

Colombia protests continue after government withdraws tax reform

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San Jose Del Guaviare, May 4 (RHC)-- Violent protests continue around Colombia as unions make more demands of the right-wing government of President Ivan Duque following his withdrawal of a proposed tax reform that sparked widespread public anger.

The government said the tax reform aimed to stabilize a country economically ravished by the coronavirus pandemic, but the working and middle classes said the plan favoured the rich while placing more pressure on them. An array of new or expanded taxes on citizens and business owners and a reduction and elimination on many tax exemptions, such as those on product sales, angered many.

Finance Minister Alberto Carrasquilla submitted his resignation on Monday evening, after spending most of the day in meetings with Duque. “My continuance in the government will complicate the quick and effective construction of the necessary consensus,” Carrasquilla said in a ministry statement, as reported by the Reuters news agency.

But experts say demonstrations are expected to go on. Alicia Gomez, a 51-year-old cleaner who supports the protests, told Al Jazeera that Colombians are tired of the government “putting more taxes” on the population, which is already struggling due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We have to keep fighting because if we don’t they’re going to take our rights away completely,” she said.

Duque previously insisted that the reform would not be withdrawn, but continuing protests, deaths and international condemnation of alleged human rights abuses against protesters by police saw the president concede on Sunday.

“This is the first time that the government has budged when faced by widespread popular opposition,” said Arlene Tickner, a political science professor at Bogota’s Rosario University. “The fact that the tax reform stood little chance of being approved in the Congress, combined with the growing unruliness of the protests and domestic and international condemnation of widespread police brutality, likely factored into the president’s decision.”

In a local media interview last month, Carrasquilla was asked how much a dozen eggs cost. His unrealistic answer – he said they were more than four times cheaper than they actually are – sparked outrage in a country already struggling with a coronavirus-related economic crisis.

“Minister Carrasquilla should resign because a minister that doesn’t even know how much a dozen eggs costs is a complete embarrassment for us Colombians,” Gomez, who works in Bogota, said before the minister announced his resignation.

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