



The Illicit Economy's Impact on Democracy: Case Studies in Bolivia and Ecuador

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Introduction

Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) “poses a direct and escalating threat to public health, public safety, and national security,” according to the White House.¹ It also poses a significant threat to democracy in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region.

This report focuses on TOC’s impact on democratic institutions in LAC. It examines how the persistent presence of illicit local economies like illegal mining, timber trafficking, and human smuggling feeds Mexican and Colombian cartels and other mafias around the region. It analyzes how criminal activities such as drug trafficking, bribery, illicit campaign finance, and political violence (e.g., political assassinations) feed an ecosystem of corruption comprising police, judges, candidates, politicians, and elected authorities.

This report also illustrates how organized crime infiltrates democratic institutions and corrupts politicians, eroding democratic stability and citizens’ trust in the political process. This political corruption, enabled by complicit judicial, governmental, and local officials, as well as law enforcement agencies like the police and military, often allows organized crime to operate with impunity. This engenders distrust and creates a chasm between a political system and citizens, opening the way for populist and disruptive actors to offer extreme solutions that threaten democratic principles.

Finally, this report describes how corrupt regimes sometimes act as conduit for corrosive influence from China, further undermining democratic institutions.

Addressing pervasive criminality requires comprehensive measures to reinforce democratic institutions, strengthen law enforcement, and promote transparency in politics. This report summarizes recommendations for action—with special attention to the international community—in the legislative, law enforcement, and civil society arenas.

1 [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/15/executive-order-on-establishing-the-united-states-council-on-transnational-organized-crime/#:~:text=\(i\)%20The%20Division%20shall%20produce,and%20funding%20for%20the%20Division](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/15/executive-order-on-establishing-the-united-states-council-on-transnational-organized-crime/#:~:text=(i)%20The%20Division%20shall%20produce,and%20funding%20for%20the%20Division).

Evaluation objectives and goals

This report explores the impact of organized criminal activity on democratic institutions. The relationship between organized crime and democracy is not straightforward. Many variables, actors, and incentives are involved and each of them is dynamic, not static.

Drawing on case studies in Bolivia and Ecuador, this report identifies the key variables that facilitate this dynamic. IRI's approach centers on an analysis of organized crime's influence on central governments, justice systems, electoral processes, and legislative bodies, with the objective of yielding actionable recommendations to better understand and counter TOC regionwide.

Goals:

- **Crime:** Quantify and evaluate the extent of organized crime operations in the two countries.
- **Criminal influence:** Analyze how organized crime affects the function of central and local governments, judicial systems, electoral processes, and legislative bodies.
- **Political gaps:** Study the impact of organized crime on the relationship between a political system and citizens.
- **Trust:** Evaluate public confidence in the political system and the impact of organized crime on this trust.
- **Regression:** Investigate the factors that create an environment conducive to democratic regression as influenced by organized crime.
- **Authoritarianism:** Assess the extent to which authoritarian regimes are supported financially by organized crime.
- **Recommendations:** Develop strategies to mitigate organized crime's influence on democratic institutions, promote a healthier democratic environment, and prevent democratic backsliding.

Methodology

Between February and April 2024, IRI conducted a study of the impact of organized crime on elections and political parties in Bolivia and Ecuador. This involved in-person and virtual interviews with stakeholders in both countries, including law enforcement, judicial and local authorities, electoral bodies, civil society organizations, and private sector leaders.

Teams conducted 15 interviews with experts and stakeholders. This allowed for a deeper understanding of individual perceptions.

To ensure this report's relevance, IRI's regional and Ecuador teams also conducted a desk review of academic articles, government reports, and publications from the last three years. Teams examined more than 30 secondary sources, including NGO and international organization publications and media coverage to understand public perceptions related to organized crime.

Aspects of Organized Crime: This study assessed several aspects of organized crime's impact on democratic institutions. IRI's research prioritized the following aspects:

- **Corruption:** Drug trafficking and organized crime are often associated with high levels of corruption. Corruption weakens democratic institutions by undermining citizens' trust in their leaders and in the system in general.
- **Infiltration of institutions:** In some cases, criminal groups try to infiltrate democratic institutions to influence decision-making. Such infiltration can take place via political parties, manipulating electoral processes, or by coopting political figures and judges.

Ecuadorian Case:

The Ecuadorian Attorney General's Office's (FGE) investigations show that organized crime has infiltrated at least five state institutions: the National Court of Justice (CNJ), the Judiciary Council (CJ), the National Service of Integral Attention to Adults Deprived of Liberty and Adolescent Offenders (SNAI), the National Police, the National Assembly, and local governments.²

Bolivian Case:

In February 2011, René Sanabria, head of the Bolivian Special Police Force Against Drug Trafficking (FELCN) between 2007 and 2008 was arrested for exploiting his role to provide protection to drug traffickers in 2010 for the export of 144 kilograms of cocaine to the United States. According to a report by Infobae, an online Spanish language news site, at least five former police and military chiefs have been indicted for links to illicit activities such as protecting drug shipments and covering up drug trafficking. This pattern of complicity erodes public trust in institutions and complicates efforts to strengthen democratic governance in Bolivia.³

- **Political Violence:** Violence associated with drug trafficking and organized crime can directly impact democratic stability. Intimidation, threats, and assassinations create a climate of fear that limits citizen engagement in politics and civic life and weakens the democratic system's ability to function effectively.

² <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2024/09/03/caso-plaga-en-ecuador-una-red-de-abogados-y-jueces-falsificaban-documentos-para-liberar-a-peligrosos-criminales/>

³ "Narcopolicias": los cinco ex jefes de fuerzas del orden de Bolivia que cayeron por sus vínculos con el tráfico de drogas - Infobae

Bolivian Case:

"In Bolivia, the level of violence is relatively low considering the extent of drug trafficking operating in the country. This is because the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) government relies heavily on the coca growers from the Chapare region [as their political base] who are linked to the drug trafficking supply chain. This relationship has led to a non-aggression pact between the two sectors. However, the issue of violence could escalate if any government attempts to curb drug trafficking." --Former Bolivian Congresswoman from Unidad Nacional

Ecuadorian Case:

In January 2024, Ecuador was rocked by a surge of violence that underscored the deepening security crisis in the country. Riots erupted across prisons and some criminals escaped. Meanwhile, masked gunmen stormed a television studio in Guayaquil, taking hostages and disrupting a live broadcast. At the same time, a series of explosions rocked several cities, further destabilizing the nation and highlighting organized crime networks' growing influence.



Armed and hooded men enter a television station in Guayaquil, Ecuador.

- **Economic distortions:** Illegal activities, such as drug trafficking and illegal exploitation of natural resources, often generate large sums of money that distort a country's economy by creating a shadow economy that operates outside legal frameworks. This undermines government control over monetary policy, fiscal revenues, and economic regulation, as significant financial flows bypass taxation and reporting mechanisms, also the injection of illicit funds into certain markets (e.g., real estate, luxury goods) inflates prices artificially, making them unaffordable for average citizens and creating speculative bubbles. This can lead to a parallel economy that operates outside of government control, with a negative impact on transparency and economic fairness.

After drug trafficking, money laundering is the second most notable expression of criminality in Ecuador. – The Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime⁴

- **Law enforcement challenges:** The presence of well-organized criminal groups can overwhelm security forces' resources and capacity, weakening the government's ability to keep the peace and enforce the rule of law.

Ecuadorian Case:

The Metastasis and Purga cases, which came to light in 2023 and 2024, uncovered the extent to which drug traffickers have compromised Ecuador's judicial system and security forces. Leandro Norero, alias "El Patrón," was an Ecuadorian drug trafficker linked to money laundering and the financing of criminal gangs. He faked his death in 2020 and was arrested in 2022 following the seizure of millions of dollars in assets, but died murdered in prison in 2022, following a shootout in the prison where he was held. His case sparked the "Metastasis" investigation, which revealed links to judicial and political corruption in Ecuador. The case demonstrated the extent to which criminals coordinated with paid off judges and prosecutors to obtain favorable sentences. He implicated high-level officials which resulted in significant prosecutions.

Bolivia Case:

"Chronic limitations in funding and access to modern investigative tools have significantly weakened the capabilities of law enforcement in Bolivia. This gap is exploited by criminal groups, who often operate with greater resources and better equipment, exacerbating impunity in illegal activities such as mining and drug trafficking."⁵

⁴ <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/cocaine-industry-bolivia-its-impact-peasantry>
<https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2024/11/21/caso-euro-2024-en-ecuador-un-operativo-expuso-una-red-de-lavado-de-activos-vinculada-al-narcotrafico/>

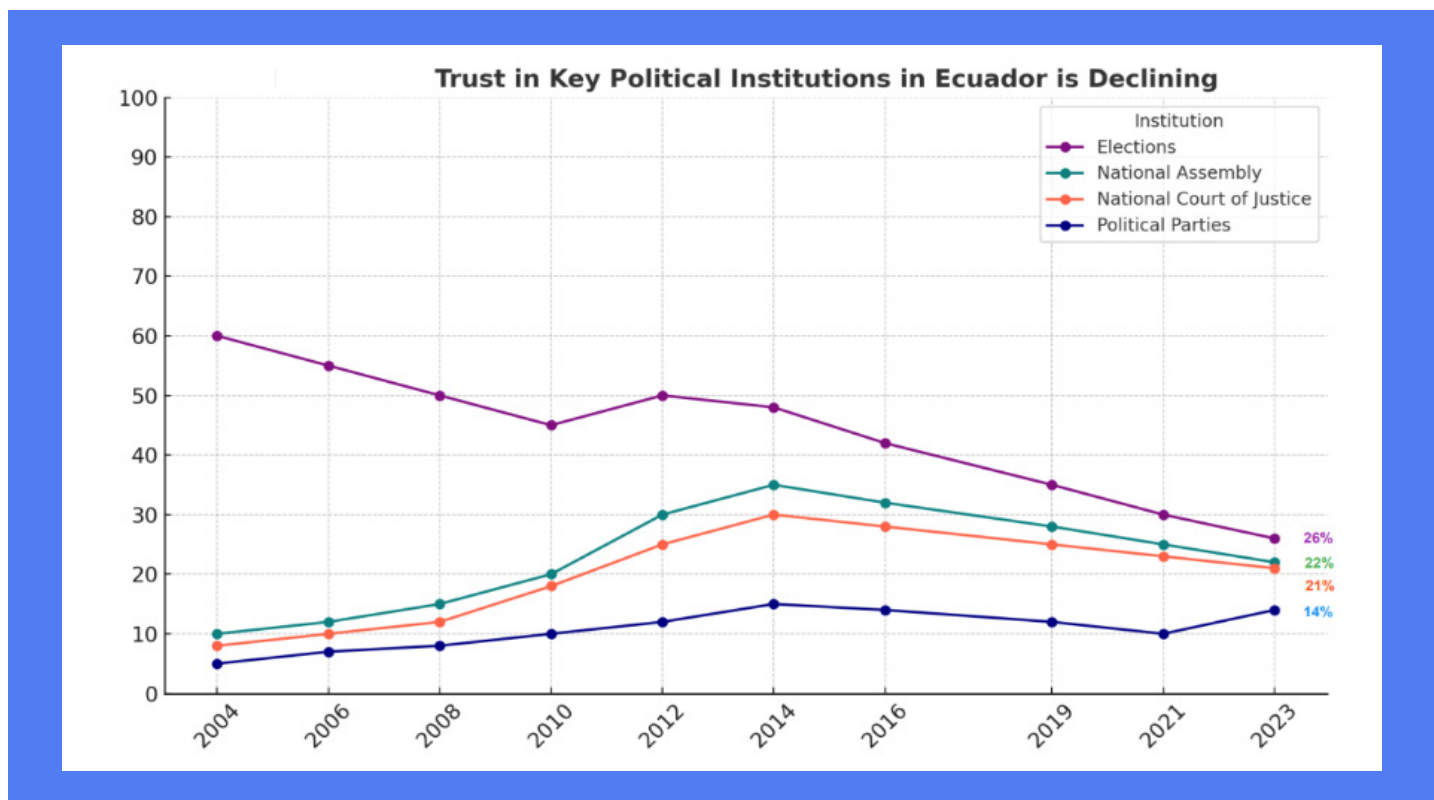
⁵ <https://es.mongabay.com/2022/12/contratos-inadecuados-y-acuerdos-secretos-estimulan-la-extraccion-de-oro-en-bolivia/>

Findings

Corruption and Institutional Decay

Corruption undermines trust in democratic institutions by eroding their legitimacy, weakening government authority, and facilitating illicit activities. This cycle perpetuates impunity.

- According to the *Pulse of Democracy in Ecuador*, published by Vanderbilt University's Center for Global Democracy, in 2023, 19 percent of Ecuadorians said that the country's national police is "very corrupt."⁶ In the same survey, respondents noted their trust in various political institutions has fallen consistently since 2014 (see graph below⁷) because the year 2014 marked a turning point in institutional trust due to a combination of an emerging economic crisis, political attrition after years of power concentration, and growing social criticism. This context fostered the perception that institutions were ineffective, corrupt or disconnected from the needs of the citizenry.



- According to Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, Bolivia is one of the most corrupt countries in South America, placing third behind Venezuela and Paraguay. The country's score dropped to 29 out of 100, reflecting deep-rooted corruption that permeates public administration and diminishes trust in governmental processes.⁸

6 <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ecuador/ABECU2023-Pulso-de-la-democracia-final-20240307.pdf>

7 This graph was produced by IRI with data from the "2023 Pulse of Democracy in Ecuador" survey, originally published in Spanish

8 [2023 Corruption Perceptions Index: Explore the... - Transparency.org](https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023)

- Corruption, much of it originating from TOC, has hollowed out both Bolivia's and Ecuador's judicial systems and compromised its integrity and impartiality.
- Ecuador's judicial system faces serious credibility issues, highlighted by the recent Metastasis,⁹ Encuentro,¹⁰ and Purga¹¹ cases. These investigations, led by the Attorney General's Office, exposed entrenched corruption in the judiciary and state security forces. It uncovered direct ties between drug trafficking networks, judges, prosecutors, and the National System for Comprehensive Attention to Persons Deprived of Liberty (SNAI). Prosecutors alleged that officials from Ecuador's judiciary, legislature, and security forces received bribes through Norero via his lawyers and other intermediaries in exchange for helping him maintain his criminal empire while behind bars.
- The case uncovered sentences negotiated between criminals and the judiciary to free criminals from prison through bribes to judges, carried out by Leandro Norero, who was considered one of the most infamous drug traffickers in Ecuador. Among the main defendants is the former president of the Judiciary Council, Wilman Terán, who has already received a sentence of nine years and four months in prison. It laid bare the extent of drug trafficking organizations' take-over of Ecuador's justice system and its devastating impact on the rule of law.¹² In addition, corrupt judges allegedly delayed money laundering cases against Norero's siblings after receiving bribes, while police and prosecutors on Norero's payroll passed him information about law enforcement crackdowns both inside and outside prison. Seventy-six people, among them judges, police officers, prison officials, lawyers, prosecutors, legislators, businessmen and politicians, are currently on trial in these three cases. Notably, Wilman Terán, former president of the Judiciary Council was sentenced to 9 years and 4 months in prison for the Metastasis case.
- Bolivia's legal system is similarly compromised. For the last 20 years, judicial appointments have been heavily influenced by political considerations, and used as weapons to prosecute and remove political opponents. While some level of political influence in judicial appointments exists worldwide, the Bolivian case demonstrates a particularly extreme example of judicial subordination to the ruling party. This degree of politicization not only undermines the judiciary's independence but also weakens public confidence in democratic institutions, creating a cycle of systemic vulnerability. This politicization fostered a judiciary perceived as subservient to the ruling party, rather than impartial and justice oriented. The systemic vulnerabilities in Bolivia's judiciary allowed narcotraffickers to exploit institutional weaknesses for their benefit. Corruption within the justice system, fostered by political control, often leads to bribes, intimidation, or manipulation of legal outcomes, enabling narcotraffickers to operate with impunity.
- For example, Bolivia's status as a major coca producer, combined with weak oversight of air and land borders, has facilitated the growth of transnational drug trafficking networks. The judiciary's inefficiency and corruption have allowed prominent figures, such as Sebastian Marset, a notorious Uruguayan trafficker, to operate in Bolivia with impunity for extended periods.¹³ This connection underscores how judicial independence is not just a democratic ideal but a practical necessity for combating organized crime effectively.¹⁴

9 <https://www.fiscalia.gob.ec/caso-metastasis/>

10 <https://www.fiscalia.gob.ec/caso-encuentro/>

11 <https://gk.city/2024/03/06/caso-purga-explicado/>

12 <https://gk.city/2023/12/14/caso-metastasis-explicado-delincuencia-organizada/>

13 <https://latinoamerica21.com/es/narcotrafico-en-bolivia-dudas-y-deudas-pendientes/>

14 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/25/will-luis-arce-rebuild-bolivias-broken-judiciary>

- In Bolivia, corruption infiltrates all levels of government, including the judiciary and police, weakening state institutions. Public officials, including those in law enforcement, are often involved, or complicit in, criminal activities. This dynamic undermines public trust and hampers efforts to tackle organized crime and corruption.¹⁵ For example, corruption in public procurement processes and misuse of state resources are major governance challenges. A notable case involves the Bolivian Highway Administrator (ABC) and China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC). Allegations include bribes totaling BOB 18.3 million (approximately USD 2.5 million) to influence the award of a contract for the Sucre-Yamparáez highway.
- In Ecuador, the Democracy Code (the Electoral Law) provides conditions for the infiltration of organized crime into politics due to regulatory vagueness regarding control over the electoral campaign process, or the involvement of candidates. For example, to run as a candidate, it is not necessary to be affiliated with a political party. This situation opens the door to the existence of more than 200 political organizations, while raising questions about who has the resources available to finance these campaigns.
- In Ecuador, the infiltration of organized crime not only affects political parties, but also extends to electoral campaigns and candidacies, compromising the legitimacy of elections and eroding the independence of political decisions. The best example of this was the assassination of presidential candidate, Fernando Villavicencio, in 2023. Investigations are still ongoing, but it has been revealed that Villavicencio had information on the drug trafficker alias Invisible and was threatening to reveal it.¹⁶
- In addition to this, during the investigation of the Metastasis case, it has been evidenced that Norero has had an alleged interference in electoral politics, with illicit campaign financing. And this is precisely one of the weakest points of the electoral system. Although no electoral officials have been discovered in the plot of the Metastasis case, the chats speak of the obvious: the National Electoral Council (CNE) does not have the capacity nor the means to execute the control of the financing of parties and movements.

*"It is obvious that there is a penetration [before, during, and after election] and that the narcos not only finance candidates but also become the candidates. That is, we believe that this is always a step, first finance someone and then you are that someone."
– Martha Roldos, Ecuadorian journalist*

¹⁵ <https://www.lostiempos.com/actualidad/seguridad/20231204/bolivia-ya-no-es-sitio-transito-sino-operacion-carteles-narco>

¹⁶ <https://elpais.com/america/2024-08-09/a-un-ano-del-crimen-de-fernando-villavicencio-en-ecuador-siete-sospechosos-muertos-y-sin-autor-intelectual.html>

Social Impacts

- Criminal organizations generate a climate of fear. This fear can be pervasive, restricting citizens' political participation and freedom of expression, and while undermining trust in institutions. Criminal gangs also use intimidation to muffle journalists, opinion leaders, and politicians, which curtails citizens' access to information and favors narratives supporting illegal interests.
- Self-censorship among journalists and fear of retaliation against judges and prosecutors¹⁷ in charge of sensitive cases limits public debate on these issues and affects the quality of the country's democracy.
 1. Fear of government retaliation, legal harassment, and physical violence means self-censorship among Bolivian journalists is widespread. According to research by the LatAm Journalism Review, over 59 percent of Bolivian journalists have admitted to self-censorship.¹⁸ Additionally, the U.S. Department of State's 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices notes that reporters in Bolivia often choose self-censorship over potential conflicts with the government.¹⁹
- Citizens who live in a world of pervasive violence and insecurity, including political assassinations such as in Ecuador, often focus on security as their main need and can even support measures that undermine the democratic order and human rights. The trade-off between freedom and security often allows states to justify consolidating power under the guise of combating crime, which can lead to authoritarian practices, abuses of power, and erosion of individual rights. By co-opting fundamental powers—such as law enforcement, the judiciary, and political institutions—organized crime secures impunity and perpetuates its operations.²⁰
 1. In Ecuador, 49 percent of survey respondents point to security as the country's main problem (LAPOP, 2024).
 2. Faced with rapidly increasing homicide levels when he assumed office in 2023, the newly elected president, Daniel Noboa, declared that the country was in a state of internal armed conflict against 22 criminal groups whom he described as "narco-terrorists" on January 9, 2024. This designation allows the use of lethal weapons in the territory of a State. It is important to emphasize that this decision has contributed to serious human rights violations by the security forces. Violations include apparent extrajudicial executions and multiple cases of arbitrary detentions and ill-treatment.²¹
 3. Upon taking office in November 2023, Daniel Noboa had an approval rating of 60 percent. After decreeing a state of internal war to fight criminal gangs in the country, his approval rating rose to 80 percent by the end of January, marking Noboa as the president with the highest approval rating since 1979 in Ecuador.²²

17 <https://www.fundamedios.org.ec/ante-el-caso-metastasis-y-por-una-real-etica-periodistica/>

18 [More than half of Bolivian journalists have suffered censorship and self-censorship - LatAm Journalism Review by the Knight Center](#)

19 <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bolivia/>

20 <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ecuador/>

21 <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2024/05/22/ecuador-abusos-luego-del-anuncio-de-un-conflicto-armado>

22 <https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/politica/daniel-noboa-aceptacion-alta-cedatos/>

Recommendations

While this study does not explore all the threats governments face in combatting organized crime, the findings in this report shed light on how such infiltration can impact a state's integrity, public trust, and the rule of law.

Reaching out beyond a country's borders is a key step in tackling crime. International cooperation is crucial for intelligence sharing, providing assistance, and building legal frameworks that allow countries to tackle transnational criminal networks. Joint operations and multinational capacity-building initiatives improve law enforcement and judicial systems. With funding and support from international donors, countries can implement best practices for combatting crime to protect their political and legal systems.

The following recommendations outline how international cooperation could strengthen efforts to combat organized crime:

Transparency and accountability:

- Devise strategies to enhance transparency in public administration and resource distribution. Strengthen accountability, ensuring that public officials are held responsible for their actions and decisions.
- Strengthen existing research networks of local experts and civil society organizations to better use open data is crucial for enhancing transparency and accountability, particularly in governance, public policy, and elections. This approach enables more informed analysis of trends by empowering local stakeholders to access and interpret open data, which can be used to track government actions, monitor public spending and campaign financing, and assess the effectiveness of policies
- Encourage legislative reform related to transparency, data management and access to public information, promote press freedom and freedom of expression.
- Support a cultural shift towards transparency and institutional integrity is an essential complement to laws and legislative reforms. It is vital that communities are involved in the brainstorming process as noted in the Nothing About Us, Without Us approach. This work could be done through roundtables, presentations and/or workshops for communities with government officials, judges, journalists, etc., regarding good democracy practices. Lectures and presentations by anticorruption experts, with a focus on preventing organized crime's penetration into state agencies could also promote change.

Judicial reform:

- Support judicial reforms to guarantee independence, impartiality, and efficacy. This will help combat corruption and organized crime. Reforms should include robust evaluation methods to assess the performance of judges.
- Share best practices on how to improve institutional capacity to investigate potential conflicts of interest among judicial staff, particularly as they pertain to case management. This includes establishing mechanisms for background checks and possible links to external influences.

- Support efforts to improve public access to justice. Training programs for judges, prosecutors, and court staff are essential to ensure they are equipped to handle specialized cases effectively, apply relevant laws consistently, and protect human rights throughout the judicial process. Streamlined procedures can reduce case backlogs and ensure timely resolution, while victim support services provide much-needed psychological, legal, and social assistance to empower victims and secure their participation in justice delivery (e.g., Specialized Judicial Units) and related mechanisms.

Combating corruption:

- Share best practices to develop evidence-based measures to prevent, detect, and punish corruption at all levels of government. Implement anticorruption laws and strengthen control and oversight institutions. Governments must take a multifaceted approach that focuses on preventing, detecting, and punishing corrupt practices at all levels of government. This involves a combination of legislative measures, strengthening institutions, and fostering a culture of accountability.
- Support investigative journalism and guarantee protection for freedom of expression and press freedom to expose corruption cases.
- Build and support civil society groups which will push for adherence to a national anticorruption policy.
- Provide assistance to implement and enforce anticorruption laws, including those related to money-laundering, asset forfeiture, and terrorism financing across all government agencies.

Legislative:

- Prioritize a legislative agenda for bills and reform proposals addressing anticorruption, organized crime, money-laundering, and asset forfeiture. Legal tools, such as asset forfeiture laws, allow authorities to seize property and assets purchased with laundered funds, can disincentivize crime.
- Encourage the dissemination and explanation of new regulations to inform citizens and government entities.
- Provide assistance and best practice approaches with regional peers to establish compatible laws to strengthen regulatory frameworks for transparency.

Institutional strengthening:

- Strengthen democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, oversight bodies, and anticorruption agencies. Supporting institutions so they operate independently is vital for the rule of law, human rights, and democratic principles.
- International cooperation can play a pivotal role in combatting organized crime by strengthening institutions through sharing intelligence, lessons learned, best practices, and coordination strategies.

Journalists and officials:

- Support security training for journalists to mitigate the risks associated with their work.
- Train journalists on covering corruption, organized crime, and internal conflicts using up-to-date technologies, with a special emphasis on reporting during electoral periods and in vulnerable territorial spaces.

Conclusions

While this report focuses on Bolivia and Ecuador, organized crime presents a significant challenge to development and democratic governance across Latin America and the Caribbean. Organized crime has become increasingly entrenched, evolving into sophisticated, modern, and violent organizations in nearly every country in the region. These covert activities severely undermine the rule of law, hinder effective law enforcement, and have a devastating impact on the economy. They weaken political systems, compromise the integrity of electoral processes, and corrupt the administration of justice through infiltration and bribery.

Organized crime's threat to democracies is multifaceted and demands a comprehensive response. Chronic issues such as poverty, inequality, and political instability, prevalent throughout the region, create a fertile environment for social unrest, populist movements, and the infiltration of organized crime into political systems, all of which weaken democratic processes.

Efforts to support democratic development must go beyond merely strengthening institutions and promoting responsive governance; they must also tackle underlying economic and social challenges. Multi-agency and multi-national strategies to combat corruption, address organized crime, and promote economic growth means collaboration among democratic countries is crucial. Given that organized crime operates across borders, responses to it must be transnational and collaborative in nature. Furthermore, addressing the complicity of political, judicial, and law enforcement officials in corruption is vital to restoring public confidence in democratic processes.

The intersection between organized crime and politics poses a grave threat to democracy, as it undermines the integrity of institutions and encourages authoritarian tendencies. Regimes influenced by organized crime not only erode democratic values within their own borders but also serve as models for authoritarianism abroad, contributing to a global decline in democratic principles.

To counter this threat, it is imperative to strengthen law enforcement, ensure transparency in politics, and safeguard the integrity of democratic institutions. Tackling the root causes of organized crime, such as poverty and inequality, is key to reducing its influence and preventing democratic backsliding. By combating organized crime and reinforcing democratic values, nations can secure their democratic foundations and ensure a future of freedom, justice, and prosperity for all citizens.



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