



In August 2010, hundreds of Mexican journalists silently marched in downtown Mexico City in protest of the kidnappings, murder and violence against their peers throughout the country. (Knight Foundation)

Only Connect: the Survival and Spread of Organized Crime in Latin America

By Ivan Briscoe and David Keseberg

Legend has it that Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Guatemala at the height of that country's civil war in 1983, handed down a highly undiplomatic refrain to his official hosts: "you like to kill." It is a conclusion that, decades on from the Cold War era of military dictatorships, left-wing revolutionary regimes, and embattled democracies, is still largely valid across Latin America, although for quite different reasons. This is the region of the world that is now least affected by armed conflict, yet most exposed to a daily dose of largely criminal violence. In 2016, 17 of the 20 countries and 43 of the 50 cities with the world's highest rates of homicide—excluding those affected by armed conflict—were to be found in Latin America.¹ In absolute terms, one in four global homicides occurs in only four countries: Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia.² This lethal yet commonplace violence is most closely associated with those countries saddled with the presence of vibrant criminal organizations, groups which are in turn associated in the minds of many Latin Americans with the spread of sinister tentacles across poor urban communities, peripheral rural areas, prisons, police forces, judges, eminences of the political establishment, and international bankers and lawyers. Crime no longer appears as a mere underworld, but has become a source of fear, resentment, popular entertainment and, perhaps most crucially, livelihood and opportunity; it has become a culture.

However, this broad-brush depiction of Latin America as a fertile territory for bloodthirsty cartels does not do justice to the complex path that organized crime has taken in the past four to five decades. From the time when the first major independent drug trafficking organizations emerged and the Cold War regimes of the region, often with their own flourishing illicit enterprises, began to subside, the region's criminal groups have morphed towards ever higher levels of complexity, differentiation, and selectivity in their areas of influence. Their presence and the violence they mete out is highly uneven: rates of murder not only vary greatly between countries, but also within them.³ The safest region of Mexico, Yucatán, suffered a mere 2 percent of the murders recorded in 2017 in the country's most murderous state, Guerrero, and notched up roughly the same homicide rate as Belgium.⁴ Similarly extreme disparities in murder rates are found in Brazil and Guatemala.

An extraordinarily diverse array of criminal groups and armed factions is now engaged in illicit activity across the region, each with its own mores and footprints. These range from street gangs or *maras* in the

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Northern Triangle of Central America to criminal fiefdoms in Brazil, from drug cartels and criminal syndicates in Mexico to guerrilla forces and dissidents in Colombia, Mexico, and Paraguay, and from militias formed by former members of the security forces in Brazil to neo-paramilitary groups in Colombia. Whereas peripheral and border territories across Latin America—themselves shaped by a historically limited state presence—have provided plenty of opportunities for criminal groups to thrive, these organizations have grown and diversified in complicity; direct or indirect; overt or tacit; active or passive alongside their local communities, security forces, and state authorities at multiple different levels.⁵ Strategic trading hubs such as the port cities of Tumaco and Buenaventura on Colombia's Pacific Coast or border cities such as Ciudad Juárez in Mexico or Ciudad del Este, located in the tri-border area of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil, have lost none of their appeal to organized crime and commercial hustlers. Peripheral areas of major cities, for their part, now act as magnets for gangs and extortion rackets. Meanwhile, the deep rural hinterlands of Colombia and Venezuela have become hubs for multiple forms of illicit trafficking, coveted by competing armed factions often acting in league with military and state officials.⁶

Aside from the insecurity and violence they generate, armed criminal groups exert demonstrable political, social, and even electoral influence over certain circumscribed territories, both rural and urban.⁷ At the same time, their sway over national democratic politics through the use of channels of high-level corruption and influence trafficking remains opaque, although numerous scandals corroborating these connections have fueled public outrage.⁸ Electorates across Latin America have already taken great offense at evidence of these high-level illicit linkages, most notably in Guatemala and Mexico, and tend to regard the infiltration of criminal actors in political life as a large part of the reason for the failure of governments

to handle resources properly or provide adequately for their populations.⁹

The combination of chronic criminal violence, selective territorial control, and supposed national political influence together represent an interconnected series of threats, to both public well-being and the stability of democracies. More immediately, they have prompted across Latin America an assortment of public responses that have included traditional demands for tougher law enforcement (so-called *mano dura*) but have more recently featured calls to prosecute corrupt officials, purge state bodies and security forces, or recast entirely the ruling paradigms of security policy. Meanwhile, vigilante violence and eroding faith in democracy show some of the risks of failing to address public anxieties over lawless streets and venal practices in high office.

The Reconfiguration of Organized Crime

More than a decade after then-President Felipe Calderón declared Mexico's war on drugs, the country's public security crisis has descended into a trough. The year 2017 went down as the country's bloodiest since official records began some 20 years ago, with 29,168 registered homicides. An even greater number of violent deaths are expected in 2018.¹⁰ Instead of disrupting command structures, debilitating criminal organizations and reducing criminal violence, the cure promulgated by Calderón and perpetuated by his successor Enrique Peña Nieto has proven worse than the disease. The war on drugs, the deployment of troops and militarized policing strategies to wage it, and the targeting of high-ranking members of organized crime groups in effect accelerated an incipient process of fragmentation in the criminal underworld towards horizontal networks of smaller outfits.

Adapting to Crackdowns

Major drug cartels that once had the means to control the entire drug trade between Colombia and

the United States have splintered into an interconnected array of national and regional cartels, local mafias, and national and transnational trafficking networks (*transportistas*). At the end of Peña Nieto's *sexenio* (six-year term), estimates suggest up to 300 criminal groups could have been operating across Mexico. In comparison, during Calderón's tenure only eight major cartels fought for access to and control over drug trafficking routes to the north.¹¹

In the course of this fragmentation, criminal groups that lost access to or were left in control of minor segments of the trafficking routes diversified their illicit activities, which in turn fueled turf wars in which local communities bore the brunt of intensifying cartel violence.¹² Opting primarily for predatory or extractive criminal rackets, including (but not limited to) extortion, kidnapping, human smuggling, and resource theft, particularly illegal siphoning of oil (*huachicoleo*), many of these new criminal groups have tended to prey on local communities in order to make up for their losses in traditional drug-related revenue streams.¹³ At the same time, narco-trafficking still remains a major source of income and a cause of fighting between a few powerful cartels, such as the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

Extortion rackets, paired with extraordinarily violent behavior and increased rootedness in local communities and institutions, have become the means *par excellence* for numerous criminal groups to demonstrate and reinforce social and territorial control. As a result, local communities and authorities are both co-opted and intimidated. In the Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—small-scale extortion has transformed from what was a “relatively small-time, hyper-local revenue stream” into the most “emblematic crime” of the region, and has become inextricably linked to the phenomenon of gang violence and to the rise of other illicit activities.¹⁴ In Honduras “some 79 percent of registered small businesses . . . and 80 percent of the country's informal

traders report they are extorted.”¹⁵ In neighboring El Salvador, maras extort up to 70 percent of businesses, in particular transportation companies, in municipalities where they are present (estimated to be 247 out of 262 municipalities).¹⁶ With 692 transportation workers killed in El Salvador between 2011 and 2016 compared to 93 police officers, until quite recently “it has been more dangerous to drive a bus than to fight gang crime.”¹⁷

During the past 15 years, governments in the Northern Triangle repeatedly opted for *mano dura* (iron fist) policies—*Cero Tolerancia* in Honduras, *Plan Mano Dura* in El Salvador, and *Plan Escoba* in Guatemala—in a bid to crack down on gang violence. But indiscriminate mass arrests of thousands of alleged gang members did little to weaken criminal structures. On the contrary, the decision to segregate imprisoned gang members according to the group to which they belonged, triggered a structural reorganization, as a result of which the maras evolved into “sophisticated criminal organizations.”¹⁸ “Segregation allowed the gangs to turn the prisons into their own criminal fiefdoms and bases of both internal and external operations, facilitating the development of a gang hierarchy where power flowed down from incarcerated gang leaders.”¹⁹ This transformation process simultaneously mirrored a shift in the scope and nature of illicit activities as maras on the outside set up sophisticated extortion schemes to tax local businesses. Originally a response to the financial needs of their incarcerated gang leaders, these rackets enabled maras to consolidate and extend their territorial and social control in the long term.²⁰

The transformation into more vertical and sophisticated criminal organizations was one of the most notable effects of Central America's crackdown on street gangs. But iron fist policies also provoked another subtle yet equally pernicious effect that served to further reinforce street gangs' grip on local communities. Indiscriminate detention of individuals on grounds of suspect behavior and appearance

rather than proven criminal activity has tended to further alienate both individuals and communities from local and state authorities. The result of this disaffection with the state is all the more significant in the Northern Triangle given that street gangs are, first and foremost, a social phenomenon, rooted in

the socioeconomic exclusion of large parts of the population and sustained by pride in their estrangement from mainstream society.²¹ As one expert on street gangs pointed out, in the case of El Salvador “gangs did not steal the territory from the state, they simply occupied it when it was empty [after the armed conflict].”²² Nowadays, maras in El Salvador draw on a broad estimated social support base of 500,000 people, equivalent to 8 percent of the country’s population.

Perceived mistreatment by El Salvador’s police, in this context, is more likely to drive gang growth than weaken the gangs: one young man observed to Crisis Group that “If they call me a gang member, treat me like a gang member, maybe I am one of them.”²³

The Social Roles of Crime

Security policies that address the threat of criminal groups purely through law enforcement fail to take sufficient account of the psychosocial roots of these organizations, and the multiple social and economic roles they have come to play. Adolescents in El Salvador turn towards street gangs for multiple reasons, whether to gain protection from repressive policing or attain a source of identity, pride, and belonging in a context marked by scarce economic opportunities and negligible upward mobility. Meanwhile, firms in Guatemala

City’s municipal market have turned to street gangs for protection from more predatory groups, paying extortions on a regular basis.²⁴ Naturally, criminal groups are often eager to provide these services to local communities, ranging from the provision of security, mechanisms of conflict resolution and basic economic

opportunities, to a sense of collective identity.

Colombia provides perhaps the most prominent regional example, first of the initial success of robust and highly militarized security policies, followed by the subsequent entrenchment of criminal and armed groups’ territorial and social control. In 2000, the U.S.-backed initiative *Plan Colombia* started assisting and financing the Colombian government’s strategy to combat drug cartels and left-wing insur-

gencies. This campaign undeniably weakened the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the country’s main insurgent group, and eventually nudged the guerrilla towards negotiations with the Colombian government and the landmark 2016 peace accord. Throughout this period, the country’s appalling levels of homicide fell consistently, although credit for this must be shared by activist local governments in Colombia’s major cities and by judicial and police reforms and modernizations.

Forced eradication of coca crops formed a backbone of Plan Colombia, based on the understanding that the illicit drug trade drives criminal violence and internal armed conflict. However, massive aerial and manual eradication provoked disenchantment among local communities in peripheral territories, where the revenues generated by coca crops helped

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sustain people's precarious livelihoods. Under the pressure of counter-narcotic offensives, illicit crop production shifted towards the most peripheral and economically deprived parts of the country—notably to border or coastal regions such as Nariño, Cauca, and Putumayo in the south, or to Norte de Santander on the frontier with Venezuela—where it became the life-blood of communities that were already steeped in illicit activity or had few other livelihood options. Criminal groups involved in the drug trade—small-scale drug cartels, left-wing guerrillas, paramilitary groups and their criminal successors, sometimes linked to the armed forces, police, or the state—were able to establish close links with local communities in need of protection services and a market to sell their illegal crops.

This evolution strengthened the legitimacy of criminal groups vis-à-vis perceived corruptible, weak, or absent state authorities that often lacked the means or commitment to enforce the rule of law, resolve local disputes, or boost development in the country's sparsely populated periphery. For example, in 2014 less than 50 percent of Colombia's municipalities—453 out of 1,122—counted on the presence of a public prosecutor's office.²⁵ Under recently elected conservative president Iván Duque, whose party led opposition to the peace accord, a failure to deliver on core elements of the agreement such as rural reform and voluntary illicit crop substitution programs risks generating a further backlash in these local communities.²⁶ In a context marked by a proliferation and expansion of non-state armed groups vying to occupy the space left behind by the FARC, this approach could drive disenchanted communities into the arms of these groups, all of them eager to embrace marginalized communities' "orphanhood vis-à-vis the state," as Alma Guillermoprieto has aptly put it.²⁷

While organized crime's "transformation into a supplier of resources and goods in marginalized social sectors" has earned it a degree of often

grudging social acceptance in Colombia, parts of Central America, and urban Brazil excessively coercive security policies have reinforced the mutual interdependence between criminal groups and local communities.²⁸ This is not to say that local communities are intrinsically criminal, nor is it to argue that criminal groups are genuinely interested in the greater welfare of communities in which they operate. For instance, "one community leader in ELN territory in Cauca called the group a 'necessary evil,' because without them thieves and rapists would 'invade' her town."²⁹ However, a pronounced shift towards criminal rackets operating within clearly defined territorial limits, and the failure or inability of state authorities to provide basic services, have provided criminal groups with opportunities to shore up a social support base, and fertile ground to undermine, contest, and to a certain degree, erode state authority and legitimacy. As a leader of Brazil's *Comando Vermelho* fittingly put it, "The gangs, no matter which, are part of the favelas. We come from it and blend into it, are part of the fabric."³⁰

Territorial Control and State Linkages

The shift toward firm control over relatively small parcels of territory can be regarded as one of the defining features of contemporary organized crime in Latin America. While the move toward territorial control derives in large part from the evolution in criminal markets, and the rising significance of extortion and other predatory rackets, repeated and prolonged exposure to coercive, often militarized security policies have obliged criminal groups to develop more complex coping strategies to mitigate the potential threat to their operations. For instance, patterns of criminal violence in Latin America show how extraordinarily selective these groups have become in terms of who is being targeted, where, and for what purpose. High profile and outspoken members of society such as local politicians, journalists,

community leaders, and human rights activists are on the front line of communities exposed to the ambitions of criminal groups. In 2017, at least 212 human rights defenders were killed in Latin America and the Caribbean, equivalent to an estimated 68 percent of all registered homicides of human rights defenders globally; 156 murders or 50 percent of the global death toll, took place in Brazil and Colombia.³¹ In the runup to Mexico's general elections in July, an estimated 80 percent of acts of political violence, including homicides, assaults, and threats, pointed to the involvement of organized crime.³²

The trend toward highly selective use of violence is underscored by its uneven geographic spread, even within confined areas exposed to high levels of homicide. At present, 80 percent of homicides in Latin America's large- and medium-sized cities occur on just 2 percent of streets.³³ Not all of this concentrated violence can be ascribed to menacing shantytowns or deprived urban areas. Somewhat surprisingly, Mexico remains one of the world's top ten tourism destinations despite homicides skyrocketing in some of its major beach resorts.³⁴ Indeed, the resort of Los Cabos in Baja California ranked first and Acapulco, in the state of Guerrero, third among the world's most homicidal cities with more than 300,000 inhabitants not affected by armed conflict, with homicide rates of 111.33 and 106.63 respectively.³⁵ Los Cabos nevertheless continues to sustain a thriving trade in foreign tourism, even as the internecine criminal violence occasionally intrudes onto beaches and into hotel lobbies.³⁶ In spite of the tremendous violence criminal groups are disposed to deploy,

they also seek to divert or minimize the attention of state authorities and security forces by keeping a low profile or by controlling local media (in Mexican argot, they seek to *enfriar la plaza*).³⁷ Especially in the Baja California peninsula, where vested economic interests are at stake—control over drug trafficking routes further north and the potential drug trade servicing tourists in beach resorts—criminal rivalry for spoils is fierce, but the desire to become involved in a prolonged war with security forces is scant.

Large-scale atrocities such as the Piedras Negras and Allende massacres in Coahuila state committed by the Zetas cartel in response to former Zetas operatives' collaboration with U.S. authorities in March and April 2011, and the disappearance of 43 students in Iguala, Guerrero, in September 2014, have seemingly become less frequent. Although extremely effective in terms of cowering local communities, major atrocities run counter to efforts to establish rigorous local control by stirring public indignation at the national and international level, or stoking calls for a military crackdown on territories infested by crime.³⁸

Large-scale human rights violations would certainly not have been possible without multiple links between state and non-state agents.

Rather than perpetrating mass killings or displaying excessive levels of violence, enforced disappearances have instead become one of the preferred methods of exerting criminal control in Mexico. From 2007 to April 2018, more than 36,000 cases of disappeared people have been registered at the national level.³⁹ In the Mexican state of Veracruz,

where murder rates prior to 2016 were relatively low compared to other regions, 2,750 cases of disappearances have been reported to state prosecutors; civil society organizations fear the numbers could reach as high as 20,000.⁴⁰

Illustrating the sheer magnitude of enforced disappearance, these numbers hint to a yet more sinister feature of contemporary organized crime: the porosity of barriers between state, security forces, and crime as the latter blends into its host societies. The perpetration of such large-scale human rights violations would certainly not have been possible without multiple links between state and non-state agents, which have created a permissive environment for state-criminal collusion. This phenomenon has been particularly pervasive in the case of Mexico as a consequence of its prolonged war on drugs, with criminal groups marshaling resources to neutralize potential security responses before they materialize. And yet, the Mexican case is in no way unique. Widespread links between criminal non-state and state actors have been evident throughout the region, especially in Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, Brazil, and Venezuela.

John Sullivan has coined the term “neo-feudal zone” to characterize territories not only contested by criminal groups but also marked by a high depth of criminal penetration, including the maintenance of mercenary armies, taxation of economic activities via entrenched extortion schemes, and the extraction of resources, as well as domination over local political and community authorities to avert potential security responses.⁴¹ Far from being a one-sided relationship, however, “neo-feudal zones” need not subsist solely in the dominion of organized crime. State officials have continuously co-opted criminal groups to pursue their own economic and political interests. And in this respect, the crackdowns and law enforcement strategies preferred in most Latin American countries as the means to fight crime have spurred major shifts in the nature of illicit networks among criminal groups, the private sector, and state agents. State agents have in some cases managed to appropriate the contemporary dynamics of organized crime for their own purposes, and thereby redefine the scope and nature of state-criminal collusion.

Latin America’s Modern Democracies

More than three decades into the Third Wave of Democratization, Latin America at large has consolidated the foundations of liberal democracy. Strengthened state, judicial, and electoral institutions across the region, though far from perfect, have mostly allowed for the peaceful alternation in power between opposing political parties, with both right and left wing forces competing for mass public support. This is a far cry from prolonged periods of military dictatorship and authoritarian rule, whether in the Cold War or interspersed throughout the region’s post-colonial history.

Subnational Authoritarians

In the 1990s, new parties began to eclipse their disgraced but long dominant forerunners. The fragmentation and decay of traditional parties and the high tide of alternative political forces from across the ideological spectrum have exacerbated the dependence of national forces on local party structures for electoral backing. The nature of relations between local-level and national politics, especially in times of elections, has enticed scholars to argue that formal advancement towards and consolidation of democracy “has been territorially uneven and mostly limited to the national level.”⁴² Referred to as “regime juxtaposition,” scholars argue that the transition towards democracy at the national level does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with the abandonment or withering of subnational undemocratic regimes, or “subnational authoritarianism.”⁴³ Under these local authoritarian enclaves, systemic corruption, practices of electoral fraud, restriction of civil rights, and targeted violence as means to pursue vested political interests belie the creation of formal democracies, and prepare the way for the consolidation of “neo-feudal zones.”⁴⁴

The transition of Mexico toward a multiparty democracy in 2000 after 71 years of hegemonic rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) is

the example *par excellence* of this political opening. Mexico's transition has profoundly reshaped the relations between federal and state governments, transferring considerable powers to the latter and earning them the epithet "viceroyalties," in reference to the omnipotent jurisdictions of colonial Spanish America.⁴⁵ In fact, Mexico's state governors have come to embody the very core of what constitute subnational undemocratic regimes: 14 former and current state governors are being investigated for corruption and links to organized crime.⁴⁶

The Mexican state of Veracruz is a case in point, illustrating the extent to which criminal groups, especially the Zetas cartel and its successors, have been able to infiltrate and corrupt state authorities, and vice versa. According to a Crisis Group report, under former governors Fidel Herrera Beltrán and Javier Duarte, "Veracruz played host to increasingly fluid political and criminal interconnections, accelerating its descent into extreme insecurity."⁴⁷ An illicit network bridging organized crime and state agents, including high officials in the police force, the state attorney's office, and the state government, enabled the installation of a regime of fear designed to loot public resources, prey on civilians and, if necessary, eliminate dissenting voices within state authorities and beyond. With 23 assassinations and 8 enforced disappearances since 2011, Veracruz has become Mexico's most dangerous state for journalists to work in.⁴⁸ The strategy of the Zetas cartel and its fragmented successor groups to actively blend into and assimilate local and state power structures protected them in large part from repressive state interventions and judicial prosecution. Collusion between organized crime and state authorities at the highest level, created a permissive environment in which criminal organizations could engage in illicit activities while shielded behind a cloak of impunity.

Furthermore, police chiefs, emboldened by complicity with organized crime groups, used their authority over lower level police officers to establish

a "regime of terror" within the force designed to serve criminal purposes.

One way was to adopt a passive response to crime. Officers were explicitly instructed to reject citizens' requests of help and assistance, to arrive late at crime scenes, to not report sightings of suspicious vehicles and armed individuals or groups, and to stay clear of ongoing armed confrontations, according to a former police officer. . . Active participation in criminal operations, including kidnappings-for-ransom and forced disappearances, formed another part of police operations.⁴⁹

This level of criminal influence over the security force is increasingly echoed elsewhere in Mexico, such as in the states of Michoacán and Guerrero. In Coahuila, the Zetas cartel infiltrated the security forces to the degree that they could use state prisons as a safe haven to escape persecution.

Colombia's "parapolitics scandal" is another case in point, and remains one of Latin America's emblematic cases regarding the scope and nature of state-criminal collusion. Subnational undemocratic regimes flourished across Colombia in the wake of the opening of its political system and decentralization of state power, a process that began with the introduction of local elections for mayors in 1986 and was enshrined in the constitutional reform process of 1991. As a perverse result of reforms intended to deepen the country's democracy, local political elites frequently engaged in alliances with paramilitary groups, and vice versa, to preserve the status quo. Following the demobilization of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), the national paramilitary umbrella organization, in late 2006, revelations emerged regarding what would come to be known as the "parapolitics scandal:" an extensive web of links between paramilitaries and politicians, ranging from mayors and local politicians

to governors and members of Colombia's National Congress. By April 2016, 102 members of Congress and 97 Senators were under investigation, 42 of whom had been convicted.⁵⁰ “[R]eflecting the degree of political ambition of different paramilitary fronts, economic interests and local conflict dynamics,” the depth of criminal penetration of local political life as well as the preferred means of exerting power over communities—whether through intimidation, violence, social and territorial control, or bribery—differed across the country.⁵¹ This recent history of criminal co-option of political life continues to resonate deeply within contemporary Colombia.⁵²

Driven by their hunger for votes in highly competitive electoral arenas, the dependence of relatively new, fragile, and weakly structured national parties on local party bosses to secure votes has reinforced subnational authoritarian regimes. Of course, national politics is hardly free of illicit influences, particularly as power fragments across various parties and interest groups. The complex transactions between executive and legislative powers, opaque public procurement practices, and opportunities to secure future favors through illicit financing of election campaigns have provided the main avenues for corruption across national politico-economic elites in the region. Latin America's largest and most resonant corruption scandals in recent years, those of Petrobras and Odebrecht in Brazil, exemplify how these domestic political arrangements and powerful business and government cabals fostered corruption rackets, which were later redeployed across Latin America's political elites.⁵³

Local political contexts shaped by cronyism and rent-seeking have been at the forefront of the interests of organized crime due to the opportunities to co-opt underpaid local police forces, gain public contracts to launder money and divert public funds for illicit enrichment, while also benefiting from comparatively lower levels

of institutional oversight and media coverage. Tellingly, the entire police force of the municipality of Ocampo, in the Mexican state of Michoacán, was arrested on charges of alleged links to the organized crime and its involvement in the assassination of a candidate running for mayor in June 2018.⁵⁴ Political opportunism and vested interests have created natural incentives for incumbents and criminal groups alike to engage in mutually beneficial relationships, and for state authorities and national parties to turn a blind eye to their illicit and often violent nature.

Political Violence and Influence

For more than 70 years, the hegemonic rule of Mexico's PRI forged a system of mutual accommodation between criminal groups and state agents at multiple levels, establishing a “state-sponsored protection racket” that granted license and impunity to illicit organizations in exchange for their readiness to observe certain controls over their activities.⁵⁵ Mexico's transition towards a multiparty democracy, while raising the potential benefits to political parties and candidates of colluding with criminal groups, also caused the breakdown of established arrangements that reached to the heart of the central state. The emerging political divisions and rivalries between municipal, state, and federal levels within a multiparty system meant that guarantees of impunity traditionally enjoyed by organized crime under the system of vertical one-party rule could not be vouchsafed. In a bid to recover these benefits, criminal groups resorted to violence, intimidation, and co-option as leverage in negotiations with the new political authorities, above all at the local level. As a result, illicit networks now find themselves in a constant state of flux, with violence spiking during election campaigns as relations between criminal groups and state officials or political candidates are reshuffled.

While it is not always clear whether a particular case of political violence in Latin America is the work of organized crime or of inter- and intra-party feuds, targeted violence against politicians has become pervasive, especially in Mexico and Brazil. Ranging from coercive actions to prevent undesirable candidates—either those affiliated with rival groups or others pushing for reforms that could have potentially adverse effects on illicit revenues—from running for office to killings of political contenders, a dominant pattern has become the targeting of politicians, especially from the opposition, at the municipal level prior to polling day. At least 152 political candidates and activists were assassinated in Mexico during the 2018 election campaign.⁵⁶

An estimated 80 percent of these murders targeted politicians at the municipal level, and 60 percent of the victims formed part of the opposition.⁵⁷ In Brazil, homicidal violence against politicians is lower, with 9 incumbents murdered on average per year since 2007. But of the 98 political assassinations registered over the past decade 28 of them, or 32 percent, were in 2017. During the decade all reported victims held office at the municipal level: 85 town council members, four mayors, and one deputy mayor.⁵⁸

Criminal groups' readiness to resort to violence by no means represents the only way they exert influence over local authorities. The shift towards tighter territorial control by illicit groups, against a background of political fragmentation and weakened party structures, has spurred other avenues for collusion. Criminal groups' control over local communities is of particular interest to political forces as these

organizations have the power to stifle opponents' electoral campaigns, or hand over blocks of voters to a preferred candidate. In Brazil's urban peripheries, especially in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the nature of illicit activities effectively shapes "criminalized

electoral politics" between criminal and political actors. While criminal groups engaging in non-extractive illicit activities (e.g. drug retail) primarily target political rivals, predatory criminal groups capitalize on their control over local communities to influence voter intentions during elections and translate it into political power.⁵⁹ Although the extent and degree of this phenomenon is hard to quantify, militias formed by former security force members are reckoned to control 45

percent of Rio de Janeiro's favelas—an estimated two million people—and drug gangs a further 37 percent.⁶⁰

Revelations that political leaders of both ARENA and FMLN allegedly made payments of \$350,000 to El Salvador's major street gangs, *MS-13* and *Barrio-18*, prior to the 2014 presidential elections in exchange for votes highlight their potential influence over the country's electoral processes.⁶¹ As a veteran government official put it:

*Let's be honest: every single party in this country talks to gangs, how they would not, since they have to organize rallies in their territories?*⁶²

Corruption and Eroding Confidence

High levels of electoral competitiveness have driven up the costs of electoral campaigning across Latin

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America. Patchy regulations and lax enforcement of election financing across the region have traditionally propelled illicit funding, and private companies have made extensive use of these channels of influence to gain preferential access to public contracts or other favors from the state.⁶³ These practices reached an extreme in the case of Brazilian construction company Odebrecht, accused of paying \$788 million in bribes across 12 countries, most of them in Latin America. Even though the Odebrecht case has not pointed to any intimate links between political and business elites and violent organized crime, it does, at the very least, cast light on a certain proximity and overlap between different types of illicit activities. In fact, in Colombia the Odebrecht payments have been primarily made to politicians that were investigated or allegedly linked to the “parapolitics scandal,” as was the case of Senators Álvaro Ashton and Musa Besaile.⁶⁴

While the judiciary is traditionally intended to serve as a check on abuses of power, judicial systems across the region have not been spared involvement in outrageous corruption cases. In 2017, the highest spheres of Colombia’s judicial system were rocked by the “Cartel de la Toga” case, which appeared to point to the sale of impunity to rich, high-level politicians. Accordingly, members of Colombia’s Supreme Court and now disgraced anti-corruption prosecutor Luis Gustavo Moreno set up a sophisticated extortion scheme to manipulate ongoing prosecutions in exchange for bribes, targeting in particular politicians investigated for corruption charges and linked to the “parapolitics scandal.”⁶⁵ Again, although collusive actions between violent criminal organizations and state or judicial actors do not lie at the core of the “Cartel de la Toga” case, as with the Odebrecht scandal, parapoliticians seemingly constitute the nexus between distinct illicit networks which, at the very least, share labyrinthine channels of influence and meeting spaces.

The perceived ease with which politicians, the judiciary, business elites, and criminal groups have



President Maduro speaking at a Venezuelan Constituent Assembly session on August 10, 2017. (Presidency Press)

been able to share these spaces of encounter within democratic systems—engaging in the process in all manner of illicit secondary markets in state and judicial power—has helped to sow deep public disenchantment with democracy. According to the 2017 regional survey by *Latinobarómetro*, despite the region’s authoritarian past a mere 53 percent of the population on average prefer democracy over other political systems, and only 30 percent are satisfied with democracy. On the contrary, a staggering 79 percent believe that the system is designed to benefit elites rather than the public interest—a figure that has risen in recent years. Unsurprisingly, democratically elected institutions such as government and congress, as well as the judiciary and political parties, make up the least trusted institutions within the state, with 25 percent of Latin Americans or less approving of them. Once again, these rates are also falling.⁶⁶

Populist Responses and Risks

Rampant insecurity and pervasive levels of systemic corruption and impunity have provided fertile ground for populist attacks on the political establishment by modern *caudillos* from the left and right. Playing on public concerns over insecurity and corruption, charismatic leaders have evoked the prospect of providing quick, comprehensive solutions to these maladies, whether through crackdowns on crime, eradication of corruption or the prospect of generating economic miracles. As a result, the complex issues that are intimately bound up with the region’s

public security crises, whether as cause or consequence—such as illicit coca cultivation in Colombia, socio-economic and ethnic exclusion in Brazil, or illegal migration in Central America’s Northern Triangle—are frequently simplified and demonized, thereby concealing and misrepresenting the problems that governments should address as a priority and in a holistic fashion. With crime and corruption reportedly the region’s main concerns, it is not surprising that the armed forces traditionally fare the best after churches in public opinion surveys in Mexico, Central America’s Northern Triangle, Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil, even though support for them is waver- ing as a result of excessive use of violence and human rights violations.⁶⁷ At the same time, exceptions to the clamor for iron fist security approaches are becoming far more prominent, most notably in the anti-corruption drive in Guatemala, and in Colombia’s various peace processes under former President Juan Manuel Santos. Most recently, the newly elected president of Mexico Andrés Manuel López Obrador has vowed to dismantle the 12-year “war on drugs,” although it is still too early to determine the potential political consequences of his huge electoral success, given its basis in his personal integrity and resolve rather than on concrete policy proposals.

Venezuela now constitutes the outstanding example of how the concentration of executive power and veneration of a messianic leader has only served to exacerbate the original condition that the public had voted to cure. With pledges to dismantle the highly corrupt politico-economic establishment that ruled the oil-rich country and quash the inequity it perpetuated, the populist government, first led from 1999 by Hugo Chávez and since 2013 by Nicolás Maduro, has progressively weakened liberal democratic safeguards and created a factionalized authoritarian regime in which crime and corruption have become the glue keeping the system alive. “The creeping authoritarianism of the latter years of former President Hugo Chávez’s rule and the first years

under Maduro has metastasized into full-blown partisan exploitation of state and judicial institutions.”⁶⁸

Venezuela’s armed forces have long been co-opted by the *chavista* government through the positioning of high-ranking military officers in strategic positions in ministries and state companies; to a large extent the military have come to form the cornerstone of Maduro’s regime. In February 2016, Maduro issued a presidential decree to establish the *Arco Minero*, a 100,000 square kilometer area for mining south of the Orinoco River in Bolívar and Amazonas states. To run mining operations, potential private investors are obliged to form a joint venture with state-owned companies, such as the newly founded, military-controlled Anonymous Military Company of Mining.⁶⁹ However, independent reports suggest that, despite frequent clashes between the armed forces and criminal groups including gangs, paramilitary structures, and Colombian guerrillas that all operate in the area, the military are colluding with several of these to loot the natural resources within the Arco Minero. “Former [Bolívar] state governor Liborio Guarulla, who left office in 2017, said that in his state, ‘those in control [of illegal mining] are the guerrillas, under an unofficial agreement with the armed forces.’”⁷⁰ Tellingly, following the landslide victory of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in the October 2017 regional elections, clear evidence of electoral fraud surfaced in Bolívar state—for the first time ever in any elections during the *chavista* era.⁷¹

Conclusions

Deeply entrenched over decades, organized crime has married with systemic corruption and high levels of impunity to generate multiple forms of political and economic capital across the ideological spectrum in Latin America. But recent experience gives some provisional grounds for optimism. The end point of popular disaffection with flawed democracies and illicit links between criminal

groups, political elites, and the private sector need not inevitably result in an embrace of authoritarianism and/or charismatic *caudillos*. In Guatemala, the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) has gained huge public support after it filed charges of corruption against high-ranking government officials, elected representatives, and military officers, including former President Otto Pérez Molina and former Vice-President Roxana Baldetti, both currently in jail.⁷² The Support Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) has also assumed the tall order of disentangling extensive illicit networks in the face of hostile headwinds from the Honduran Congress.⁷³ Meanwhile, the Colombian peace agreement has formally set the stage for the Colombian government and former FARC guerrillas to engage in joint endeavors aimed at reducing coca production and dismantling organized crime.⁷⁴

In Mexico, López Obrador's landslide victory in July underlined the failure of the country's war on drugs, and, as in Guatemala, the scale of public support for a clean-out of state and security institutions as well as a more holistic approach to the country's appalling levels of violence. Such an approach could include, but should not be limited to, the greater professionalization of security forces, increased external oversight of police and military, greater use of evidence-based community policing, improved urban planning to prevent segregation and exclusion, progressive and context-specific drug legislation, efforts to reform the jail system and rehabilitate prisoners, and stricter gun controls. Severing the illicit networks that allow criminal groups to collude with political forces and state officials across the region would also require strengthened judicial and prosecution systems, as well as tighter controls on political financing and public procurement practices. It should be obvious that none of these proposals are remotely easy to achieve. There is

no simple solution to the corruption and collusion generated by electoral competition and fraught executive–legislative relations aside from greater respect for and enforcement of the law in each country's commanding heights. Nor is there any quick and non-painful corrective to the region's inequality, the absence of the state from peripheral areas, or cross-border illicit trade.

Where disgruntled citizens have led an open revolt against corrupt security forces and rampant crime, the results have proved discouraging. A handful of towns and cities across Mexico have gone to great lengths to effectively secede from the national state in an effort to restore law and order. In Tancitaro, Michoacán, a public uprising led by militias pushed out both cartels and the local police. Yet despite Tancitaro's nominal self-rule—the local government fled in the wake of the revolt—the militias have come to impose themselves in a way painfully reminiscent of the days when drug cartels roamed the streets in league with corruptible local police and government officials.⁷⁵

In short, neither new security policies nor public uprisings are assured of success. Opponents of every reform endeavor are robust and relentless, and a definitive escape from Latin America's vortex of crime, sub-national authoritarianism, corruption, and impunity remains elusive. Governments from both left and right have reinforced coercive and militarized security policies even though the evidence suggests any short-term operational successes are unlikely to be matched by a long-term reduction in criminal violence. A set of “extraordinary measures” introduced by the El Salvadoran government in April 2016 to break the maras' sophisticated jail-based command structures—ironically, the result of the first set of iron fist policies—aims to cut down on communication between incarcerated gang members and their peers outside.⁷⁶ Following the decision by Brazil's federal government to put the military in charge of Rio de Janeiro's police force

in February 2018, shootouts between the security forces and criminal groups as well as police-related killings have been on the rise.⁷⁷ This drift to coercive security policies is now set to intensify. In a country shaken by major corruption scandals, and where the public darling, former President Lula da Silva, has been imprisoned on corruption charges, populist right-wing hardliner Jair Bolsonaro exploited anti-establishment sentiments to win the presidential election in late October.⁷⁸

Awareness of the counterproductive effects of existing security policies, and the way they have hit, decapitated, and dismantled criminal organizations without preventing the entrenchment of organized crime and its nexus with state and society, is on the rise. But the complementary policies needed to address these chronic dilemmas have not yet been underwritten by a political mobilization strong enough to implement and sustain them. Neither governments nor civil society have yet grasped how to unpick the roles of crime as a livelihood, source of identity, and route to power. Reducing this pervasiveness will require tremendous persistence across politics, the judiciary, and the security forces, possibly more than fragmented democracies allow for, yet certainly more than authoritarian leaders care for. **PRISM**

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