

Review “The Disaster of the Decent Ones” by Paula Bolívar

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At the time of writing these pages, two former ministers, two members of Congress, and several officials from the Petro administration are spending their days in different prisons and detention centers across the country, or are fugitives from justice. The reason? The largest corruption scandal of the current government: the embezzlement of funds from the National Unit for Disaster Risk Management (UNGRD) and the use of those resources to buy off members of Congress. It is within this complex and chilling framework that the book “*El desastre de los decentes*” (“The Disaster of the Decent Ones”) by Paula Bolívar (2026) is situated, whose relevance emerges on two levels. First, because she herself conducted the investigation that exposed the entire corruption network and is the most authoritative voice to recount what happened firsthand. Second, because although corruption has become part of the landscape in Colombia, there remained hope that the ideas of change and transformation promoted by the government during its campaign would materialize into concrete actions against corruption. As the book shows, reality is far removed from those promises.

Paula Bolívar’s narrative unfolds across two temporal layers which, although presented in parallel, reflect the chronological scope of her investigation. The first takes place in the detention facility of Olmedo López, former director of the UNGRD and a key figure in the scandal, who decides to speak precisely with the journalist who made his actions public. This is no minor detail, as his behavior toward her remains distant, evasive, and even condescending. Meanwhile, the second narrative layer provides a journalistic account of how the scandal developed and how it proved to be far deeper than the journalist herself initially believed. By combining both narrative planes, the book achieves a profound, yet also intimate, understanding of the scandal and those involved.

With the setting and argumentative development established, it must be noted that the book identifies an original sin, given the urgency and complexity of issues related to disaster response, procurement mechanisms have tended to be relaxed in pursuit of rapid and concrete solutions. The special procurement regime of the UNGRD, established by Law 1523 of 2012, allows for bypassing Law 80 of 1993, which generally regulates public contracting. Although this is understandable, it has opened the door to far less transparent and less stringent contracting practices, the perfect breeding ground for corruption. In addition, Decree 2113 of 2022, through which the

president declared a disaster in La Guajira, and subsequently Decree 1810 of 2023, which extended the emergency declaration due to the La Niña phenomenon, created all the conditions necessary for the scandal to take shape.

Within this context, Paula Bolívar finds that under these frameworks, contracts were awarded for several tanker trucks intended to store and transport water in the most remote areas of La Guajira. However, behind the decals bearing the silhouettes of Olmedo López and President Gustavo Petro, which adorned all the trucks, lay realities that were almost absurd. According to the journalist, local residents suspected irregularities because the vehicles would not be useful; during the rainy season, the predominantly desert terrain would render them completely inoperative. Moreover, it was never clear where the drivers for each vehicle would come from, nor how the project would be sustainable in the medium and long term.

The problem was even greater, beyond their operational infeasibility, the tanker trucks were purchased with cost overruns exceeding twenty billion pesos. Sadly, this was not new; in Colombia, this model of corruption has become institutionalized, whereby contracts funded by public resources are inflated through increased market prices or the inclusion of unnecessary budget items. In this way, the surplus is funneled into specific pockets and eventually benefits the same officials responsible for authorizing the expenditure. Bolívar provides, in essence, a meticulous anatomy of how such a corrupt scheme is structured, making her investigative work unquestionable.

Following the tanker truck scandal, the central objective gradually came to light, essentially, to secure cash in order to grease the legislative machinery. The President of the Senate, Iván Name, and the President of the House of Representatives, Andrés Calle, allegedly accepted bribes in exchange for unconditional support for the government’s legislative agenda. In many cases, that support was not direct; simply being absent during votes on such bills was sufficient to ensure their passage, as in Name’s case. This reveals an idea Bolívar suggests throughout her book, the centrality of this scandal for top-level political figures in both the Congress of the Republic and the National Government.

This was not a matter of two officials misappropriating funds within their agency; rather, it involved a coordinated,

specific, and deliberate order originating from high-ranking government officials such as Carlos Ramón González, then director of the Administrative Department of the Presidency of the Republic (DAPRE); Luis Fernando Velasco, former Minister of the Interior; and Ricardo Bonilla, former Minister of Finance. A particularly telling episode recounted both by Olmedo López in his testimony and by Paula Bolívar in her book is the so-called “Conclave”, a meeting held on November 27, 2023, at the Casa de Nariño, which brought together the aforementioned ministers and officials. According to López, during this meeting, an explicit order was given to move resources in order to buy off members of Congress and ensure the success of social reforms. Both the participants and the setting only deepen the doubts that Bolívar implicitly develops throughout her text.

Undoubtedly, the greatest of these concerns is the role of President Gustavo Petro. None of those implicated has stated that the president was directly involved, yet the doubt is reasonable. Gustavo Petro appointed all the government officials implicated in the corruption scandal and even defended Olmedo López immediately after he was suspended by the Procuraduría General de la Nación. A similar pattern has occurred with his former ministers, as he has attacked judicial decisions without addressing the evidence against them. Of course, the president is not legally responsible for the actions of his subordinates, but it is striking that he has never assumed political responsibility for this or other corruption scandals. To conclude, it would be fitting to adapt the famous phrase by Harry Truman for this government, “The buck never stops here”.

References

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