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Corruption, Abuse of Power, Gang Violence Endanger Democracy in Central America

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The 1987 signing of a regional peace agreement formally ended the internal wars between guerrillas and national armies that had raged throughout Central America, but the violence itself was replaced by a conflict between organized crime and security forces that is still alive today.

Along with pacifying the region, the accord, known as the Acuerdo de Esquipulas (Esquipulas Agreement), sought to strengthen democracy as a means to, among other goals, bring about development and facilitate regional integration (NotiCen, Aug. 10, 1988). But contrary to the expectations, democracy has not really consolidated itself in most of the countries in the region (NotiCen, July 30, 2015).

Democracy is the system favored by most Central Americans, although not as wholeheartedly as would be expected. Many express mixed feelings when it comes to democracy, seeing it is a suitable means to facilitate solutions, but at the same time saying they would not mind having non-democratic governments as long as they solve economic problems. The majority also say that curbing freedom as a means to have order does not sound all that bad, according to Latinobarómetro’s most recent survey, Informe 2016, released in August.

PEN-CONARE report

In its latest Central American report, the Costa Rican Programa Estado de la Nación en Desarrollo Humano (State of the Nation in Human Development, PEN), issued by the Consejo Nacional de Rectores (National Council of Rectors, CONARE), warns that democracy is not strong enough in the region, and highlights corruption and abuse of power among the reasons.

“Although over the past years there has been progress regarding the administration of justice, transparency, and accountability, this was not sufficient to solve structural problems associated with the states’ weaknesses, corruption in handling public resources, and difficulties in effectively shielding human rights,” said the report, issued in June. “Although the isthmus is home to the oldest democracy in Latin America [Costa Rica], several nations have chosen to strengthen the capacities and prominence of armies to face up to increasing levels of violence, drug trafficking, and organized crime operations inside their territories.”

The report also concluded that, despite recent improvements, human and financial resources assigned to support justice systems, transparency, and accountability are still not adequate. It noted that “most Central American nations have managed to strengthen the legal and institutional framework to combat corruption,” but pointed to “a lack of capacity to guarantee an adequate use of public resources and to stop abuse of power.”

The report suggested that Central America’s political systems are not providing satisfactory answers to popular demands of participation, representation, justice, transparency, “and, in general, the people’s expectations of well-being and development.” Governments in the region constantly prove
themselves incapable not only to provide basic services but to have full control over their territories, which limits their ability to curb organized crime, the report said.

**Latinobarómetro survey**

A survey conducted by the Chile-based think tank Latinobarómetro and released in August also points to a general downward trend in Latin Americans’ support of democracy, from 38% to 34% in the last year, while dissatisfaction climbed from 58% to 62%. Despite the negative trend, democracy is highly regarded as a system that “allows a solution to the problems we have.”

In Central America, this view of democracy is shared by well above half of the region’s population. In Nicaragua, 66% of those surveyed agreed that democracy “allows a solution to the problems we have.” In Panama, 65% agreed, followed by 62% in Guatemala, 61% in Honduras and El Salvador, and 59% in Costa Rica, the country with the most stable democracy in the area. Belize was not included in the survey.

At the same time, however, many of those surveyed said they would not mind authoritarian governments in power.

The statement “I do not mind a non-democratic government taking over if it solved economic problems” was backed by 62% of Hondurans and Salvadorans, 61% of Nicaraguans, 60% of Guatemalans, 51% of Panamanians, and 46% of Costa Ricans.

Furthermore, the concept that “a bit of a heavy hand from the government would not be all that bad” was accepted by 78% of Costa Ricans and Panamanians, 73% of Hondurans and Salvadorans, 63% of Guatemalans, and 47% of Nicaraguans.

**‘Endemic problems’**

José Thompson, the executive director of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights (IIHR) pointed to three “endemic problems” that he said plague the region and color Central Americans’ view of democracy as a system: violence and crime, corruption and lack of transparency, and poverty and lack of opportunities for the future (NotiCen, Sept. 1, 2016).

“I believe that the good news... is that we have democracy,” he said, but added that democracy “hasn’t found how to successfully face up” to some of the issues that citizens worry about.

“I don’t think the worst risk for democracy is that we fall into authoritarianism, because that’s fairly easy to fight... today, that concept has lost much legitimacy... no one backs that type of adventure nowadays, so, they quickly degrade,” he told LADB. The risk, he said, is for democracy “to become banal... a moderately legitimate exercise in the election of authorities... with no effect on citizens’ lives, or even worse, exacerbating the problems citizens are facing... because it’s much easier to face up to totalitarianism than it is to face up to a democratic front stripped of its content.”

A danger of that kind of democracy, he said, is that it could allow for organized crime or economic powers to be “the channels through which society functions.”

Thomson added: “I don’t think we’re there... I do believe... at times, and in certain zones, we fall there.”

He pointed to Honduras as one of the worst cases in the region.
“There, one finds corruption, international crime, maras [violent youth gangs], abuse of power, non-democratic values, persecution of ethnic diversity, of sexual diversity, of human rights defenders, of women,” he said. “We have the sum of all evils” (NotiCen, April 7, 2016).

Democracy has not fully delivered as a system, he said, noting that the problem isn’t related to any particular government in power since “the government changes, the opposition steps in, there’s a change to another party, and the situation remains more or less the same.”

He offered a metaphor: “Democracy in the region seems to be well enthroned, but if it were a person, we’d say it isn’t in good health, and so at any moment it could get complicated over any given situation.”

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