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Ecuador in a stranglehold

Gang wars, drug trafficking and military repression: how did Ecuador mutate from a peaceful country to a danger zone?

'The time when convicted drug traffickers hired killers, and organised crime convicts dictated to the government what to do is over!' — with these words, Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa declared war on organised crime at the beginning of the year.

While giving the military a free hand has never led to anything good, prevention programmes and investments in education, as well as government attention to vulnerable and poor population groups, have. None of this, however, can be seen in the current policy of the centre-right banana entrepreneur, who has been in office since November and who relies on suppression by the police and military, first and foremost.

From January until April, Ecuador was under a 'state of emergency' (*estado de excepción*) due to what Noboa called an 'armed internal conflict'. Since 8 April, the state of emergency has been revoked, but a presidential decree has allowed for the extended deployment of uniformed security units to flood the streets and prisons of Ecuador. These continuously imposed emergency measures, which legitimise the government's free reign, give the impression that the country is drifting further towards authoritarianism.

A poor security situation

The heavy-handed policy is a response to the expanding drug trade and the war among the more than 22 criminal gangs – classified in the decree as 'terrorist organisations' based on the government's own interpretation – fighting for control in Ecuador. The country's prisons, in particular, have for some time now been under the command of gang leaders, who use them as operating zones for their criminal activities. In recent years, foreign drug traffickers from Mexico and Colombia have started cooperating with Ecuadorian gangs like '*Los Choneros*', building a powerful drug trafficking industry and corruption network that even

extends into the government to some degree.

With over 7 000 murders, 2023 went down as the bloodiest year in the country's history, exceeding even the murder rates of Mexico and Brazil. Eight out of 10 killings were committed with firearms. This makes Ecuador not only one of the most violent countries in Latin America but also worldwide.

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Just a decade ago, Ecuador was considered peaceful. But various factors have led to today's poor security situation: With the dollarisation in 2000 and the consequent facilitation of transactions, the country became attractive for money laundering to criminal groups. Its geographical location next to Colombia, the largest cocaine producer in the world, and its access to the sea make Ecuador a very suitable smuggling route. The increased demand for cocaine in Europe and Asia ultimately led to Ecuador becoming a processing site for the drug. Following the peace agreement in Colombia and the subsequent demobilisation of the guerrillas, since 2016, the previously controlled border between Ecuador and Colombia has gradually been taken over by drug gangs and other illegal armed actors.

In addition to this, the pandemic, the socio-economic crisis, and the austerity and security policies of Noboa's predecessors, Lenín Moreno (2017–2021) and Guillermo Lasso (2021–2023), have contributed to the current situation. Moreno turned his back on left-wing politics and introduced reforms that benefited US oil multinationals and the IMF, resulting in major austerity programmes and subsidy cuts, and an absolute neglect of public infrastructure. The Ministry of Justice, which administered the prisons, the Ministry of Security Coordination and the National Council for the Control of Narcotic Drugs were abolished to reduce the budget deficit. Moreno also increasingly relied on the support of the US in security matters.

The ex-banker Lasso, meanwhile, was busy deepening the neoliberal economic model of his predecessor, which led to a deterioration in living, social and labour conditions for most Ecuadorians. Thus, when Noboa took over, he inherited a country with a budget deficit of well over $3 bn, as well as foreign debt amounting to over 60 per cent of Ecuador's GDP.

Nationwide militarisation

Three key events ultimately led to the recent militarisation of Ecuador: Firstly, last August, presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, who was campaigning against corruption and criminal activities, was murdered. Secondly, at the beginning of this year, members of the '*Los Tiguerones*' gang took journalists hostage and broadcasted the event live. Finally, the escape of one of the country's most violent and powerful gang leaders, Adolfo Macías, from a prison in southern Ecuador demonstrated to the state that it had lost control over the prisons.

President Noboa, who had already announced his intention to crack down on gangs during his election campaign, then opted for a quick solution: nationwide militarisation. He declared a state of emergency, heavily restricting rights such as the freedom of movement, the inviolability of the home and the freedom of assembly. It appears that the judiciary is working hand in hand with the government, as the Constitutional Court unanimously confirmed the legal validity of the state of emergency to fight organised crime. Operations reached a new climax last month when state security forces stormed the Mexican embassy in Ecuador to arrest ex-Vice President Jorge Glas, who had been convicted of corruption by the Ecuadorian state and had found refuge in the embassy.

Since the uniformed state forces took over the streets, reports of human rights violations, prison torture, as well as murders of civilians not involved in illegal activities, have emerged.

According to the government, control over the prisons has now been regained. The government also claims that the operation has helped reduce homicide rates from 24 to 12 per day. Nearly 12 000 people have been arrested, and 3 300 weapons and 64.3 tons of drugs have been confiscated.

However, since the uniformed state forces took over the streets, reports of human rights violations, prison torture, as well as murders of civilians not involved in illegal activities, have emerged. Human rights organisations also highlight the erosion of rights, where citizens are detained without legal basis and treated cruelly.

The government has mostly remained silent on the accusations. When criticism first arose, the president publicly asserted that they wouldn't 'let no anti-patriot come to us and say that we are violating anyone's rights when we are protecting the rights of the vast majority.'

And the majority of Ecuadorians don't seem to mind Noboa's new, tough military course; they even support it. At the end of April, Ecuadorians voted in a referendum to maintain the tough course and to allow the president to deploy the military in the country without the state of emergency.

A dangerous path

Military interventions disproportionately target marginalised communities since organised crime often takes place in the shadows of neighbourhoods that have been ignored or forgotten by the state or in areas with high rates of unemployment.

A look into history shows that increased military presence and the use of the 'state of emergency' back door in Latin America have often led to the abuse of power and the erosion of rights and democracy. Some states have transformed into authoritarian regimes — initially under the guise of security. This has favoured gross human rights violations such as extrajudicial killings, disappearances and torture. Such was the case with the disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa, Mexico, in 2014, or the Colombian 'false-positive' scandal, where state forces dressed innocent young students as guerrillas after killing them to legitimise military operations, increase the number of rebel fighters and collect bonuses for the killings.

While military presence may provide a temporary sense of security for the population, it does not constitute an effective long-term strategy. It would be better to invest in a comprehensive security plan that addresses the root causes of crime, such as poverty, unemployment, and the great social inequality and hopelessness of younger people, as well as to provide opportunities and educational programmes for young people in Ecuador. Instead of relying on state violence and military repression to address the symptoms, the focus should be on sustainable solutions. However, the current Ecuadorian president does not seem to have understood this yet.



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