DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 11.08.2023 | Constantin Groll

The end of the island of peace

The murder of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio has left Ecuador in shock. Can the country escape this growing spiral of violence?

Disbelief, fear, anger and grief: the murder of Fernando Villavicencio is sending shock waves through Ecuador. Eleven days before the first round of the early presidential elections, the conservative candidate was shot dead by an assassin on the evening of Wednesday 9 August, following an election campaign event in the centre of the capital Quito. The suspected perpetrator was subsequently killed by security forces.

The 59-year-old Villavicencio, one of eight presidential candidates, wasn't considered the favourite for the election scheduled for 20 August — according to reliable polls, his chances of reaching the run-off as the second-placed candidate against Luisa González of ex-President Rafael Correa's party, who was leading by far in the polls, were vanishingly small. However, the former trade unionist and journalist explicitly positioned himself as an anti-correist champion against violent crime and corruption and denounced the links of organised crime with state institutions such as the police and the military. Several times during the election campaign, he drew attention to death threats against him.

A hard blow for Ecuador

News of this brutal crime spread like wildfire in the country. Although the reasons for the murder are still largely unclear, one thing is certain: in times of great social insecurity, political polarisation and socio-economic crisis, it has hit the country deep in its core. The Ecuadorian perception-of their country as an island of peace surrounded by violent neighbouring countries is gone for good. This is also because the murder – which no one in the country would have thought possible – is only the latest stage of a spiral of violence that has been rapidly worsening for the past two years and to which the outgoing government under Guillermo Lasso has so far reacted helplessly.

To grasp the extent of violence and insecurity in the country, it is enough

to look at its homicide rate (25.9 per hundred thousand inhabitants in 2022) and realise that it is now more likely to be murdered on the former island of peace than in countries where violence is more common, such as Mexico or Brazil. The reason for this, apart from the spread of organised crime in the form of transnationally networked drug gangs fighting among themselves, is also the weakening of state institutions due to austerity policies under the last two governments, as well as the strange disinterest of political decision-makers in developing and implementing effective strategies and programmes to maintain internal security and effective reforms of the dysfunctional law enforcement agencies. It does not help the situation that Ecuador's geopolitical importance in international drug trade continues to grow due to its role as a hub for shipping the commodity to Europe and Asia.

Journalists estimate that more than 60 acts of violence, some of them fatal, were committed against politicians of various parties during the last local and regional elections.

The 'Mexicanisation' of Ecuador – not in the sense of an identical sequence, but an analogy of the violence and diffusion dynamics of organised crime in Mexico in the noughties – manifests itself in today's Ecuador in the form of a rapidly expanding radius of action of hostile drug gangs. This is accompanied not only by a rise in violent deaths, but also by an exponential increase in protection rackets, kidnappings, human trafficking, deadly prison riots and other acts of violence. Increasingly, all spheres of life are affected, with the socially vulnerable sections of the population experiencing the lion's share of violence. The 'Mexicanisation' of Ecuador also manifests – and this can only be said in the country at the risk of life and limb – through the tolerance and or complicity of state institutions and actors, especially the security agencies.

For it is also clear that as inconceivable and shocking as the assassination of presidential candidate Villavicencio is for many Ecuadorians, it is one of a series of acts of violence against politicians in recent months. Journalists estimate that more than 60 acts of violence, some of them fatal, were committed against politicians of various parties during the last local and regional elections at the beginning of the year. Just a few weeks before the assassination of Villavicencio, the country was shaken when the mayor of the coastal town of Manta, Agustín Intriago, was shot dead on the street – presumably as revenge by drug gangs for not being allowed to bid for public contracts.

These acts of violence against the country's political authorities are only the latest proof of how fragile the Ecuadorian state's monopoly on violence has become in the meantime. But they should also be a wake-up call to the entire political spectrum in Ecuador that the window of opportunity for decisive, comprehensive and, above all, consensual action by all political parties against the violence in the country is beginning to close. Ecuador's days as an island of peace in the region may be over, but a future as a centre of violence in the region should be collectively fought against.



Constantin Groll
Quito

Constantin Groll heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Ecuador. Previously, he worked for the foundation in Paraguay.

-