Blog

# Recasting the Security Policy in Central America

BY José Miguel Cruz | May 10, 2012


In the mid-1990s, the Inter-American Development Bank published various reports indicating that El Salvador and Guatemala had the highest homicide rates in Latin America. Fast-forward sixteen years later and these two countries form, along with neighboring Honduras, the most violent region in the world by all accounts.

With a combined population of 28 million, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador constitute the northern triangle of Central America; a sub-region that has experienced almost twice-as-much violence as Mexico has since 2006, when Calderon's war on drugs started. According to official data, approximately 50 thousand people have been killed in Mexico since 2006. In contrast, the northern triangle, with a population four times smaller than Mexico, has endured nearly 90,000 murders during that same period. But while Mexico, with an annual homicide rate of 18 deaths per one hundred thousand inhabitants, is a tragedy, the northern triangle, with average homicide rates surpassing 60 per one hundred thousand, is a catastrophe.

Many believe that the appalling rates of violence in the sub-region are the result of the penetration of Mexican and Colombian drug cartels. According to this argument, in their effort to control the drug routes from South America to the United States, criminal organizations are not only bringing unparalleled violence to Central America, but also taking over highly fragile public institutions. The logical extension of this argument then is that this relentless assault of transnational gangs can only be addressed with greater police and military force.

Although the presence of criminal cartels has undeniably contributed to the skyrocketing violence in the northern triangle, the fundamental problem of security in Central America does not have to do merely with drug traffickers—or social conditions, for that matter. It has to do with government institutions. It has to do with local political and criminal-justice organizations that are extremely corrupt. It has to do with institutions that have been historically pervaded by local criminal lords, death squads, crooked politicians, and vicious paramilitaries who were present long before the Mexican Zetas or the Colombian syndicates began crowding the illegal enterprises of the region.

Despite the fact that corrupt institutions have played a role in the region's ever-increasing levels of violence, the current policy debate aimed at tackling crime in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador revolves almost exclusively around drugs and gangs and ignores the importance of institutions. While the U.S. government is fixated on stopping the flow of narcotics from the Andes and preventing the spread of criminal groups, Central American countries are interested in more resources, weapons and manpower. Although both visions converge in strengthening police and military forces to increase their might against the drug lords, the resulting strategies tend to neglect the necessity of cleaning-up those same corrupted organizations.

Even the seemingly audacious proposal of Guatemalan President Otto Pérez to legalize drugs in the region is really just an ill-considered distraction in the debate about security in the isthmus. The decriminalization of drugs will not reduce crime in Central America. After all, historically, these countries have always faced violence over state control of already perfectly legal markets, including coffee, dairy products, and even transportation permits.

Nor will the violence be reduced by simply expanding and training police and military forces. Actually, Washington has been doing that since the 1990s, and the results remain less than impressive. This kind of cooperation and the millions invested in criminal-justice institutions in the region have not made them any less prone to corruption. Rather, Central American institutions are legendary for their involvement in mafias and their capacity to suppress political opposition, as the Honduran coup recently illustrated. In a regional survey conducted by Vanderbilt University's Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 2008, more than sixty percent of Guatemalans, and nearly half of Salvadoran and Hondurans said that their local police were involved in criminal activities. In Guatemala and Honduras, police chiefs, military officers, and government officials have been repeatedly linked to drug cartels and death squads. Even in El Salvador, whose institutions are generally considered as less infiltrated by drug traffickers, American officials have expressed concern for alleged ties between recently appointed police officials and organized crime.

Traditional international assistance has also failed to improve the effectiveness of police institutions. The Salvadoran police are perhaps the best equipped and most "American-trained" organization in the region. Yet, the underfunded Nicaraguan police, with a budget that is a mere fraction of the Salvadoran budget and police officers that earn a third of what their Salvadoran peers earn, has managed to become one of the more effective and highly-reputable law enforcement institutions in Latin America. The difference has to do more with political decisions than just resources.

Washington needs to reshuffle its approach to security in Central America. The renewed commitment of President Obama to the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) is a unique opportunity to focus in what really matters, namely, the creation of democratic accountable institutions and a far-reaching effort to uproot corruption and crime from local public organizations. Plans that favor military budgets and Special Forces units need to be seriously reconsidered.

Doing anything less than addressing the root, institutional causes of crime and violence in Central America will amount to the U.S. simply lining the pockets of criminals and training the new paramilitary criminals (like the Zetas) in the region. That will require a balanced effort that links traditional security-related assistance with forceful accountability campaigns in the public sector. And more directly it demands an unflinching commitment to removing crooked officials and remodeling Central American democratic institutions to better fight against corruption, abuse, and impunity.

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