Politics, Business & Culture in the Americas | Volume 15 | Issue 1 | 2021

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Music in Ecuador PAGE 84

B-F E L ---

# GUESS WHO'S HAVING A GOOD PANDEMIC

How COVID-19 is changing organized crime

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# **Boom Times**

# COVID-19 has been great for organized crime. Better international coordination could ease at least some of the damage.

LONG WITH NETFLIX, FOOD DELIVERY services and toilet paper manufacturers, the list of businesses bolstered by COVID-19 also includes organized crime groups. Gangs like the Brazil-based First Command of the Capital (PCC, by its Portuguese initials) and Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel are taking advantage of distracted governments

and desperate populations to tighten their grip over swathes of the economy, political structures and, often, territory as well.

The tale of cartels getting rich off drug trafficking in the Americas is not a new one—it's at least 40 years old and, while names and faces change, it's depressingly constant in its themes of unwavering supply and demand (which still comes mainly from the United States). But there are signs the pandemic really may be a game-changer, creating long-term headaches for governments every-

where, including the new Joe Biden administration.

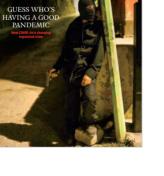
Criminal groups thrive best in areas where residents see them as a more effective and caring version of the state. As the virus spread, it was often gangs (page 24) who enforced lockdowns in Mexico, distributed food in El Salvador and imposed curfews in Rio de Janeiro. They have trafficked in pandemic paraphernalia like surgical masks, test kits and sanitizer. Some expect they will try to control distribution of vaccines. COVID-19 also caused a spike in unemployment, adding to the more than 20 million young Latin Americans who neither studied nor worked on the eve of the pandemic. After the region's economies shrank 8% on average in 2020, most forecasts expect only a 3.5% recovery this year—meaning misery will persist. That has proven fertile recruitment ground for gangs

> in Colombia (page 14), and probably elsewhere. With fewer people on the streets, some gangs have diversified further into digital crime.

> It's a sobering picture, and though we consider ourselves optimists at AQ, this is one area where we frankly see little chance of major change. Under Biden and a split U.S. Congress, a wholesale rethinking of the "war on drugs" seems unlikely (page 52). Some governments don't seem to see fighting organized crime as a top priority. Others such as Venezuela meet the definition of

a narco-state. The rest are simply overwhelmed.

In that light, the focus should probably be on managing the consequences. That means better coordination among the hemisphere's governments and militaries (page 48), as well as following the example of Brazilian police, who have cracked down on the PCC's money laundering (page 42). Economic measures to attenuate rising inequality might also help. These steps are more Band-Aid than cure—but in the age of COVID-19, that may be all we can expect.



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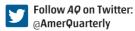
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#### IN OUR NEXT ISSUE:

Green Gold: How a standing Amazon rain forest can in fact increase South America's economic output.





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# Our Readers

**Tell us what you think.** Please send letters to Brian@as-coa.org



Former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet (top left), former Buenos Aires Governor María Eugenia Vidal (bottom left), and Costa Rican Vice President Epsy Campbell Barr (bottom right), join AQ's Editor-in-Chief Brian Winter to launch our special report on Latin America's gender gap.



Claudia Costin

Brasileira, professora universitária FGV-RJ e Harvard, diretora do Centro de Excelência e Inovação em Políticas Educacionais- CEIPE-FGV, colunista na Folha SP

How to Transform Childcare in Latin America americasquarterly.org/article/how-to... via @amerquarterly



How to Transform Childcare in Latin America The examples of Chile and Colombia can help others in the region, but don't expect one-size-fits-all solutions. & americasquarterly.org



#### ONU Mujeres

ONU Mujeres es la agencia de las Naciones Unidas para la igualdad de género y el empoderamiento de las mujeres.

 Building an investor ecosystem for female entrepreneurs can help close persistent funding gaps: Innovative Ways to Finance Women in Latin America. @mnyonumujeres Regional Director @ONUMujeres via @AmerQuarterly



#### Bianca Jagger Nicaraguense por gracia de Dios = @Bianca Janger

Bianca Jagger: President and Chief Executive of the Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation. Comments made here are my personal views.

#### ICYMI RT Joe Biden: The Western Hemisphere Needs U.S. Leadership americasquarterly.org/article/joe-bi... via @amerquarterly



Joe Biden: The Western Hemisphere Needs U.S. Leadership In 2018, Biden wrote this essay for Americas Quarterly about how he sees Latin America. & americasouarterly.org



#### Francisco Resnicoff 📒 🥏 🐣 🤣

Subsecretario de Relaciones Internacionales e Institucionales en el @gcba

Las ciudades se transformaron en actores centrales en la gestión de la pandemia. Esta nota de @AmerQuarterly describe muy bien el rol de las ciudades como actores cada vez más relevantes en la agenda internacional



How Mayors Are Ignoring Dysfunction and Handling COVID-19 Among Thems... With nationalism on the rise, politicians in charge of cities are forging alliances and bypassing national governments.  $\mathscr{O}$  americasquarterly.org

# AmerQuarterly

#### @elenaestavillo No

dejen de leer a @flaviafrei y @BeticaMunozPogo en @AmerQuarterly donde identifican barreras para la participación política de las mujeres y dan propuestas para cerrarlas

#### *@jennpiscopo* Fantastic

piece by @lsabelitaCast in @AmerQuarterly on Prudencia Ayala, the first woman to run for president in Latin America ... An indigenous woman in El Salvador, in 1930, before women could even vote! #suffrage #nosinmujeres

#### @shannonkoneil Great piece in @AmerQuarterly on the tug of war between economic reform and political imperatives in Brazil, and why Paulo Guedes' job is so tough

Opprovitina What might happen in Latin America post COVID-19? A cautiously optimistic analysis of how prior social and economic crises may be a guide to the future of the region, from @BrazilBrian in @AmerQuarterly

*@claudferraz* The great labor economist and most Brazilian Peruvian @hugonopo wrote a fantastic piece for @AmerQuarterly — Come On, Guys: It's Time Men Got More Involved at Home

*(Distribution of the second s* 

**Ouffygary** Now, with #COVID-19, #LatinAmerica is rudderless and in the midst of a perfect storm. Via @OliverStuenkel @AmerQuarterly





#### **O** THE BIG PICTURE

More than 200 artists, activists and intellectuals gathered outside Cuba's culture ministry in late November to protest a police raid on members of the San Isidro Movement, which has been protesting the government's censorship and detention of artists. The protest succeeded in obtaining a meeting between the vice culture minister and some 30 activists. But the movement's true impact on the Cuban state and society was still coming into view.

#### STAT BOX

**411**% of Argentines the support the decriminalization of abortion

Source: Poliarquía Consultores, November

#### QUOTES



"I've guaranteed that the 45 million Brazilians here in São Paulo will be vaccinated, and the vaccine will be obligatory. We will take legal measures if there are any setbacks in this regard."

—**João Doria,** governor of Brazil's São Paulo state



"Development cannot be measured only in terms of GDP, but in terms of social well-being and conservation of biodiversity."

-Francia Márquez, Colombian activist who wants to run for president

#### **UP CLOSE: PERU**

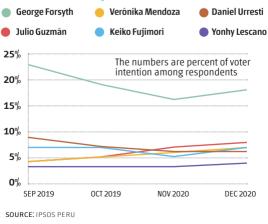
Last year's political unrest, which saw the deposition of two presidents in a week, set the stage for what will be a big year for Peru: Voters will choose a new president in April, before celebrating the country's bicentennial in July.



**ECONOMY** After the fumbled implementation of an ambitious stimulus package last year, Peru had the worst economic contraction in Latin America, after Venezuela. Still, markets were calmed by the naming of centrist technocrat Francisco Sagasti as caretaker president. A \$4 billion bond sale in late November, which included \$1 billion in 100-year bonds, reflected investor confidence. But will political instability catch up to the economy in 2021?

**POLITICS** An energized youth movement may play a big role in April's election. The candidate leading the polls is also the youngest: 38-year-old former football star-turned-mayor George Forsyth. After last year's protests, some are proposing big changes to the constitution (see page 55).

#### Voter intention for presidential candidates



What's Up



#### E-COMMERCE

Online shopping enjoyed a pandemic-fueled boom in Latin America last year. U.S. powerhouse Amazon grew its presence in the region, expanding in Mexico and Brazil. Still, it faces stiff competition from South American rivals like Brazil's Magazine Luiza and Argentina's MercadoLibre, the region's e-commerce leader. MercadoLibre said its net revenue in the region soared nearly 150% in the third quarter of 2020.

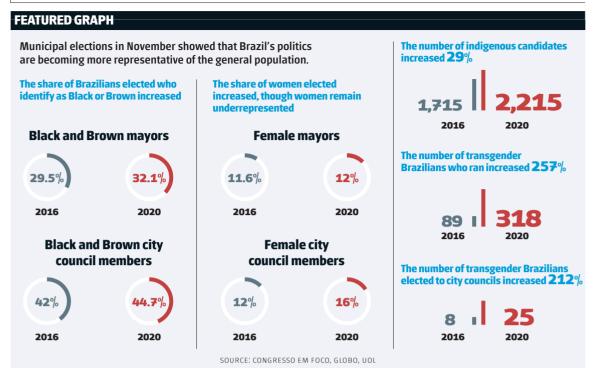
#### What's Down



#### JUAN GUAIDÓ

Venezuela's internationallyrecognized interim president has lost footing in his stand against Nicolás Maduro's regime. After boycotting December's legislative elections (seen as illegitimate by many in the international community), Guaidó lost his seat—and his claim to the interim presidency—in the National Assembly. Still, the assembly in January voted to extend its term and exist as a smaller, parallel body to a new Maduro-aligned assembly, maintaining Guaidó's presidency of the weakened body.

#### panorama



#### AQ Q&A



#### Enrique Samayoa

Farmer from El Jute, a community in La Libertad, Guatemala

# How is climate change affecting your community?

Climate change has been a significant challenge for my community. The process is accelerated by deforestation, which is a common practice to gain access to more farmland. However, deforestation actually creates major problems for farming, like soil erosion. When it rains, it rains hard and directly on our plants, causing flooding. The most nutrient-rich part of the soil is washed away. We used to be able to anticipate the rain but recently it has rained more irregularly, and it has become more difficult for our communities to cultivate corn and beans, our main food sources.

# How are you and your community reacting to these challenges?

We use techniques to fight climate change that we taught ourselves. They have been developed and refined over time by our parents and their parents. For example, we plant corn, legumes and squash on the same plot of land because it conserves space and the nutrients complement one another. We save fertilizer, water and time. Squash have big leaves that provide shade to keep the soil moist, the legumes deposit nitrogen in the soil, and the corn helps the beans grow. Through this process we conserve large amounts of water and do our part to protect the environment.

# What would you like to see your government do to protect the environment?

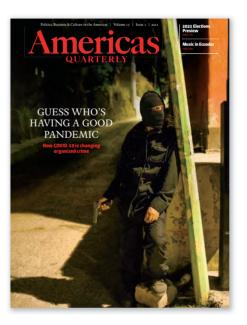
Although we have a ministry of the environment, their impact is limited in our community. So our local government has introduced regulations. For every tree that gets cut down another five must be planted. I would like to see more national regulations that prohibit hydroelectric dams and mining, which affect our water supply. When these projects come to our communities, they destroy our livelihood.

—Leonie Rauls





# Americas Quarterly Virtual Event The Big Winners from COVID-19: How the Pandemic Is Changing Organized Crime



Event information Mariana Reina mreina@as-coa.org

Press: mediarelations@as-coa.org

#### February 2021 Watch this event live on www.as-coa.org

With governments distracted by COVID-19 and facing major budget crises, transnational gangs such as the PCC, ELN, Sinaloa Cartel and others are expanding their reach into multiple countries, enjoying a recruiting bonanza among newly unemployed youth and "diversifying" further into areas such as illegal fishing, cybercrime, timber piracy and even local politics. How can governments and other actors prevent the 2020s from becoming a major setback for the rule of law? Our expert panel will discuss how organized crime has evolved and practical actions that governments and other actors can take to counteract these groups.



As the pandemic hit, illegal businesses did what they do best: adapt.

While governments diverted resources to enforce lockdown rules and fight the pandemic, criminal organizations found novel ways to thrive and expand operations across the hemisphere. Free of legal constraints, organized crime soldiers continued to traffic freely through illegal border crossings—on foot, by plane or submersibles.

AQ's special report looks at how transnational criminal groups operate and what can be done to weaken them.



#### A MID-PANDEMIC OVERVIEW

by Brian Fonseca and José Miguel Cruz

page 24

#### THE BIG PLAYERS

by AQ Staff page 32

#### WHERE CRIMINALS CONTROL TERRITORY

by Emilie Sweigart and Leonie Rauls

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#### DEFUTDING ORGANIZED CRIME by Cecilia Tornaghi

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#### WHEN CRIME AND POLITICS MEET

by Lucía Dammert

#### A THREAT THAT CARNOT BE ADDRESSED ALONE

by Rear Admiral Andrew J. Tiongson page 48

## HOW BIDEN MUCH

by Brendan O'Boyle page 52





# Li lin Min, that In , th

The Institución Educativa Misional Santa Teresita in Tumaco, Colombia, closed because of the pandemic.

# hool's Out. 50 **Gangs Are Thrilled.** WITH 97% OF LATIN AMERICAN KIDS OUT OF CLASS.

SOME CRIMINAL GROUPS SEE A BONANZA IN RECRUITMENT.

by John Otis





Based in Bogotá since 1997, **John Otis** reports on South America for NPR and *The Wall Street Journal* and is a consultant for the Committee to Protect Journalists. He is author of the book *Law of the Jungle*, about the rescue of three American hostages held by Colombia's FARC guerrillas. **UMACO, COLOMBIA**—Lidia Cruz, a community leader in southern Colombia, spends her days trying to prevent children and young adults from being forced to join drug trafficking groups. When all else fails, she covertly helps evacuate potential recruits to safer areas of the country.

One of the most recent evacuees: her own son.

He had been attending a technical college in the Pacific coast city of Tumaco. But classes were cancelled in March as the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, so he and other students began spending their newfound free time playing soccer. That caught the attention of Los Contadores, a gang whose members began hanging around the soccer field, bragging about their exploits and flashing weapons.

"My son was telling me, 'Mom! These men are showing us their guns and their money!" Cruz recalled. "I had to get him out of there."

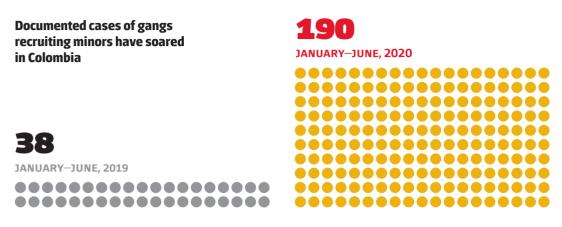
Cruz sent her son to live with his grandfather near Bogotá, the Colombian capital. But his sudden departure angered Los Contadores, who then began harassing Cruz, a prominent activist, and warning that she had better watch her back.

Cruz, who insisted I not use her real name, told me that Los Contadores and half a dozen other armed groups are fighting for control over the cocaine business in and around Tumaco and are constantly on the lookout for fresh foot soldiers. When youths resist, Cruz told me, the gangs will sometimes take them away at gunpoint.

"They will come up to a mother and say, 'Give me your son or I will kill you," Cruz said.

As 2020 drew to a close, more than 97% of students across Latin America remained physically out of school because of COVID, according to a study by UNICEF. This has been a disaster for the region's education systems—and a potential bonanza for criminal organizations, who suddenly have an even bigger pool of idle young people to recruit from.

It's unclear whether gangs have had much success growing their ranks elsewhere in the region. But in Colombia, government officials and civil society organizations have documented a sharp increase in forced



Note: Real numbers likely much higher due to underreporting

source: Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia (COALICO)

recruitment since the pandemic began. The Bogotábased Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Young People in Colombia's Armed Conflict, or COALICO, reported that at least 190 minors were recruited during the first six months of 2020—five times the number it tracked a year earlier. This likely represented only a small percentage of the actual cases, given the fear many families have of reporting such episodes.

"There has been a big jump in recruitment," said Julia Castellanos, a researcher for COALICO.

It's an alarming state of affairs for a country that has seen drug-fueled violence diminish sharply over the past 15 years, and where the government signed a historic 2016 peace treaty. Now, in Colombia and elsewhere, there are fears that the desperation engendered by the pandemic could draw a new generation into a life of crime.

Colombia imposed one of Latin America's longest lockdowns, which lasted until September, and officials expected the economy to contract about 7% in 2020. Officially, unemployment has jumped from 9.8% to 14.7%, but that doesn't take into account the millions of informal jobs that have disappeared.

"The dynamic has changed during the pandemic," said a Tumaco-based lawyer who has regular contact with the region's criminal groups, and requested anonymity. "For many families, the money that these groups offer is their best option and their only option."

The gunmen start wooing potential recruits by handing out cash, clothes and cell phones, the lawyer said. They romance young women and sometimes get them pregnant so they feel obligated to join. They will even provide groceries and prescription drugs to win over the families of the youths they covet. The youngest recruits start out as part-time lookouts. Full-timers receive weapons, monthly stipends of \$300 to \$600, plus a motorcycle.

## **A Drug Economy**

IN PLACES LIKE TUMACO, such offers can be hard to resist.

The densely packed city is built on three islands just off the Pacific Coast, near Colombia's border with Ecuador. The region is populated by Afro-Colombians, the descendants of enslaved people who were first brought here in the 1500s to mine gold and cut timber. These days legal job opportunities are limited, and drug smuggling drives much of the economy.

Coca bushes, whose leaves provide the raw material for cocaine, dot the countryside. Mangrove swamps and estuaries provide clandestine launching sites for drug-filled boats and homemade submarines heading



to drop-off points in the waters off Central America and Mexico. When Colombian security forces arrest or kill members of trafficking groups, Cruz said, they can easily be replaced.

"When 20 get locked up," she said, "they recruit 30."

Sometimes the only way for families to protect their sons and daughters is by evacuating them to other parts of the country. That's when Cruz steps in.

In April, for example, three families abandoned their homes along the Mira River near the Ecuadorian border to prevent their kids, including a 10-yearold boy, from being recruited. On boats and by foot, they made their way to Cruz's cramped house near Tumaco. There, they hid as Cruz spent three months badgering local officials until they could arrange transportation for the families to leave the region.

When criminal groups are recruiting, Cruz said, "The biggest problem you can have is telling them, 'no."

Such stories rekindle memories of an agonizing era most Colombians hoped was over. I first reported on forced recruitment during the height of the country's guerrilla war in the early 2000s. While visiting rebel camps I saw camouflage-clad kids cleaning automatic rifles, a task they were good at because their hands are so small. On the outskirts of Bogotá, I toured a shelter housing former child warriors whose memories were jogged during the evening snack of popcorn.

"When they hear the corn popping, they say, 'That's what it sounds like in combat,'" Marcela Bernali, a child psychologist, told me at the time.



Coca fields are seen from a police helicopter during an anti narcotics operation in Tumaco, in the Nariño department of Colombia.



# "When 20 get locked up," they recruit 30."

—LIDIA CRUZ, COMMUNITY LEADER

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, used profits from cocaine smuggling to become the country's largest rebel army, with some 17,000 fighters. Many were forcibly recruited and by some estimates about one-third were minors. Under the 2016 peace accord, the FARC officially laid down its weapons and became a legal, left-wing political party. Yet even so, Colombia's peace has been partial—with forced recruitment a recurring nightmare.

At the heart of the problem, said Jeremy McDermott, co-director of the research group InSight Crime, is the failure of Colombia's police and army to provide security in regions abandoned by the FARC.

Several armed groups have stepped into the vacuum, like Los Contadores, that are led by so-called dissident FARC members who have rejected the peace process, rearmed, and now focus almost exclusively on smuggling drugs. Another key player is the National Liberation Army, or ELN, a 55-year-old guerrilla army long overshadowed by the FARC that is now expanding.

All of these groups battle for control over territory and trafficking routes and compete for young recruits.

"It's very sad but kids make good soldiers," said Juan Sebastián Campo of the Bogotá group Benposta, which operates programs for at-risk youths in conflict zones. "A 15-year-old boy or girl can march up and down the mountains faster than a fat old commander. We have dealt with 17-year-olds who were excellent snipers."



## **Refugees on the Line**

THE POOL OF POTENTIAL recruits has also expanded thanks to the estimated 2 million Venezuelans who have fled to Colombia, escaping joblessness, food shortages and authoritarian rule back home. In Colombia's Catatumbo region along the Venezuelan border more than half of all recent recruits have been Venezuelans, said Carmen García, president of the human rights group Mothers of Catatumbo.

During security operations over the past three years, Colombian police and soldiers rescued 1,509 minors from criminal groups, according to Nancy Patricia Gutiérrez, the top human rights advisor to Colombian President Iván Duque. These figures are similar to those registered in the mid-2000s when the war was far more intense, said Paola González, a researcher for the Bogotá-based Ideas for Peace Foundation.

"All the data show that the numbers are going up," she told *AQ*.

In one case on a Monday morning shortly after the pandemic began, a teenage boy was hanging out in a pool hall in the northern Colombian state of Arauca. Suddenly, members of the ELN guerrilla group burst in looking for fresh recruits. The boy resisted so the rebels put a gun to his head.

"They said, 'Why don't you just save us the bullet?" said Claudia Arango, the head of the parent-teacher association at the public school where the boy had been studying.

Then, she said, the rebels tied up the teenager and marched him into the jungle.

Arango, which is a pseudonym, insisted that the adolescent would have evaded the rebel recruiters had he been in class as usual. She described schools as sanctuaries that allow students to eat a decent meal, get away from abusive parents, discuss personal problems with teachers, get involved in music or sports, and find direction for their lives.

"When kids are in school, their minds are occupied," Arango said. "But when they're not in class they have more time to hang out with folks who are not good for them. These people arrive at their homes and tell them that studying is a waste of time. They start to brainwash them."

Many expect these circumstances to outlast the pandemic itself. A recent study by academics including Nora Lustig of Tulane University (page 80) estimated that the percentage of Latin American students who complete high school may fall from 61% to 46% because of the pandemic. The high school completion rate could decrease by as much as 20 percentage points among students whose parents have lower education levels, the study found.

In Colombia, although millions of students in urban areas have switched to online learning, small towns and villages often lack decent Internet service and are sometimes off the grid altogether.

That's the case in and around Arauquita, a town located just across the Arauca River from Venezuela. There, virtual learning has been impossible because most kids lack computers, telephones and access to the Internet, said Joel Llanes, the local human rights official.

Instead, school consists of teachers handing out worksheets to their pupils and collecting them every few months. But Llanes says many students have lost interest and that 10% have quit since the pandemic began.

"We assume that some of these students dropped out and were recruited," Llanes said.

The most dramatic testimony I heard about the vital role of schools in protecting children came from a 17-year-old girl who grew up in a village a few hours south of Arauquita. We spoke via Zoom, and she asked me to identify her only as Erica.

"I always felt safe at school because the professors would take care of me," Erica said. "But I felt scared going home."

ELN rebels roamed her neighborhood and occasionally stopped to chat with her mother. One day she arrived home to find an ELN gunman on a motorcycle waiting for her. She protested but her mother, for reasons still unknown to Erica, told her she had to go with him.

In the jungle, the guerrillas taught Erica how to disassemble weapons and ordered her to cook for the rest of the group. They expounded on the glories of joining the ELN and told her that it would be a "beautiful life." But she wept constantly and after a few days became so ill that the rebels took her to a hospital near her home.



### "A 15-year-old boy or girl can march up and down the mountains faster than a fat old commander. We have dealt with 17-year-olds who were excellent snipers."

—JUAN SEBASTIÁN CAMPO OF THE BOGOTÁ GROUP BENPOSTA



"The idea is to show that there are alternatives so young people won't have any excuses for going into the gangs."

—JUAN ANGULO, NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVIST



After recovering, Erica sneaked out of the hospital, hid with relatives, then made her way to Bogotá. She now lives in a shelter for former child combatants, is finishing high school, and talks of becoming a systems engineer.

"I was lucky," Erica said, "because soon after I left, the military bombed the rebel unit that took me."

## **Courage Needed**

BACK IN THE SOUTHERN CITY of Tumaco, I cut a deal with Juan Angulo. He's a 31-year-old neighborhood activist who has received so many death threats that the government assigned him a bodyguard and an SUV so he wouldn't have to move around on public buses. But the vehicle was out of gas and Angulo was broke. So I agreed to fill the tank and Angulo agreed to pick me up at my hotel and tell me his story.

Angulo pointed out that government institutions,

like Colombia's child welfare agency, operate programs to prevent the recruitment of young people. But their reach is limited and in remote towns and villages the task often falls to local residents—like him.

Angulo runs a foundation called We Are Youths, We Are the Future in his hometown of Candelillas, about an hour south of Tumaco. When he was growing up, Angulo said the town was peaceful, with residents raising yucca, plantains and coconuts. Now, he said, Candelillas is surrounded by coca fields and lorded over by a group of FARC dissidents.

"It's all about power," Angulo said. "They want you to be afraid of them."

Openly denouncing the recruitment of youngsters in Candelillas would be foolhardy, so Angulo attacks the problem in a roundabout fashion. We Are Youths, We Are the Future sponsors soccer matches, reading programs, clean-up campaigns, dance lessons and movie nights in the Candelillas town park.



Juan Angulo, left, holds a meeting with young men who had been targeted by recruiters from criminal groups.

"The idea is to show that there are alternatives so young people won't have any excuses for going into the gangs," Angulo said.

It's a one-man operation with Angulo, his phone glued to his ear, cajoling people for donations of cash, books, toys and sports equipment. Still, this shoestring philanthropy nearly got him killed.

In April he was kidnapped by FARC dissidents who had watched him mentoring youngsters and accused him of spying for a rival drug-smuggling gang. Angulo, who is a muscular 6-foot-2, said his captors openly discussed chopping him to pieces with machetes so they wouldn't have to dig such a big grave. Fortunately, after 24 hours, the gunmen released him.

"I am not scared," Angulo insisted. "I believe in God and I am not losing faith."

But to paraphrase South American independence hero Simón Bolívar, the work often seems like plowing the sea. Even government officials admit that Colombia's recruitment numbers will probably keep rising until rural schools reopen and the economy starts growing again.

"What's needed are legal job opportunities," said Carlos Camargo, the government human rights ombudsman. "That's the only definitive solution to this odious practice, which is killing off Colombia's future."

In the meantime, idle youths will jump at almost any chance to make a buck, said Castellanos, the researcher with COALICO.

That was the case in May, she said, when 45 teenagers showed up at a ranch in northern Colombia. They thought they were to be employed as farm laborers. But the property turned out be a makeshift induction center run by a drug smuggling group called the Gulf Clan.

Its gunmen urged the newcomers to join up. And according to Castellanos, most of them did.

A MUTATING VIRUS

How organized crime groups are evolving, and what governments can do about it.

by Brian Fonseca and José Miguel Cruz

Hooded men patrol the streets of San Pedro Ayampuc, Guatemala. Residents have organized to defend themselves against the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs.





**Dr. José Miguel Cruz** is the director of research at the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University's Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs. He is an expert in the area of criminal violence, gangs, police, democratization and public opinion in Latin America.



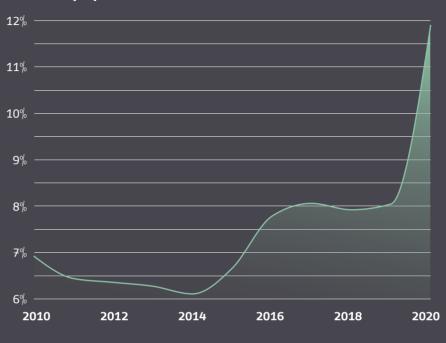
**Brian Fonsec**a directs the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy and is an adjunct professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Florida International University's Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs. Fonseca has published extensively on Latin American governance and security and U.S. security policy toward the Americas. URING THE EARLIEST DAYS OF THE pandemic, some believed COVID-19 might prove to be a negative for large organized crime groups such as MS-13 and the Sinaloa Cartel. Lockdowns kept people inside, suffocating both legal and illegal commerce. The ensuing recession hit Latin American economies harder than any other in the world, on average, meaning less money in everyone's pockets. As governments mobilized money and personnel to meet the challenge, there was talk of a new level of engagement that could strengthen bonds between citizens and the state, possibly squeezing out transnational criminal organizations (TCOS) in some areas.

A year later, we know that's not what's happening. The operational capacity, adaptability, expansive networks, and deep pockets of TCOS have provided them with opportunities to exploit the voids left by overwhelmed institutions and stressed market chains across the region. Although it is still too early to assess any enduring changes, TCOS are showing signs of adapting and even growing stronger in numerous ways, some of them surprising.

Indeed, the pandemic may ultimately be a turning point that saw unfortunate crime and security-related trends of the past three decades accelerate even faster. The question is what governments can do to stop it.

#### WHERE WE'VE BEEN

VEN BEFORE THE PANDEMIC STRUCK, Latin America and the Caribbean was home to some of the most pervasive, adaptable and violent criminal groups in the world. Since the 1990s, they have evolved from highly centralized and hierarchical criminal structures to expansive and agile criminal networks engaged in a wide range of illicit activities. Today, they manage diverse portfolios that include everything from trafficking in drugs, humans, weapons, minerals and other illicit commodities to extortion, kidnapping for ransom, cybercrime and money laundering. These groups have also evolved from largely hemispheric-focused and cashbased criminal enterprises to global criminal networks



Unemployment in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010–2020

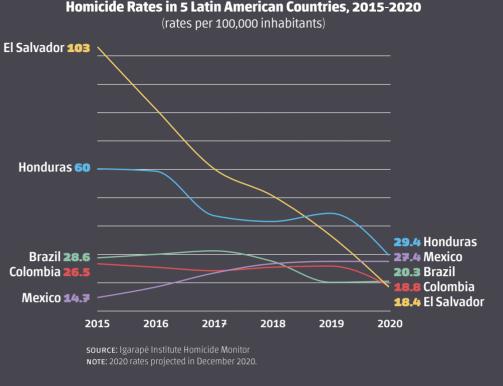
SOURCE: International Labor Organization (2010-19), Morgan Stanley projection for 2020

that are deeply entangled with public and private sectors across the region.

Recent history illustrates their tremendous resilience. In South America, the Andean nations of Bolivia, Colombia and Peru remain major producers of cocaine despite decades of eradication policies. Past Colombian and Peruvian insurgencies weathered governments' security forces and evolved into de facto TCOS with global reach and expansive illicit portfolios. After the demobilization of Colombian paramilitaries in 2006, criminal bands, or BACRIM, emerged as part of an evolution in illicit trafficking organizations that were far more expansive and diverse than their predecessors. According to InSight Crime, an organization that studies citizen security in Latin America, Colombia today is experiencing a fourth generation of criminal enterprises that possess tremendous business acumen, greater technological sophistication, and are better at both blending in with society and fusing legitimate businesses with illicit activities.

In Venezuela, the regime of Nicolás Maduro has turned the country into a major hub for drugs departing the region bound for the United States, West Africa and Europe. The Cartel of the Suns (Cartel de los Soles) is a major drug trafficking organization comprised largely of members of the Venezuelan military. Venezuela also acts as a major source of sex trafficking in the hemisphere. The São Paulo-based First Command of the Capital (PCC) has expanded its footprint beyond Brazil's borders to take a larger stake in the international movement of illicit narcotics leaving the Southern Cone. Mexican drug cartels remain some of the most pervasive and powerful TCOs in the world. Among them, the Sinaloa Cartel, Jalisco New Genera-





tion, Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas Cartel operate all over the world and have been responsible for more than 61,000 disappearances and many more deaths since the 1960s. By the end of 2020, Mexico was on track for its most violent year on record, with more than 40,000 murders and a projected homicide rate above 27 per 100,000 inhabitants. The recent arrest and subsequent release of Mexico's former defense minister General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda highlights how entrenched criminal organizations are within Mexico.

In Central America, gangs such as MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) and Barrio 18 (18th Street Gang) survived nearly two decades of government hardline policies aimed at dismantling them, but-perhaps because of those policies-gangs still run rampant, with more than 50,000 members across El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Studies show that homicide rates sometimes fall in countries where criminal groups consolidate power - only to rebound again later if dire

economic conditions, weak governments and social shocks remain. Central America attracts other transnational criminal organizations that relocate there to take advantage of dire economic conditions, weak governments, diminishing rule of law, and proximity to important markets in the United States. Finally, the Caribbean is once again providing TCOs with vital smuggling routes that connect producers with consumers. Weak visa restrictions and citizenship by investment schemes are attracting TCOS looking to use the Caribbean as a hub for various criminal activities. including illicit trafficking and money laundering.

#### WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW

OW, BECAUSE OF THE PANDEMIC, TCOS are expanding into other sectors, including those that the state is simply too overwhelmed to handle. Criminal groups have been providing a kind of governance in areas virtually abandoned by state in-

#### Because of the pandemic, transnational criminal organizations are expanding into sectors that the state is too overwhelmed to handle.

stitutions. For example, in Central America gangs undertook the task of enforcing government lockdowns and distributing food supplies to people in their communities. In Mexico, several criminal groups, such as Chapo Guzmán's organization and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, have been handing out food to the communities they control as a way to gain public legitimacy. In Brazil, gangs in various favelas in Rio de Janeiro imposed curfews and social distancing on residents and local shops, while also handing out sanitation items, medical supplies and food. If citizens continue turning to criminal groups to provide services, governments will be forced to pay a heavy price to dislodge these groups once the pandemic is gone.

COVID-19 is also creating new economic opportunities for these groups. As the recession pushes even more Latin Americans into the shadows of informal economies, the trade in illegal goods and unlawful commodities may become even more valuable. For example, there has been a surge in trafficking of medical supplies, everything from surgical masks, hand sanitizer and disinfectants to therapeutic and test kits. Recently, INTERPOL'S Secretary General Jürgen Stock warned that criminal groups were planning to infiltrate vaccine supply chains.

Economic hardships are creating a parallel epidemic of emotional distress, increasing the global demand for psychotropic substances, many of them heavily regulated or outright illegal. TCOs are encountering a more demanding and expansive market with weaker institutions. Some countries, such as Brazil, may emerge as new critical transnational players in the flow of illicit goods, given the disruption to existing flows and new demand in places like Europe. Yet most subregions in the Americas will experience the consolidation of their existing transnational illicit networks. The Andes may see an increase in illegal crops, as they will become one of the safest sources of revenue for local peasants and farmers. Central American and Caribbean criminal organizations, in many cases with the help of corrupt politicians and state operatives, will secure their status by controlling transshipment hubs and providing jobs to needy populations.

In this environment, state and nonstate actors in Russia, China and other countries may find it easier to partner with criminal organizations and corrupt institutions in the Americas. These countries and their private sectors are known for circumventing the rule of law and often prefer working with corrupt actors. China's growing influence has provided support to Maduro in particular, allowing his kleptocracy to survive.

The social costs of the pandemic will be massive, especially considering that the region's economies may not fully recover to pre-COVID levels until as late as 2025, according to the International Monetary Fund. According to the World Bank, before COVID-19, there were already more than 20 million *ninis*—youths who are neither working nor in school-in Latin America. For thousands of young people, participation in criminal groups may become the only chance for survival. Widespread joblessness and underemployment will also increase the pressure for legal and illegal migration, feeding human trafficking chains. Reports showed, for example, that when the Colombian government closed its border with Venezuela to contain the COVID-19 outbreak, thousands of desperate Venezuelan migrants ended up falling into the clutches of criminal organizations operating in the area.



#### **HOW GOVERNMENTS CAN STOP IT**

ANY NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS WILL REACT to the growing power of TCOS, and the ensuing public outcry, by redirecting resources to expand security institutions. Other governments may find themselves forced to negotiate with criminal organizations, a practice already in place in El Salvador, and common at subnational levels where local governments are weak. These kinds of negotiations will appear politically expedient, especially in countries with elections over the next 18 months, but in the absence of appropriate institutional restraints and improvements to key institutions, such responses have rarely been successful in the past.

Any truly effective government response must tackle the devastating economic consequences of the health crisis, the erosion in state capacity, and the collapse of institutional legitimacy. Governments must dig deep and find the political will to expand the fight against impunity, widespread corruption, and lack of institutional capacity. They must deepen structural reforms in key institutions such as the administration of justice, and national and local police forces, and improve the ability to deliver vital services such as education and public health to their citizens. Without comprehensive efforts to overhaul accountability institutions and a sustained investment in human capital, any traditional securityfocused effort is doomed to fail.

Substantial investments in human and social capital must be accompanied by increased accountability in political institutions. The authoritarian regression that several countries are now facing will certainly worsen the crises unleashed by the pandemic. Therefore, tackling transnational organized crime under these circumstances demands that the resilience of democratic governance be greater than the resilience of the region's deeply entrenched criminal groups.

In addition to building sustainable domestic capacity, and given the scale of the emergency and the increasing transnational nature of illicit networks, governments must work multilaterally to streamline resources, share information and improve intergovernmental coordination. Combating TCOs is a global issue that demands more meaningful multilateral collaboration with countries inside and outside the hemisphere.



A soldier stands next to a sanitary perimeter imposed by San Salvador's municipality to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the Salvadoran capital.

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# THE BIG PLAYERS

Latin America's largest criminal organizations continue to enjoy large profits and increasingly rely on sophisticated money-laundering schemes and even political and judicial ties. Many have humble or ideological roots, but today these are illegal businesses that are crossing borders and reaching far beyond their origins.

Here is an X-ray of seven of the region's most visible groups.

By AQ Staff



ELN

Ejército de Liberación Nacional / National Liberation Army

4,000–5,000 members

According to the Ideas for Peace Foundation

**60% of its income is from illegal mining in Venezuela and Colombia** According to the International Crisis Group

#### **Money makers**



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drug trafficking kidnapping hui traffi

human trafficking

extortion



Origins: The ELN began in the 1960s as a Marxist-Leninist movement formed by radical priests and students influenced by Catholic liberation theology and trained in post-revolution Cuba. The discovery of oil in Colombia in the 1980s created a new source to finance their revolutionary aims through extortion. The 1990s brought conflict with paramilitary groups, followed by failed negotiations with the government in 2002 and 2004.

Recent Changes: "More powerful today than ever before," according to InSight Crime, the ELN has grown its size and profits by filling vacuums left by the demobilized
Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The ELN has also capitalized on Venezuela's collapse and an expanding illegal mining industry. In 2018, President Iván Duque froze peace negotiations begun under his predecessor. In 2019, the ELN bombed a police academy in Bogotá, killing 20 people, spurring Duque to formally end negotiations.

**Structure:** The ELN's federal structure is characterized by consensus-driven decision-making and leadership that operates on different fronts and without defined headquarters, making it harder to negotiate with the ELN than with the FARC, which had a vertical hierarchy, said Gwen Burnyeat, a political anthropologist at the University of Oxford. The ELN's "iceberg" structure, defined by a relatively small number of combatants in uniform but extensive clandestine networks, has made the group resilient to military pressure, said Dr. Román Ortiz, a professor at the National Defense University (NDU).

 Culture: Marxism-Leninism is the guiding ideology for ELN members. Angelika Rettberg, a professor at Universidad de los Andes, points out that many members find inspiration in Camilo Torres Restrepo, a Jesuit priest and fighter killed in his first, combat experience, becoming a martyr for ELN's cause from a Marxist-Christian point of view.

**Geography:** The ELN is present in at least half of Colombia's departments, along the Venezuelan border and Pacific Coast, and in major cities. The group has expanded significantly into Venezuela and operates in parts of Ecuador and Guyana.

Competitors: The Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, also known as the Gulf Clan and a powerful drug-trafficking paramilitary group; the Popular Liberation Army; Los Pelusos, a drug trafficking guerrilla group; the declining Los Rastrojos cartel; dissident FARC militants, who are also sometime allies.

Political Ties: The ELN is at war with Colombia's national government, but relationships with local governments can look different. Agreements between candidates and the ELN are common in the department of Arauca and also exist in Cauca and Catatumbo, said Kyle Johnson, researcher and co-founder of the Conflict Responses Foundation. In Venezuela, the group "enjoys safe haven ... with the complicity of the Maduro regime," a U.S. state department official told Reuters in 2019.



Primeiro Comando da Capital / First Command of the Capital

#### Estimates vary from **8,000** to more than **30,000** members

#### \$**6.6 billion**

The revenue moved over four years by a single moneylaundering ring dismantled by Brazilian police in 2020

#### Money makers:



drug

trafficking

(s)



armed robbery weapons

money laundering

- **Origins:** Inmates in a São Paulo prison founded the PCC in 1993, less than a year after police killed 111 prisoners during a riot in another penitentiary. The group's original goal was to help inmates survive the appalling conditions in Brazilian prisons and to pressure authorities to make changes by using violence, including attacks against police stations. According to Josmar Jozino, a reporter who has covered the group since its origins, the original imprisoned PCC leadership learned sophisticated criminal tactics from Italians from the Camorra and other international criminals who had been arrested in Brazil. In 2001 a series of coordinated prison riots brought the PCC to the public's attention, but it was in 2006 that the PCC showed its full power, terrorizing São Paulo with a series of concerted attacks.
- Recent Changes: The group has grown significantly in Paraguayan prisons. A headline-grabbing assassination of Paraguay's main arms and drug middleman in 2017 accelerated the PCC's growth and

internationalization, according to Ivana David, an appellate court judge in São Paulo state. According to Rafael Alcadipani, a professor at Fundação Getúlio Vargas, the group started expanding into cyber crime during the pandemic.

- **Structure:** The PCC has been run like a multinational corporation for the past two decades. Senior prosecutor and former São Paulo attorney general Luiz Marrey said the leadership is divided in sintonias, each running one area such as drug sales, bank robberies or money laundering. The PCC recruits within prisons, from where their leaders, including chief leader Marco Willians Herbas Camacho ("Marcola"), also conduct business. Membership requires multiple sponsors and a small monthly fee for imprisoned members, and heftier dues for members on the streets.
- Culture: The PCC has a strict code of conduct, and breaches can be punishable by death. Despite that, they avoid unnecessary killings and

**Geography:** Headquartered in São Paulo, the PCC operates throughout Brazil and has a presence in Bolivia—its main supplier—and in Paraguay, where it dominates the drug trade. It also has suppliers in Peru and Colombia, and buyers in Brazil, Europe, North Africa and Lebanon. Its footprint in Uruguay and Argentina is debated.

> as the PCC's power rose, homicide rates in São Paulo state decreased. Many experts attribute it to the PCC's fierce enforcement of its internal rules. Researchers cite a directive from top leaders who want to avoid attracting more public—and police—attention that could disrupt their sales operations.

São Paulo, Brazil

- Competitors: Comando Vermelho (Red Command), a former ally based in Rio de Janeiro; Família do Norte (Northern Family).
- Political Ties: Several investigations show the group has allegedly bought support from individuals in the judiciary system. The police also investigated cases of politicians who had to ask for permission from local PCC leaders to campaign in areas under the group's control. In 2020, multiple candidates for town council and mayor were suspected of PCC ties and even membership. The group has also infiltrated Paraguay's police and politics, said NDU's Ortiz.



Comando Vermelho Rogério Lemgruber / Red Command



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#### **20.000** members

According to Federal Police projections

#### \$39.5 million

Ämount laundered through one scheme dismantled in 2020 by Rio de Janeiro state police and public prosecutor's office

#### Money makers



drug

trafficking





kidnapping

extortion



• Origins: Red Command, or CV, which they paint on walls to demarcate their territory, was founded in 1979 in a prison on Ilha Grande, Rio de Janeiro, where common criminals and political prisoners shared cells, knowledge and expertise. The group's full name pays homage to a drug trafficker who founded the Red Phalanx, CV's predecessor, which masterminded daring operations from within prison in the 1970s. The CV developed its early hold in poor urban communities of Rio de Janeiro by providing services the state failed to offer. CV was the largest criminal organization in Brazil throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and is said to have inspired the creation of the PCC.

Recent Changes: Allies for almost a decade, the CV and the PCC turned against each other in 2016 as they increasingly internationalized. Massacres followed in prisons across the country and frequent gun battles have rocked favelas and other

areas of major capitals. The group arrived in the city of Salvador in 2020, publishing on social media a list of "its" favelas, where CV graffiti sprouted overnight. While the CV was losing ground and members before the pandemic hit, evidence of expansion into new areas, such as in northeastern Brazil, shows the CV still fighting back and garnering new alliances and territory, albeit outside Rio.

- Structure: According to reports by investigative journalists, CV functions mostly in a loose format, almost a syndicate of independent criminals linked by a strong leadership command. Like most Brazilian groups, their main recruiting process is within the prison system.
- **Culture:** Since its inception, the CV has had bylaws inspired by the intellectual prisoners who influenced its organizing principles, stated as "peace, justice and freedom." The bylaws outline a strict code of conduct and

**Geography:** Headquartered in Rio de Janeiro, CV has a presence outside Brazil in Paraguay—which has been shrinking due to the PCC's advance—and ties in Bolivia and Colombia.

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

prioritize the pursuit of freedom for jailed members at all costs.

- **Competitors:** The PCC nationally;  $\bigcirc$ at home Rio's paramilitary groups, known as *milícias*, have become CV's main rival.
- Political Ties: The CV became a political force in the 1990s by ruling over large swaths of territory across Rio de Janeiro and through its alliances across Brazil. The PCC's aggressive push for control of the major cross-border drug routes greatly diminished the CV's economic power. Judge David also highlights that paramilitary groups formed by former police and firemen have taken over control of large areas of Rio de Janeiro, challenging the CV in its home base.



Cártel de Sinaloa / Sinaloa Cartel, also known as The Federation

#### The cartel operates in some **50 COUNTRIES**

According to a July 2020 U.S. Congressional Research Service report

Credible and current figures on income and number of members aren't available

#### Money maker



**Geography:** The Sinaloa Cartel's main stronghold is Mexico's "Golden Triangle," where Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua states converge and where the Sierra Madre mountains provide cover for illegal crops and labs that produce heroin and fentanyl. It also operates in at least 21 Mexican states and abroad.

Culiacán, Mexico

- **Origins:** The Sinaloa Cartel grew out of the splintering of the powerful Guadalajara Cartel in the 1980s, later filling a power vacuum left by Colombian cartels in the early 1990s. The group became known for its creative tactics to smuggle drugs and evade prosecution, which was evident in two separate prison breaks by its notorious leader, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, in 2001 and 2015.
- Recent Changes: The Sinaloa Cartel has declined in dominance amid the fragmentation of Mexican cartels in recent years. El 🔘 **Culture:** Historically, the cartel Chapo was arrested for the third time in 2016 and extradited to the United States, where he was sentenced in 2019 to life in prison. In El Chapo's absence, internal and external power struggles have sparked a wave of violence, with clashes between a faction led by El Chapo's children and another led by El Chapo's former partner, known as El Mayo. Still, it remains one of Mexico's most dominant cartels, having

expanded into the market for highly profitable synthetic drugs.

- **Structure:** InSight Crime refers to the Sinaloa Cartel as "a federation of different and often disconnected elements, each with great autonomy and independence of action." According to a U.S. congressional report in 2020, the cartel's decentralized structure "has enabled it to be quite adaptable in the highly competitive and unstable environment that now prevails."
- has shown a preference for using bribes to avoid violence-making them at times less visible than other groups. However, recent explosions of violence, like the cartel's October 2019 uprising in the city of Culiacán—after the government arrested El Chapo's son Ovidio Guzmán—suggest that's changing, following what the journalist Ioan Grillo called "a bloody trend of cartels developing insurgent tactics over many years."

- Competitors: The Sinaloa Cartel's top competitor is also its former ally: the Jalisco Cartel.
- **Political Ties:** The cartel has long used bribes to create alliances across the political spectrum at the local, state and national level. In December 2019, for example, U.S. authorities arrested Genaro García Luna, the public security secretary under President Felipe Calderón, on charges of taking millions of dollars in bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel.



### **10 million** DEA bounty on kingpin El Mencho

Credible and current figures on income and number of members aren't available

#### Money makers



Origins: The Jalisco Cartel began as a meth-producing splinter group that broke off from the Sinaloa Cartel "federation" in 2010. Once known as Mata Zetas—they promised to defeat the then-powerful Zetas cartel—CJNG has emerged as one of Mexico's two most dominant cartels amid an increasingly fragmented field of competitors.

- Recent Changes: Thanks to what the U.S. Congressional Research Service described as an "aggressive growth strategy underwritten by U.S. demand for Mexican methamphetamine, heroin and fentanyl," CJNG continues to grow in reach and firepower. They have heavily invested in arms manufacturing capabilities, making them less reliant on arms trafficked from the U.S. By mid-2020, the cartel had become "the biggest criminal drug threat to the U.S.," according to *The Wall Street Journal*.
- Structure: Led by "El Mencho," a former cop and kingpin described as the "next El Chapo," CJNG

follows what InSight Crime called a "hierarchical, disciplined structure." The security analyst Alejandro Hope, however, described the cartel to *The Washington Post* as "more an ecosystem than it is a vertically integrated organization." The cartel tends to build alliances with smaller criminal organizations that help them gain or maintain control over territory.

Culture: The cartel is known for its violence and what Matthew Donahue, the DEA's deputy chief of operations, described to *The Washington Post* as a "non-value on human life." The CJNG is not shy about confrontation: They've kidnapped El Chapo's sons and attempted to assassinate Mexico City's top security official in July 2020. That attack, which followed the killing of a federal judge weeks earlier, highlighted a willingness to brazenly target public officials.

Competitors: Its most notorious enemy is the Sinaloa Cartel; CJNG also competes against local

**Geography:** The cartel is based in Mexico's second city and Jalisco's capital, Guadalajara, where Pacific ports allow the cartel to import from Asia the chemicals needed to make synthetic drugs. The cartel in 2020 had a presence in at least 27 Mexican states, according to the Mexican government, and reportedly has customers on six continents.

> criminal groups, including the Knights Templar, Cártel de Santa Rosa de Lima, Los Viagras and Unión Tepito, among others.

Guadalajara, Mexico

Political Ties: Despite a general anti-government stance, the CJNG has still managed to infiltrate public institutions. In 2016, Jalisco's state attorney general reported that in Guadalajara, 20% of municipal police forces had been corrupted and 70% intimidated into not acting against the CJNG.





50,000-70,000 members globally

According to InSight Crime and American University

#### **36,000** members in the Northern Triangle

According to sources compiled by Florida International University

#### **Money makers**





extortion

murder for hire petty d traffic

petty drug m trafficking laur

money laundering

Origins: MS-13 as we know it was formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s by refugees fleeing the 1980–1992 civil war in El Salvador. Many gang members were deported to Central America, where they recreated the gang and expanded throughout the Northern Triangle. In El Salvador, the government's *mano dura* policies, beginning in the early 2000s, actually strengthened the gang by incarcerating non-members with active MS-13 members and also connecting different factions.

Recent Changes: A truce between MS-13 and rival Barrio 18 brought a short-lived respite between 2012 and 2013, but El Salvador's homicide rate soon reached a peak of 103 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015. The rate fell to 18.3 per 100,000 in 2020, according to the Igarapé Institute. Analysts agree that a significant drop in the homicide rate under President Nayib Bukele, who took office in 2019, is mainly due to the gangs' decision to reduce killings and therefore invite less state intervention. MS-13 has in recent years adopted increasingly sophisticated moneylaundering operations, military capabilities and legal protections, said Ortiz, the NDU professor.

- Structure: MS-13 lacks kingpins and famous leaders, and does not act as a single group, with individual cells known as *clicas* operating at a regional level and smaller factions working with autonomy in hyper-local areas across a few countries. The national leaders the gang does have tend to be incarcerated, older members who direct the gang from prison.
- Culture: While MS-13 has engaged in drug trafficking, financial gain generally comes secondary to larger social goals around group identity. Members earn respect by committing crimes and acts of violence. Outward signs of gang affiliation, such as face tattoos, hand signs and graffiti, have long been markers of belonging. However, these

**Geography:** El Salvador, with factions in Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico and the United States.

Active in **94% of El Salvador's municipalities** According to the International Crisis Group

have become less common as *mano dura* policies have forced members to make their presence less noticeable, experts told *AQ*.

- Competitors: In El Salvador, competition comes from other street gangs: Barrio 18, Mao Mao and La Máquina.
- **Political Ties:** Gangs have long been involved in electoral politics in El Salvador and Honduras, said Ortiz. Recently, the investigative journalism outlet *El Faro* reported that Bukele's government had negotiated with imprisoned MS-13 members to keep homicide levels down in the lead-up to legislative elections in February 2021. *El Faro* also reported meetings in 2015 between MS-13 and city officials while Bukele was the mayor of San Salvador. Bukele denied working with the gangs. Former President Mauricio Funes denied similar accusations.



Barrio 18/18th Street Gang, also known as Calle 18, Mara Dieciocho, or La 18

## More than 16,000 members

**in Central America** According to figures compiled by Florida

International University

#### Money makers





murder for hire

ire petty drug trafficking

ug human ng trafficking

Origins: Like MS-13, the Barrio 18 gang of today has its roots in Los Angeles, in the 18th Street Gang of the 1960s, an outgrowth of older Mexican-American gangs but one that welcomed Latino immigrants from other countries. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Salvadorans and Guatemalans joined the gang's ranks after fleeing instability and civil wars back home. Immigration reform in the U.S. in the mid-90s effectively exported the gang through the deportation of thousands of convicts to Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras.

Recent Changes: In 2005, internal divisions led to the fracture of the gang in El Salvador into two rival branches: the Sureños (Southerners) and the Revolucionarios (Revolutionaries). In 2020, in the pandemic's early months, there were reports that Barrio 18 and other gangs suspended extortion payments.

Structure: Like MS-13, Barrio 18 is more of a network than a

singular vertical organization. However, its factions are "less wellstructured" than MS-13, according to a 2017 survey of Barrio 18 members in El Salvador conducted by Florida International University. A July 2020 International Crisis Group report said disrupted communication between leaders inside and outside prisons, known as *palabreros*, is "contributing to the progressive fragmentation of gang cliques," with fractures "particularly noticeable in the 18th Street gang." Specifically, the Revolutionaries faction in El Salvador "is progressively fragmenting, to the point that nobody can speak on its behalf."

Culture: Barrio 18's reputation for irrational violence and extreme cruelty has made them lose ground to MS-13, said Ortiz, the NDU professor. The FIU study found that most respondents didn't have direct ties to the United States, suggesting that membership in gangs like 18th Street has far less to do with migration than it once did. **Geography:** Barrio 18's main contingent is in El Salvador, with a notable presence in the United States, Guatemala and Honduras.

Competitors: Barrio 18's fiercest rival is MS-13; in El Salvador, the two factions—the Revolutionaries and the Southerners—fight each other and smaller street gangs.

Political Ties: In El Salvador. reporting by InSight Crime points to efforts by the Bukele administration to facilitate communication between streetlevel and prison-based leadership as part of an "informal pact" between the government and gangs to reduce violence and allow Bukele's allies access to gang-controlled territory to campaign ahead of the February 2021 legislative elections. Most of *El Faro's* reporting in 2019, meanwhile, showed that the government's "negotiations" have taken place primarily with Barrio 18's rival MS-13.



## Criminal Organizations Often Control Territory

Organized crime and paramilitary groups effectively control large areas in Latin America, taking advantage of governments' insufficient resources, geographic difficulties or lax policies. Their territory often shifts. But in places where the state is largely absent, criminals act as parallel powers, dictating economic, labor and security norms. The areas indicated here are not an exhaustive list, but are examples of where criminal groups exercise control.

#### by Emilie Sweigart and Leonie Rauls

sources: Thiago Rodrigues (UFF), NEV (Núcleo de Estudos da Violência, Universidade de São Paulo), GENI (Grupo de Estudo de Novos Ilegalismos, Universidade Federal Fluminense), Federal Police Organized Crime Division report, Prosecutor Luiz Marrey (SP-MP), Judge Ivana David; InsightCrime; Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP); Human Rights Watch; CMIC (Cámara Mexicana de la Industria de Construcción), Milenio; Proceso Digital, Council on Hemispheric Affairs

## Mexico of "Golden Triangle"

This mountainous region located in the states of Chihuahua, Sinaloa and Durango is the stronghold for the Sinaloa Cartel, and was the hiding place for many years for the boss known as El Chapo. It's one of the country's main areas for growing marijuana and opium poppies. In February 2020 AMLO announced agricultural investment and infrastructure projects to connect the isolated communities of the triangle.

#### Colombia-Panama border, Darien Gap

This dense stretch of jungle connects Colombia and Panama. Many human trafficking networks operate in this area, also transporting people trying to reach the United States through Central America. It is the only incomplete section of the Pan-American Highway. Drug smuggling also occurs along this route.

#### Colombia-Ecuador border

This border area is a major drug trafficking route where various armed groups, including FARC dissidents, have fought to control territory since the FARC began to demobilize in 2016. The coastline and the Mataje River in Esmeraldas province in Ecuador are key conduits for the smuggling of fuel from Ecuador into Colombia, which is used in cocaine production. Cocaine is then smuggled into Ecuador and exported to the U.S. and Europe.

#### Honduras La Mosquitia

This remote region is a transit point along Central America's cocaine corridor. In 2020, 31 illegal airstrips used for drug-smuggling planes were destroyed in the area. Colombian and Venezuelan planes are known to land in the region, delivering cocaine that will head north through Guatemala. Authorities have been active in La Mosquitia since 2018, but the lack of infrastructure and difficult terrain have enabled organized crime groups to maintain control.

#### Colombia-Venezuela border

The ELN, FARC dissidents and other criminal groups are active between Norte de Santander and Táchira state in Venezuela, where contraband, drug smuggling and human trafficking are common. Farther south, along the border between Arauca department in Colombia and Venezuela's Apure state, ELN and FARC dissidents control the social, political and economic lives of people and have penetrated local politics.

#### • Venezuela "Mining Arc"

Various criminal groups, including the ELN, FARC dissidents and Venezuelan *sindicatos* (local mining mafias) are competing for control of gold mines in Bolívar state. The worsening political and economic crisis in Venezuela has caused impoverished Venezuelans to work in the mines, in deplorable conditions and under tight control from armed groups.

## Brazil northern and southern borders

The northwest Amazon region is home to a key drug-smuggling corridor where FARC dissidents, Red Command and the PCC are active. The Familia do Norte (Family of the North) gang exerts control over the city of Tabatinga on the Brazilian side. The southern area bordering Paraguay and Argentina is a hub of criminal activity, including arms and drug trafficking, the smuggling of goods, counterfeited documents and currency, and money laundering.

#### Ponta Porã in Mato Grosso, Brazil, and Pedro Juan Caballero, Paraguay

Since the criminal in charge of the area for decades—dubbed "King of the Border"—was killed inside a bullet-proof vehicle by a rival organization in 2016, this border area has seen constant fighting between rival groups PCC and Red Command. At stake is the main route for heavy weapons smuggled into Brazil and Bolivian cocaine heading to Europe.

#### Brazil, Terra Indígena Munduruku Pará and Terra Indígena Sai Cinza

Several groups operate in the region, with both illegal mining and illegal timber extraction providing the bulk of the revenue. The heavy equipment used in both types of operations suggests a much more powerful organization behind the poor and indigenous people who are usually blamed for the damage inflicted to the forest.

#### Brazil, Favelas in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Salvador

Paramilitary groups comprised of former police officers and other security personnel, as well as the PCC and Red Command, control entire sections of these cities, often engaging in gun battles. Organized crime groups also exert full command in most state prisons. Law enforcement officials are known to send convicted criminals to prisons controlled by the groups to which they have pledged allegiance.

Sweigart is an editor at AQ; Rauls is editorial assistant at AQ



## Defunding Organized Crime

How a pioneering official at Brazil's Federal Police followed the money.

#### by Cecilia Tornaghi

Commissioner Elvis Secco is the coordinator against drugs, guns and organized crime at Brazil's Federal Police.

> RGANIZED CRIME GROUPS are for-profit business enterprises," Elvis Secco said. "To combat them, we have to defund them." Before being appointed to lead the organized crime division at Brazil's Federal Police in 2019, Secco gained national recognition for dismantling a money-laundering unit of Brazil's largest criminal organization, the Primeiro Comando da Capital, or PCC. While authorities were busy looking for drugs, the PCC had been actively laundering money in Londrina, Paraná, a prosperous town of 600,000, for 10 years, unbothered.

POLICIA

Now, Secco is attacking money laundering by criminal organizations at a national level, a strategy that isn't frequently seen in Latin America. Other organizations, including the UN, are eager to draw lessons from his unit's work.

#### You were chosen to lead the organized crime division because of your results in seizing assets, not drugs. Why did you pick that strategy?

I joined the Federal Police 25 years ago, and my inspiration came from my experience working as an agent. We would mount operations that uncovered large amounts of drugs. But I realized that only strengthened those groups, because we stopped at the base of the pyramid. In the meantime, the organizations were enhancing their money-laundering capabilities and working on their international links—be it in producing countries like Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, or where the buyers are: Asia, Europe, the United States and Africa.

I have a degree in economics, I understand market forces. Criminals are in this business for profit, so the only way to stop them is to decapitalize them. But there wasn't a national directive in the Federal Police to investigate money laundering related to organized crime in the way we did for corruption cases. When I was promoted to commissioner, I started to focus my operations on money-laundering schemes.

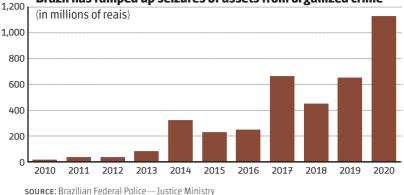
The goal is to locate the financial center of an organization, weaken the leaders and reach the top of the hierarchy, identifying also the people working for them. We investigate to pinpoint the financial centers, often operated by people who have no criminal background—and then reach the leaders.

## What triggered your first money laundering investigation?

Ostentation is a very good lead. When I was first appointed head of the Londrina office, there were these families in town that drove \$100,000 cars, traded them for a newer model every few months, lived in mansions and were always around the local elites. Who were they? We started checking the deeds and car registrations. That is when we found out that their luxury vehicles—dozens of them—were registered to people living in other states, some of whom were workers making minimum wage. The mansions, too, were registered to multiple people with no clear source of income. That was enough to launch a formal investigation. What we found was a sophisticated moneylaundering scheme, with investments in gas stations, transportation companies, real estate and luxury assets.

For more than 10 years that group had laundered money without any interference. And if that was one cell, just imagine what the organization had across the country. The reality is that organized crime has infiltrated the elites and are enjoying a rich lifestyle. These are businesspeople, The reality is that organized crime has infiltrated the elites, enjoying a rich lifestyle.





Brazil has ramped up seizures of assets from organized crime

many of them lawyers, entrepreneurs, accountants. The level to which organized crime has integrated itself within our society is really dangerous.

## How sophisticated are the money-laundering schemes that you have uncovered?

They are laundering money all over the world. It is exactly the same process used by corrupt politicians and their corruptors: They use *doleiros* (black-market foreign exchange dealers) and offshore accounts, multiple shell companies and cash businesses. They use all sorts of businesses that can allow them to launder money.

A gas station, for example, will handle maybe up to 30% of its revenue in cash. In one operation in São Paulo, they had gas stations where 60% of the deposits were in cash. That group had a structure of about 70 businesses where the legal and illegal components were hard to differentiate. They also aggressively expanded abroad. Of some recent PCC leaders arrested, one was the owner of an export-import business in Mozambique, another had businesses in Italy.

After a few years, as these businesses start to have real revenues, it is much harder to investigate and prosecute them. And what stops them, then, from legally financing political campaigns? Participating in public bids? Nothing. They can then launder money through public works, laughing at us.

In 2020, in what we dubbed Operation King of Crime, we investigated and served warrants on a ring that had moved about \$5 billion over four years. In that one operation we seized close to \$100 million in assets, including helicopters, boats, cars and properties.

The only way to dismantle criminal organizations is to defund them. And to effectively decapitalize them we need to break their laundering operation. Besides depriving them of the possessions, when you prosecute for money laundering you can compile jail sentences for each asset seized—this way even if they are able to strike down a sentence for trafficking, they still have multiple other charges to keep them in jail.

## Are Brazilian criminal groups focused only on drug trafficking?

The large organized crime groups work in other areas as well, like illegal mining or human trafficking, which also help them launder money. But nothing is more lucrative than cocaine.

## Are they moving to digital laundering options like cryptocurrencies?

They are definitely using them, and we are getting better at investigating and trailing this. But their favorite scheme is still to have multiple small companies. And they are very organized. There are members in charge solely of the finances, who never deal with drugs or weapons.

So we changed the paradigm at the Federal Police. They do this for money, so let's take the money away from them. The vision is to combat organized crime from a capitalist point of view, always looking to weaken their financial power.

But for this to work, international collaboration is key. We work with the U.S. DEA, but few countries have this focus on the money when it comes to organized crime. We need to change that. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime wants to use our example to get other countries to follow this model. These are global operations and we can't just investigate locally.

Tornaghi is Managing Editor at AQ



## WHEN CRIME AND POLITICS MEET

A case in Peru allegedly shows how gangs can put friendly figures into office.

#### by Lucía Dammert

IMA—Located just north of Lima, Peru's Áncash department is resource-rich, replete with a mix of zinc, gold and silver deposits. It is also home to the country's most notorious mix of government and organized crime, a network that was allegedly led for years by César Álvarez, governor from 2007 to 2014.

Known as "the Beast" because of his reputation for political violence, Álvarez asserted control through an elaborate network of government institutions and criminal organizations, extorting, threatening and ordering the assassination of political adversaries, according to a congressional investigation and an indictment by Peru's public prosecutor's office. In 2014, a preventive arrest warrant was issued, and since then he has been sentenced to 14 years in prison due to his involvement in the international Odebrecht scandal. (Álvarez has denied any wrongdoing, and in 2018 declared—from prison—his intention to run again for governor.)

How did someone like Álvarez become so powerful? How do organized crime and politics end up mixing? Álvarez's early days in politics may shed some light.

An accountant by trade, Álvarez initiated his political career in the 1990s. He ran for office for the first time in 1998, after creating his own party, the Movimiento Cuenta Conmigo, and also served as a congressional aide. But his initial multiple tries at mayorships and a seat in Congress failed. It was only in 2006 that he was finally elected—surprisingly, to the immensely powerful role of governor.





According to the congressional report, Álvarez super-charged what had been a lackluster career by making pacts with licit and illicit players. In doing so, he gained not only votes, but also funding for his political rise, promising (and delivering) public contracts and judicial favors. Criminal organizations have found openings especially through illicit campaign financing of local budding politicians, then reeling them in through clientelism and family ties.

Major criminal organizations are often not interested in holding power directly. Instead, what these relationships offer them are new channels for money laundering, freedom to operate in given areas, and regional expansion. Drug trafficking groups seem to have gained all of this and more, for example, at Peru's main port at Callao, believed to be the departure point for the majority of the estimated 3,000 tons of cocaine Peru exports annually. Former city and regional leaders were charged with multiple cases of corruption and money laundering in connection with the Odebrecht scandal, and later were linked to an illicit network of judges known as Los Cuellos Blancos, the "whitecollar gang."

That case may illustrate another truth: When offending politicians are caught—if they are caught at all—it is usually for white collar offenses or corrupt

GDA/AP



Álvarez (center) in 2014, after he was denied release from pretrial detention. practices rather than involvement in organized criminal activity. It has been notoriously difficult to prove the direct involvement of politicians in such groups. However, highly personalized political movements, clientelistic approaches to politics and strong family networks give us a glimpse into the strategies used by criminal groups to gain access into politics and to sustain control.

The early involvement of relatives occurs in almost all cases, more often than not playing direct roles, such as operating illegal or facade businesses used for money laundering or for territorial expansion.

In areas dominated by extractive industries, regional governments may also be complicit in severe environmental damage, allowing legal and illegal mining and logging groups to operate side by side.

### The Path to Reform

he difficulty in proving a direct connection to criminal activity contributes to a culture of impunity, even when links are known to exist. A 2017 poll by Proética, Peru's branch of Transparency International, found that 68% of Peruvians believe that politics is "highly infiltrated" by organized crime.

The problem is not unique to Peru: Organized crime has forged deep links in local governments across Latin America. Tackling the issue thus demands a series of reform efforts. First, campaign financing needs accountability, and second, the state must extend its presence outside of capitals. Boosting funding for anti-corruption efforts at the regional level and training police forces for more complex criminal investigations are key. Last, barriers must be raised to exclude those linked to corrupt practices from political participation.

Impunity has grown deep roots, and these reforms offer a chance to bring greater transparency to regional politics and slowly rebuild public trust.

**Dammert** is the executive director of the Global Consortium on Security Transformation and a professor of international relations at the Universidad de Santiago de Chile. This article was inspired by a chapter she co-wrote in Corruption in Latin America: How Politicians and Corporations Steal from Citizens, published in 2019.



# **A Threat** That **Cannot Be Addressed** Alone

Combating organized crime requires cooperation among the hemisphere's countries.

#### by Rear Admiral Andrew J. Tiongson

N THE VAST EXPANSE of the Eastern Pacific, near the Central American isthmus, a lone semisubmersible vessel transits westbound, loaded with several tons of cocaine. Its low, partially submerged profile is nearly imperceptible to the human eye. The four-person crew's job is to get a massive cocaine shipment as close to the U.S. as possible, before handing it over to the next link in the narco-trafficking chain.

U.S. Navy and Colombian Air Force maritime patrol aircraft pinpoint the vessel's location, track its movements, and share its projected path with authorities from a nearby Central American country positioned to intercept the shipment. The partner country dispatches a maritime interceptor to close in on the vessel.

The semisubmersible crew makes a desperate attempt to evade the incoming interceptor, but the interceptor crew spots their vessel. It is game over for the drug smuggling crew and the end of the road for their cocaine shipment.



DREW LANGHOLF/RELEASED/U.S. NAVY







This story is based on similar disruptions successfully carried out during counter-narcotics operations led by the U.S. military's Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), working closely with more than 20 nations and 16 interagency partners—a collaboration that has led to a 65% increase in targeting of maritime cases.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, transnational criminal organizations (TCOS) have adjusted their tactics, techniques and procedures. Use of commercial fishing vessels and shipping containers in cocaine transport has decreased and they have increasingly employed smaller, semisubmersible vessels instead. Their use of Western Caribbean transit routes also increased in response to travel and shipping restrictions. Every country has to be at the top of their game to counter this threat.

The TCOS operating in the Americas compete for the estimated \$94 billion generated annually by cocaine trafficking worldwide. They will exploit any technology, opportunity or vulnerability, going as far as corrupting government, judicial and law enforcement officials to undermine institutions entrusted with public security. TCOS respect no borders or rule of law and operate with agility and innovation. This requires the U.S. government to operate as one entity—across multiple agencies—and cooperate across international boundaries.

Countering TCOs is a national security and defense imperative and is critical to the homeland defense of the United States. Whole-of-hemisphere cooperative security approaches and strong security institutions, which share values and ensure security, prosperity and freedom, are vital.

#### VICIOUS CIRCLE OF THREATS

RANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS will spare no idea or tactic to smuggle cocaine and other dangerous drugs. During the 2018 World Cup tournament, Argentine authorities seized World Cup trophy replicas, each containing approximately 1.5 kilos of cocaine. In 2019, Spanish law enforcement authorities interdicted a semisubmersible vessel loaded with 3.5 metric tons of cocaine off the Iberian Peninsula's northwestern coast. Earlier that year, news reports described how Cape Verde law enforcement authorities seized 9.5 metric tons of cocaine aboard a Russian vessel en route from South America to Morocco.

These global cocaine trafficking networks pose a significant threat to the health of people, the environment and economies. The harmful substances and chemicals used to manufacture cocaine hydrochloride include ammonia, methyl ethyl ketone, sulfuric acid and gasoline. Cocaine laboratories recklessly release these chemicals into the environment. Cocaine users ingest these chemicals, often unaware of the full extent of consequences to their health. Some drug dealers lace cocaine with fentanyl, a synthetic opioid analgesic that is similar to morphine, but 50 to 100 times more potent. The result is a cheaper but more powerful and potentially fatal cocaine high.

There are financial threats as well. Businesses created as front companies to launder criminal fortunes undermine legitimate commerce and trade. Chinese professional money-laundering networks have in recent years emerged as key service providers in the region, capable of moving large amounts of drug proceeds quickly through international trade.

Every time they engage in illegal activity, criminal and violent extremists undermine the rule of law and contribute to a spiral of instability, which, exacerbated by violence and COVID-19, fuels levels of corruption, weak institutions, and fragile states that strain social and legal systems and trigger migrations. The result is a vicious circle of threats that threatens the security of our shared neighborhood. Defending it requires a whole of government and all domain approach; as well as a cooperative effort between partner nations. Intelligence sharing and overall coordination are absolutely essential.

What began in 1989 as a U.S. military joint task force charged with supporting law enforcement-led counter-narcotics operations in the Caribbean, the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South), a component of SOUTHCOM, has since become a model for interagency and international counter-narcotics cooperation.

Today, 16 U.S. federal agencies support the task force's mission to monitor, detect, track and report air

and maritime illicit trafficking. Their efforts support and enable law-enforcement counter-narcotics successes in an operating area that encompasses 42 million square miles, extending from the Eastern Pacific to the Western Atlantic and from international waters north of the Caribbean Antilles to the waterways south of the Cape Horn territorial boundary.

The U.S. Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection, Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. Defense Department are among the many U.S. federal agencies assisting countries seeking to dismantle transnational criminal organizations operating within their national territories.

This cooperation is effective. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the Americas accounted for 85% of total cocaine seized globally in 2018. And, despite the domestic demands created by COVID-19, our partners remain committed to the counter-narcotics fight. In the first six months of SOUTHCOM's counter-narcotics operations, partner nations have participated in 60% of disruptions.

From Mexico to Brazil, and from Canada to Chile, our partners in the Western Hemisphere have contributed in varying ways to results achieved during SOUTHCOM's counter-narcotics operation and Colombia's Orion V counter-narcotics operation. From April through November, these combined efforts disrupted and seized more than 226 metric tons of cocaine, a loss of nearly \$6 billion in profits for illicit narcotics trafficking networks. During that same period, the operations netted the detention of at least 520 suspected drug smugglers and are credited with saving an estimated 2,300 lives.

The increased participation of partner nation security forces is made possible through continued U.S. investment through Department of Defense (DOD) authorities, such as Title 10, Section 333, which permits the DOD to train and equip our partners with critical capabilities to counter illicit trafficking and increase border and maritime security. Sustained U.S. engagement supports partner capabilities ranging from improved riverine capability to disrupt narcotrafficking deep inside source zones in South America, to increasing partner nation aerial reconnaissance capability and maritime interdiction throughout Central America and the Caribbean, thus creating a dense network to disrupt transnational criminal organizations.

And many of these committed nations are increasingly investing in expanding or modernizing their counter-narcotics capabilities and contributing more to international counter-narcotics operations.

Jamaica and Costa Rica have purchased maritime patrol aircraft, Trinidad and Tobago and Ecuador have thwarted attempts by transnational criminal organizations to smuggle drugs in or near their territories. El Salvador's naval forces are patrolling deeper into the Eastern Pacific, while Guatemala's security forces are working in concert with counterparts from the U.S., Colombia, Mexico and other Central American nations to disrupt cocaine transported via illicit trafficking flights.

All counter-narcotics efforts by nations and government agencies support a common goal: to defend the security of our shared neighborhood by detecting, degrading and dismantling the transnational criminal organizations. To succeed, we need to continue to build on our strong partnerships with U.S. interagency and partner nations, through information sharing, data-based analysis and assessments, and synchronized targeting of TCOS. Only then we will be able to illuminate, map and dismantle the networks behind a global narcotics-trafficking enterprise contributing to roughly 450,000 annual drug-use-related deaths, according to the UN.

Transnational criminal organizations are innovative and highly adaptable and use a well-funded global network. We know that TCOS will continue to try to move unseen through porous borders, oceans and airways—but they will have to avoid detection and apprehension by a coalition of counter-drug nations, defending their citizens from the scourge of corruption, violence and death that accompanies the illicit drug trade.

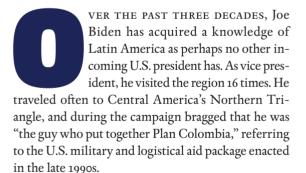
**Rear Admiral Tiongson** *is southcom's director of operations* 



## UNDER BIDEN, BIG CHANGES SEEM UNLIKELY

A December report could lead to some modifications of U.S. anti-drug policy, but no dramatic steps.

#### by Brendan O'Boyle



When it comes to U.S. policy regarding organized crime and narcotics interdiction in the region, most expect Biden will largely continue with the status quo that has prevailed during most of his career—and failed to curb either U.S. drug consumption or violence in Latin America. While some changes are possible, the realities of a split U.S. Congress and a crowded domestic agenda will probably prevent the kind of bold experiments such as drug legalization that some progressives support.

"The ongoing opioid crisis is going to make it polit-

ically difficult to do anything that looks like softening the law enforcement approach," said Cynthia Arnson, the director of the Latin American program at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.

Arnson noted that governments in Colombia, Mexico and Brazil seem similarly uninterested in major changes, and also cited "very entrenched bureaucratic interests and inertia in Washington and among U.S. officials on the ground in Latin America."

However, she and other experts said Biden could act on some of the changes advocated in a major report released by the U.S. Congress in December, written by a bipartisan group of experts and policymakers. The report called for a "long-term, inter-agency" counter-narcotics strategy that would involve greater funding for science-based treatment and prevention, more resources for the Treasury Department's antimoney laundering efforts, a new drug certification and designation process, and a data-driven overhaul of the metrics for combating drug trafficking and money laundering.



U.S. President Joe Biden has a long history on both Latin America and crime policy.

Shannon O'Neil, the chair of the commission that put together the report, expects the Biden administration's efforts to focus on "citizen security and fighting transnational criminal organizations versus interdicting drugs and focusing on drug trafficking alone." O'Neil notes that the biggest challenge may come less from partisan clashes rather than from Washington's complicated processes for enacting policy.

"Lots of different agencies have a role to play," O'Neil told *AQ*, "But there really isn't a corralling mechanism to bring all these together."

To fix this, the report recommends a larger role for the State Department in streamlining the administration's anti-crime efforts, as well as locally tailored coordination with Latin American governments.

Collaboration with the U.S. on security and drugs will be particularly vital—and challenging—in Mexico, where "the center of gravity, when it comes to drugs in the Americas, seems to be shifting," said Bryce Pardo, a drug policy researcher at the RAND Corporation. Unfortunately, the bilateral relationship has hit a rough patch, most visible after the capture—and subsequent release—of General Salvador Cienfuegos on drug trafficking charges. Shortly after, Mexico's Congress pushed through a bill proposed by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's office that will make it harder for Mexican officials to collaborate with U.S. law enforcement.

"This could be really problematic," said Pardo.

Another big roadblock to change, experts tell AQ, is a drugs market that is changing faster than the metrics and tools governments are using to disrupt it.

"Synthetic drugs are the future," Pardo told AQ. "But everything that we've been doing on autopilot for the last 30 to 40 years has really been out of the international drug control regime, which is based largely on plant-based drugs. So it's hard to shift the policy orientation to be more dynamic."

**O'Boyle** is a senior editor at AQ



## A 'Must-Listen' for Latin American Politics

Brian Winter, editor-in-chief of *Americas Quarterly*, hosts a conversation on the people and events shaping Latin American politics.



Available on Apple, Spotify, Soundcloud and Google Podcasts.



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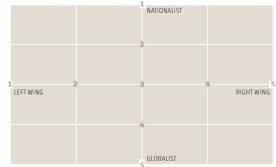


#### **SPECIAL SECTION**

A closer look at the leading candidates in this year's presidential elections



**IDEOLOGY** *AQ* asked a dozen nonpartisan experts on Latin America to help us identify where each candidate stands on two spectrums: left wing versus right wing, and nationalist versus globalist. We've published the average response, with a caveat: Platforms evolve, and so do candidates.







**ECUADOR** 

### Andrés Arauz

35, former government minister and central bank director Democratic Center

#### "The president will be me, and Rafael Correa will be my principal adviser."

#### **HOW HE GOT HERE**

Former President Rafael Correa chose Arauz, a young economist and loyal technocrat who served as his minister of knowledge and human talent, to lead his political movement's ticket. Correa had wanted to run as Arauz's vice president, but his hopes died when a court upheld a prior conviction on corruption charges.

#### WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Experts suggest about a fifth of Ecuadorians are committed *correistas*, so Correa's endorsement alone could be enough to get Arauz to a runoff election. Voters may see the fresh-faced Arauz as a return to the good times of Correa's decade in office, when high commodity prices helped the economy grow an average of about 3% annually.

#### WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

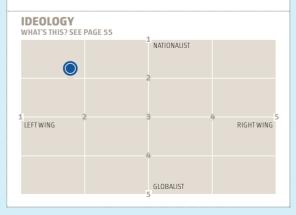
At just 35, Arauz's inexperience could be seen as a gamble in such difficult times. He also must deal with the baggage associated with Correa's corruption convictions (Arauz considers the charges to be political persecution).

#### **WHO SUPPORTS HIM**

A portion of Ecuador's left who are ideologically aligned with the "21st-century socialism" championed by Correa and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez. Ecuadorians who benefited from Correa's social and infrastructure programs.

#### WHAT HE WOULD DO

A critic of the IMF, Arauz promises to roll back President Lenín Moreno's "neoliberal" policies and advocates for capital controls. One of his priorities is to relaunch the regional bloc UNASUR. He supports the construction of an oil refinery on Ecuador's coast, a flagship project of Correa's government that was never completed.





## Guillermo Lasso

65, businessman, former economy minister and governor Creating Opportunities

*"Correísmo* is offering more of the past: a failure that includes corruption at all levels."

#### **HOW HE GOT HERE**

Lasso is running for president for the third time. After a lucrative career in banking, he held short stints in government in the late 1990s and early 2000s, first as governor of Guayas province, then economy minister and itinerant ambassador. Lasso founded the Creando Oportunidades (Creating Opportunities—CREO) party to launch his 2013 presidential bid. After narrowly losing his second presidential race in 2017 to Lenín Moreno, Lasso contested the results, alleging fraud.

#### WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Lasso has more name recognition this time around and will pick up votes from CREO's new coalition partner, the Social Christian Party (PSC). He will attract the anti-Correa vote, and stands a better chance against Arauz, a less popular *correísta* candidate than his 2017 opponent, Moreno.

#### WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

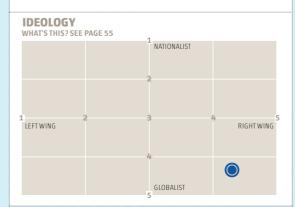
Some say he lacks charisma and struggles to connect with voters. Voters may still hold Lasso responsible for the 1999 financial crisis, during which he was economy minister.

#### **WHO SUPPORTS HIM**

Business elites, social conservatives and the center-right. Lasso has strong support in Quito, and his alliance with the PSC will bring him support from Guayaquil.

#### WHAT HE WOULD DO

Analysts believe Lasso will probably comply with the IMF's loan program, despite issuing a statement criticizing the deal and its proposed tax increases. Lasso has promised to create 1 million jobs as well as a universal health care system. A member of the Catholic group Opus Dei, Lasso staunchly opposes abortion.



## ECUADOR

## PERU



#### Yaku Pérez

51, former prefect of Azuay province Pachakutik

#### "We are fighting correismo and the right."

#### **HOW HE GOT HERE**

A lawyer by training, Pérez is an environmental activist who has fought for water rights and protested against mining activity. He had a prominent role in the October 2019 anti-austerity protests and emerged as the leader of Pachakutik, the political arm of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador. Pérez served as the prefect of Azuay province, a position akin to governor, before resigning to run for president.

#### WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Pérez is an anti-Correa leftist, and could gain support from opponents of both Arauz and Lasso. His proenvironmental stance is popular with younger voters.

#### WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

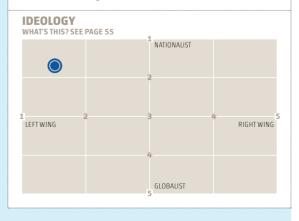
Pérez is less well-known in the north of the country, where most of the population lives. Those who do know him might associate Pérez with the violence during the 2019 protests. Some voters may be biased against Pérez because of his indigenous, non-Catholic background.

#### **WHO SUPPORTS HIM**

The indigenous community and environmentalists. Pérez hails from Cuenca in Ecuador's southern highlands and will likely garner more votes from that region.

#### WHAT HE WOULD DO

Pérez's plans are based on an economic model of sustainable development that protects the environment. He has promised to create a universal basic income. Unlike Lasso and Arauz, Pérez has refused to meet with IMF officials. He is against the tax increases in Ecuador's IMF deal, and said he would review the deal if elected and call for a moratorium on debt payments if the debt is found to be "illegitimate."





### George Forsyth

38, former mayor and professional soccer player National Victory

"We want a new generation of politician. The corruption is killing us."

#### **HOW HE GOT HERE**

A national champion soccer goalie who also played briefly for Peru's national team, as well as a business owner and reality TV contestant, Forsyth used his celebrity to enter politics in 2010 as a council member in Lima's workingclass La Victoria municipality. After his election as La Victoria's mayor in 2018, Forsyth gained notoriety for his work to "clean up" the municipality, using both sports—he moved the mayor's office to an abandoned sports complex—and heavy-handed policies, like police evictions of informal workers.

#### WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Thanks to his regular media presence, he is recognized by many. He is a fresh face who sells himself as a new generation of politician at a time of widespread frustration with the political class, and his limited experience in politics means he has less baggage than other candidates.

#### WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

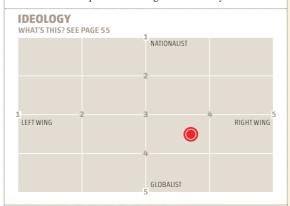
After Forsyth resigned as mayor to run for president, his replacement said residents "felt used politically." His inexperience and vague platform may also turn voters off.

#### **WHO SUPPORTS HIM**

Forsyth does not have a clearly defined ideological base, but polls suggest that his supporters skew younger, more urban, wealthier and more female.

#### WHAT HE WOULD DO

Forsyth is pro-business, anti-corruption, and tough on crime, but he hasn't gone into much detail on policy. He said his decision to run for a conservative party was based on its record of being clean of corruption rather than for its ideology. Forsyth called for amending the constitution to declare corruption a crime against humanity.





PERI

## Keiko Fujimori

45, former congresswoman Popular Force

#### "I'm affirming my commitment to move ahead, with my father's support."

#### **HOW SHE GOT HERE**

Fujimori is the daughter of former President Alberto Fujimori, who is serving a 25-year prison sentence for human rights violations during his 1990-2000 government. She narrowly lost in the second round of the 2011 and 2016 presidential elections. Fujimori has been held twice in pre-trial detention related to alleged laundering of illegal campaign donations from Odebrecht. An investigation is ongoing, but at the time of publication, her candidacy was moving forward.

#### WHY SHE MIGHT WIN

Fujimori has a high level of name recognition. Some voters remember her father as a leader who oversaw important pro-business reforms and improved the standard of living.

#### WHY SHE MIGHT LOSE

Fujimori has the highest negative ratings among the candidates. Many associate her with authoritarianism during her father's rule, as well as corruption. Support for her waned after a public confrontation in 2018 with her brother Kenji over an attempted vote-buying scheme.

#### **WHO SUPPORTS HER**

There is still a loyal pro-Fujimori electoral base among lowerincome and more conservative voters. Alleged illegal campaign financing, as well as investigations into undeclared campaign donations from CONFIEP, the main business group that once backed her, eroded much of the support Fujimori had in the private sector. According to Ipsos polling, her support is a fraction of what it was at the same point in the 2016 race.

#### WHAT SHE WOULD DO

In addition to freeing her father from prison, Fujimori would likely pursue the market-friendly economic policies she has followed throughout her political career.





## Julio Guzmán

50, former secretary-general of the presidential cabinet Purple Party

"The pandemic has created a lot of fear, and populists want to take advantage."

#### **HOW HE GOT HERE**

An economist and PhD in public policy, Guzmán spent a decade at the Inter-American Development Bank before working as a deputy minister and cabinet chief for former President Ollanta Humala. Guzmán ran for president in 2016, climbing to second place in polls before his candidacy was disqualified on a controversial technicality. Later that year he launched the Purple Party.

#### WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Following former President Martín Vizcarra's impeachment, Guzmán played a prominent role in opposing Manuel Merino's government. Francisco Sagasti, Peru's interim president, was slated to run on Guzmán's ticket before stepping down. If Sagasti leads the country out of crisis, Guzmán could benefit.

#### WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

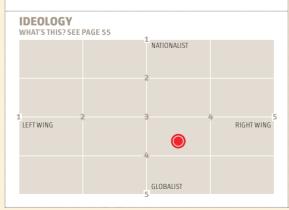
Some see Guzmán as lacking in charisma, and his centrist views could be perceived as an aversion to taking firm stances. Past scandals may also hurt his chances. Guzmán issued an apology after a case of infidelity emerged in January 2020. In August, authorities opened an investigation into allegations that his 2016 campaign accepted an illegal \$400,000 donation from Odebrecht.

#### WHO SUPPORTS HIM

Political analysts describe his supporters as centrist, with higher levels of education.

#### WHAT HE WOULD DO

Guzmán has argued that Peru should lessen its dependence on exports by diversifying its economy. He says the state should combat monopolies "so that the market can be free." If elected, Guzmán stated that he would consider holding a referendum on whether to write a new constitution.



LUKA GONZALES/AFP/GETTY; GUZMÁN'S SOCIAL MEDIA PAGE

APRIL 11

### PERU



## Verónika Mendoza

39, former congresswoman New Peru

## "We need to get rid of the entire traditional political class. They should all go."

#### **HOW SHE GOT HERE**

Mendoza is running for president after finishing third in 2016 with 18% of the vote. She served in Congress from 2011 to 2016. An anthropologist by training, Mendoza speaks Quechua and hails from Cuzco. Formerly a member of President Ollanta Humala's Nationalist Party, she broke with Humala and left the party in 2012.

#### WHY SHE MIGHT WIN

Mendoza is one of the few leading candidates who is not from Lima, which could appeal to voters in the country's interior. Many regard her as honest and transparent. In one of the countries hit hardest by the pandemic, Mendoza's plans for social policies to address inequality could resonate.

#### WHY SHE MIGHT LOSE

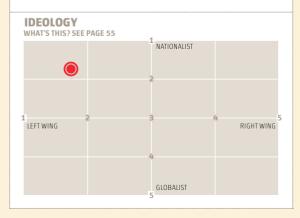
Her leftist views could alienate voters in a country still haunted by the bloody legacy of the leftist Shining Path terrorist group.

#### **WHO SUPPORTS HER**

Mendoza's base is in southern Peru, especially in cities like Cuzco, Arequipa and Puno. While she has struggled to build a united leftist coalition, she is still the only competitive option for many leftists.

#### WHAT SHE WOULD DO

Mendoza seeks to implement progressive reforms in taxes, health care and the environment, as well as a "second agrarian reform" to support a sector that, according to her, has been "abandoned" by the state. A key part of Mendoza's platform is replacing the constitution. She has stated that Peru needs a new founding document to give citizens a greater say in their government, which is controlled by the political class.





## Daniel Urresti

64, congressman, former interior minister and general We Can Peru

#### "As long as criminals are on the street, you will continue to see me."

#### **HOW HE GOT HERE**

A retired army general, Urresti served as the interior minister under President Ollanta Humala from 2014 to 2015. He ran for president in 2016, but Humala's party pulled Urresti's candidacy. After mounting a failed bid for the mayoralty of Lima in 2018, he served as the head of public safety in a municipality on Lima's outskirts. Urresti won a congressional seat in January 2020.

#### WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Best known for his hardline stance on crime, Urresti appeals to concerns over security, which remain heightened despite crime levels being stable throughout 2020. He makes frequent media appearances and has a confrontational personality and a reputation for telling it like it is, which is popular among some.

#### WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Urresti is a polarizing figure who is not well known outside of Lima, and apart from being tough on crime, he has not taken many strong policy stances. He was charged with ordering the 1988 murder of a journalist and faces a retrial relating to the case after the Supreme Court overruled a 2018 decision that cleared him of the crime.

#### **WHO SUPPORTS HIM**

Most of his supporters are in Lima. Urresti is ideologically fluid, and his populism holds appeal for anti-establishment as well as anti-Fujimori voters.

#### WHAT HE WOULD DO

He has promised to fight corruption and crime, and recently introduced legislation to prevent the resale of stolen goods. Urresti has also signaled he would permit continued pension withdrawals, but has been otherwise vague on his economic policies.



## There Is Hope for Combating Illicit Trade in 2021, but We Have To Act Together

#### by Alain Vermaut

Regional Head of Illicit Trade Prevention, Latin America and Canada Philip Morris International

#### **COVID-19 HAS DEVASTATED**

normal life and greatly affected the global economy. Governments have countered the pandemic with travel restrictions, social distancing measures, strict hygiene protocols and direct economic intervention. And the disruption of economic activity and global supply chains associated with consumer goods, like tobacco, affected not only the legal economy but also the illicit market.

According to a 2020 Euromonitor International report, the pandemic resulted in the growth of illicit trade, especially in the tobacco industry, where organized crime is causing governments to lose billions in tax revenue, as well as severely affecting legitimate businesses. As government resources continue to be stretched to curb the pandemic, criminals are taking advantage of shifting regulatory frameworks, supply shortages, changing consumer preferences and price gaps to expand their illicit profits via new distribution channels, and innovate production and supply chains.

The numbers for illicit tobacco trade were already significant. The WHO has estimated that 10% to 12% of cigarettes worldwide are illegal, corresponding to an estimated 400 to 460 billion cigarettes. This costs governments worldwide \$40 billion to \$50 billion each year.

Our region is no stranger to this problem. Ecuador and Panama,

in particular, are the Latin American countries with the highest consumption of illegal cigarettes, reaching over 70% of total consumption by the end of 2019. According to the KPMG EOS report for Latin America and Canada, consumption of illegal cigarettes grew from 17% in 2016 to 22% in 2018, and accounted for 52.5 billion cigarettes, with an estimated lost tax revenue of US\$ 6 billion. Our estimate for 2019 (based on independent studies) is that illicit consumption kept growing, reaching 23%, which represented around 54.7 billion cigarettes.

CUSTOMS

And the COVID-19 outbreak is not helping the situation.

The pandemic has served to reroute the illicit goods market in

the long run. The proliferation of goods being sold online including in the dark web—has soared, placing an added burden on law enforcement and customs authorities. As highlighted by The Economist Intelligence Unit, while the demand for personal protective equipment might eventually disappear, the illicit markets created during the pandemic will likely remain ... and so will the criminals who run those markets.

## WHAT WORKS (AND WHAT DOES NOT)?

Different approaches to fighting COVID-19 and mitigating its effect on the population have had a significant impact on the illicit trade landscape. For example, the decision to ban the sale of tobacco and cigarettes in South Africa led to an increase in illegal sales. And enforced lockdowns in Asia and the Americas caused a spike in wildlife poaching.

In Argentina, the mandatory quarantine led to the closure of tobacco factories and consequently to a cigarette shortage. This situation triggered criminal organizations to switch from drug trafficking to cigarette contraband. It also fostered the proliferation of local companies offering brands with low quality standards and control. These companies sell cigarettes at prices far below major competitors as they managed to be exempt from paying minimum excise tax, levied on most companies. This mechanism is possible thanks to judicial injunctions that permitted companies to sell their most

popular brands for half the price.

However, not all countries have seen adverse effects resulting from restrictions.

Canada, in cooperation with the U.S., closed its border to nonessential traffic during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing very limited and controlled border crossings, resulting in the disruption of cross-border tobacco smuggling. In eastern Canada, the governments of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia even implemented inter-provincial travel restrictions. Due to all these restrictions, consumers turned to legitimate retail sources for tobacco, which resulted in increased tax collection from the sale of tobacco products, as observed in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec.

#### LOOKING AHEAD

An important lesson from COVID-19 is that bans end up fueling illicit trade. We have also seen how blocking the outflow of smuggled cigarettes through enhanced enforcement and border controls is paramount to significantly reduce illicit trade. These learnings will be crucial to help us disrupt the illegal market, which will require not only innovative solutions, but also greater collaboration and improved regulation.

As we enter 2021, there is hope for effectively combating illicit trade in all its forms. Last year, the spotlight placed on illicit trade led to a greater understanding of its negative impact, and this presents an opportunity to work together toward disrupting illicit economies and the criminals profiting from them.

Part of the solution is opening a dialogue between law enforcement agencies, civil society, governments and the private sector. Because no one can stop illicit trade on their own. In the case of Philip Morris International (PMI), we work with public and private sectors alike to promote comprehensive, sustainable and long-lasting action against illicit trade, focusing on awareness-raising activities, support to customs authorities, providing technical training to law enforcement officials, and advocating for regulatory frameworks that can allow for illegal products to be attacked at their sources.

Eliminating illicit trade is also particularly important within the context of PMI's business transformation toward a smokefree future, where cigarettes are ultimately replaced by better alternatives for adult smokers who would otherwise continue to smoke. We are fully aware that to achieve a world without cigarettes, we must help secure a future without illicit trade.

So where are we heading? It's clear to me that public-private partnerships based on an inclusive approach by governments, private sector, and civil society—coupled with the implementation of appropriate regulation—will be vital to help advance the fight against illicit trade in Latin America and the rest of the world. We are ready to do our part.

## PHOTO ESSAY

## A YEAR OF CHANGE ON THE PARANÁ RIVER

#### BY SEBASTIÁN LÓPEZ BRACH

THE PARANÁ is one of the longest rivers on the planet, running 3,000 miles through Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina until its delta, a rich and delicate ecosystem. The delta region was already suffering from drought and deforestation, and over the last eight months forest fires have destroyed more than 1,500 square miles of wetlands, an area equivalent to 15 times the size of Buenos Aires. While confronting the dual disaster of an environmental emergency and the spread of COVID-19, islanders in Argentina's Paraná Delta try to keep their focus on local traditions.

Droughts in the delta threaten to cut off island communities, making them more vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19. This pond is on the verge of drying up completely, preventing locals from accessing waterways to travel to the city to get food and medicine. "The life of a fisherman is hard. There is an ecological disaster, and as if that weren't enough, the government banned river travel to avoid spreading COVID-19. If they catch me fishing, they take away what I caught and my fishing net."

-TURCO DÍAZ

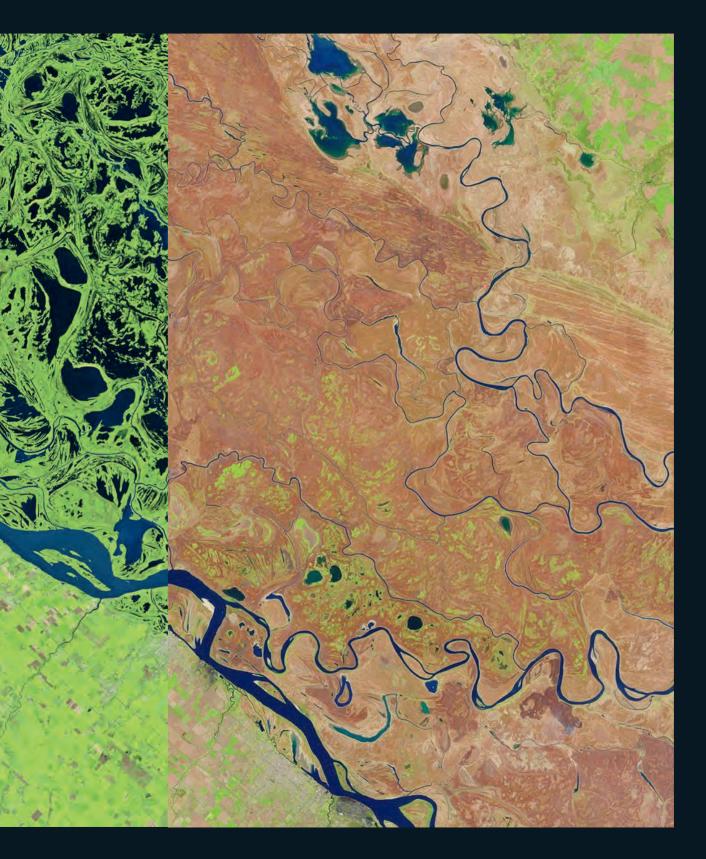
Artisanal fisherman Turco Díaz (55) teaches his trade to grandson Lázaro (7), who was born on the islands of the Paraná Delta. Lázaro's routine has changed due to the pandemic. His school canceled classes, so now he spends his days learning his grandfather's trade. Everyday life has become a school for him.



According to old navigation charts, one night in 1943 an Argentine oil tanker rammed a barge carrying wheat along the Paraná River en route to the port of Buenos Aires. The barge sank, but the crew was rescued in time. This almost forgotten accident ended up creating Mast Island. Sediments from the river accumulated on top of the sunken tanker and built up over the years. Mast Island continues to grow and change, and has become a refuge for biodiversity and life in the Paraná River.

> A satellite image from the European Space Agency (left) shows the Paraná Delta wetlands in 2019. Satellites captured an image of the same area in 2020 (right), showing the destruction wrought by forest fires.





## "On the island the main problem is falling river levels. This cuts off access to people who live in remote areas, and they can't travel by canoe to buy food or medicine."

-FABIAN ROS

After suffering an accident at the factory where he worked, Fabian Ros (53) decided to leave that life behind and moved to the islands of the Paraná Delta. He collects wood from fallen trees, turning them into beautiful decorative pieces. Everyone knows him as "El Flaco."





Mother and daughter Patricia Godoy (86) and Tiana Gómez (46) were both born in the islands of the Paraná Delta and are some of the few women in the area who tend livestock. They raise and tame wild horses, keeping this tradition and knowledge alive.





"We flew by helicopter across the approximately 7,300-square-mile Paraná Delta, attending to people who never received health care before, and in some cases hadn't even seen other people in a long time."

-DR. REMILLY MOLINI

Remilly Molini (63) has been living and working as a doctor on the islands of the Paraná Delta for more than 30 years. He makes regular trips to Rosario, where he is head of the local emergency medical service. Since the pandemic hit, he decided to work full-time on the islands. In March, he carried out a health care campaign across the Paraná Delta, providing medical care to local families.



Fires have destroyed much of the Boca de la Milonga area in the Paraná Delta. TABARÉ VÁZQUEZ 1940–2020

# FAREWELL TO AN UNASSUMING STAR OF LATIN AMERICA'S LEFT

# The least flashy leader of the 2000s Pink Tide was one of its most effective.

by Nicolás Saldías

TABARÉ VÁZQUEZ, the two-time president of Uruguay (2005–2010 and 2015–2020), died December 6, 2020, of the disease he fought against his whole life: cancer. An oncologist who continued to see patients even while he governed, Vázquez was not the most charismatic leftist leader of his era in Latin America, which included figures such as Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and the famously austere, Volkswagen Beetle-driving fellow leftist whose presidency bridged Vázquez's two terms, José Mujica.

Yet Uruguay quietly, perhaps unglamorously, became Latin America's model of social inclusion over the past 15 years. Poverty fell from 26% to 9%; extreme poverty was all but eradicated; inequality became the lowest in the region; and the minimum wage tripled. Some of this progress was due to the commodities boom of the 2000s, but Uruguay avoided the worst effects of the ensuing bust in





Vázquez at the swearing-in ceremony for his successor, Luis Lacalle Pou, in March 2020.



Vázquez (second from left) joined by former presidents Nicanor Duarte of Paraguay (far left), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil at a Mercosur summit in 2007.

the 2010s that brought down his higher-profile rivals.

However, Vázquez's most underappreciated accomplishment—and one that carries lessons for the rest of Latin America even today—was his key role in the transformation of Uruguay's left from radical to pragmatic.

As recently as the late 1980s, the Uruguayan left continued to promote an economic program formulated in the mid-1960s that favored the nationalization of vast portions of the economy, radical land reform and a hostile attitude toward foreign investment. Several of its leaders, including Mujica, had taken up arms during the 1973–1985 dictatorship. After the fall of the Eastern bloc in 1989, Uruguay's Frente Amplio (FA)—a coalition of leftist parties that included Communists—fell deeper into ideological squabbles. The FA seemed perpetually distant from power, with stagnant vote totals in consecutive elections.

Enter Vázquez, who in 1989 ran for mayor of Montevideo. He was seen as a political novice and few expected him to win, but his moderate and pragmatic profile, as well as being a prominent doctor, assuaged the electorate. His pragmatism and unassuming personality were a result of his working-class background.

Born in 1940, he grew up in the working-class neighborhood of La Teja. His family lived in precarious housing and he worked multiple jobs to help keep the family financially afloat. During the 1960s, he lost his father, mother and sister to cancer and he would dedicate his life to battling the disease. He became a doctor in 1969 and became one of Uruguay's most respected oncologists. He also had real-world experience managing an organization, as he was president of a local soccer club that went from relative obscurity to winning the country's first division championship. This fame helped him become the mayor of the capital city, Montevideo, in 1989. Vázquez exceeded expectations by using his experience in administration and governing the capital city in an efficient manner. He proved that to win, the FA needed to abandon radical politics and demonstrate governability, and so began the long road toward ideological moderation.

The 1990s saw Vázquez and the FA fall short in elections, in part because of a 1996 constitutional reform

that changed the electoral rules. But after the crisis of 2002, when Uruguay was thrown into the worst economic and social turmoil of its modern era as it suffered from Argentina's collapse next door, the appetite for change was finally large enough. Although radical elements on the left wanted a default on the debt and others wanted to oust the president, Vázquez remained committed to supporting the integrity of the country's in-

VÁZQUEZ'S FIRST TERM IN OFFICE WAS AMONG THE MOST TRANSFORMATIVE IN URUGUAY'S HISTORY.

stitutions. Vázquez was the ideal candidate to convince the population that the FA had a moderate and pragmatic agenda. He won the 2004 election with an outright majority of the vote, becoming the first president to gain power who did not originate from Uruguay's traditional parties, the Partido Nacional and the Partido Colorado.

Vázquez's first term in office was among the most transformative in Uruguay's history. It initiated the latest wave of inclusive social legislation, and also strengthened labor laws to empower the country's unions and collective bargaining institutions, making the union movement the strongest (measured as a share of workers who are members of a union) in Latin America. He greatly expanded access to the pension and health care system. His government oversaw the implementation of Plan Ceibal to give all students in the country access to a computer. He passed tax reform that made the tax system more progressive. As an oncologist, he also took on Big Tobacco by implementing some of the most restrictive anti-smoking laws in the world.

There were setbacks, one of them being his inability to sign a free trade deal with the United States. He frustrated his base and resigned from the Socialist Party when he decided to veto a law legalizing abortion in 2008 on personal grounds. Vázquez finished his first term in office with a 61% approval rating. His second term, following an economic slowdown and

> Mujica's poor management of government finances, was not as positive. Unemployment grew from 7.5% in 2015 to 8.9% in 2019, his vice president resigned due to a corruption scandal, and the country experienced a disturbing wave of crime that the government proved unable to convincingly tackle. After 15 years in power, the FA lost the 2019 general election to Luis Lacalle Pou and his center-right coalition.

I was present at the public ceremony in March 2020 when Vázquez gave the presidential sash to Lacalle Pou. An indelible image is the sincerely felt emotion on Vázquez's face of transferring power to a new generation of leaders. In many ways, Vázquez represented the pragmatism at the heart of Uruguay's political culture. He transformed the country without falling into the populist trap: rapid and flashy policy changes that are unsustainable over time. He showed that transformative politics can happen in Latin America without leaving a legacy of debt, inflation or worse. That's an example that will, hopefully, outlive him in Uruguay and beyond.

**Saldías** is a Latin America and Caribbean analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit and a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Toronto A Brazilian student does homework using a textbook personally delivered by her teacher amid the pandemic.

# BACK TO THE 1960S? Education May Be Latin America's Most Lasting Scar From COVID-19

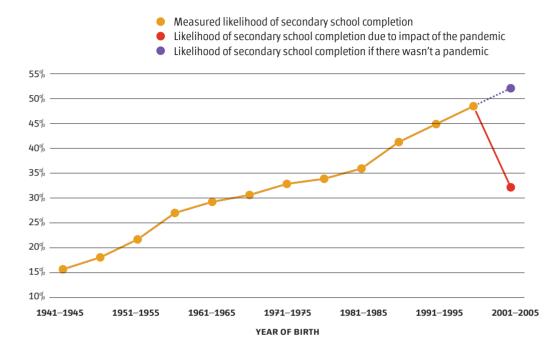
By Nora Lustig, Guido Neidhöfer and Mariano Tommasi

HE COVID-19 PANDEMIC is placing Latin America at serious risk of unraveling the progress the region has made in the last decades when it comes to education. According to UNICEF, 97% of children are out of classrooms in a region where social mobility stemming from education is already low, and where equality of opportunity is rare. But the current generation of school children may—especially in low income, less educated households—be facing a future with the meager levels of education is not just bad for the children directly affected. In the future, Latin America could see losses in economic growth and increased political polarization as a result.

While schools shut their doors for children of all socioeconomic backgrounds, students' ability to continue learning depends on their parents' income and educational level. As in other regions of the world, high-educated parents have better access to Internet and laptops, tablets, and so on, as well as the knowledge and non-cognitive skills to support their children's home schooling.

#### BACK TO THE 1960S?





NOTE: The figure shows the likelihood of disadvantaged children (individuals whose parents have not completed secondary schooling) to complete high school for each year of birth interval. The estimates for 1996– 2000 and 2001–2005 are linear projections. 2001–2005 is the cohort closest to high school completion in 2020 (15 to 19 years old). Red dot shows the estimated likelihood of high school completion due to COVID-19. **SOURCE:** Guido Neidhôfer, Nora Lustig and Mariano Tommasi. 'Intergenerational transmission of lockdown consequences: Prognosis of the longer-run persistence of COVID-19 in Latin America.' CEQ Working Paper 99, Commitment to Equity Institute, Tulane University.

They also have the economic resources to hire tutors and purchase the best online options for course materials. Children in households with lower levels of parental education, in contrast, may find it difficult if not impossible to continue their education at home due to lack of adequate equipment, connectivity and—above all—one-on-one coaching. Just as an example of such inequalities, the Internet coverage for households whose head has less than secondary school in Bolivia, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua is around 30%, while it is above 90% in families within the same country headed by adults with better than secondary education.

Children in disadvantaged households will end up with lower levels of learning and many might drop out of school altogether. This will result in lower social mobility and more inequality of opportunity in the future. Governments across the region have implemented a series of measures—whose scale varies significantly across countries—such as TV, radio, printouts and online learning schemes, as well as income support programs.

But these mitigation policies simply aren't enough. Our projections, which are based on simulation exercises we explain in our paper on the intergenerational effects of COVID-19 in Latin America, estimate that the likelihood of today's students to complete secondary education in Latin America may soon drop from a regional average of 61% to 46%. (The working paper was published by the Commitment to Equity Institute.)

## Children in disadvantaged households will end up with lower levels of learning and many might drop out of school altogether.

This average, however, hides striking differences across countries and socioeconomic groups. While individuals from highly educated families are hardly affected, the probability of completing secondary school for individuals with low-educated parents is considerably lower post-pandemic, declining by almost 20 percentage points, from 52% to 32%. A level of educational attainment this low for children of low-educated families was last reported in Latin America for cohorts born in the 1960s. The sharpest decline is estimated for Brazil: 32 percentage points; the least dramatic, for Uruguay: 9 percentage points. In Guatemala and Honduras, the probability of completing secondary school for individuals from lower-educated families might even fall below 10%. The gap in the likelihood of completing high school between children of low-educated families and children of high-educated families-already high before the pandemic-could rise significantly.

Can something be done to prevent this unequalizing result from happening? To soften the negative impact of school closures on children, governments are experimenting with ways of reopening them that are prudent from an epidemiological point of view. Reopening schools, however, is not enough now and it will not be enough in the post-pandemic period either. There will be a need to make up for the losses by increasing both the amount and quality of learning time once the pandemic is tamed. School systems will need to contemplate extended schedules, summer and afterschool programs, and more personalized instruction. Efforts should also be geared to developing online and offline resources available for free and expanding connectivity to schools and other places so the resources can be downloaded at no cost. The focus should be on the most vulnerable children—that is, children in low-educated households, as they are the ones who are likely to have lost more instructional time.

The remedial actions and rescue operations will require resources, especially financial resources. One key recommendation is for governments not to cut education spending when they face the inevitable need to reign in fiscal deficits (deficits that were not only acceptable but encouraged during the pandemic). In fact, if anything, fiscal resources devoted to education may need to rise. The challenge is so daunting that help will be needed from nonstate actors as well. Private philanthropy, the for-profit sector, and community-based organizations, together with governments, should launch a crusade to save the next generation of vulnerable children from falling behind.

**Lustig** is founding director of the Commitment to Equity Institute at Tulane University and founding member and president emerita of the Latin American and Caribbean Economic Association (LACEA)

**Neidhöfer** is advanced researcher at ZEW—Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research in Mannheim, Germany

**Tommasi** is director of the Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Humano at Universidad de San Andrés in Argentina

# Cultura

### MUSIC

HY MAKE AN ALBUM?" is a question that countless musicians face, especially at a time when the trend is to drop singles from time to time and avoid the investment of creating a larger product. This Sisyphean task of producing an album can feel like throwing time, money and talent into the wind, given the long odds of recovering anything. That is exactly why Ecuadorian singer Mariela Condo called her latest release *Al viento, vol. 1 (Into the Wind)*, her first album in five years and the first in collaboration with guitarist and arranger Willan Farinango.

**AQ's** Winter

by Sebastián Zubieta

As she put it in a recent interview for the radio station Ecuasónika, "You keep doing things, and they end up being carried away by the wind, but you still need to do them, like plowing the ocean because, as useless as they are in material terms, they pay off spiritually, something that sometimes you realize later." With Farinango, Rodrigo Becerra on bass, and Antonio Cilio on percussion in one track, *Al viento* starts with a pair of similarly mysterious wordless pieces, one traditional from the Esmeralda region, and one original composition by Farinango. This juxtaposition highlights the constant dialogue between tradition and personal expression that weaves throughout the album. Farinango explains that they are both indigenous people living within Western civilization (Farinango is from Imbabura in the north, Condo hails from the central Chimborazo province), and navigate the ever-shifting, in-between life that is a hallmark of Latin American art.

The repertoire selection for *Al viento* includes songs in Kichwa and Spanish, some traditional and some by illustrious 20th century composers, alongside newer compositions. Condo didn't intend to record traditional criollo hits such as Rubén Uquilla's "Bonita

#### Cultura: Music



guambrita" (Beautiful Girl) or the equally famous yaravi "Nunca me olvido" (I Never Forget) by Ulpiano Benítez. Rather, she told AQ that the songs found her as she relearned to listen to the music of her country during a nearly two-year international tour.

Farinango's arrangements are always subtle and rely on his creative guitar playing and on a self-possessed but unorthodox harmonic approach. The use of the bow throughout the album, as in the beautiful duets with the voice in Farinango's "Quiquimba" and in "Bonita guambrita," or in the fast "Coplas al carnaval de Licto" (Verses for the Carnival in Licto), which closes the album, show a creative exploration of the melodic capabilities of Becerra's bass. Cilio contributes a delicate shaker and a bombo in "Curiquinki," adding an understated touch to a palette that is remarkably colorful with very few elements. Soaring over this fine instrumental tapestry, Condo's voice travels through a variety of characters, from the hymn-like serenity of the opening tracks to the traditionally romantic delivery on the melancholy "Solo" (Alone) and "Nunca me olvido," to the rhythmic "Beta Huagra" or the vertiginous flexibility of "Bonita guambrita." Her voice occupies the center without overpowering the precise balance of the ensemble, creating a work that any wind would be lucky to carry away.

Several of Condo's productions can be enjoyed online: *Al viento* is on Spotify and other streaming platforms (you can even buy a vinyl!), along with her previous releases. Also, a five-song concert they recorded for Americas Society in Quito with Cilio and bassist Matías Alvear is available on our website, at as-coa.org.

**Zubieta** is director of the music program at Americas Society

# Film



#### Eduardo & Mônica

DIRECTED BY **René Sampaio** 

SCREENPLAY BY Gabriel Bortolini, Jessica Candal, Michele Frantz, Claudia Souto and Matheus Souza

starring Alice Braga, Gabriel Leone, Otávio Augusto

COUNTRY **Brazil** 

#### AQ'S RATING: 9

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FILM Fduardo &

## Eduardo & Mônica

by Cecilia Tornaghi

NE OF THE most incisive voices of the openly political rock 'n' roll movement that took Brazil by storm in the 1980s was a gifted poet named Renato Russo. The late lead vocalist for the band Legião Urbana penned songs that told the story of a generation—of young people coming of age and finding love amid the turbulence of economic recession and a slow transition away from military rule.

The ballad "Eduardo e Mônica" was one of Russo's most wellknown and beloved songs. As with much of his music, the lyrics are so visually intense that they are almost a movie script unto themselves. In his latest film, Brazilian director René Sampaio stayed true to the song's charming against-the-odds love story while turning it into a silver screen delight of its own.

Cultura: Film



Alice Braga and Gabriel Leone bring to life an unlikely love story inspired by the lyrics of late composer Renato Russo.

Brasília's famed architecture plays a major part in the film (below).



A tale of bridging differences, the reality of Brazilian life in the 1980s is background noise to *Eduardo & Mônica*'s focus on the two diametrically different lives of the film's title characters. The funny and heartwarming pair, played by Alice Braga and Gabriel Leone, win the audience right from the opening scenes with charm and understated wit. The film begins with Eduardo waking up for school and wishing good morning to his favorite soap opera star on a poster next to his bed. On a split screen we see Mônica across town, holding a motorcycle helmet and having a shot of cognac after a night of art performances in a club. We know they will meet—but how?

This whimsical and earnest love story is also an ode to the country's capital, Brasília, another constant theme of Russo's lyrics. *Eduardo & Mônica* embraces the city's stark and futuristic architecture and turns its sharp edges and round monuments into a playground, the concrete landscape playing the role of Cupid.

The film marks producer Bianca de Felippes and director René Sampaio's second posthumous collaboration with Russo. In 2013's *Brazilian Western*, Sampaio brought to the screen Russo's "Faroeste Caboclo," a tragic love story between a privileged white girl and a black, self-made drug dealer. But where *Brazilian Western* sings the wounds of Brasília through a toxic combination of drugs, inequality and repressed youth, in *Eduardo & Mônica* all we see is love—family, friendship and falling for each other. These are welcome and much needed themes after a long and at times dispiriting year.

Tornaghi is managing editor at AQ

# Books

### *Conquistadores: A New History*

Fernando Cervantes frames the story of the conquest within the context of Columbus' America.

#### by Andrew Downie

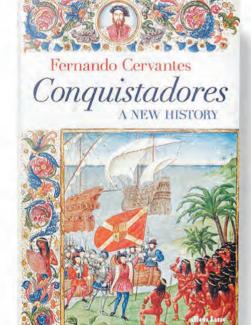
LONG TIME HAS PASSED since Christopher Columbus, Hernan Cortés and Francisco Pizarro arrived in the New World, and it seems like there is little that we don't know about their historic voyages from Spain. They came, they saw, they conquered, killing hundreds of thousands of locals, plundering unimaginable amounts of gold, silver and jewels, and transforming the region in almost every possible way.

*Conquistadores: A New History* by Fernando Cervantes is billed as a "reframing" of the conquests and comes as the world vociferously reviews all kinds of long-standing narratives that were penned by the victors.

But this book by one of the world's leading authorities on the intellectual and religious history of early modern Spain and Spanish America is not a revisionist history.

Cervantes has written about the atrocities meted out by the conquistadors for decades and his key argument here is that any discussion of the conquistadors' actions must be set in the context of their own time, not in ours. The conquistadors were products of their environment, where great glory and riches came to those daring enough to hit the high seas and discover new worlds.

The Mexican historian explains the background to those voyages and his total command of the details is the



**by Fernando Cervantes** Penguin Books Hardcover, 512 pages The settle stuff time, sprea build seen crue the a Inca purs In Co Cerv fictio the la unfa the N them prim chrot the s Worl lands At th whos defin Fron the e in th acco cours



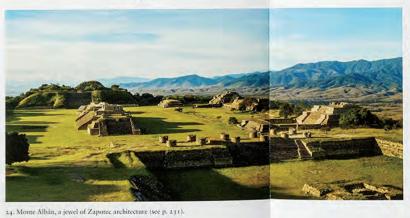


22. Sketch of Hernán Cortés by Christoph Weiditz (see p. 240).

23. Portrait of the indefatigable 'Defender of the Indians', Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas.



25. Lienzo de Quauhqueebollan showing the advance of Spaniards and Nahuas as equal partners in the conquest of Guatemala (see pp. 234–5).





26. Mixtec turquoise mosaic mask (see p. 232).

key to the book's success. The basics are well known: Columbus touching land in the Caribbean while searching for a westward route to Asia; Cortés striking out unauthorized for Mexico and seizing Tenochtitlán, then one of the biggest cities in the world; and Pizarro's brutal domination of the Incas and the sacking of Peru.

Most of what we know about these conquests comes from the Spaniards' own telling: Some of the details were written down after the fact and much else came in self-serving missives to the Spanish crown designed to impress the court and inflate the deeds and the loy-

Cervantes examines the complex worlds the Spaniards encountered in the Americas.

alty of those reporting them. There is no comparable version of events from the side of the Mexica or Incas.

Cervantes judiciously lays out the narratives we do have and helps steer the reader toward the most likely version of events. He frequently questions the official versions and paints rounded pictures of the conquerors, the vanquished indigenous leaders, and the worlds they inhabited in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

The book is excellent in describing the rich and sophisticated worlds they encountered. Cervantes' description of Tenochtitlán and the battles to control it are vivid, and the portraits of Moctezuma, Atawallpa, and the power struggles that proceeded the fall of the Inca empire are equally fantastic.

Cusco, for example, was described to Spanish king Charles V as "the greatest and most splendid of all the cities ever seen in the Indies. ... [S]o beautiful and graced with so many fine buildings that even in Spain it would certainly stand out."

The booty taken from Peru was phenomenal: 26,000 pounds of silver and more than 13,000 pounds of 22.5 carat gold in the first four months alone.

"Exploring for its own sake was all very well, but what the monarchs really needed was cash," Cervantes writes as he balances out the conquests' religious, commercial and imperial motives.

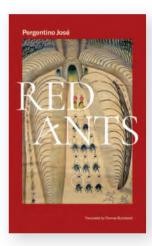
The book is weighty—there are detailed descriptions of the Taíno people's creation myths, the origins of the Spanish inquisition, and Bartolomé de las Casas' powerful moral opposition to the conquests—but it is rarely slow or dull.

In fact, it reads like both an adventure story and a travelogue, with Cervantes an enthralling guide.

If there are quibbles, they are over the slightly uneven pace. There is a heavy accent on the early expeditions in the Caribbean and Mexico. Pizarro's conquest of Peru is given less space and the pages devoted to Hernando de Soto's fruitless traipse around the southern U.S. in search of gold are uneventful in comparison. There is little mention of the conquests of Colombia, Chile, Bolivia or Paraguay and nothing about the Portuguese conquest of Brazil, which is a shame, as a comparison would have made for interesting reading.

But those are minor grumbles. *Conquistadores* is a tour de force and should be welcomed by anyone interested in Latin American history.

**Downie** has lived and worked in Latin America for almost 30 years, reporting from more than a dozen countries. He is the author of Doctor Sócrates: Footballer, Philosopher, Legend, a biography of the Brazilian footballer and political activist. He currently divides his time between the U.K. and Brazil.



**by Pergentino José** Translated by Thomas Bunstead Deep Vellum Publishing Hardcover, 152 pages

## Red Ants

#### **Reviewed by Mariana Reina**

N HIS FIRST SHORT story collection, *Red Ants*, Zapotec writer Pergentino José blends magical realism with the mythology of his upbringing to shine a light on the historical struggles of Mexico's indigenous communities—and to make clear that the threats they face have not gone away.

The title of the collection is a nod to the primary theme of José's stories: In Zapotec culture yellow ants represent happiness and good fortune while red ants represent adversity. José's tales are thus full of everyday violence and hardship that stem from a community being forced to assimilate and leave behind its way of life.

In "Room of Worms," José's narrator sees a forest torn down by his own community to help an absentee landlord establish a coffee plantation, all while birds noisily escape the area. In Zapotec tradition, the forest is where many spiritual rituals take place, and birds represent the divine. Here is José's lament for the loss of tradition and a fractured spiritual life, as Zapotec communities are forced to abandon their customs. In the narrator's inhospitable shelter full of worms and roaches falling from the roof, a friend ominously tells him, "Nza nja mend tub do nit to? Can you hold back the sea? The bridge of dreams broke, but this world does not belong to you."

Other of José's stories allude to the role of the Catholic Church in indigenous life. Beyond introducing a foreign belief system that was adopted by many Zapotecs after the conquest, in José's telling the Church has continued as a form of institutional control over communities like his. In "Prayers," a man walks through a dystopian town that is ruled by the dictatorial Padre Edgardo, a priest who uses physical violence and guards to control the townspeople and impose his own zealous religiosity.

"Voice of the Firefly" tells of suffering with the introduction of foreign diseases. The narrator loses his wife to smallpox because the town's nearest doctor neglected to quickly offer help. The doctor's cruel demeanor maddens him and leads the narrator to kill the doctor in broad daylight, only to be tormented by his actions. José's surreal imagery comes to life in the narrator's fears of turning into a firefly, destined to die if he leaves his house.

The common thread across the book's 17 stories is the metaphorical presence of red ants, tied to each narrator's distress and, in some cases, the fruitless search for a return to the way things were. Along the way, José paints a picture of the richness of Zapotec culture. His dreamlike settings and open-ended writing leave ample room for interpretation. But it becomes clear his are traditions in need of protecting.

José has said that the main goal of his writing is to "rescue the collective memory" of his community, the proud "people of the clouds," as Zapotecs refer to themselves. In *Red Ants* he succeeds in taking readers to a different world, one that they did not expect but will be unlikely to forget.

Reina is production editor at AQ

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The Surrendered: Reflections by a Son of the Shining Path ByJosé Carlos Agůero March 2021 Duke University Press Hardcover, 152 pages

# LATIN AMERICA AT A GLANCE

As policymakers debate vaccine distribution, Latin America is struggling to contain the coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout. Citizens are frustrated with their political leaders, reflected in falling approval ratings for almost all of the region's presidents.

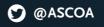
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<b>1</b> (projected)	4.3%	3.5%	<b>4.9</b> %	<b>4.6</b> %	<b>4.9</b> %	<b>3.2</b> %	<b>3.9</b> %	3.5%	<b>8.7</b> %	- <b>3.8</b> %
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**SOURCES:** GDP growth forecasts; Inflation rate; Unemployment rate; Government deficit: Bloomberg (December 2020); Fiscal response as % GDP: International Monetary Fund (September 2020); COVID-19 confirmed cases and deaths: Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (January 2021). **NOTE:** Figures rounded to one decimal place. PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL: Argentina, Management & Fit (December); Brazil, PoderData (December); Chile, Plaza Pública Cadem (December); Colombia, Invamer (November); Ecuador, Cedatos (November); Dominican Republic and Guatemala, Directorio Legislativo (October); Mexico, El Financiero (December); Peru, Ipsos (December). NOTE: Figures rounded to nearest percentage.

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