**Juan Acevedo** 00:07

Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that brings together scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on an understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is Juan Acevedo and I'm a Research Associate at the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

**Juan Acevedo** 00:31

Today we discuss the unrest in Colombia in recent days and what it means. We're pleased to have with us Sandra Borda, Associate Professor of political science at Los Andes University in Bogota, Colombia. Professor Borda is the author of "Parar para Avanzar: The Chronicle of the Student Movement that Paralyzed Colombia."

**Juan Acevedo** 00:54

She has been a visiting scholar at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, the Munk Center for International Studies at the University of Toronto, and the International Relations Department at the University of Groningen (Netherlands). She was also a member of the Mission on Foreign Policy, a group of experts convened by the Colombian government to formulate recommendations for its future foreign policy. She is a columnist for El Tiempo in Bogota’ and co-host of the podcast, Buceando en el Naufragio (which in English is "Diving Around the Shipwreck”), which examines news and topics in international relations. Professor Borda holds a PhD from the University of Minnesota and master’s degrees in political science from the University of Wisconsin and in international relations from the University of Chicago. Welcome, Sandra Borda.

**Sandra Borda** 01:54

Thank you, Juan, so much for the for the invitation. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Juan Acevedo** 02:00

Thank you. So my first question to open is: Colombia has had tax reforms before; this is not the first one. Why has this round of tax increases lead to such huge, huge protests in Colombia? And what's going on there?

**Sandra Borda** 02:23

I would say that, before the pandemic, we were already in the middle of a very difficult social and economic situation, right? I mean, two main characteristics of our situation were inequality. Of course, we were one of the most unequal countries in Latin America, that was a big problem, and this is one of the reasons why we saw social unrest before the pandemic. And also poverty.

**Sandra Borda** 02:51

And then what happens with the pandemic is basically that these two features tend to get even more and more accute. I mean, this happened all over the world. We know now that the the main effect of the pandemic and the confinement that followed it is basically that people who were already in a very difficult social and economic situation tend to get worse, right? And this is particularly important for students in this country and for young people, because, as an area that was already difficult for them tend to get worse after the pandemic. They don't have a space in the workforce for them now, they don't have access to education because our public educational system is very poor, so this is a very hard, again, economic situation for them.

**Sandra Borda** 03:47

What happened with the tax reform is basically that the government --and I think they had a good intention in this --the government tried to put forward this reform with the main objective, the main goal in mind, which was basically to collect money in order to pass subsidies to people who were in the middle of this economic crisis. And then the trouble was that they weren't very good about communications. They didn't worry about the fact that they needed to construct a political coalition before putting forward this tax reform, so even their own party opposed and crticized their reform.

**Sandra Borda** 04:32

So the result was basically that people didn't understand what was going on. You have to keep in mind this tax reform was a 200 pages thing that nobody was going to read, right? And it was very technical. You cannot ask public opinion in general to familarize themselves with this type of text. So the result was that basically people felt like they were trying to impose more taxes on them and that, in the middle of this economic situation, that was completely unfair. And they were not going to be able basically to handle all these demands by the state.

**Sandra Borda** 05:12

Especially middle classes, I guess, were very very mad about what the government was trying to do, because they were saying --and in this they have an argument-- that the richest part of the country was the one who was supposed to contribute to this, and instead the government was asking middle classes --already in a difficult situation-- to contribute.

**Sandra Borda** 05:40

So the result is that miscommunication, arrogance by the government resulted in the social unrest that we are seeing right now. People are tremendously mad about their own situation, the ineptitude of the government. So this is what we are seeing right now and this is the reason basically why, even though the government decided to withdraw the tax reform, people are not happy about whats going on and they are still on the streets.

**Juan Acevedo** 06:15

Great. So this is a good segway to my second question, which is about President Duque's approval ratings, which he seems to be very unpopular, and you argue in your book that there was a perception of him misrunning Colombia. So can you talk a bit about Duque's performance in office?

**Sandra Borda** 06:41

Here, this is a very particular issue, right? Because what you have normally --and this is this is not even a rule for Colombia it's in general a rule for presidents. The first year is that is what they call the honeymoon period. This is the part of the government in which presidents tend to put forward as many reforms and initiatives as they have, to the extent that they know that this is the moment where they, when they are going to have most of the biggest amount of approval by the public.

**Sandra Borda** 07:14

So it is very interesting basically because Duque didn't have that honeymoon period. Approval ratings for Duque have been tremendously low. He had like a sort of parentheses during the pandemic, to the extent that this happened all over the world that people basically had faith in the executive. We already know that in an emergency, people tend to believe that concentrating power in a single figure, treating him as a savior, is the only alternative that they have. So to the extent that we were confined, and the Congress wasn't working and the courts weren't working, because we were all locked down, and he started showing up every single day on TV and this worked kind of well for him.

**Sandra Borda** 08:14

I would identify another period, probably, the moment when they proposed this "Cerco Diplomatico," I don't now how to translate this, this "Diplomatic Closure" on Venezuela. He had the initiative of recognizing Juan Guaido as the President of Venezuela and to initiate a very strong international offensive to get rid of the Maduro government in Venezuela.

**Sandra Borda** 08:49

And for a very short period of time that initiative was useful for him. People started looking at him as someone with international initiative, with some kind of leadership. So I would say that those two periods were the only moments during the Duque administration in which his approval ratings were pretty good. The rest of it has been has been pretty pretty bad for a Colombian president.

**Sandra Borda** 09:21

And this is something that is very interesting to the extent that Duque is part of a political party The Centro Democratico, Democratic Center, led by former president Alvaro Uribe. And you have to remember that Alvaro Uribe ended his second administration with a 90% approval rate. So these are people who are used to very good approval ratings. They tend to be very popular, or used to. So it is very unusual that we have a president coming from this political strand that is non-subject of the love of the people, I would say.

**Juan Acevedo** 10:07

So it seems that Venezuela is a flagship for this government to gain some popularity. What is, is that rhetoric still working? And what is the role of Venezuela in all of this? Recently Colombia's Minister of Defense reported that protests were infiltrated by Venezuelan Government. So what, how much of a threat is there?

**Sandra Borda** 10:36

Yeah, I think that Venezuela, Venezuela became an internal political issue for Colombia. This is not foreign policy anymore that we're talking about. And the reason why this is internal politics for us is due to various factors.

**Sandra Borda** 10:55

The first one is that the Centro Democratico, and particularly Duque, they are very, very close to the opposition in Venezuela and not the moderate opposition in Venezuela. They are very, very close to the radical opposition in Venezuela, the ones who have been trying to to get rid of the of the government, not necessarily through democratic and institutional means.

**Sandra Borda** 11:21

So Duque comes to power with a very, very close alliance with these radical wing of Venezuela. So his proposal to solve the Venezuelan crisis has never been a negotiation proposal, for instance. I mean, he's never been in favor of sitting with the government. He says that this has happened before that the government doesn't respect dialogues that they don't give guarantees. So that the best way to deal with this is just to impose a lot of pressure on Venezuela and basically kick out the government. This is the plan that they have.

**Sandra Borda** 12:00

This sort of alternative had a very good moment during the Trump Administration. And I now would say at the beginning at the beginning of the Trump Administration, to the extent that Michael Bolton... (no it's not Michael, what's his name?) Bolton is.. John Bolton. (Michael Bolton is the singer, horrible singer?) Well, when Bolton and Trump has started to have a very militaristic approach to the Venezuelan crisis, at some point, they even threatened with a military invasion. They were talking about --you would remember the "yellow pages," that Bolton showed in a press conference saying: "Well, we're thinking about sending troops" and all these things.

**Sandra Borda** 12:49

So this was a great moment for Duque, because having in mind exactly the same sort of solution for Venezuela; being in the same page with the Trump Administration was a great thing for him. And many Latin American governments at that moment, at that point --and we're basically talking about the beginning of 2019-- they fell for that. And I guess I'm having in mind Piñera in Chile, and then in maybe Peru; some governments in the in the region felt that this had momentum. That it was a great time to try to get rid of the Maduro administration in Venezuela, and consequently, the leftist threat on the rest of the region.

**Sandra Borda** 13:38

So they supported the Duque initiative through the Lima group for, I would say, two or three months. And you might remember basically, this long line of Republicans in Cucuta [Colombia's border with Venezuela] and people from the Trump Administration too supporting what Duque was trying to do with their humanitarian passing of resources and his attempt to weaken the Maduro administration with the Cerco Diplomatico [Diplomatic Closure]. This basically failed, because they couldn't topple the regime. And now, what we have is basically a Duque administration that doesn't want to talk about the Venezuelan crisis, mainly because their own proposal to solve the Venezuelan crisis didn't work. It lost momentum.

**Sandra Borda** 14:44

Now we have the Biden Administration, and the Biden Administration doesn't want to follow the same path that the Trump Administration followed. The international community in general is in a different mood vis-à-vis Venezuela. So you know, it's a bad timing or for what Duque wanted to do with Venezuela. So he stopped talking about Venezuela. After the beginning of the pandemic, we've never heard about this, but it's still an electoral device for them. Because Venezuela is the way they found the most effective way to weaken leftist political parties and alternatives in Colombia. They play with people's fear. So they basically say that, "the left in this country is going to be exactly the same thing that it was in Venezuela, and that we're gonna end up exactly the same." So they are using this as an electoral device at this point.

**Juan Acevedo** 15:47

Very interesting, it seems that this behavior from the right-wing in Latin America, as you mentioned, has had a sort of response in the rest of the continent. So you have most governments finishing their tenure next year. So we have Piñera in Chile, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Duque in Colombia. Pedro Castillo is already leading polls in Peru, and Bolivia's Evo Morales candidate, Luis Arce, also won the elections and the same happened in Argentina with Fernandez's candidate. So in this sense, and also taking into consideration the protests in 2019, do you see a pink tide rising again in Latin America?

**Sandra Borda** 16:43

Hmm, it is hard to say you know, because it seems that this very famous pendulum theory. I mean, the region going from one side, one ideological side, to the other. I don't see that clearly how it's working right now. It seems to me, you're right, we need to see what's going to happen with Brazil and with Colombia in the next elections.

**Sandra Borda** 17:15

But it seems to me that what you're seeing is more fragmentation, right? I mean, a part of the region going left, another part of the region going right, and some other governments that you really, even if you try, you really have a very hard time trying to figure out where they are. Mexico still blows my mind. What would you say? Is this a leftist government? I don't know. I have I have strong doubts about it. So it's less clear to me than it was probably 10 or 15 years ago, when basically the only country with a right government was Colombia. Alvaro Uribe at the end of it was absolutely alone in the region and this is one of the reasons why his relationship with the US ended up being way stronger than it was supposed to be, because he was alone.

**Sandra Borda** 18:12

I'm not quite sure that this is what what we're seeing right now. But we still have to wait and see what happens, for example, with social organizations and social unrest. Because, you know, people always ask, "Well, you think that the social unrest is good for the left in Colombia?" I don't know. I am not quite sure. Because to one extent, I think that a lot of people are being activated politically, and this is good for the left; newer voters are always better for them. Young voters, for instance, are always going to be closer to them.

**Sandra Borda** 18:53

But the fact is that we're in the middle of -- today is already the 12th day of -- a strike. And this is going to start to have strong effects on on people. People are already having trouble to find groceries and food. Strikes tend to degradate with the passage of time, and this is not going to be good for the left, if that happens. So it can it can go both ways here, so it can happen the same way in in any other country.

**Juan Acevedo** 19:30

So I want to go back now to Colombia and the side of protesters. Who are they? There's been several different groups joining the protest; this seems unprecedented. You see truck drivers, students, health workers, indigenous communities. What are they after and how they perceived? And most importantly --if you could emphasize this-- do you see a generational change represented in the protests?

**Sandra Borda** 20:11

Yeah. I think that the best way to answer the question is to compare what's going on on the street right now with what went on during the strike in 2019. Because I think that the big difference is that in 2019, you saw the strike committee, which is a bunch of social organizations: labor organizations, students, the usual; environmental organizations, feminist organizations. And that was a strike that was led by these organizations in a very effective way. I mean, they were the ones organizing people, using social platforms. And to that extent, I think that that social mobilization was way more organized, and a little bit less violent precisely because social organizations had a very important role.

**Sandra Borda** 21:06

Right now, we also have a strike committee, which is composed by the same social organizations. But the problem is that many other people outside on the streets protesting are not necessarily part of those social organizations. This is the big problem right now. Problem to the extent that if you want to have a dialogue, it's really difficult to identify the who you're supposed to have that dialogue with.

**Sandra Borda** 21:40

So I'm thinking, for instance, young people. I mean, in 2019, most of the young people that you saw on the streets were students from universities, public and private. And they were talking about tuition rates. And they were talking about access to public education and so on. Now, it's not students what we're seeing on the streets necessarily. And at the strike committee, you have a couple of student organizations, but they do not necessarily represent many of the young people that you see on the street. Because the people that you see on the street are people that don't even have access to education.

**Sandra Borda** 22:23

I mean, these are not college students, these are people living in very difficult neighborhoods in main cities. People who have no access to education, no access to the labor force, and people who have very historical difficult relationship with the police. So this is more on the margins. And, to that extent, you have discussions and you see discussions constantly here saying, "Well, you know, the government wants to talk to people wants to have, like what they call, a 'national conversation,'" --very grandiloquent-- "we want to talk with all social forces" and all these things.

**Sandra Borda** 23:05

And then you see people on the street saying, "Well, you know, those people do not represent me. So if you want go ahead and keep talking to them do it, but these are not the people who represent my interests and my political views." So it's going to be very hard to try to articulate a conversation in which you represent them.

**Sandra Borda** 23:25

And then you have, and they were the main protagonists yesterday in Cali, indigenous organizations. Indigenous organizations have become a very, very important political force in Colombia. They are very organized, every single time that they support a strike, you know, that turns the strike way stronger than in the past. And yesterday in Colombia, we had this unfortunate, you know, issue because they were blocking some of the some of the main our roads that go straight to Cali, one of our main cities, and we saw something that, you know, it's it's a very Colombian problem, to say the least. And we saw private citizens armed basically shooting indigenous people. And the public force the police being there and not doing anything. So so. So this is another big problem that we have here, the privatization of the use of the force, illegal privatization of the use of the force, that that, you know, we haven't been able to solve and is just popping up now that that we have this social unrest and this kind of disorder on the streets.

**Juan Acevedo** 24:49

Where this is a great segue to my last question, which is maybe the hardest one and is precisely this President Duque's kind of erratic behavior, talking to some leaders to some political actors, some representatives of young population. But people in the streets or the voices you mention of people on the streets that hasn't been heard, or at least that it seems. How can these demands be heard? Or how can the government put an end to these protests?

**Sandra Borda** 25:34

Yeah, that's the that's the million dollar question, right? In Spanish, you say, a million pesos, and it's way more way, way less horrible than a million dollar, but still. I guess one of the problems is that, yeah, that the government has to negotiate, right? And we know that. What's, what's the problem? First, that the government is in a very weak position right now. And, and to that extent, they don't want to have a conversation with people, that seems that seem too challenging for them, you know, political forces that they feel challenged by, because they are too weak.

**Sandra Borda** 26:18

And they are, we're going to get into this, you know, presidential election process very soon. And probably the Centro Democratico, the government's party, wants to once to have a new President, and, you know, they don't want to seem weak at the end of this story. So, so they've been cherry picking social sectors and people that they can talk to, without looking too weak. Right? That's the problem. So for instance, two days ago, they had a public conversation with what they call people who represent young people and students, right? Who were these people? I mean, no idea. One was a person who works as a columnist for El Tiempo, but he's not part of the student organizations or any other social organization, and, you know, a whole bunch of people that people don't know who they are, right?

**Sandra Borda** 27:22

So it's like they are trying, it's a very cosmetic thing to do, and this is very, this is a very strong characteristic of this government. They tend to present things in a positive way. And they tend to present their initiatives, but they are very weak when it's about finding real solutions for real problems. So it's all representation, right, so for them. And the other issue, I guess -- I mean, one issue is that they are too weak so it's very difficult for them to have negotiations -- and the other issue is that, as I was saying before, we know that these people that they're bringing to the governmental palace are not representative of anyone. But when you ask, "Well, okay, then who represents people on the streets?" That question is not very easy to answer either, right? Because social organizations are important, but they are not the whole story. So this is a sort of structural obstacle that the government is going to have to overcome. I don't know how they're going to do that. But you know, this is, to the extent that people on the street don't feel that people like them are talking to the government, they are not going to feel that these dialogues and these conversations are, you know, an exit to this crisis.

**Sandra Borda** 28:54

And finally, I would say that, as it happens with the rest of Latin America, political parties, political institutions in in Colombia have lost a lot of credibility. So people do not feel represented by political parties or politicians. They feel like the establishment is just basically something that has nothing to do with them. So since we don't have these communication channels between civil society and the government, then it's very difficult to see how what's going on and on the streets with social organizations is going to turn into a solution in terms of public policy, right? I mean, our our communication channels between civil society and the government are lost. So people don't believe in them anymore. And and that makes conversation as a way to solve this crisis, a very, very difficult thing to achieve.

**Juan Acevedo** 29:58

One last question, if I may. Because I think this is very interesting. There's been rumors that the government is planning to declare the state of internal disturbance. And that perhaps also that the Centro Democratico party is trying to coup their own government. How is that true? How do you see that?

**Sandra Borda** 30:29

No, I would say that in Colombia, we're very fond of forms of, you know, manners. So we, we take pride in the fact that we've been the the oldest democracy in the region, and that we've never done this whole thing of, you know, coups and all this unrest. And it's kind of funny, and I laugh only because it's all a matter of manners, right? I mean, it's not, this is not a very, you know, vibrant and profound democracy. And you can see that, just by listening to what the government and the elites are saying about the social unrest on the streets, right? I mean, they have no problem with validating things such as, you know, killing people, because they are breaking windows. So, I mean, you cannot call this a very strong democracy, when people's they think about that way of solving problems.

**Sandra Borda** 31:25

But what I do think, I don't think that we're going to have a coup, I think, basically, that doesn't make any sense for the armed forces. Because at this point, they're doing whatever they want to do. So it's not like they feel constrained, and they need more space to do what they want to do. I mean, they're killing people on the streets, the police. So you know, why would they need more power, if that's what they want to do? But I do think that the Democratic Center, this governmental party, is feeling weak, very weak, and they feel like they're going to have a very hard time for the next election. And that basically means that they are going to use any single alternative that they have in hand in order to try to overcome that political weakness.

**Sandra Borda** 32:16

And, and we know what they've done in the past, and we know that they are not very constrained by the whole, you know, rules of the game, the democratic rules of the game or the Constitution. They have a very flexible relationship with the rule of law. So that's something that we need to be very careful, you know, because it's very, the feeling that weak, in that feeling in the corner, after being such a powerful political force in this country might be what, what is what is pushing them to do unusual things to basically get back to power.

**Juan Acevedo** 33:02

Well, thanks very much. That was a powerful insight. That’s it for today’s episode. I want to thank Sandra Borda for sharing her insights into the recent protests in Colombia. Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on Soundcloud, Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

**Juan Acevedo** 33:25

I want to thank professor Veronica Michel-Luviano for helping in the production of this episode and Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance. I also want to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song “International Horizons” as the theme music for the show. This is Juan Acevedo saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons.

**Juan Acevedo** 33:50

Thank you, Sandra.

**Sandra Borda** 33:52

No, thank you. That was great. It was a very, very good conversation, Juan. Thank you so much.