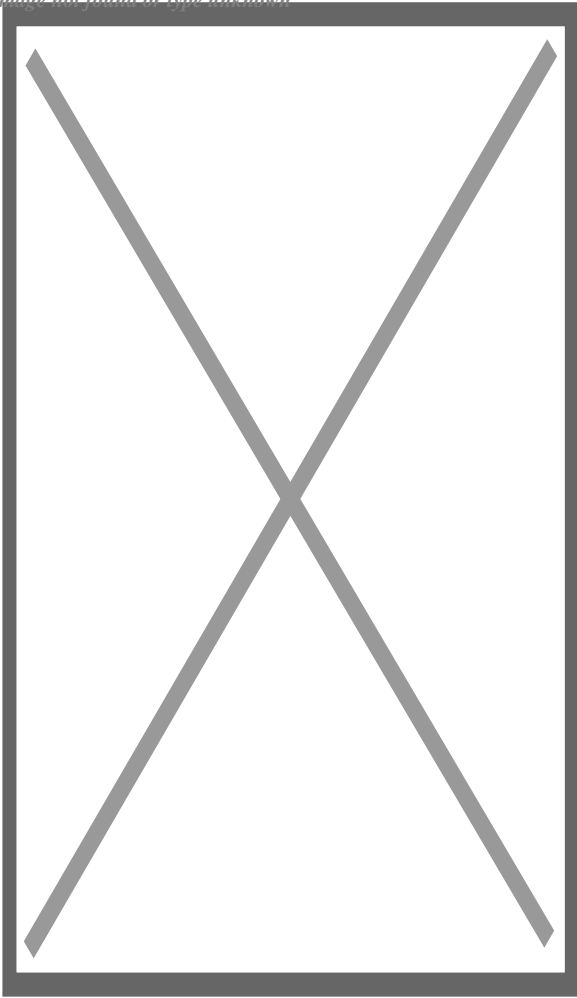


Protesters strike out at Colombian president's planned reforms

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Bogota, April 22 RHC-- Tens of thousands of Colombians have taken to the streets in several cities to protest against President Gustavo Petro's social reform agenda. About 70,000 people demonstrated in Bogota on Sunday, according to estimates provided by the city government. Large rallies also took place in other cities across the country in opposition to Petro's proposed economic and social reforms.

Protests have been a constant since the former leftist fighter took office in 2022, but have gained momentum as Petro has floated the possibility of rewriting the constitution to spur social reforms blocked by a hostile congress and conservative business groups.

A Senate committee earlier this month rejected a proposed health reform aimed at stripping power from insurers and expanding access to healthcare. The opposition has been angered by the government's move to take control of two main insurers it said had failed to correctly care for patients.

The government is expected to propose a new version of the health reform once the new legislative session begins in July. Pension and labor reforms are also being debated by lawmakers.

Marches have also previously taken place in support of Petro's reforms. "This government's policies are dire. The health system, despite its flaws, was working and now Petro is putting an end to it by plunging patients who have no healthcare or medicine into a crisis," Monica Leon, a 45-year-old doctor told the Reuters news agency.

President Petro said in a post on X that the protests were large in Medellin, Bogota and Bucaramanga but "weak" in 18 other cities. "The main goal of the marches is to shout 'Petro Out' and to topple the government," Petro said, calling the protests a "soft coup" to thwart reforms. He called for a massive pro-government march on May 1st, International Workers' Day.

When Petro came to power two years ago he was the first leftist to govern a country traditionally run by conservative elites. However, he lost majorities in the legislature a few months after his inauguration, and his approval rating has plummeted.

Seventy percent of Colombians say the situation in the country "is getting worse," according to the Invaer polling group.

Petro's ambitious policy of "total peace" – attempting to bring an end to six decades of armed conflict – has also faced reversals. Concessions to armed groups have been controversial, with frequent violations reported.

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