

LATIN AMERICA: STATES FACED WITH VIOLENCE

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David Gamboa, Pascal Drouhaud, Elisabeth Beton-Delègue and Mario Otero

A continent of paradox and contrast, Latin America is marked by an extraordinary diversity, with its landmass of 23 million km² and its 33 countries populated by 600 million inhabitants. But the fracture points are numerous and result in extreme violence which continues to undermine its growth.

In the fight against this multifaceted violence (demographic, social, political and economic), all eyes are now on El Salvador, a country devastated by a 12-year civil war between 1980 and 1992, but which, under the leadership of its new president, Nayib Bukele, who was elected in 2019, seems to be shaping up to be a more prosperous future. His vice-president, Félix Ulloa, also boasted, via a video message, of the positive results of his government, making

MODERATION

Pascal Drouhaud, Founding president of the LATFRAN Association

SPEAKERS

Elisabeth Beton-Delègue, Diplomat, former Ambassador of France to the Holy See, Haiti, Mexico and Chile

David Gamboa, Political scientist and political consultant

Mario Otero, Special representative of the vice-President of the Republic of El Salvador

El Salvador currently 'the safest country in Latin America' even though the homicide rate in 2015 was the highest in the world. So, how were these results achieved against the Maras, the local gangs whose members often come from Salvadoran communities in California? Mario Otero, special representative of the Vice President of the Republic of El Salvador, explained: 'Our mandate began on a negative note in 2019, because it was undoubtedly difficult to grasp that a small country like ours had adopted a new policy on insecurity, and that this policy has proved successful'. He recalled that his country lost 30 years of governance after the civil war. 'With Bukele, the post-war period ended, but we had an obstacle in the first two years: a hostile parliament. We ultimately managed to initiate a series of legislative reforms.' According to him, two conditions allowed the construction of a social state: leadership and a convergence of forces to carry out the defined policy. Having solved the problem of insecurity, El Salvador now wants to focus on the economy. The expansion of El Tunco, also known as Surf City, is a prime example of the government's desire to attract new tourists.

Unfortunately, the case of El Salvador is too unique to suggest that there will be any continent-wide improvement in safety, given that it is considered to be the world's most violent continent. Latin America, which has 9% of the world's population, accounts for 37% of all homicides committed worldwide. With the exception of Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela, gangs are not the only factors contributing to violence on a continent that has almost entirely embraced democracy. Elisabeth Beton-Delègue, a diplomat and former ambassador to Chile and Mexico, pointed out that the problem is also territorial. Although the population of Latin America is almost equivalent to that of Europe (600 million against 500 million), in terms of surface area, the European Union only has 4.2 million km², whereas Latin America extends over 19.2 million km². This is a colossal difference with the following consequence, according to her: 'Managing this area means dealing with all the problems of territorial control'.

Latin America counts three main coca producers, with a frenzied consumer neighbour, the United States

Élisabeth Beton-Delègue

Paradoxically, Latin America is rarely talked about on an international scale. It is not in the spotlight, neither is it a threat to peace. The region has been denuclearised since the ratification of the Treaty of Tlatelolco in 1967. It is mainly in the news because it is the hub of international drug trafficking. 'It's the curse of Latin America, with its three main coca producers and its frenzied consumer neighbour, the United States', explained Elisabeth Beton-Delègue, quoting the words of the former President of Mexico, Porfirio Diaz: 'Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States'. The considera-



ble increase in drug consumption, with 300 million consumers in 2023, does not help matters. Its ports open to the Pacific and the Atlantic and the extent of its territories, with completely empty and abandoned regions, facilitate this underground economy. However, once-notorious large cartels, led by famous names like Pablo Escobar and El Chapo, have been replaced by small groups, which have expanded their activities to include extortion, arms trafficking, kidnapping and exploitation of immigration routes. 'The drug economy is flourishing in this climate of globalisation, with revenues so large that it enables large-scale corruption', adds Elisabeth Beton-Delègue.

Ecuador has recently experienced this large-scale corruption. Los Lobos, a gang specialising in drug trafficking and assassination, was found guilty of the murder of presidential candidate, Fernando Villavicencio, a figure in the fight against corruption, in August 2023. According to David Gamboa, a researcher at Sciences Po Paris, these paradoxes of a continent without conflicts between states are part of a 'magical realism', according to the formula borrowed from writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. 'In Latin America there are criminal groups that have more weight than the State. It is therefore impossible to replicate solutions that work here in Europe.' The same goes for El Salvador, where the



new political solutions put forward by Nayib Bukele would not work in neighbouring countries such as Costa Rica or Nicaragua, the only country in the world without an army since 1948. This violence is a response to other political, economic and social violence. 'The failure of states provokes an escalation of violence. The dramatic situation in Ecuador did not happen overnight. A combination of these factors led to an increase in drug trafficking.'

In Latin America there are criminal groups that have more weight than the State

David Gamboa

But this reality also hides all the positive aspects of this continent and its immense artistic creativity. In this respect, Haiti, nicknamed the 'country of writers', is an exception, as literature and poetry occupy an important place there. Elisabeth Beton-Delègue was the French ambassador there between 2015 and 2018. She is very familiar with this country, which has been repeatedly hit by devastating natural disasters. The 2010 earthquake killed more than 280,000 people. The extraordinary re-

sistance of its population, 'who live in total destitution, totally abandoned by its institutions' impressed her deeply. In 2021, the assassination of its current president, Jovenel Moïse, generated a political crisis which worsened in January 2024 with the end of the mandate of elected officials. As it is unable to hold elections, the country no longer has any elected representatives at national level. This absence is leading to the emergence of gangs. 'This is not a consequence of drug crime', explained Elisabeth Beton-Delègue, 'but of internal decomposition'. In Haiti, as elsewhere in Latin America, the fragility of the institutions in place has not withstood the successive crises. This situation could happen elsewhere or other problems could emerge. 'Since the 1980s, we have seen this migratory flow of Cubans who came to Central America to go up north to the United States. Today, we also see Africans migrating to South America to go north from Nicaragua to Mexico and continue to the United States.' Conversely, in Venezuela, more than 4 million people out of a population of 30 million left the country on foot to go to Colombia, 'crossing the country in the mud with disastrous health consequences', adds Pascal Drouhaud.

In conclusion, the era of head-on opposition between powerful gangs and states, with massive mobilisations of national armies, is well and truly over. Now, there are numerous players and the power over drug trafficking has been fragmented, without a clear leader. This

situation is facilitated by invisible networks. In addition to strengthening their collaborations, Latin American countries will have to find localised and targeted solutions if they want to effectively combat this evil that is eating away at them.



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