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Feeling of Insecurity Used as Political Tool in South America

by LADB Staff

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Citizens' insecurity, or the feeling of insecurity, as those who study the matter prefer to call it, has recently become a cause for worry in South American societies. During recent electoral campaigns, citizens were bombarded by a propaganda onslaught that, in general, was monopolized by the most extreme sectors of the political right. During the months of campaigning before the June 28 Argentine midterm and Uruguayan primary elections, the issue was on the agenda every day.

In Argentina, one candidate even proposed a game in which voters could interact on his Web page, creating what was called "the citizen-insecurity map," an idea with such scant scientific validity that it was taken down shortly after it was posted. In Uruguay, crimes that were no different in either number or type from what would be considered normal in any modern society were used to unleash a merciless campaign against Interior Minister Daisy Tourne, who resigned, beleaguered by accusations that, ultimately, proved to be false.

The issue was used in early 2009 during electoral processes in Bolivia and Ecuador, and in mid-June, the Venezuelan opposition put the matter on the front pages as if it were something new in a country that has historically been the most violent in South America. Even in Colombia, where in recent decades the internal war turned violence into a dramatic everyday occurrence, and in Brazil, where cities such as San Paulo and Rio de Janeiro have insecurity indices among the highest in the world, the conservative press treated the issue as if it were a new phenomenon.

The discourse, said Argentine sociologist Alcira Argumedo, "always ends up offering the same false prescriptions, repeatedly favoring resolving the problem through greater repressive state activity: zero tolerance, lowering the minimum age of criminal responsibility, constructing more and more prisons, reforming the national penal codes to punish criminals with increasingly severe penalties." And, in some cases, the idea surfaces to legalize the death penalty, dangerously trumpeted by the press.

In February 2009, caught in a settling of scores among criminals, a young man was assassinated who worked as an interior designer for Argentine celebrity Susana Gimenez, one of the country's most popular TV hosts. After the incident, Gimenez's voice became one of the most influential in affecting public opinion. She referred to the crime as "the worst example of the insecurity in which we Argentines live, unprotected by a government that defends criminals' human rights but forgets the human rights of decent people."

Amid the pain caused by the death of a person she cared about, Gimenez sermonized in favor of establishing the death penalty, on camera in front of millions of viewers. Other well-known show-business personalities followed suit. More serious, however, was that, in the heat of the initiation

of the electoral campaign, rightist head of the Buenos Aires city government Mauricio Macri and his main ally, businessman Francisco de Narvaez, expressed their support for Gimenez's position and released a series of openly repressive proposals. De Narvaez asked voters to help him draw up the aborted "citizen-insecurity map," an idea that he quickly had to abandon when his advisors detected that Internet users put more jokes and false information on the map than real incidents of insecurity.

Macri went even further and made three proposals "with dissuasive objectives." One called for installing 400 cameras in plazas, parks, and avenues around the city. Another proposed increasing police presence on the streets through what he called "witness-patrol cars," vehicles equipped with sirens and flashing lights that drive around the zones with the highest density pedestrian traffic so they can be seen by the people. However, because they would be staffed by civilians, they would not be legally authorized to carry out police duties.

Finally, Macri announced the installation on public thoroughfares of thousands of "anti-panic buttons," devices connected to an intelligence center that can be activated by anyone who feels at risk or is suspicious that a passerby might be a potential criminal. Various legislators said the measures violated people's privacy. Shila Vilker, a security-issues analyst, told daily Pagina 12, "In the long run, the mere presence of those devices could make life oppressive and insecure, provoking a worse feeling of insecurity."

Insecurity also an issue in Uruguay

Across the Rio Plata, in Uruguay, the situation is similar. Last April, in the midst of the party primary campaigns, now candidate for vice president for the Partido Blanco (PB) Jorge Larranaga took advantage of the feeling of insecurity and proposed militarizing the police and applying a "zero-tolerance" crime-fighting policy. Insecurity became a topic of debate, but his own party members, among them the head of the PB presidential ticket, former President Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-1995), rejected his proposals so vigorously that he was forced to drop them.

During a debate on Radio El Espectador, just days before the forced resignation of Tourne, Foreign Relations Minister Gonzalo Fernandez, an expert on criminal law and university professor, said, "We are not facing a new phenomenon but rather an increase in criminal activity that has been observed for several decades." He said the only way to stop the process was to first determine the causes.

"There is no doubt," said Fernandez, "that we are facing a problem of marginalization; the crimes spring from the reservoir of social marginalization, combined in recent years with an explosive surge in drug use." The minister gave substance to his ideas with "an oft repeated phrase by criminologists, here and around the world, which says that anti-crime policy is only the tip of the social-policy iceberg."

In general, sectors that try to use the feeling of citizen insecurity to instill fear do not use precise statistics or data; they are content to exploit public credibility. Thus, at the beginning of the year, Presidents Rafael Correa of Ecuador and Evo Morales of Bolivia were attacked simply on the basis of perceptions of security problems. In recent weeks, the issue has been taken up by opposition sectors

in Venezuela, Paraguay, Peru, and even the excessively violent Brazil and Colombia. For the most part, the solutions proposed in all the countries were extremely repressive and, at most, suggested applying a policy against the illegal possession of firearms. In Venezuela, there are an estimated 4.5 million unregistered weapons in the hands of the civilian population.

In Paraguay, Interior Minister Rafael Filizzola said that one of every six people has a gun. In Peru, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Instituto de Defensa Legal (IDL) says, without providing evidence, that in the cities, firearms possession has become a common practice," which explains why 48.8% of Limenos are afraid of being assaulted at gunpoint. What the critics do not understand, said an article in the Brazilian daily O Estado de Sao Paulo, is that "the possession of arms is not in itself a cause of insecurity but rather the opposite, a consequence of society's feeling of insecurity; arms are supposed to be for defense and not for crime."

In all the analyses, the media are a substantive part of the phenomenon. "There are not victims without victimizers, not are there victims without victimologists all those who assume the role of representing the victim, among them the press, are the loud voices of fear and terror, increasing panic, giving it substance," said Bolivian Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera in February. During a debate organized in Uruguay by Radio El Espectador, one panelist pointed to Venezuelan daily El Universal as "an excellent example of the frequent irresponsibility of the press."

Political analyst Fernando Scrigna cited two articles dated May 3 and May 9. In the first, a woman named Ana Paz, speaking at the grave of her son in the Cementerio General Del Sur, said, "I lost him five years ago, and it gets harder all the time to come, or rather, to stay. I only stay a little while because the insecurity is so great that it is very difficult to be here."

In the second article, an unidentified owner of a funeral home in Guatire, 40 km east of Caracas, told the paper, "Funerals have become very insecure, so we have asked the municipal police to post some of their officers at the door." The audience was left with the idea that Scrigna had used two extreme examples. Gonzalo Fernandez asked whether these campaigns, besides having destabilizing purposes, were not really aimed at bringing about the privatization of public security. "In Argentina," he said, "just in Buenos Aires and the surrounding area, there are now 692 specialized agencies that employ a real army of more than 200,000 people."

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