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Crime, violence, and the reshaping of politics in the Americas

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Abstract

Latin America is undergoing a political transformation driven as much by the perception of insecurity as by its reality. Organised crime is no longer only a public security problem. It has become an electoral variable shaping who runs, how campaigns are fought, and what voters are willing to trade for law and order. Homicide trends have diverged sharply across the region, yet insecurity remains politically salient — driven by fear, distrust, and perceived state incapacity as much as by victimisation. Criminal organisations have increasingly pursued subnational capture, using intimidation and rent extraction to shape municipal contracting, policing appointments, and territorial governance. Many politicians respond with a simple offer: expanded coercive authority in exchange for the promise of control, rather than the slower work of institutional reform. El Salvador's state of exception has become a regional template, with variants now visible in Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and beyond. US security framing that fuses migration, drugs, and transnational crime into a single strategic threat has increased the domestic payoff of emergency postures while narrowing the perceived feasibility of rights-anchored approaches. The cumulative effect normalises punitive spectacle and compresses democratic choice even where elections remain formally competitive. Reversing that trajectory requires protecting local democratic actors, rebuilding justice and security institutions in the nodes where criminal profits concentrate, and disrupting the illicit markets that finance political capture. It also requires a security program that is operationally credible, rights-respecting, and demonstrably accountable, one that treats legality and effectiveness as complements rather than rivals.

Introduction

Chile's presidential runoff ended on 14 December 2025 with José Antonio Kast, a hardline conservative, winning after a campaign dominated by crime, migration, and a widening perception that the state was losing control (Wells 2025). The significance of the result lies less in Chile's partisan cycle than in what it illustrates about the region. Across Latin America and the Caribbean, organised crime is no longer simply a public security challenge. It is increasingly influencing elections and democracy more generally, determining who competes, how campaigns are fought, and what voters are willing to trade for law and order.

This article advances three basic arguments. First, organised crime has become a political variable shaping electoral competition. Second, its influence operates through subnational capture and the substitution of punitive control for institutional reform. Third, the diffusion of exceptionalist templates, exemplified by the Bukele model, narrows democratic choice and weakens accountability, even when transplanted across heterogeneous settings. This article documents the gap between homicide trends and subjective insecurity, examining coercion, suppression, and capture as pathways of influence. It then reviews the regional spread of mano dura governance and the impact of US security framing. It concludes with recommendations focused on strengthening protection, building capacity, and disrupting criminal markets.

Latin America's differentiated crime wave

Over the past decade, patterns of lethal violence across Latin America and the Caribbean have diverged sharply by subregion. Central America experienced the steepest homicide rate decline, driven in large part by El Salvador's extraordinary fall in killings.[1] South America's average homicide rate has also trended downward over the decade, albeit less dramatically, with major national outliers, and periodic spikes (Muggah & Aguirre 2024; UNODC 2025). The Caribbean has moved in the opposite direction. It has registered an increase in average homicide rates over the last ten years and remains the most volatile subregion, where relatively small absolute changes can produce dramatic national swings (Muggah 2024c; UNODC 2025).

This regional divergence in homicide trends has not necessarily produced a commensurate decline in insecurity as a political mood. In much of Latin America, killings have stabilised or fallen, yet public concern about crime remains persistently high and, in some contexts, has intensified (Bisca et al. 2024; Maloney et al. 2025). Regional polling consistently registers public security as a leading concern, including in countries with comparatively lower homicide rates, demonstrating the gap between objective violence indicators and subjective insecurity (Latinbarómetro, 2024).

That disjuncture between real and perceived violent crime is most evident in places once seen as comparatively safe but where organised crime and everyday violence have become more visible (Winter 2023). Recent polling in Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay consistently ranks crime, delinquency, and insecurity as top public concerns, often ahead of economic issues, reflecting rising fear in daily life and declining confidence that institutions can protect citizens (CEP 2024; La Hora 2025; Subrayado 2025; Ulloa 2025).

The share of respondents naming delinquency as a principal national problem is 'more an indicator of fear' than a direct proxy for victimisation, and its relationship with reported victimisation can be weak (Latinbarómetro 2024). That paradox is politically fertile. Criminal groups exploit it through intimidation and governance by threat. Politicians exploit it by converting diffuse anxiety into a straightforward electoral exchange that consists of expanded coercive power in return for the often false promise of control.

The new politics of control

The most consequential criminal pressure is often subnational. Criminal networks increasingly prioritise the structural 'scaffolding' of the state over the presidency. Illicit rents flow from municipal contracts, port access, zoning decisions, transport unions, procurement, and local policing appointments. This reflects the economics of capture: local power is cheaper to influence, oversight is often weaker, and returns are immediate. It also fits the evolution of criminal portfolios. Across the region, groups have diversified beyond drug trafficking into extortion, illegal mining, migrant smuggling, fuel smuggling, cybercrime, and other revenue streams that depend on controlling local economies and local authorities (Muggah & Glenny 2025).

1 As tracked by Homicide Monitor, https://homicide.igarape.org.br/, accessed 3 March 2026.

Such criminal pressure typically manifests through three mechanisms that together constitute a kind of 'criminal governance'. First is coercion, including selective killings, threats, and intimidation, which narrows who is willing to run, who can campaign, and what alliances are feasible. Second is suppression, whereby violence raises the costs of participation and can reduce civic engagement, candidate supply, and turnout, sometimes across multiple election cycles. Third is substitution, in which security becomes the master question on the ballot when citizens feel abandoned; repression is then marketed as a substitute for the slow work of reforming police, courts, prisons, and anti-corruption systems.

The perceptual shift is as consequential as the physical one. Fear does not need to track victimisation closely to influence vote choice. Public concern can be driven by anxiety, salience, and narrative amplification rather than direct experience of violence (Muggah 2024b). In practice, lived insecurity often manifests as extortion at shopfronts, robbery on commuting routes, spectacular high-visibility incidents, and a persistent suspicion that criminals exercise de facto authority in specific neighbourhoods (Lessing 2021). Those conditions reward candidates who can credibly perform control — advancing tough-on-crime platforms and compressing policy debate toward punitive options.

When the strongman becomes a template

The clearest contemporary emblem of substitution politics is El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele. Since March 2022, the government has operated under a rolling state of exception that expands police powers and limits due process protections, enabling mass arrests on an unprecedented scale (Rubio & Casique 2024). By 2025, reported detentions under the crackdown reached well into the tens of thousands. The policy architecture extends beyond policing to aggressive incarceration, legal hardening, and a governance narrative that treats detention as the central instrument of order (Escano et al. 2025).

Bukele's flagship symbol is the CECOT mega-prison, built to hold up to 40,000 inmates. It functions not only as a correctional facility but as political theatre, a demonstration that the state can identify an enemy, capture them, and warehouse dehumanized prisoners at industrial scale (Arcanjo 2026). The message travels easily even where the underlying conditions do not. Few governments can replicate El Salvador wholesale, but many are borrowing its political technologies, including emergency powers, militarised policing, tougher sentencing, and highly visible prison expansion (Freitas 2025).

Ecuador is the clearest case of emulating El Salvador under radically different structural conditions. In January 2024, President Daniel Noboa declared an 'internal armed conflict' and expanded the domestic role of the military (Muggah 2024c). Authorities designated multiple criminal groups as terrorist organisations, widening the government's legal and operational latitude. In 2025, Ecuador's legislature advanced reforms that further strengthened crime-fighting powers and penalties while expanding the state's ability to seize criminal assets, accompanied by warnings from rights advocates that this was normalizing an emergency posture (HRW 2025; Reuters 2025). By March 2026, US Special Forces deployed alongside Ecuadorian commandos in joint raids on drug trafficking facilities, the first acknowledged US-assisted land operations targeting cartel infrastructure on Ecuadorian soil (Martinez 2026).

Honduras has followed a similar path. The government has relied on extended emergency-oriented approaches and announced plans for a large mega-prison framed as a response to acute insecurity (AP 2024; DW 2024). The state of exception, first declared in December 2022 and since extended to cover more than 90 percent of municipalities, has resulted in over 5,000 gang-linked arrests while granting authorities broad powers of search and detention with limited judicial oversight (Breda 2025). The state of exception has been extended at least 17 times, often without explicit approval of Congress (Olson 2025). Proposals to designate drug traffickers as terrorists and enable collective trials are part of the same signalling strategy, emphasizing visible resolve, speed, and punishment, and illustrating how emergency governance can produce measurable gains in one indicator while displacing violence into less legible forms.

Costa Rica's shift is striking because of its historical self image as a comparatively safe outlier. In 2025, the government announced plans for a new high security facility modelled on El Salvador's template, designed for thousands of inmates and framed explicitly as deterrence and capacity expansion (Murillo 2025). The institutional response reflects a genuine rupture in the country's security trajectory. It also coincides with a documented rise in lethal violence over recent years and high public anxiety about insecurity (Thayer 2025). That combination of rising lethality and eroding institutional confidence has made the previously unthinkable — mass incarceration on the Salvadoran model — politically sellable.

Not every government has reached for emergency powers directly, but the regional pull toward coercive governance is visible even where the route has been more legalistic. Argentina has pursued anti-mafia tools aimed at strengthening investigative and prosecutorial capacity rather than declaring blanket emergency rule (EFE 2024). Chile has not adopted mass detention at the Salvadoran scale, but has steadily expanded the military's role in border governance — a quieter but telling indicator of how the fusion of migration and security is reshaping institutional mandates (AFP 2025).

Other cases sit closer to the exceptional end of the spectrum without fully crossing into it. Peru has relied on repeated states of emergency and military deployments in response to extortion-driven insecurity and public outrage, each extension normalizing the next (Bensekkaim 2025). Guatemala moved further and faster. Following escalating security shocks through 2025 that included coordinated prison riots and the retaliatory killing of eleven police officers, President Arévalo declared a thirty-day nationwide state of siege in January 2026 and expanded police and military powers of arrest and detention (AP 2025; Roht-Arriaza 2026). What links all of these cases is not the form of the response but its direction toward coercive authority, visible resolve, and the subordination of institutional reform to the politics of control.

The democracies beneath the headlines

Brazil illustrates how coercion and intimidation need not decide national elections to corrode democracy. The most direct impacts are local: candidate deterrence, shrinking civic participation, and a hardening of campaign incentives toward heavy-handed responses in areas where criminal governance is entrenched. Those dynamics become politically combustible when spectacular violence turns into a legitimacy test for the state.

That tension was stark in Rio de Janeiro in late October 2025. A large-scale operation targeting Comando Vermelho (CV), one of Brazil's largest criminal factions, became the deadliest police action of its kind in the state's history. At least 121 people were reported dead, including five police officers, amid citywide disruption and retaliatory dynamics (Muggah 2025a). The episode intensified debates about proportionality, accountability, and whether spectacular crackdowns are becoming the default currency of seriousness in security policy.

It has also emboldened right-wing governors in Brazil's Southeast and Center West, who announced a 'Peace Consortium' shortly after the operation to share intelligence and equipment and, pointedly, to coordinate a political agenda (Magalhaes et al 2025). Around the same period, Rio's state legislature approved a controversial bonus mechanism that financially rewards police for neutralizing criminals (Philipps 2025). At the federal level, the Bukele effect is reinforcing a market for exceptionalism. Right-wing advocates have called for loosening constraints on searches, arrests, and surveillance, explicitly citing El Salvador's state of exception as inspiration (Campiteli and Casanova 2025).

Mexico remains the region's most visible case of electoral violence as context, not merely campaign concern. At least 34 political candidates or aspirants were assassinated between September 2023 and May 2024, with experts warning that some municipalities were too dangerous to host voting booths (Diaz 2024). Such violence is typically instrumental, aimed at shaping municipal governance including control over policing, procurement, and territory. The consequence is democratic distortion well before election day, including candidate withdrawals, constrained campaigning, and zones of limited contestation.

Chile is analytically instructive precisely because it is comparatively safe. Homicide rates remain low by regional standards, yet public anxiety has surged as political discourse fused crime, organised networks, and Venezuelan migration into a single threat narrative. That fusion does not require a corresponding rise in violence — only a credible villain and an attentive media environment. The resulting gap between objective risk and subjective insecurity helps explain why security can become electorally decisive even where violence is modest (Rondon 2024).

Washington's hard line and Latin America's hardening politics

The regional convergence toward 'order first' politics is being reinforced by shifts in US posture. The Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy elevates the Western Hemisphere and explicitly links regional stability to curbing migration and combating cartels and transnational criminal organisations (US President 2025). Washington has also demonstrated a willingness to intervene directly. The January 2026 operation resulting in the detention of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro signaled that sovereignty and criminal enforcement can be treated as overlapping domains (AP 2026).

More consequential, however, is the US's indirect channel of influence. US signalling – such as redefining what counts as credible policy; privileging rapid disruption over institutional reform; and fusing drugs, migration, and insecurity into a single strategic frame – can reshape domestic incentives across the region. Such actions can raise the political returns to emergency measures, militarised enforcement, and punitive spectacle while narrowing the perceived feasibility of slower, rights-anchored approaches to policing, justice, and governance – what is often called citizen security (Muggah 2017).

Coercive and gunboat diplomacy have also become more visible. In January 2025, Colombia briefly refused to accept US military deportation flights. The dispute ended after Washington threatened tariffs and other measures, and Bogotá conceded (Buschschlüter & Aikman 2025). Beginning in September 2025, the US launched a sustained military campaign called 'Operation Southern Spear' striking vessels in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific suspected of narcotics trafficking. By early March 2026, at least 45 strikes on 46 vessels had killed at least 157 people. Such episodes translate international bargaining into domestic political vulnerability, rewarding leaders who can credibly manage Washington while validating security-first postures at home.

The 'terrorism' framing also reinforces emergency politics through a further mechanism. In 2025, US designations of major transnational gangs and cartels as foreign terrorist organisations expanded prosecutorial reach and set a rhetorical tone that raises the domestic payoff of counter-terror posturing across the region.[2] In March 2026, Trump convened the Shield of the Americas summit, gathering leaders from a dozen right-leaning governments to sign a proclamation committing member states to using lethal military force against cartel and narcoterrorist networks — a gesture directed as much at domestic audiences as at criminal organisations (Davis 2026). Even when these tools are aimed at transnational disruption, they tend to normalize exceptional language and reinforce the argument that due process is a luxury in the face of 'narco-terror' (Muggah 2025b, 2023).

Toward a credible democratic security agenda

The principal democratic risk of criminal governance is not stolen elections but hollowed ones — contests that remain formally competitive yet are substantively constrained by intimidation, fear, and a policy menu narrowed to punitive spectacle. The problem is therefore not simply criminal violence but the political economy of control: a structure that rewards visible coercion and short time horizons while discounting institution-building. Bending that trajectory requires changing what is politically rewarded and administratively feasible, especially at the subnational level where criminal capture tends to concentrate.

A credible alternative rests on five mutually reinforcing priorities.

First, protect democracy where it is most exposed. The highest risk actors are local candidates, journalists, election officials, prosecutors, and civic organisers. Protection cannot be episodic or reactive. It requires risk mapping, preventive security, rapid response protocols, and credible investigation of threats so that intimidation does not become a low-cost tactic. Mexico's pattern of candidate killings illustrates how violence can distort competition before election day through withdrawals, constrained campaigning, and zones of limited contestation. Where coercion is used strategically, deterrence depends less on rhetoric than on consistent investigative capacity and visible consequences for criminal organisers and financiers.

Second, rebuild state capacity in the nodes where criminal profits concentrate. Organised crime rarely requires full national capture to shape politics. Control over ports, borders, prisons, logistics corridors, procurement systems, and extractive zones can yield decisive profits and political leverage. This implies a need for targeted professionalisation

2 See US State Department, 'Foreign Terrorist Organizations', https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations (accessed 3 March 2026).

of policing and prosecutors, strengthened witness protection, and judicial independence, combined with operational reforms that reduce discretionary power in high rent environments. It also requires governing prisons as strategic infrastructure rather than a residual sector. The regional diffusion of prison-centred approaches and the role of carceral systems in gang organisation should be treated as a core risk to state authority, not simply a correctional management challenge.

Third, disrupt illicit markets and their enabling financial architecture. A sustainable strategy must raise the costs of criminality by constraining the revenue streams that finance it, including extortion, procurement corruption, and money laundering. This requires financial intelligence, beneficial ownership transparency, procurement integrity, and consistent asset seizure frameworks that are insulated from political cycles. It also demands greater attention to the microeconomics of local capture, including transport unions, municipal contracts, and land use decisions, since these often generate predictable financial returns and political influence.

Fourth, reduce the demand for exceptionalism by improving everyday security performance. The appeal of order first politics typically rests on the perception that institutions cannot deliver routine protection, particularly against extortion, robbery, and territorial intimidation. Where insecurity is driven as much by fear and distrust as by direct victimisation, legitimacy depends on making visible improvement in case clearance, response times, and procedural fairness, not only rising arrest counts. Repeated states of emergency and militarised deployments may produce short-term political gains yet weaken accountability and professional incentives over time. The objective should be speed with legality, operational effectiveness with oversight, and measurable performance rather than punitive spectacle.

Fifth, invest in political communication and civic trust as security infrastructure. Insecurity operates as a political mood as well as an empirical condition. Public concern can remain high even when lethal violence stabilises or falls, and perceptions can be amplified by salience and narrative dynamics rather than direct victimisation. Democracies therefore require communication strategies that are empirically grounded, transparent about trade-offs, and demonstrably linked to improvements in service delivery. This is especially important in countries previously seen as safe where organised crime has become more visible, heightening fear and eroding confidence in institutions.

These priorities also clarify the limits of the strongman template. El Salvador's state of exception has reshaped the regional marketplace for security policy by signalling speed, resolve, and punitive certainty. Yet its diffusion has encouraged emulation of emergency framing and expanded coercive authority in settings with very different criminal ecosystems and institutional constraints, as Ecuador illustrates. The result is a higher probability that exceptional measures will become normalised without delivering durable institutional capacity and that democratic choice will narrow as campaigns converge on mano dura-style responses.

Finally, external incentives matter. Washington's security posture and its fusion of migration, drugs, and transnational crime can compress domestic debate and raise the political payoff of emergency framing. But foreign pressure cannot substitute for domestic institutional reform. The practical tasks involve building coalitions for rule-bound security that can deliver fast improvements while protecting rights, demonstrating that legality and effectiveness are complements rather than rivals. Without that, the region will continue to exchange institutional safeguards for the promise of immediate control, only to find that fear is an unstable foundation for democratic governance.

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