a predominance of the phrase ‘law and order’ in state-level responses to the protests, reflecting state practice in the decades of violence preceding the 2016 peace agreement.

Especially in speeches by Duque and other government representatives, the law-and-order narrative emphasised the value of security, keeping people safe and systems orderly, and protecting the well-being of all citizens. It likewise advocated ‘civility’. Because of the history of violence in the country, these values resonated with much of Colombian society.

Our research shows that the law-and-order narrative operated as a disciplinary move to quiet dissent from protesters before there was evidence of violence. It served to subsume grievances and distract from the substance of the protests. Although this narrative and subsequent instances of state violence initially diminished support for the government, that changed when protesters retaliated and entered a spiral of escalating violence with state forces. The predominance of the law-and-order narrative over time and its weight in this context made it the dominant narrative.

Whether it is being affirmed or denounced, a dominant narrative derives its power from its widespread use. As Hilde Lindemann Nelson shows, a dominant narrative does not belong to a given set of actors – it is picked up and used by a wide set of people to make sense of events.⁷ The law-and-order narrative was thus spread not only by the Duque administration and its supporters to delegitimise protesters, but also by civilians living through the protests and even by protestors who were denouncing the state violence justified by the law-and-order narrative.

Furthermore, the law-and-order narrative reinforced itself by legitimising stories about the protesters as villains and, at the same time, preventing protester stories from gaining strength and long-term legitimacy, so that they became concealed narratives. This is significant because in contentious political spaces, protest often serves to give voice to the stories that are not being addressed or that cannot be spoken, be heard and gain a significant platform for recognition. Indeed, protest can be understood as a struggle for legitimacy that is suppressed due to overarching narratives that become dominant and take over the narrative landscape. And, as Sara Cobb argues, when there is an inability to speak and be heard from a narrative perspective, violence often fills the vacuum.⁸

Although the government made efforts at dialogue, these were seen as insufficient by the protesters. The interviews show that government proposals and concessions were not seen as responding to the concerns of the protesters. Because protesters were not adequately included in discussions of their grievances, the actions of the government reportedly came off as empty pacifications and inhibited the possibility of positive transformation of the stories the two sides told about each other.⁹ According to interviewees, the government’s approach led to escalating violence and further marginalised protester grievances, particularly at the national level.

National-level Narrative Dynamics during the Protests

Stalled Negotiations and Unresolved Grievances in Earlier Protests

According to all the interviews and focus group discussions, to fully comprehend the events of 2021 it is critical to view them in the context of the protests that began in Colombia in October 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those protests were initiated by labour unions and later joined by students denouncing corruption and opposing cuts to public spending on education.¹⁰ They soon included Colombians of all kinds expressing concerns about an inadequate health system, low pensions, widespread violence, inequality and corruption, among other issues.

That November, frustration compounded as a result of an earlier tax reform bill before Congress, which galvanised further opposition from labour unions and students, as well as indigenous groups.¹¹ This discontent was rooted in issues with the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement, which left many feeling vulnerable, especially social and indigenous leaders who were subjected to threats, violence and periodic killings at the hands of rebel groups still operating in the country, such as the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN).¹² One interviewee noted the irony of this, as many people were responding by asking for more state security.¹³

The government established ‘negotiating tables’ to address issues between the protest leaders and state officials. According to interviewees, the government sought to appease the protesters and then looked the other way without implementing any changes or indicating its future intentions. The unsuccessful negotiations and resulting grievances were then eclipsed by the pandemic, which restricted collective action. Interviewees noted that the pandemic served as a buffer for the government, allowing it to avert the planned negotiations. According to our research, these unresolved grievances set the stage for the protests in 2021, as narratives about experiences in 2019 were woven into and integral to the descriptions of the protests two years later.

Early Narrative Justifications of State Violence in 2021

When the 2021 protests began on 28 April, they were largely seen as non-violent and garnered unprecedented support. The protesters’ tactic of creating blockades on major roads was seen as a major disruption of daily life, however, and attracted criticism from many in civil society and the government. While for supporters of the protesters this strategy was necessary to increase protestor visibility and pressure the government into addressing their grievances, interviewees noted that the government leveraged the law-and-order narrative to respond to this disorderly conduct with violence. In many cities, police were cited for using tear gas and weapons as the first line of action against protesters.

On 2 May, Duque made a statement supporting the militarisation of Colombian cities until order was restored, stating that doing so would be lawful. He called for all state forces to take to the streets in the name of security while respecting human rights,¹⁴ advocating

“maximum deployment of military assistance for the National Police” in Cali and 12 other cities.¹⁵ This statement underscored the government’s justification of the use of intimidation and force to address the protests.

Moreover, Duque’s call to force came shortly after Alvaro Uribe, the former president and also a conservative, posted on Twitter/X: “Let’s support the right of soldiers and police to use their firearms to defend their integrity and to defend people and property from criminal acts of terrorist vandalism”.¹⁶ Some protesters indeed committed acts of violence, but this post portrayed the protesters as engaging solely in violence, eclipsing any notion of their having legitimate grievances.

Interviewees said that by framing state violence as a defence against criminal acts of vandalism and violence, these statements underplayed the peaceful nature of many of the protests, spreading a particular interpretation as truth to citizens of Colombia who may not have been close enough to the action to know differently.

Concessions and More Stalled Negotiations

On 2 May, the Duque administration put a halt to its economic reform bill. In a statement to the BBC, Duque said, “It is a moment for the protection of the most vulnerable, an invitation to build and not to hate and destroy”.¹⁷ Announcing that taxes would not be increased, he called for Colombians to reach consensus and work together. According to Reuters, lawmakers, unions and other groups hailed the announcement as a victory for the protesters.¹⁸ According to interviewees, however, this sentiment was not widespread or seen as sufficient.

Then, on 10 May, Duque met with protest leaders and representatives of student groups, the Catholic Church and the United Nations. News reports show that attendees walked away with very different interpretations of the meeting. According to Francisco Maltés, president of the Central Union of Workers, “There was not empathy from the government with the reasons, with the demands that have led us to this national strike”.¹⁹ Youth protest leaders were similarly dissatisfied with the response and angry about the use of force by the state, according to our interviews. Government representatives, meanwhile, reported a positive outcome for the meeting, with High Commissioner for Peace Miguel Ceballos saying, “There was an environment of listening and of respect”.²⁰ Ceballos added that attendees had agreed on the need to reject violence and repeated a government call for road blockades around the country to be removed before proposing another meeting.

According to several interviewees, the government’s concession on the tax increase, along with an announcement of free university tuition, was no longer sufficient to end the protests at that time. They noted that protest leaders said the government had not shown empathy for their demands and that a different quality of dialogue was needed for a more successful outcome to the negotiations. The momentum and support for the protests also gave some hope that more could be accomplished. As one interviewee said, “the process of concessions brought up the existing grievances of how government handled the negotiations in 2019”.²¹

Escalating Narrative Justifications of State Violence

Even as government representatives spoke about negotiating with protest leaders, the administration continued to promote the law-and-order narrative and denounce protesters. On 17 May, in a live-streamed speech, Duque said that Colombia's laws permit peaceful protest, but that the protesters' road blockades were illegal, arguing that criminal interests were negatively affecting economic and social development. "This conduct is categorically rejected", he said, adding, "In our country, the rights of everyone should be protected".²² Duque urged public authorities across the country to deploy all operational forces in the name of protecting the human rights of Colombians and ensuring their mobility and well-being. He also stated, "We are clear, any outrage or violation of the constitution and the rule of law, of course, is censured".²³

This speech met with varying responses on Twitter/X, but mainly pleas for the government to listen to the protesters, withdraw the *Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios* (ESMAD) riot police it had deployed widely, and engage in dialogue and reconciliation. As a Twitter/X user mentioned, the presence of ESMAD was controversial and seen as overreach by many protesters and onlookers.²⁴ While ESMAD used rubber bullets to break up the protests, there is evidence that they illegally aimed at protesters' faces at close range, causing some to lose eyes and disfiguring others' faces. The government largely chose to ignore these allegations, with legislators instead criticising protesters for taking part in the demonstrations.²⁵ In a 22 May interview in English, intended for international audiences, Duque again expressed his allegiance to law and order and asserted that there was nothing institutionalised about police violence in the country.²⁶

While Duque denied that the state used excessive force, reports indicate that between 28 April and 15 June, 46 deaths occurred at the hands of state agents. In addition, 73 people received eye injuries, 25 were subjected to sexual violence, 1,445 were placed in arbitrary detention, and 539 were forcibly disappeared.²⁷ Interviewees noted that each time someone was visibly killed by the state, the protests escalated. They also said that because of statements by Duque and others in his administration delegitimising the protesters and their narrative, the state was seen by many as killing unarmed protesters with impunity.

Protester Violence and Narrative Delegitimation

In addition to blocking roads, which led to fuel and food shortages and prevented circulation of ambulances, protesters began to engage in direct violence against police. For example, a police officer was reportedly sexually assaulted and beaten when protesters attacked a police station.²⁸ Although it occurred in the context of asymmetrical power relations and resources between the state and protesting citizens, the escalating violence by both sides affected narratives in support of or against them.

Interviewees said that as state violence increased at the outset of the protests, public support for the protesters rose. Then as protesters increasingly turned to vandalising public structures, burning police and bus stations, blocking roads and outlets for food and other basic necessities, and attacking police, people began speaking negatively

about the protests and legitimising negative characterisations of the protesters.²⁹ The interviews indicate that violence polarised debates and simplified stories each side told about the other and about the context overall.

As the protests continued, ending the violence became the focus for supporters and opponents of the protests alike. Given the dominance of the law-and-order narrative, as protesters defended themselves as well as increased their use of violence, the power of their grievances and social justice narratives diminished. The violence began taking over the narrative space, which according to interviewees made alternative narratives far less visible.

Local-level Narrative Transformation and Peacebuilding: The Case of Cali

According to IFIT's [narrative framework](#), "When grievances accumulate and conflict arises, constructive group narratives are those that question simplification and polarisation while promoting plurality and participation". During the 2021 protests, the narratives that were most visible at the national level largely left long-standing grievances unaddressed and fuelled violence. Yet, our research shows that a number of engagements occurred across the country that, though far less visible, enabled narrative transformation and de-escalation of the conflict.

In Cali, the third-largest city in Colombia, civil society organisations, government entities and ordinary citizens held local dialogues that created space for learning conversations between people who supported and opposed the protesters. Two initiatives were recognised as especially effective by interviewees: The Youth Have the Word (*Los Jóvenes Tienen la Palabra*) and Peace Initiatives of the West (*Iniciativas de Paz del Oeste*).

Through these and other initiatives, concealed narratives about protesters and state representatives emerged, creating the conditions for them to humanise one another, generate more complex stories about the drivers of the protests, and thereby collaboratively develop responses to underlying grievances. Interviewees reported that the predominant narratives about the protests came from Bogota, the capital, while narratives from other cities and regions in Colombia did not garner as much attention in the national and international media.³⁰ Similarly, stories about the dialogues in Cali were not widely circulated, even though they hold lessons for promoting peace through narrative transformation.

Interviewees noted that Cali was the most violent protest site in Colombia. The city was especially economically affected by COVID-19, which increased poverty levels and exacerbated grievances about socioeconomic inequality.³¹ State forces rapidly militarised the city at the start of the protests, which further galvanised the protesters.³² As violence worsened, Cali residents anxiously waited for the government to de-escalate the protests. Interviewees not directly involved in the protests but affected by them described the scene in Cali as a "war zone", with protesters blocking roads to the city, creating fuel and food shortages, and then facing civilian and state retaliation.³³ Fourteen people were

reported killed.³⁴ During a lockdown of two weeks, people could not leave their homes without the threat of violence and had little access to daily necessities.

Faced with continuing violence, one interviewee said that the events solidified their support for the government's violent enforcement of public order.³⁵ Another noted that they began to question the validity of protesters' tactics, even though they had previously supported the same tactics in their work in rural areas affected by historical conflicts.³⁶ Overall, interviewees noted a sense that the central government had abandoned Cali, strengthening a local impression that the centre of politics in Colombia is not a site for complex understandings of most citizens' lived experiences and needs.

In response to this situation, locals realised that the protestors would not abandon their strategies and began to organise dialogues across protest lines. While dialogue efforts in times of contentious politics yield multiple and competing accounts, it is significant that conversations and learning happened about the grievances driving the protests and how to respond to them. People were speaking and being heard. Interviewees characterised the dialogue processes in Cali as complicated, tense and often uncomfortable, yet ultimately non-violent and 'civil'. Importantly, they emphasised social and narrative complexity.³⁷

The Youth Have the Word

The Youth Have the Word was an initiative that brought young protesters in Cali and young members of Congress from different political parties – representing the local and the national – into conversation. The initiative was partly inspired by political leadership work and a multi-party dialogue led by IFIT and the Netherlands embassy in Colombia in 2020.³⁸ In light of the increasing political turmoil in the country, the congresspeople visited areas outside Bogota – “where they don't usually go” – to have conversations with protesters and better understand the situation, including why young people were protesting instead of using the formal participatory mechanisms established under the 2016 peace agreement.³⁹ As the protests went on, the initiative brought opposing actors into dialogue in 15 cities, including Cali.

According to our research, the initiative faced recruiting challenges in Cali because of the distrust young people expressed towards political institutions. This historical distrust, in tandem with the government's narrative that protesting youth were criminals without legitimate grievances, deepened the young people's sense of 'us versus them'. The conveners thus had to work hard to bring a diversity of voices into the dialogues. Ultimately, they managed to incorporate members of the youth wings of political parties (the majority belonging to student groups, especially from public universities), women's groups, LGBTQIA+ collectives, and artists' groups, with those in music and theatre playing a key role.

Our research shows that the young participants had different, complex narratives among themselves during the dialogues. For example, youth with political interests saw the protests as an opportunity to organise and garner youth support for their political parties and to channel their demands via institutional means. They were more willing to push

for consensus because they felt that change could happen within the existing system. Meanwhile, collectives that had never associated with political parties were more opposed to using traditional channels, asserting that protest was the only means of ensuring their demands were heard by the government, with some sanctioning violence as a way of achieving that goal. These participants reportedly saw political parties as a threat and believed that political support for small changes would not go far enough to respond to larger societal needs. Because the negotiations around the 2019 protests had stalled, many young participants said they would fail again in 2021.

The Congress members came to the dialogues expecting the local youth to express their demands as a set of concrete proposals. Instead, the young people shared their own experiences before and during the protests in an emotive way. The process of dialogue eventually enabled the politicians and the youth protesters to engage in learning together, with an interviewee noting, “We learnt through this process the importance of the expression of emotions, and this was something that helped us to build common ground between the congresspeople and the young people in these spaces”.⁴⁰

In an effort to create horizontal spaces of dialogue, the initiative invited youth leaders to co-design the methodology. They established ground rules together and the youth took charge of the logistics. Mothers of the young people, who often cooked for the protesters, were hired to cater the events. The initiative rented chairs from local people for the meetings as an act of goodwill and to establish trust.

For security reasons, the conveners initially kept the dialogues private, establishing trust by prohibiting cameras, foregoing attendance lists, and allowing facial coverings to avoid identification due to fears of arrest. Eventually, they made a public announcement that, as a result of the dialogues, they had collected more than 100 proposals that the multi-party group of congresspeople turned into five law projects and presented to the Chamber of Representatives.⁴¹ This step delivered on the organisers’ promise that the dialogues would result in concrete proposals for Congress, while also bridging the gap between local actors and the national government. The Youth Have the Word initiative reportedly proved critical for de-escalating violence in Cali.⁴²

Peace Initiatives of the West

In another example of dialogue shared by our interviewees, after the mayor of Cali failed to convince protesters to remove their road blockades, citizens in the western part of the city took it upon themselves to approach protesters directly. This enabled conversations across protest lines and resulted in the creation of Peace Initiatives of the West.⁴³ Local businesspeople drove the initial engagements,⁴⁴ and were later joined by healthcare professionals, engineers, educators and other citizens.⁴⁵ One interviewee spoke about how much their experience in the initiatives expanded their view of the relationship between Cali businesspeople and the protesters, most of whom were frustrated by the lack of socioeconomic opportunities they faced.⁴⁶

The engagements humanised the protesters and the businesspeople to each other. One businessperson stated on Twitter/X, “I have been very struck by the lack of dialogue between ‘the two Calis’, the one that suffers today from the blockades and the one that

has historically suffered from poverty. Today I saw a light of hope”.⁴⁷ While responding comments indicate that many saw the post as disingenuous, our interviewees gave accounts of the meetings de-escalating the violence in the streets. In a specific example mentioned by one interviewee, the president of a Cali-based business engaged in open dialogue with people on the front lines of the protests, shifting the image each had of the other and starting conversations around collaboration.⁴⁸

These independent dialogue initiatives among the private sector, neighbourhood associations and protestors in Cali led to concrete local responses to protester demands, including new employment opportunities and English-learning programmes.⁴⁹ This one example demonstrates how the connection to lived experience reveals the subnational dimensions of the protest and “the need to think beyond national agendas”.⁵⁰ Citizens on different sides created alliances based on collaboration on how to address local concerns, especially about youth opportunities.⁵¹ The humanisation and learning were steps towards cultivating positive relationships that reportedly shifted the stories people had about one another and changed the local narrative landscape, disincentivising violence.

Conclusion

The 2021 protests in Colombia were characterised by a complex set of narrative dynamics rooted in the polarisation and conflict in the country. The protests gave rise to two main narratives: one on social justice and equality and the other on law and order. The protesters drew widespread support that legitimised their grievances, based on a widespread desire to change the status quo. Given the long history of violence in Colombia, however, the law-and-order narrative became the dominant one.

While the protesters largely employed what they considered peaceful tactics, their road blockades disrupted public order and fed into portrayals of them as criminals aiming to overthrow the government. This served to strengthen the law-and-order narrative and justify the state’s use of force against protesters. Eventually, protesters and government forces entered a negative conflict spiral, with increasing incidences of violence narrowing opportunities for dialogue and other non-violent interactions between protest supporters and opponents. According to the interviewees from Cali, stories about violence, coming largely from Bogota, became predominant at the national level and fuelled polarisation, while stories about dialogue initiatives that led to narrative transformation and de-escalation in Cali and elsewhere in the country were rendered invisible.

This case study shows how narratives function at critical junctures in polarised contexts, as outlined in IFIT’s [narrative framework](#). In times of conflict in deeply divided societies, narratives become increasingly simplified and self-reinforcing. They consolidate possible meanings, validating a particular group’s grievances while delegitimising others’ grievances. The case of the 2021 protests shows that dominant narratives have material consequences, constituting which actions can be taken and which policies adopted. The law-and-order narrative in Colombia justified the government’s enforcement of public order, including through the use of excessive force.

In Cali, a site of fierce violence, local dialogues facilitated by intermediary organisations enabled learning conversations to take place, which led people on the two sides of the issue to humanise each other with more complex stories – a process seen in other regions as well.⁵² In doing so, these groups were able to co-develop context-specific policies and programmes that responded to local grievances, demonstrating that relying only on the central government to address local issues is not always effective, particularly when polarisation is extreme. These efforts illustrate how narrative shifts can help reduce violence and how the local and the national level can be connected to promote narrative transformation at scale over time.

Debate persists about how the 2021 protests ended, with some attributing it to lessening public support for the protests and others to local engagements across protests lines in places like Cali. While the latter were not the only mechanisms for reducing the violence, they arguably represent a key story that is lamentably concealed by the dominant narrative of the need for (and perceived effectiveness of) law-and-order approaches. Despite this, our research indicates that as the protests ended, a new generation of young political actors emerged who, based on their experience, may shape Colombia’s narrative landscape differently in the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Alison Castel is Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Communication Studies at Regis College and a member of IFIT’s Inclusive Narratives Practice Group.

Dr. Jale Sultanli is Senior Advisor to CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation.

Dr. Sara Cobb is Drucie French Cumbie Professor Emerita at the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University and a member of IFIT’s Inclusive Narratives Practice Group.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank IFIT’s [Inclusive Narratives Practice Group](#) for inspiring this case study. They also thank IFIT’s Jasmina Brankovic, María José Daza Bohorquez, Alejandra González Ferro, Martha Maya and Andrés García Trujillo for their valuable input. IFIT and the authors are grateful to the members of the [Colombia national and territorial brain trusts](#) as well as the IFIT Colombia staff and external experts who participated in the research process.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/could-colombias-protests-derail-its-basic-income-experiment/>
2. <https://www.ila-americanbranch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/The-Columbian-Peace-Agreement.pdf>
3. <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/5/14/in-pictures-barricades-continue-in-cali-the-epicenter-of-the-an>
4. <https://www.routledge.com/Storytelling-for-Social-Justice-Connecting-Narrative-and-the-Arts-in-Antiracist/Bell/p/book/9781138292802>
5. Workshop with IFIT brain trust members and IFIT staff in Colombia, 2 November 2022.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/27/colombia-protests-paola-holguin-stop-crying-one-eye>
7. <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9780801436659/damaged-identities-narrative-repair/#bookTabs=1>
8. <https://academic.oup.com/book/8944>
9. Interviews and workshop with IFIT brain trusts members and IFIT staff in Colombia, 2 November 2022.
10. Ibid.
11. <https://colombiareports.com/colombias-nervous-congress-set-to-cast-final-vote-on-controversial-tax-reform/amp/>
12. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/98-protecting-colombias-most-vulnerable-road-total-peace>
13. Interview, INGO employee, 15 November 2022.
14. <https://tinyurl.com/mtjc54y3>
15. <https://colombiareports.com/colombia-partly-militarized-amid-anti-government-protests-and-uprisings/>
16. <https://colombiareports.com/colombias-former-president-glorifying-violence-twitter/>. The company later deleted the tweet for glorifying violence.
17. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56967209>
18. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/colombias-president-withdraws-tax-reform-after-protests-2021-05-02/>
19. <https://sg.finance.yahoo.com/news/colombias-duque-recognizes-protesters-concerns-144232780.html>
20. Ibid.
21. Interviews, INGO employee, 15 November 2022; dialogue expert, 21 November 2022; Cali human rights advocate, 22 November 2022.
22. <https://twitter.com/i/broadcasts/1kvKpoRzMloxE>
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Colombia-33-People-Suffered-Eye-Injuries-Amid-Social-Outbreak-20210519-0008.html>
26. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZwrPtc6vcM>
27. <http://www.indepaz.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Bolet%C3%ADn-Indepaz-Cifras-Paro-Nacional-15-06-2021.pdf>
28. <https://tinyurl.com/ar5h6xtu>
29. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/18/world/americas/colombia-protests-what-to-know.html>
30. Interview, Cali human rights advocate, 22 November 2022.
31. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-57300639>
32. Interview, INGO employee, 15 November 2022.
33. Interview, Cali citizen, 22 November 2022; <https://tinyurl.com/zh2w9thn>
34. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-57300639>
35. Interview, Cali citizen, 22 November 2022.
36. Interview, Cali human rights advocate, 22 November 2022.
37. <https://revistapropectiva.univalle.edu.co/index.php/prospectiva/article/view/11864/14818>
38. This initiative was part of the project *Del Capitolio al Territorio*, which monitored the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement in different regions of Colombia and sought to build bridges between members of Congress and citizens in these regions.
39. Interview, dialogue expert, 21 November 2022.
40. Ibid.
41. Email exchange, dialogue expert, 20 December 2022.
42. Interview, dialogue expert, 21 November 2022.
43. <https://www.revistacienciasinep.com/home/dialogo-social-luego-del-estallido-del-28a-en-cali/>

44. Interview, Cali businessperson, 21 November 2022.
45. <https://www.elpais.com.co/calilos-vecinos-del-oeste-de-que-apuestan-por-la-reconciliacion.html>
46. Interview, Cali businessperson, 21 November 2022.
47. <https://twitter.com/juanitagoe/status/1393252569774952450>
48. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xozaAB38dSE>
49. Interview, dialogue expert, 21 November 2022.
50. https://storage.ideaspaz.org/documents/nota_estabilizacion04_movilizacionFIP.pdf
51. Interview, Cali businessperson, 21 November 2022.
52. <http://mars.gmu.edu/handle/1920/10772>

Founded in 2012, the [Institute for Integrated Transitions](#) (IFIT) is an independent, international, non-governmental organisation offering comprehensive analysis and technical advice to national actors involved in negotiations and transitions in fragile and conflict-affected societies. IFIT has supported negotiations and transitions in countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Gambia, Libya, Nigeria, Syria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.