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Militarization of Public Security in Latin America and the Caribbean

A Discussion Paper by Thiago Rodrigues
Translated into English from the original Spanish version.

Background

The presence of military or gendarmerie-type police forces has been a constant feature of public security policy throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), implemented equally by left, center, and right governments. With characteristics that reflect national, regional, and local historical and political dynamics, heavy-handed or zero-tolerance programs against crime have spread throughout the region since the 1980s. These programs have been developed in the context of profound social inequality, institutional fragility, and economic instability marked by legacies of slavery, authoritarianism, and oligarchic regimes.

The increase in illicit activities driven by the surge of drug trafficking has resulted in a scenario that accentuates the sense of insecurity across all social strata in Latin America. It is true that the distinction between national security (a responsibility of the armed forces) and public or domestic security (a law-enforcement function) has always been blurred in LAC. So when the states have faced the demand for increased security, their most common response has been to deploy military troops and create or reequip police forces with militarized features.

From the processes of national independence in the nineteenth century to the involvement of Latin American and Caribbean security forces in the hemispheric security doctrines drawn up by the United States in the post–World War II era, the armed forces had a much more active role in domestic conflicts (civil wars, counterinsurgency operations, suppression of social protests, supporting or leading authoritarian regimes) than in so-called traditional tasks such as defending national territory or waging interstate wars. Similarly, police forces did not follow the citizen-based model of the liberal democracies of the north but were built as armed forces associated with the military power, engaged in repressing and controlling social groups considered "dangerous."

Data from the Citizens' Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice of Mexico in 2018 indicates that out of the 50 deadliest cities in the world, 43 are in LAC.[1] In the 21st century, many countries in the region maintain high rankings in the Citizens' Council's report, a situation driven by the war between transnational organized crime groups, actions of local criminal gangs, and the persistent policy of increasing militarized, punitive responses.

Faced with a public terrified by the high levels of violence and lethality, governments have opted to deploy military forces for social control. In general, the militarization of an urban or rural area triggers two situations: (1) the displacement of illegal activities or routes used by transnational organized crime groups to other areas and (2) the reorganization of forces in dispute over a region, where state troops are only one of the armed groups present, in a delicate balance of power among transnational organized crime groups, criminal gangs, death squads (formed by former members of state security forces), and citizen self-defense groups. In this scenario, militarization policies have increased the levels of conflict and lethality in societies already weakened by decades of various forms of violence.

Recommendations

– Promote comparative research: secure funds for research groups engaged in the production of common methods and metrics to study the social, political, and institutional effects of the militarization of public security in LAC to generate comparative studies that serve as a basis for recommendations to authorities.

– Raise awareness among security forces: approach security forces (military and law enforcement) through contact with academies or schools of advanced military studies, in order

to present the effects of militarization in terms of (a) institutional, material, and doctrinal impacts produced by the deviation from their traditional roles; (b) exposure of military and police officers to criminal proceedings before national and international courts for human rights violations; (c) potential loss of social legitimacy due to the escalation of acts of violence against civilians; (d) corruption of soldiers and officers through their contact with criminal groups; and (e) submission of the forces to serve the electoral purposes and demagogic interests of political parties and leaders (regardless of their ideological affiliation).

– Raise awareness of opinion makers and policymakers: work to disseminate information based on scientific research, but ensure it is available in accessible language, among opinion makers (journalists, social movement leaders, public intellectuals, religious leaders, community leaders) and professional politicians (party leaders, politicians engaged in security and defense issues).

– Disseminate information through the media: produce text for printed and electronic media (Twitter, YouTube, blogs, Facebook, Instagram, newsletters) based on scientific research but in accessible language, to reach the broader, nonspecialist audience on the effects of militarization and its long-lasting impacts related to violence, lethality, corruption, and displacement of illegal activities.

Endnote

[1] "Las 50 ciudades más violentas del mundo 2018," Seguridad, Justicia Y Paz: Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal A.C., http://seguridadjusticiaypaz.org.mx/files/estudio.pdf.