
Ecuador: a country 'contaminated' by drug trafficking, caught up in a network of illicit trade, money laundering, prison control and political constraints

Why Ecuador? Why is it that one of the smallest and once relatively peaceful countries in Latin America is now comparable to Mexico or Colombia in terms of the overwhelming fear imposed by the drug trafficking cartels? The question remains unanswered. The crisis of recent days, marked by a wave of violence unleashed by criminal gangs both in prisons and on the streets of some cities, has subsided, only to be replaced by fear and anxiety over “the next attack.” No one is suggesting that the gradual release of the prison guards and the relative stability that has returned to the country means that the worst is over, although there has been a strong reaction from the government of recently elected President Daniel Noboa. In particular, this does not seem to be the opinion of experts contacted by SIR in order to gain a broader understanding of the current situation in the country - which, among other things, is linked to the European and especially the Italian Mafia in a continuous basis - and of the immediate prospects, which are likely to be marked by further violence and terror. “There is one alarming figure”, points out **Francisco Carrión Mena**, Professor Emeritus at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) in Quito. “In 2014 the country registered a homicide rate of 5 per 100,000 inhabitants, now it stands at 46, which is nine times higher. However, this sudden development has very specific, long-standing causes”, he said. According to investigative journalist **Juan Carlos Calderón**, director of the newspaper Plan V, this “would not have happened without the collusion of politicians and public institutions at different levels.” **The reasons for the escalation.** Why is Ecuador becoming a hotbed of drug trafficking? For purely geographical reasons: there are no major coca crops in the country, and it is nestled between two of the largest coca-producing countries in the world: Colombia to the north and Peru to the south. The many port cities on the Pacific coast, especially Guayaquil, provide an ideal link to Central America and Mexico. There are also some very specific factors. “At the turn of the millennium,” says Professor Carrión, “the United States launched its famous Plan Colombia, declaring war on its neighbour's coca producers. As a result, drug-trafficking operations were 'relocated' to neighbouring countries, Ecuador and Venezuela, where it was possible to carry out illegal activities without much interference. The direct route from Colombia to the United States had become less important a few years earlier, to the benefit of the Mexican cartels, which have become the most dominant drug traffickers over the years. In recent years, these cartels have found a favourable environment in Ecuador, thanks to its unique geographical location and the policies adopted by the government, starting in 2017 under the presidency of Lenín Moreno and continuing with Guillermo Lasso, the president who resigned a few months ago. These policies can be summed up in the term 'minimal state', which corresponds to the absence of the political realm from social processes and presence on the ground, with only one type of response, which has also emerged in recent days, of a military nature.” The response has been weak and inconsistent, says Calderón, who is convinced that the causes of the recent incidents are deep-rooted: “2018 was a key year, coinciding with a series of attacks on journalists and police officers in San Lorenzo, on the border with Colombia, attributed to dissidents of the former Colombian guerrilla FARC. Since then, the illicit activities of the Colombians have become intertwined with those of the Mexican cartels, particularly the Sinaloa cartel, with local support from the Los Choneros crime syndicate, and the Jalisco Nueva Generación. The cartels' disputes have spread to Ecuador, where the government's decree declaring a state of internal strife names 22 criminal groups, “although there are four or five major ones.” Ecuador has thus become a key gateway to Mexico and the United States as well as Europe - notably through the ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp, or through Spain, in particular the port of Algeciras. In recent months, several seizures of 8-9 tonnes of coca have been carried out in this Latin American country; “at least 50 tonnes of coca pass through Rotterdam every year.” The role of Mafia syndicates, such as the Italian 'Ndrangheta and Albanian gangs, plays a

central role. The journalist explains: "Some Albanian mafia bosses ran the drug trade with Europe from the Latacunga prison, here in Ecuador." **Illegal trade and prisons: the 'levers' of the cartels.** Drug trafficking has in fact "contaminated" and corrupted the entire country, which has become entangled in a web of illicit trafficking, money laundering, prison control and political constraints. The expert points out that "drug traffickers began to pay for coca not in dollars but in cocaine. Hence the overproduction, which also caused the price to fall by around two-thirds, the need to increase domestic consumption, the search for new markets - from Brazil, with its powerful cartels, to Europe - and money laundering." Calderón confirms: "There are very strong ties between cocaine and illegal gold mining, which is now a way of laundering money. The gold routes are less easy to follow. But there are also other illicit trades linked to drug trafficking, such as arms - the possession of which is fundamental for the drug cartels, which have a force of 40-50,000 armed men. This is a veritable army, with more members than the 'regular' army, which numbers 38,000, while there are 52,000 police officers throughout the country." The prisons represent yet another strategic front. The drug cartels control them completely. According to the journalist, "since 2013, when President Rafael Correa was in office, the *Choneros* took control of some institutions in exchange for pacification. The State has let them take control of the prisons. Now everything is in the hands of criminal groups, from the mattresses to the meals. A prisoner has to pay protection money in order to sleep or make phone calls. In this way, the prisons have become a vehicle for further financial exploitation." The expert explains: "It should be noted that the Criminal Code of 2014 made crime control more stringent, the prison population increased from 14,000 to 42,000 in eight years. After that, the institutions made a deal: the inmates were distributed among the prisons according to their 'affinities'. In this way, each prison ward is controlled by a crime syndicate." **Political collusion.** The problem of political collusion, and it will remain a key issue moving forward. Calderón is convinced: "Today, the narcos finance political campaigns, and at least 40 municipalities are under the control of narco-politics. We have reached this point because of the collusion between political parties and civil servants. Carrión sees a greater danger: "Politics is no longer relevant, it is conspicuously absent. The state is only present through the army and the police, and only to maintain public order. People are increasingly afraid. They don't go out of their homes. Criminal groups have disrupted the honeymoon period of the new president, Noboa. His response has increased his consensus, but it still remains within the framework of military force. Personally, I think the state's response has demoted the criminal gangs for the time being. But it's just a matter of time. They will make a comeback soon, it's a cyclical process." *journalist at "La vita del popolo"

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