



## Violencia en Ecuador: travesía por el laberinto del narcotráfico

### Resumen:

La creciente violencia desatada por grupos criminales en Ecuador desde el 7 de enero ha convertido al país en un escenario altamente peligroso, donde el presidente Noboa, recién llegado al cargo, declara el estado de excepción y despliega al Ejército para combatir el caos desencadenado en todo el territorio.

El deterioro de la situación llega al punto de ataques brutales contra la población, guardias tomados como rehenes en varias cárceles o explosiones en edificios, a causa del creciente poder de las bandas de narcotraficantes. A pesar de las medidas gubernamentales, la violencia persiste y el presidente ecuatoriano declara un *conflicto armado interno* y rechaza negociar con los criminales, enfocándose en restaurar la paz.

Esta crisis de seguridad en toda regla puede parecer repentina, pero es el resultado de malas políticas de sucesivos gobiernos que no quisieron o no supieron enfrentar el florecimiento del crimen organizado.

### Palabras clave:

Violencia, Narcotráfico, Bandas armadas, Estado de Excepción, Noboa, Ecuador.

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## Introduction

In an extremely complex international context with the highest concentration of active conflicts since the end of World War II - such as Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and Yemen - Ecuador, a country once known as the "island of peace" in the world<sup>1</sup>, has been plunged into chaos since Sunday 7 January, with criminal groups waging war against the government, plunging the nation into a scenario of violence, fire and chaos, where the horrors of *narco-terrorism* have rarely been so evident.

Following the terrifying show of force by these criminal groups, the Ecuadorian president vowed to intensify his war against national crime, imposing a curfew, calling 22 gangs in Ecuador terrorist organisations and asking the military to oversee national security and the prison system. These criminals have perpetrated a series of attacks across the country, ranging from kidnappings, robberies, bombings, prison riots or prison escapes, taking more than 200 prison officials hostage, to the seizure of public buildings and even executions.

In response, the government has declared a state of emergency and deployed the army on the streets to stem the spiralling violence.

President Daniel Noboa, who took office in November last year, has declared that his country is in a state of war due to the existence of an *internal armed conflict* and that he does not intend to negotiate with criminals: "We are not going to let society die a slow death, today we are going to fight them, we are going to provide solutions and soon we are going to give peace to Ecuadorian families"<sup>2</sup>.

On the other hand, in this context marked by the state of emergency and with the military forces taking control of security, the prosecutor César Suárez was also assassinated on Wednesday 17.

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<sup>1</sup> At the 1991 Peace for Development Conference, former Ecuadorian President Rodrigo Borja Ceballos described his country in this way, an expression that was also used by another former president, Gustavo Noboa, in his 2002 Report to the Nation.

<sup>2</sup> Canela Radio Corp. Noboa says Ecuador "will not stop" against terrorism. 10-01-24. [online]. Available at: <https://web.canelaradio.com/noboa-dice-que-ecuador-no-va-a-parar-contra-el-terrorismo/>. (All links are active as of press time, February 2024).

Meanwhile, police and military operations are trying to put an end to the chaos generated by the armed gangs with a total of 3387 people arrested, of whom, as of 25 January according to the balance sheet published by the Government of Ecuador<sup>3</sup>, 158 were arrested for alleged terrorism.

## Unravelling the Ecuadorian Crisis

The crisis in Ecuador is not unforeseen, in fact it has been decades in the making.

It was in the late 1990s that the Andean Republic suffered one of the biggest economic crises in its history. The main reason for this was a classic in the region: governments that incurred a budgetary imbalance, exceeding their revenues and adopting uncontrolled money printing as a measure to sustain their spending levels. Moreover, this financial situation was aggravated by a fall in oil prices, the main source of resources for the Ecuadorian economy. All this led to high inflation in the country and many banks even ran out of reserves to return money to their clients. The financial crisis led to approximately 70 % of the closure of the country's economic institutions, with losses amounting to 8 billion dollars<sup>4</sup>.

This crisis had two serious consequences: the dollarisation of the economy and a military coup d'état in 2000. It also left a deep mark on Ecuadorian society, shaping the social context in which the country would evolve in the following decades. Poverty and marginalisation increased among the most vulnerable sectors of society, while those with greater resources had a relatively greater capacity to mitigate the adverse effects. This disparity contributed to the exacerbation of already existing socio-economic inequalities in the country<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Presidency of Ecuador [@Presidencia\_EC] (2024, January, 25) [Post]. X.  
[https://twitter.com/Presidencia\\_Ec/status/1750258391786643683](https://twitter.com/Presidencia_Ec/status/1750258391786643683)

<sup>4</sup> GANUZA, Carina Viviana. Política Intervencionista Ecuatoriana desde el enfoque teórico de la Maldición de los Recursos (2008-2017), in: Scientific Magazine, vol. 4, no. 13, pp. 19-39, 2019. [online]. Available at: <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/5636/563659492002/html/>

<sup>5</sup> LARREA MALDONADO, Carlos. Pobreza, dolarización y crisis en El Ecuador. Quito, Ecuador, 2004. [online]. Available at: [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1100&context=abya\\_yala](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1100&context=abya_yala)

Power was eventually transferred by the army to Gustavo Noboa Bejarano, a right-wing politician who sought to set the nation back on track, as did his successors Lucio Gutiérrez and Alfredo Palacio. Despite their efforts, the crisis had left deep scars and Ecuador faced several years of recovery challenges.

It was not until 2007, when Rafael Correa came to power, that Ecuador experienced a significant change. Correa resolutely embarked on a course oriented towards left-wing policies, marking a paradigm shift for the country and ushering in what would become known as *the golden years*.

A period of economic prosperity fuelled by rising commodity prices, following a trend also seen in other Latin American countries. Correa also implemented a series of political, economic and social reforms, including investment in infrastructure financed in part by oil revenues.

But coinciding with his rise to power, drug trafficking, and thus violence, exploded in 2007. Ecuador, by virtue of its strategic position, has emerged as a crucial epicentre for drug trafficking. As US statesman Henry Kissinger said, "geography is destiny", and this maxim becomes relevant when considering Ecuador's location between Colombia and Peru, the main cocaine-producing countries; its western border with the Pacific Ocean facilitates communication and the flow of illegal goods and services to national and international markets, particularly through the Asia-Pacific basin. These circumstances have transformed the Andean country into the operational epicentre of various global mafias, in a territory that, historically far removed from the guerrilla wars and criminal violence that plagued neighbouring Colombia and Peru since the 1970s, never developed the infrastructure or material capacity to deal with security threats from revolutionaries or illicit gangs.

The phenomenon coincides with the demobilisation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC, as a result of a peace agreement with the Colombian state; and it is from this peace process that the cocaine production and distribution chains experienced a decentralisation. Dissident groups of the FARC and others organisations linked to drug trafficking incorporated Ecuadorian gangs into this business.

This change in the regional dynamics of drug trafficking has contributed to the growth of the illicit drug trade in Ecuador, making it a major player in the international production and distribution chain. Drugs from neighbouring countries are channelled from Ecuadorian ports to destinations such as Guatemala or Mexico, where they undergo treatment processes before being shipped to the United States.



Figure 2. International drug trafficking routes in Ecuador.

Source: Source: Insight Crime

In this framework, the powerful Mexican cartels have established their presence in Ecuador, delegating the most risky operations to local gangs, among them the Sinaloa cartel<sup>6</sup>, which is believed to have started operating in Ecuador in 2003 by sending emissaries and keeping a low profile, and the Jalisco Cartel - New Generation. Although

<sup>6</sup> PRIMICIAS. The 'sombrerudos' of the Sinaloa cartel activate their envoys in Ecuador. 2-12-21. [online]. Available at: <https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/en-exclusiva/sinaloa-enviados-ecuador-detenido/>

some analysts believe that there was already a silent and mimetised presence of these northern criminal organisations in the Ecuadorian environment as early as the 1980s<sup>7</sup>.

For their part, Ecuadorian groups act in a fragmented manner and as subcontractors of these foreign criminal organisations, especially in the Colombian departments of Nariño and Putumayo, on the border with Ecuador, and also associate with other European organisations, mainly the Albanian<sup>8</sup> and Italian mafias, which have found there a good platform for drug shipments to Europe<sup>9</sup>.

All things considered, it is not surprising that, according to the Ecuadorian Observatory of Organised Crime (OECO)<sup>10</sup>, money laundering is the second most widespread criminal activity in Ecuador. The adoption of the dollarised economy plays a crucial role in all transactions related to organised crime, especially in the field of drug trafficking. The prevalence of the dollar globally facilitates the flow of illicit money; profits generated by drug trafficking in the United States can be transferred directly to Ecuador without the need for conversion, which simplifies the money laundering process compared to neighbouring countries such as Colombia, where strict currency controls act as a significant barrier to illicit financial flows.

Even so, during Correa's term in office, judicial reform led to a dizzying reduction in homicides, from 17.51 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2010 to 5.81 by the end of his term<sup>11</sup>.

Since then, successive administrations in Ecuador have sought to counter the threat of organised crime and violence. However, limited state resources have emerged as a central factor affecting the effectiveness of these initiatives, making it a systemic and multidimensional challenge that has persisted over time. Although we can also attribute this to poor policy decisions made by successive Ecuadorian governments that reduced

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<sup>7</sup> BIBERBOST, Pablo and BOSCAN, Guillermo. *Del paraíso al infierno: ¿qué variables explican la ola de violencia en Ecuador*, in: The Conversation, 15-01-24. [online]. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/del-paraiso-al-infierno-que-variables-explican-la-ola-de-violencia-en-ecuador-221026>

<sup>8</sup> What is the Albanian Mafia: How it operates in Ecuador and the world, in: ECUAVISIA, 14-02-23. [online]. Available at: <https://www.ecuavisa.com/noticias/seguridad/que-es-la-mafia-albanesa-asi-opera-en-ecuador-y-el-mundo-DE4446207>

<sup>9</sup> The latest biannual report by Italy's Anti-Mafia Investigation Directorate (DIA) highlights the connections between the Italian mafia and Ecuador, as well as with five other Latin American nations.

<sup>10</sup> MANJARRÉS, Juliana. 3 factors that make Ecuador a money laundering hotspot, in: InSight Crime, 5-10-23. [online]. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/factores-hacen-ecuador-foco-lavado-dinero>

<sup>11</sup> Statista Research Department. Ecuador: Homicide Rate 2010-2023. 10-01-24. [online]. Available at: <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/1402384/tasa-de-homicidios-ecuador/>

the state's capacity to manage the advent of criminal networks. In Correa's case, by ending cooperation with the US Drug Enforcement Agency, without replacing it with any alternative. Ecuador's coastal waters were thus freed from surveillance, making them an attractive route for traffickers<sup>12</sup>.

In the 2017 presidential elections, Correa did not repeat his candidacy, which led to Lenin Moreno becoming president of Ecuador, facing the difficult task of implementing economic adjustment measures to control excessive state spending<sup>13</sup>. The cuts, known as "el paquetazo", had a particular impact on the less privileged classes. The steep fall in oil prices had hit the economy hard, and his predecessor's persistent resistance to reducing public spending led to excessive indebtedness. Despite some social policies during the oil bonanza, the Ecuadorian economy was overly dependent on oil, a result of a lack of diversification.

Suddenly, the lack of opportunities for young people became a significant challenge, and petty crime began to manifest itself in the most disadvantaged classes of society. The austerity measures implemented by the government provoked tensions and protests, reflecting people's unease with the difficult economic conditions facing the country.

In this context of desperation and economic precariousness, international criminal organisations found fertile ground in Ecuador to expand their operations. With the economy dollarised and the country mired in poverty, the mafias took advantage of the nation's vulnerability, using its resources for both logistical activities and money laundering.

Meanwhile, corruption, a deep-rooted evil in Latin America, spread throughout Ecuador, affecting the upper echelons of the country and exacerbating existing economic problems. Moreno's administration was marked by the need to address both the economic fallout and the ravages of corruption at various levels of Ecuador's government. He carried out a comprehensive security reform, much more conservative and closer to

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<sup>12</sup> NBC News. *Ecuador says U.S. must leave Manta air base*. 30-07-08. [online]. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna25922554>

<sup>13</sup> BLASCO, E.J. La crisis económica que dejó Correa en Ecuador, in: ABC Internacional, 15-10-19. [online]. Available at: [https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-crisis-economica-dejo-correa-ecuador-201910150209\\_noticia.html](https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-crisis-economica-dejo-correa-ecuador-201910150209_noticia.html)



the United States<sup>14</sup>, and cut state spending on security as part of the agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

In addition to the above, it is necessary to consider the devastating impact of the COVID crisis in Ecuador. The pandemic, in countries that did not have a stable economy, as is the case here, resulted in the indebtedness of the state, a clear sign of the state's incapacity in the face of such a complicated process.

Lenin Moreno was succeeded by Guillermo Lasso in 2021 with a programme of neoliberal economic policies. Despite initially enjoying high approval ratings, his mandate was affected by a growing security problem in the country, with drug cartels exerting increasing control over Ecuador's institutions and territory, especially in the prison system. Several prisons witnessed massacres of inmates, bringing the number of prison murders to more than 100 in 2022<sup>15</sup>.

To address this problem, Lasso declared a state of emergency on several occasions, increased the size of the security forces and transferred thousands of prisoners to other jails. However, these measures failed to effectively reduce homicide rates and, in some cases, led to further violence. During this debacle, he did little to avert disaster amid political paralysis due to clashes with the opposition-controlled National Assembly. Meanwhile, there were growing indications that criminal networks were increasingly co-opting parts of the state, including in the president's inner circle.

Lasso opted for the "death cross"<sup>16</sup> as possibly the only way to overcome the political crisis and stay in office for a few more months. In fact, his decision coincided with the days leading up to the vote on the motion of censure aimed at removing him from office in the House.

Early elections on 20 August and 15 October last year unexpectedly brought the 36-year-old Daniel Noboa, with little political experience, to the presidency, but not before the Ecuadorian nation's serious security crisis was revealed, with the political assassinations of Manta Mayor Agustín Intriago and Fernando Villavicencio, a respected anti-corruption

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<sup>14</sup> JORDAN, F. El legado de Lenín Moreno, el presidente que dio la vuelta a la política de Ecuador, in: El Diario, 24-05-21. [online]. Available at: <https://eldiario.com/2021/05/24/legado-de-lenin-moreno-ecuador/>

<sup>15</sup> BBC News World. Ecuador: at least 15 dead and 21 injured after new prison riot. 4-12-22. [online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-63128138#:~:text=>

<sup>16</sup> Cross-death is a constitutional clause that dissolves the National Assembly in order to subsequently call elections to renew the legislative and executive branches of government.

activist who had called out gang leaders by name and one of the main candidates in the elections.

### **The escalation of the conflict**

The trigger for this latest spiral of violence was the escape of Adolfo García, alias *Fito*, the leader of the Choneros, who was serving a 34-year sentence, after an attempt to transfer him to another prison. This dangerous mafioso had already been involved in another such episode in 2013, although he was captured that same year. Although Ecuador is home to several dangerous gangs, this criminal group is one of the most prominent, considered the pioneers of Ecuador's drug scene and linked to the Sinaloa cartel. Their escape and subsequent search, involving more than 3,000 troops, has unleashed an unparalleled wave of violence across the country, with rival criminal gangs taking control of several prisons, with dozens of law enforcement officers taken hostage, looting and the murder of a prison official. In this context, another mafia leader Fabricio Colón Pico, alias *El salvaje*, leader of Los Lobos, the second largest criminal group in the country, with more than 8,000 members spread throughout the prisons, also escaped.

We must address the issue of overcrowding in Ecuadorian prisons and the insufficient allocation of resources for the control of inmates, which has transformed these institutions into centres of power for the mafias, where prisoners are in control of the facilities. Within these prisons, criminal gang leaders have established self-governance, overseeing illicit operations and charging for various services. Prisons are arguably their main centres of command and operations, having been at the centre of episodes of extreme violence that have left hundreds dead in recent years. Since February 2021, more than 420 prisoners have been killed in these clashes and in efforts by government forces to regain control of the prisons.

This dynamic is facilitated by entrenched corruption in the prison system, which allows the entry of weapons, drugs and all sorts of other items.

Instead of removing them from society, the penal system allowed gangs to carry out their activities with impunity from within prison walls, interspersed with internecine gang warfare.

Meanwhile, a group of hooded men, allegedly belonging to the Tiguerones gang, momentarily took over a local television station. It was the most visible episode in the most recent chapter of confrontation between the state and the gangs operating in this nation.

President Daniel Noboa, who, as we have already noted, took office less than two months ago, declared a state of emergency for 60 days and declared the country in "internal armed conflict"<sup>17</sup>. This measure gives the government the power to mobilise the armed forces to back up the police, establish a nationwide curfew and suspend the right to freedom of assembly. This measure gives the government the power to mobilise the armed forces to back up the police, establish a nationwide curfew and suspend the right to freedom of assembly.

This presidential decree shows that Ecuador has entered a new phase in the fight against organised crime, identifying more than 20 criminal gangs as terrorist groups and hostile elements, allowing the armed forces to intervene alongside the police.

The current security situation in Ecuador goes beyond a simple increase in crime; it is characterised by an escalation of systematic violence perpetrated by belligerent non-state actors. These acts cannot be classified merely as crimes, but represent a direct terrorist threat to state sovereignty and territorial integrity, as stated in the aforementioned decree. These gangs are now a military target and can be neutralised as such. This offensive has been backed, astonishingly, by the majority of political forces in a usually polarised country; the National Assembly expressed this with 135 votes in favour by all parliamentarians present. It even had the support of former president Rafael Correa from his Belgian exile.

There are an estimated 1,500 gangs specialising in all types of crime, including kidnapping, extortion, executions, robberies with violence, assaults and all the activities that organised crime entails.

Following the same pattern observed in other nations, such as Mexico, the rise of mafias in Ecuador has triggered an alarming increase in levels of insecurity and violence in the last three years. But 2023 was marked as the most violent year in the country's history,

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<sup>17</sup> FIEL WEB PLUS. Legal Bulletin. Executive Decree nº 110 of 8 January 2024 and extension nº 111 of extension to article nº 3. [online]. Available at: [https://www.fielweb.com/App\\_Themes/InformacionInteres/dct111.pdf](https://www.fielweb.com/App_Themes/InformacionInteres/dct111.pdf)

registering a total of 7592 violent deaths, compared to 4426 the previous year, according to the Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado (OECO)<sup>18</sup>. In 2017, the rate of violent deaths in Ecuador stood at 5 per 100,000 inhabitants, while it has now climbed to more than 40<sup>19</sup>, consolidating Ecuador as the most violent nation in Latin America.

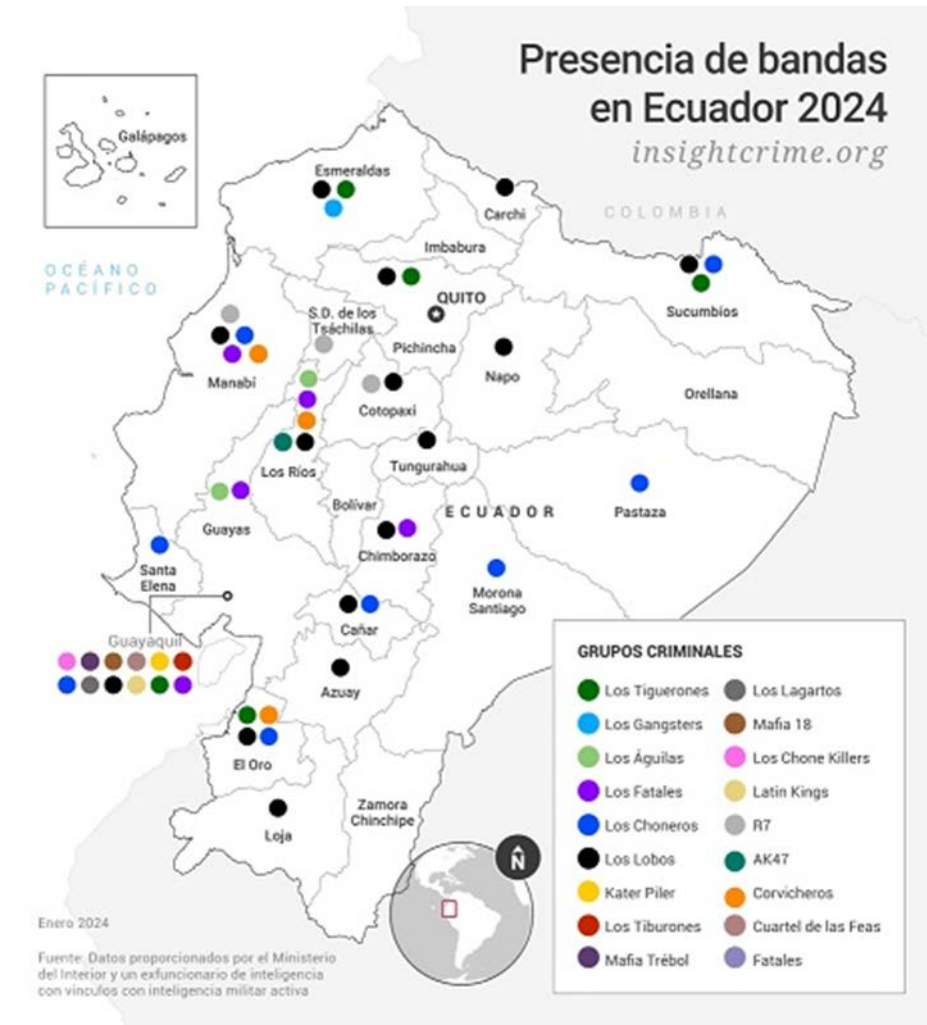


Figure 2. Gang presence in Ecuador Source: Insight Crime

One of the fundamental reasons for this distressing situation is that it has gone from being a transit country to a major regional hub for the custody, processing and distribution of

<sup>18</sup> OECO. Organised crime statistics and operational results viewer. [online]. Available at: <https://oeco.pdf.org/>

<sup>19</sup> NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC *What's happening in Ecuador? The unprecedented wave of violence in the country.* [online]. Available at: [https://www.nationalgeographic.com.es/mundo-ng/que-esta-pasando-ecuador-ola-violencia-sin-precedentes-pais\\_21392](https://www.nationalgeographic.com.es/mundo-ng/que-esta-pasando-ecuador-ola-violencia-sin-precedentes-pais_21392)

narcotics, which has empowered the more than 20 criminal gangs that operate in the region in coordination with cartels from Colombia, Mexico and European mafias.

Indeed, the involvement of multiple criminal organisations from different countries and their territorial disputes are among the main factors behind the increase in violence. According to InSight Crime, Ecuador is the second country in Latin America, after Colombia, with the most cocaine seizures, which is also an indicator of how the illegal business has expanded in the country<sup>20</sup>. It is estimated that one third of the cocaine produced in the Republic of Colombia is exported to Ecuador.<sup>21</sup>

This exponential increase in drug trafficking and the money it generates has allowed the gangs to expand, infiltrating all layers of society, including institutions, through corruption.

Recently, the Metastasis case, the most extensive operation against drug trafficking and corruption, led by the State Prosecutor's Office, has revealed the infiltration of drug trafficking into the judicial system, the political sphere and even the country's Armed Forces, an operation comprising 900 officials that resulted in more than 30 arrests.

Among those arrested are judges accused of ruling in favour of gang leaders, police officers allegedly involved in tampering with evidence and supplying weapons to prisons, and the former director of the penitentiary authority, accused of giving preferential treatment to an influential drug trafficker. Numerous members of the upper echelons of power face charges for allegedly collaborating with criminal groups in exchange for bribes, jewellery and even prostitution services<sup>22</sup>.

However, the uprising following President Noboa's declaration of a state of emergency was not limited to factional rivalries, nor to disputes over control of prisons. Given its magnitude and coordination, some analysts see this unprecedented violence as a direct challenge to the government's authority and ability to protect the population. By plunging the streets into chaos and forcing citizens to take refuge, the criminal groups appeared to be subjecting the Ecuadorian government to massive blackmail, highlighting state

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<sup>20</sup> DALBY, Chris. *Game Changers 2023: Ecuador Loses Its Grip on Crime*, in: InSight Crime 4-01-24. [online]. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/news/gamechangers-2023-ecuador-loses-grip-crime/>

<sup>21</sup> Mexico Daily Post. *Ecuador seizes over 9 tons of cocaine destined for Mexico and the US*. 14-08-21. [online]. Available at: <https://mexicodailypost.com/2021/08/14/ecuador-seizes-over-9-tons-of-cocaine-destined-for-mexico-and-the-us/>

<sup>22</sup> INFOBAE. *Caso Metástasis en Ecuador: los chats del narco Leandro Norero salpican a políticos, periodistas y otros actores*, 20-12-23. [online]. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2023/12/20/caso-metastasis-en-ecuador-los-chats-del-narco-leandro-norero-salpican-a-politicos-periodistas-y-otros-actores/>

incapacity and warning of the consequences of the action taken. So much so that a few days later the prosecutor investigating the TV station robbery, César Suárez, was gunned down in the city of Guayaquil while driving his car.

The Attorney General herself, Diana Salazar, who has been threatened since last June, maintains that, through this criminal act, the drug traffickers have sought to send an intimidating "message" not only to Noboa's government, but also to the state as a whole and to the population, which is beset by an alarming wave of murders.

The latest arrest figures provided by the Ecuadorian government for the first twenty days since the government's declaration of an *internal armed conflict* against organised crime total 4488 individuals. Of this group, 237 people were arrested on suspicion of involvement in alleged acts of terrorism<sup>23</sup>.

But the attacks, however, do not cease. This past Monday, 30 January, there was an attack on the facilities of the Public Prosecutor's Office in the city of Manta, in the province of Manabí, which fortunately resulted in no casualties, only material damage.

### **Tackling the security crisis**

Daniel Noboa's recent assumption of the Ecuadorian presidency means too short a period to implement the fundamental elements of his programme and to deal with the tumour of criminal elements in Ecuadorian society, economy and state.

His most important proposals, which won him the majority support of Ecuadorians at the polls, focus on the economy, but above all on security. Among his commitments is the implementation of significant reforms in the penitentiary system, through a segmentation that allows for the isolation of the most violent and dangerous inmates. So far, however, the security strategy has shown more reactivity than planning; good intentions are often not enough.

To give a boost to his security plan against crime and drug trafficking, the president recently expressed his intention to call a referendum for voters to legitimise the imposition of stricter security measures, such as harsher penalties for serious crimes like homicides

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<sup>23</sup> INFOBAE. *More than 4,000 arrested during the first twenty days of the "armed conflict" in Ecuador.* 30-01-24. [online]. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2024/01/29/mas-de-4000-detenido-durante-los-primeros-veinte-dias-de-conflicto-armado-en-ecuador/#:~:text=>

or drug trafficking, the expansion of the armed forces' powers, the extradition of Ecuadorians accused in other countries and the creation of a special operation to protect judges.

Similarly, its security strategy includes the intention to strengthen military control of borders and ports, the creation of a centralised intelligence hub and the proper equipping of law enforcement agencies.

Another of its projects is the construction of two high-security prisons in the Amazon and on the Pacific coast. These facilities will be developed by the same Mexican-Salvadoran consortium that previously built a prison in El Salvador during President Nayib Bukele's anti-gang campaign, and will have capacity for 40,000 inmates. Although it is clear that the new prisons in Ecuador will be considerably smaller, given that the current total prison population is much smaller.

However, questions remain over the effectiveness of all these proposals, especially given the country's precarious economic situation and the president's weak alliances in the National Assembly. Although the government presented a proposal on 12 January to raise the value added tax (VAT) by three percentage points, from 12 to 15 per cent, this measure has met with general disapproval as it represents an additional financial burden for Ecuadorian citizens.

But this securitisation process includes elements that have already been compared to Bukele's autocratic campaign against gangs in El Salvador, although the Ecuadorian president has distanced himself from this idea in an interview with the BBC, arguing that his country has a different reality and different problems and way of thinking<sup>24</sup>, in any case.

What is clear is that the repressive tactics against criminal groups being used these days in Ecuador, with mass arrests of individuals on suspicion, restrictions on civil rights and the use of armed patrols, are very similar to those that have been used in El Salvador for almost two years.

The protracted involvement of military forces in the conflict, according to some, could be the trigger for a prolonged spiral of violence and an extended period of bloodshed, with

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<sup>24</sup> GRANT, Will. *We struggle every day not to become a narco-state*, in: BBC, 13-01-24. [online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/ckv4exk0q1no>

those fighting often intermingling with civilian personnel, as was already evident in Plan Colombia. Implemented two decades ago and backed by the US, it was censured because of the perception of a large part of the population as internal enemies<sup>25</sup>.

For this reason, there are reservations among humanitarian experts as to whether criminal groups in Ecuador really fit the profile of organised armed groups that international law would recognise as parties to a conflict, security must be balanced with respect for human rights<sup>26</sup>. Over and above the risk of escalation, there are both legal and operational questions, i.e. in the end there is no way forward for Ecuador that does not entail a considerable degree of difficulty for the state and a marked concern for the Ecuadorian population.

It is also important to underline that these criminal groups constitute a phenomenon that transcends borders, forming a global crime network.

In fairness, a crucial responsibility is evident at the global level, as most of the revenues that support the 22 groups identified by President Noboa as terrorists derive from the cocaine trade destined for consumers in the West. This demand in North America and Europe has been the magnet that has attracted Mexican cartels and European criminal networks to intertwine with local Ecuadorian groups, as previously mentioned. The situation calls for collaboration at the international level to effectively address transnational crime.

According to the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, most of the cocaine arriving at the port of Antwerp, the main gateway to Europe, originates in Ecuador<sup>27</sup>.

Neighbouring countries Peru, Argentina and Bolivia, as well as the US, have already pledged their support to help the beleaguered Ecuadorian government. Coordinated collaboration among all these nations is crucial to effectively address the situation in Ecuador. An enhanced joint strategy is required, as neighbouring countries watch

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<sup>25</sup> CORREAL, Annie and GLATSKY, Genevieve. *Ecuadoreans Split on President's Drastic New Measure to Combat Drug Gangs*, in: *The New York Times*, 10-01-24. [online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2024/01/10/espanol/ecuador-violencia.html>

<sup>26</sup> CACHO, Olatz. *Ecuador: lessons learned from militarisation*, in: Amnesty International Spain. 18-01-24. [online]. Available at: <https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/blog/historia/articulos/ecuador>

<sup>27</sup> BORRAS, Marta and GARCÍA-AJOFRIN, Paula. *La mayor parte de la cocaína que llega al puerto de Amberes proviene de Ecuador*, in: EUROEFE EURACTIV, 7-02-23. [On line.] Available at: <https://euroefe.euractiv.es/section/justicia-e-interior/news/la-mayor-parte-de-la-cocaína-que-llega-al-puerto-de-amberes-procede-de-ecuador/>



developments across their borders with concern. In the case of neighbouring countries, such as Peru and Colombia, the mobilisation of improved border controls, through troops and aerial surveillance, should be demanded.

Colombia's president, Gustavo Petro, will also have to coordinate with the Andean country in his ambitious, if faltering, efforts to negotiate with Colombia's dozen or so criminal gangs, what he calls "Total Peace".

What has been achieved to date is a document of *good intentions*, a series of measures under the umbrella of the so-called *Andean security network*, signed by Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia and Peru - members of the Andean Community of Nations (CAN) - to effectively combat organised crime<sup>28</sup>.

The US, the EU and the UK similarly need to make a commitment. Part of this will involve strengthening and intensifying interdiction and demand reduction policies to reduce the flow of drugs northwards. It will also require financial, material and technical support for the Ecuadorian government and security forces<sup>29</sup>.

In this line of cooperation, another of the Ecuadorian President's initiatives is to repatriate foreigners held in prisons to their respective countries, some 3,000 people, or 10.4% of the prison population<sup>30</sup>. Citizens from Colombia, Venezuela and Peru represent the majority of the foreign population in these prisons. However, in order to carry out this process in an organised manner and preserve bilateral relations, the collaboration of the nations involved is required.

As a matter of fact, last Monday 29th, Noboa ordered the repatriation of foreign prisoners to their respective countries as a measure to avoid overpopulation in the prisons. However, this process is neither immediate nor simple due to international conventions. An example of this is Colombia's warning to the Ecuadorian government that the

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<sup>28</sup> ARIET, Andrea. *Los países andinos buscan blindarse ante el narcotráfico*, in: DW, 23-01-24. [On line]. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/es/pa%C3%ADses-andinos-y-el-acuerdo-hist%C3%B3rico-para-blindarse-ante-el-narcotr%C3%A1fico/a-68064044>

<sup>29</sup> SABATINI, Christopher. *The horrors of Ecuador are not just Ecuador's*, in: CHATMAN HOUSE, 11-01-24. [online]. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/01/horrors-ecuador-are-not-just-ecuadors>

<sup>30</sup> Republic of Ecuador. *Penitentiary Census*. May, 2023. [online]. Available at: [https://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/documentos/webinec/Poblacion\\_y\\_Demografia/Censo\\_penitenciario%20/2023/Principales\\_Resultados\\_CP2022.pdf](https://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/documentos/webinec/Poblacion_y_Demografia/Censo_penitenciario%20/2023/Principales_Resultados_CP2022.pdf)

expulsion of its citizens could be considered a unilateral action that would invalidate the judicial decisions of its own courts.

If Ecuador's democratically elected government loses this gang war, there is a risk that the once peaceful South American country could disintegrate into a narco-state.

## Conclusions

In the midst of the country's efforts to regain control and ensure the security of its citizens, President Noboa faces the daunting task of eradicating narco-terrorism and corruption.

All this places Ecuador in a crisis that will be extraordinarily challenging to address through purely military measures. The so-called *internal armed conflict* lacks a defined centre of gravity, given that Noboa himself designated 22 different gangs as terrorist organisations. Moreover, the armed groups have demonstrated their ability to corrupt and subjugate state institutions.

Ending the criminal gangs' reign of terror through draconian measures may represent an apparent solution to improve security in the short term, but it is insufficient.

The root of the structural problems in the Ecuadorian economy should be addressed, which, while not simple, are factors that have led to unprotection and poverty among lower-class youth. It is crucial to recognise that violence emerges as a refuge for those marginalised and excluded by the state. Forcefulness will not be enough if the underlying causes that fuel despair are not confronted.

The display of unity among the various political parties in the face of recent shocking events provides the government with a unique opportunity. Forging a consensus among all political forces on the fundamentals of a reform of the security of the country's security sector is a unique opportunity for the government.

State could be a key strategy in this context. It is vital to recognise that this is a propitious moment to promote dialogue and political collaboration to strengthen the foundations of national security.

Similarly, placing the strengthening of the judicial system at the forefront is an imperative in the current circumstances. This entails ensuring that judges and prosecutors in charge

of organised crime and corruption cases have the necessary guarantees to carry out their functions effectively. Protecting the independence and effectiveness of the judiciary is a fundamental pillar of a robust response to the challenges associated with these issues.

The roots of today's problems, as well as the responsibilities and solutions, extend beyond national borders, encompassing international aspects as well. Strengthening international security and intelligence cooperation is a crucial measure to effectively address transnational criminality. In this conflict declared by gangs, the intervention of the international community becomes necessary, seeking to prevent Ecuador's loss in this challenge.

The complexity of the situation and Ecuador's inexperience in confronting organised crime mafias anticipate a challenge of significant proportions. This scenario invites a profound reflection on the need for international collaboration, structural reforms and the strengthening of institutions to weave a web of lasting security and well-being in the Andean nation.

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