

CURRENT HISTORY

February 2020

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How Criminals Govern in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Since the 1970s and the development of the modern cocaine trade, organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean has expanded and become deeply involved in politics and governance. Across the region, criminal organizations collude with the state, maintain local political order, and help nominate and elect politicians. Criminal leaders sometimes even take political office themselves. These often clandestine and occasionally open arrangements have marked effects on the lives of many of the region's half a billion inhabitants. The poor and the working class bear the heaviest burden of these illicit governance dynamics, as a result of their limited incorporation into political life and the tendency of police forces to see them more as threats to public order than as citizens deserving of their protection.

Ways of Governing

Fifth in a series

Criminal networks build popular support by providing social services and keeping order in the areas where they operate, often working with state officials even while they engage in corruption, intimidation, and violence. Social and political leaders sometimes operate in partnership with criminal organizations. Such informal governance strategies are deeply entangled with formally legitimate governing practices. In many countries, different types of hybrid governance have emerged, driven by particular local dynamics that are associated with key stress factors in each context.

In Brazil, the driving stresses include urbanization, inequality, and an abusive state that uses police and prisons in a failed attempt to address social challenges. In Colombia, the relevant stresses are the long-running armed conflict and the country's central role in the global cocaine trade. In Jamaica, the stresses of historical patterns of violent conflict between the country's two major political parties create opportunities for criminal governance. In Venezuela, government-backed armed groups have seized control of districts as the nation has descended into economic collapse and political violence. Comparing these cases from around the region sheds light on the governance roles that criminals play in Latin America, and how such relations vary in specific circumstances.

BRAZIL'S POLICE MILITIAS

In March 2018, a gunman opened fire on a car in Rio de Janeiro, murdering Marielle Franco, a progressive Afro-Brazilian city council member who was active on a range of social justice issues, as well as her driver, Anderson Gomes. In early 2019, two police officers affiliated with the *Esritório do Crime* militia (“militia” is a term used in Brazil for police-linked extortion rackets) were arrested in connection with the murders. The media reported on extensive links between this group and the family of President Jair Bolsonaro, who had recently taken office.

Connections to militias are critical to electoral strategy in Rio, where these groups control many neighborhoods. Bolsonaro's son Flávio, for example, served in the Rio state assembly for years before winning a seat in the Brazilian Senate in 2018. For a decade, he employed both the mother and the

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wife of Adriano da Nóbrega, a police officer who is the leader of the *Escritório do Crime*, and he twice led successful efforts to bestow Rio's highest commendation for public service on Nóbrega. In 2008, Flávio Bolsonaro was one of only two members of the state legislature to vote against forming a special commission to investigate militias. Recently, Flávio has been implicated with Nóbrega in a corruption scandal.

There are many reasons why politicians like the Bolsonaros might maintain close ties to militias. These groups profit from their ability to control the economies and politics of marginalized neighborhoods in Rio. While researching my 2017 book *Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean*, I spent a great deal of time in Rio das Pedras, a shantytown in the Jacarepagua section of Rio, which is now under the control of the *Escritório do Crime*. During that time, Josinaldo Francisco da Cruz (known as Nadinho), a long-time resident of the favela and member of the local militia, held a seat on the Rio city council. He had won election after establishing a strong relationship with Cesar Maia, the long-serving center-right mayor, who brought Nadinho into his political party.

During his time in office, Nadinho secured various programs and services for the community, some of which were managed by the militia-controlled residents' association. But after a split developed in the militia, its locally based members supported another candidate for his seat—a police officer. Nadinho lost his reelection bid. Less than a year later, he was murdered in his apartment building.

Over the years, Rio's militias have had a great deal of success in politics and government. Several members have won city council and state assembly seats, and their allies have been elected to both houses of the federal legislature. Such political activities give militias a voice in setting government policies, especially those that affect the neighborhoods they control. Political contacts also enable militia members to run charities, manage government contracts for their own profit, and control state lottery and notary offices, which allows them to take a cut of utility payments and real estate transactions.

Militias also regulate the businesses that operate in the areas they control. Usually this involves

demanding protection payments, but they also oversee whole areas of commerce, such as the distribution of cooking gas canisters, unlicensed minibuses, and illicit cable television services. One inhabitant of a militia-controlled neighborhood in Rio told me that the local militia objected to her sharing Internet access over Wi-Fi—because it had sold a different neighbor the right to provide Internet service illegally on her street.

The militias enforce order through selective killings of individuals who are accused of “antisocial behaviors” such as drug consumption, or who threaten their monopolies. Even these extreme measures receive support from powerful politicians. Jair Bolsonaro, while serving as a congressman, gave speeches in favor of militias murdering alleged criminals.

Militias are not the only criminal organizations that engage in governance activities in Rio de Janeiro. Drug gangs, which operate in many shantytowns across the city, impose a markedly different type of governance that focuses principally

on maintaining order and silence in the community—conditions conducive to selling drugs. The gangs seek to repress other types of criminal activity that could draw police attention. They also pay off the police for protec-

tion. Another organizational priority for Rio's drug gangs is the prison system, where they form competing factions affiliated with the branches operating in neighborhoods.

Some drug gangs try to gain public support by providing minimal social services to residents. When they engage in politics, they generally do so at a further remove than militias. No drug gang leader has been elected to political office. Gang leaders often seek a veto over who can run for office in the communities where they operate, but politicians try to maintain greater distance from this type of criminal. Certainly, they do not give speeches in favor of drug gangs, as Bolsonaro and other right-wing politicians have done in praise of militias.

São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, offers an important counterpoint to Rio. For some time, it has had a relatively low murder rate, which scholars have tied to the consolidation of illicit power in the hands of a single prison gang, the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC). The PCC dominates most criminal activity in the city, thanks to its complex

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and at times contentious form of collusion with the police.

After a 1992 police massacre of 111 inmates following a riot in the Carandiru prison, the PCC came to dominate São Paulo's large prison system by organizing inmates to protect them from violence by the authorities and other prisoners. The PCC's power is based on its control of the prisons and its ability to provide paid protection to jailed criminals. The PCC seeks to maintain order both in the prisons and in the neighborhoods that its allies control. Its collusion with the state has contributed to a decline in homicide rates in the city. Recently, the PCC and the Comando Vermelho, a powerful Rio prison-based drug gang faction, have sought to extend their influence to other states.

In Rio, criminal involvement in politics and governance emerges from both inequality and the particular ways that the poor are housed and treated by city and state governments. Many live in irregular settlements such as favelas or in substandard housing projects that often lack regular public services. In some cases, relationships between criminal organizations and politicians are quite deep and public, as with militias, and in others they are more obscure, as with drug gangs. These groups take over state functions in the communities where they operate, with the support of different types of state actors.

CONFLICT AND CRIME IN COLOMBIA

As a global leader in the cocaine trade, Colombia has a long history of criminal involvement in politics. The notorious drug cartel chief Pablo Escobar won an alternate seat in Congress in 1982. In the 1990s, the Proceso 8000 investigation revealed that Cali-based drug traffickers had contributed to Ernesto Samper's successful 1994 presidential campaign. Colombia's long-running civil war provided criminals with extensive opportunities to intervene in politics.

The line between Colombia's armed conflict and criminal activity is ambiguous. Both leftist guerrilla movements and right-wing paramilitary groups have been involved in criminal enterprises, with guerrillas focusing mostly on controlling coca growing and the paramilitaries on refining and transporting cocaine. Both types of groups have involved themselves in politics.

One guerrilla commander I spoke with in northern Colombia explained how his unit of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—the country's largest rebel movement—gained politi-

cal influence. The unit, which had a small coca-growing operation, would provide electoral support to politicians, and once they were in office it pressured them to pursue policies advocated by the FARC. For example, the guerrillas sought more investment in social services in areas of the municipality that were sympathetic to its cause. I heard similar stories in southern Colombia from a variety of sources who cited extensive negotiations between FARC commanders and politicians in that region.

Since the FARC and the government signed a peace agreement in 2016, the group has been engaged in a disarmament process that has led to the demobilization of most of its units. Although many members of the FARC remain committed to the peace process, some never demobilized, and others have taken up arms again. Some of those active factions continue to look to the drug trade for income and engage in a variety of extortion-related activities to support their campaign against the government.

Paramilitary groups have also been extensively involved in politics. During a paramilitary demobilization process in the 2000s, they made a deal with some politicians to transform the Colombian political system. There is extensive evidence that paramilitaries used their control of territory to manipulate elections and came to hold sway over many municipal administrations and congressional seats. About half the members of the lower house of the Colombian Congress were implicated in the resulting scandal.

In the years since the demobilization, many former paramilitary groups (some never demobilized) have reorganized as purely criminal organizations that dominate large areas of the country, sometimes in collusion with the guerrilla forces they are ostensibly fighting. One of the most prominent groups is the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), also known as the Urabeños or the Clan del Golfo. This group operates in areas of northern Colombia centered on the region of Urabá, a spit of valuable agricultural land between the Gulf of Urabá and the Serranía de Abibe mountains. There are extensive reports of direct involvement by the AGC in this region's politics, including funding campaigns in exchange for postelection kickbacks. The AGC is also involved in maintaining order in the areas where it operates, resolving disputes among inhabitants and engaging in what residents call "social cleansing" operations against low-level gang members accused of transgressions such as drug addiction and homosexuality. The

AGC, like Rio's militias, engages extensively in extortion as well.

Criminal organizations in Colombia's major cities are also involved in political activities, extortion, and maintaining order. They seek to control local civic organizations and nonprofits, and meddle in elections as well. Their influence is strongly dependent on their overall level of organization in a city. Where criminal structures are well organized—in Medellín and its suburbs, for example—they have been driving forces in politics, contributing to prominent campaigns and helping elect allies. When criminal groups are disorganized, they have had a more limited role in politics, usually restricted to selling blocs of votes to candidates for the city council or the regional or national legislatures.

There is a great deal of variation in the role of crime in politics and governance in Colombia. The political roles of criminals and other non-state armed actors are determined by the ways in which illicit economies operate in their parts of the country. These illicit economies are driven at least in part by the country's 55-year-old civil conflict. Criminal violence in rural areas generally is defined by the nature of the conflict and coca production, and these rural dynamics in turn define the nature of urban violence.

Unlike in Rio de Janeiro, violence in Medellín is connected with armed conflict and drug production in other parts of the country. The government sometimes expands its footprint in certain places—as when it invested significantly in upgrading the city's infrastructure in the 2000s—constraining some illicit activities but opening up space for others. Medellín used to have broad and deep criminal involvement in politics, but as the state extended its presence in different neighborhoods, openings for criminal governance and other enterprises shifted.

JAMAICA'S POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Whereas criminal influence in politics is driven by urban dynamics in Brazil and by civil conflict and drug production in Colombia, violence and criminal governance in Jamaica historically have been propelled by the nature of the country's politics. The two leading parties are the center-right Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the center-left People's National Party. From the 1950s through

the 1990s, these parties armed their supporters. Early on, this led to disruptions of elections and other political events. In the 1960s and 1970s, the violence became more acute as armed political activists expelled opponents from neighborhoods in order to better control electoral districts.

After independence in 1962, both parties built housing for their supporters, creating politically homogeneous neighborhoods known as "garrison communities" in large parts of Kingston, the capital city. During the 1970s, this process deepened political conflict, culminating with the 1980 election campaign. More than 800 people were killed, largely as a result of fighting between neighborhood-based political gangs operating out of shantytowns and housing projects around Kingston and nearby Spanish Town.

The intensity of the conflict in 1980 caused both political parties to take a step back from confrontation and, to some extent, to distance themselves from the political gangs they had created. By this time, though, the gangs were well

established. Their power was further enhanced by the economic stress caused by the JLP government's austerity policies, which contributed to the migration of gang members to the United States and Britain after the violence surrounding the

1980 election. Jamaica's gangs took advantage of this growing diaspora to make the country a leading transshipment point for cocaine trafficking between Colombia, North America, and Europe. Although the intensity of political conflict eased, the gangs now had ample resources of their own.

Since the 1990s, Jamaican governments have undertaken reforms intended to reduce the political influence of gangs, but gangs still control voting in some neighborhoods, and politicians still turn to them to help turn out voters. In return for these services, gangs often earn a percentage of the government contracts implemented in the areas where they operate. Meanwhile, as US maritime interdiction operations reduced Jamaica's participation in drug transshipment, gangs turned to extortion and other rackets to make money.

Over time, geographical distinctions have emerged. Gangs' territorial control has spread in the southern region of Jamaica, where criminal structures orbit politics, and government resources are sometimes deployed to support gangs. The story is different in northwestern Jamaica around

The line between Colombia's armed conflict and criminal activity is ambiguous.

Montego Bay, the country's second-largest city. Here there are also territorial gangs, such as the Stone Crushers. As policy analyst Kayyonne Marston has pointed out, however, the main criminal groups have at times been led by well-off, politically connected businesspeople who organize drug exports. In such cases, there is less of a gang structure and these merchants, who often have other businesses, may make contributions to political parties.

Thus, crime in Jamaica was initially shaped by the political environment, and later came to reflect the nature of party competition in different parts of the country. In Kingston and Spanish Town, competition for votes among an impoverished population contributed to a partisan housing policy that was closely linked to the emergence of gangs, which in many cases grew into powerful criminal enterprises. In Montego Bay, a smaller city, politics was not so bound up with housing. Gangs emerged later as the city grew, but by that time political parties were no longer invested in relations with gangs. The production of cannabis in the western interior of Jamaica contributed to the development of criminal organizations that had a more entrepreneurial structure and were closely tied to other business interests in the region.

EXPLOITING CRISIS IN VENEZUELA

Over the course of the past four decades in Venezuela, as Andres Antillano, Veronica Zubilaga, and I found in a study for the Development Bank of Latin America, gangs evolved as economic opportunities shifted in a cyclical, oil-dependent economy. Until recently, most of them had not developed structures as coherent as those in Brazil, Colombia, and Jamaica, and there is less evidence that they exercised extensive forms of governance over neighborhoods or had become deeply involved in politics.

This has changed somewhat with Venezuela's all-consuming economic and political crisis of the past few years. Amid the collapse of the economy under heavy debt, low oil prices, corruption, and intensifying political conflict, elements of the state have worked with members of armed *colectivos*, a type of organized crime group, both to repress protests and to take advantage of illicit economies. Exploiting chronic shortages of basic necessities, the *colectivos* control access to food in some parts of Caracas as well as trade in other regulated goods. The *colectivos* also seek to monopolize gov-

ernment contracts in the neighborhoods where they operate and to extort protection money from both legal and illegal businesses.

Here, crime and its relationship with the state are driven by the economic dynamics of a society in collapse. As those conditions shift, so, too, do the structures and activities of gangs. By exploiting a historic crisis, state-connected gangs have become critical players in black markets that sustain the livelihoods of corrupt state officials.

VARIETIES OF CRIMINAL CLOUT

Across Latin America, criminal involvement in politics and governance varies from country to country in accordance with the underlying political, social, and economic dynamics. In each country, these dynamics affect the nature of relationships between the criminal and political worlds: how public they are, and whether they supplant or complement official governance.

Criminal governance in Brazil is driven by social tensions and the abuses of state power that take place in different municipalities and in specific neighborhoods. Shantytowns with large drug markets are often run by criminal groups. These groups have largely clandestine relations with politicians and share local governance with state officials. Areas lacking such drug markets are often taken over by police-connected militias that extort protection money from inhabitants. These militias, which claim to repress drug dealers and other undesirable elements, have more public relationships with state officials, and their members sometimes even seek political office.

In Colombia, illicit governance structures are driven by persistent armed conflict and large-scale drug-trafficking markets. Armed actors—both guerrillas and paramilitaries—have made significant interventions in politics, and their allies have been elected to public office, at times with little effort to disguise these relations. Armed groups play important roles in governing different regions of the country—especially farther from the centers of state power, in the jungles and on the frontier. Those governance arrangements depend on the nature of the conflict in each area and the structure of local illicit economies.

In Jamaica, partisan politics fueled the creation of gangs that turn out votes and govern neighborhoods. Although electoral violence has declined, the gangs remain locally powerful and continue to play their political roles. Politicians still attend meetings with gang leaders, though these relation-

ships, formerly public, have become more clandestine over time. But there is no history of gang leaders actually winning political office in Jamaica, as they have in Brazil.

In Venezuela, criminal governance is now driven by the country's economic collapse. The depth of the present economic crisis has prompted the security forces to seek control of illicit markets through alliances with *colectivos*. In general, though, the links between *colectivos* and the government are clandestine—these groups currently have little involvement in electoral politics.

Crime is pervasive in social, economic, and political life in Latin America. The common experience of high levels of crime in the region, especially related to the drug trade, creates an underlying dynamic that promotes the interests of organized crime and encourages relationships between criminal groups and the state.

These broad trends favor the emergence of criminal involvement in governance and politics. The forms of criminal governance in particular places, however, are shaped by local historical factors. These may be bound up with traditions of informal and private governance in a given city or country, as well as with the ways in which governments have tried or failed to include the poor and working class in the political system.

Latin America and the Caribbean have long suffered from highly unequal and exclusionary social, political, and economic systems. The stresses created by these inequalities have contributed greatly to the scope and intensity of crime in the region, and to the entanglement of state and criminal interests. Addressing these inequalities would be a key step toward setting the region on a path to reducing violence and the involvement of criminal groups in governance. ■