

FROM POLITICAL INSTABILITY TO “INTERNAL ARMED CONFLICT”: ECUADOR’S MULTIPLE CRISIS

De la inestabilidad política al “conflicto armado interno”: La múltiple crisis de Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

The year 2023 in Ecuador was characterized by a political crisis that erupted in the midst of escalating criminal violence. While the political crisis was eventually solved by means of new elections, the security crisis has persisted and even worsened during the first months of the presidency of Daniel Noboa. In response, in January 2024, the newly elected president proclaimed a state of “internal armed conflict” and declared 22 criminal gangs as terrorist groups. Against this background, the article reviews recent development in Ecuador as well as the corresponding academic scholarship to discuss two questions: Why and how has Ecuador – in such a short period of time – moved from being among the most peaceful countries in the region to one of the most violent ones? Which consequences of this escalating security crisis can we already observe for Ecuadorian politics and the democratic regime in more general terms? To make sense of Ecuador’s shift from a relatively peaceful to a violence-ridden country, we identify three interrelated sets of causal factors: Ecuador’s increasing role in the transnational drug business; the reconfiguration of Ecuador’s criminal groups; and the social and political context in Ecuador.

Keywords: democracy, criminal violence, criminal groups, security crisis

RESUMEN

El año 2023 en el Ecuador se caracterizó por una crisis política que estalló en medio de una escalada de violencia criminal. Si bien la crisis política se resolvió mediante nuevas elecciones, la crisis de seguridad ha persistido e incluso empeoró durante los primeros meses de la presidencia de Daniel Noboa. En respuesta, en enero del 2024, el recién elegido presidente proclamó el estado de “conflicto armado interno” y declaró a 22 bandas criminales como grupos terroristas. Ante este panorama, el artículo examina los acontecimientos recientes en Ecuador, así como los correspondientes estudios académicos, para analizar dos preguntas: ¿Por qué y cómo ha pasado Ecuador, en tan poco tiempo, de ser uno de los países más pacíficos de la región a uno de los más violentos? Y, ¿qué consecuencias de esta escalada de la crisis de seguridad podemos observar ya para la política ecuatoriana y el régimen



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democrático en general? Para entender el cambio de Ecuador de un país relativamente pacífico a uno plagado de violencia, identificamos tres conjuntos de factores causales interrelacionados: El creciente papel de Ecuador en el negocio transnacional de la droga; la reconfiguración de los grupos criminales ecuatorianos; y el contexto social y político en Ecuador.

Palabras clave: democracia, violencia criminal, grupos criminales, crisis de seguridad

I. INTRODUCTION¹

An unpopular president lacks a majority in a fragmented parliament. The escalating power struggle between the executive and the legislature culminates in the premature end of the elected president. A new president is elected, only to continue the struggle to build and maintain parliamentary majorities in a volatile political setting. In many ways, contemporary Ecuadorian politics evoke the memory of the decade before Rafael Correa first assumed office in 2007 (Abad et al. 2022; Polga-Hecimovich and Sánchez 2021).² But, at the same time, the situation is dramatically different. Long seen as an “island of peace”, since 2018, criminal violence has escalated sharply in Ecuador. After five years of continuous increases, Ecuador ended 2023 with the highest homicide rate in its history: 47 homicides per 100,000 people (Plan V 2024). This makes the country the most violent one in the entire region. Particularly in Ecuador’s coastal provinces, the civilian population is confronted with escalating levels of everyday violence, while rivaling criminal groups violently confront each other as well as state institutions. In August 2023, in the midst of the electoral campaign, presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated, allegedly by one of the main criminal groups. In January 2024, the newly elected president Daniel Noboa responded to yet another escalation of violence proclaiming a state of “internal armed conflict” and declaring 22 gangs as terrorist groups. Ecuador, clearly, has become a different country.

Against this background, this article reviews recent developments in Ecuador as well as the corresponding academic scholarship to discuss two questions: Why and how has Ecuador – in such a short period of time – moved from being among the most peaceful countries in the region to one of the most violent ones? And which consequences of this escalating security crisis can we already observe for Ecuadorian politics and the democratic regime?

¹ The authors thank Maya Heins and two anonymous reviewers for their most helpful comments and suggestions.

² Between 1996 and 2006, three elected presidents were removed from office ahead of time: In 1996, Ecuador’s parliament decided to remove Abdalá Bucaram from office by declaring him “mentally incapable”; in 2000, at the peak of a severe financial crisis, a rebellion-turned-coup led by the indigenous movement as well as middle-ranking military officers ousted Jamil Mahuad; and in 2005, amidst mass protests against the president’s taking control of key judicial institutions, a parliamentary majority unseated Lucio Gutiérrez (Crabtree et al. 2023: 125-126).

The article is structured as follows: In the next section, we briefly set the stage by summarizing key political developments in 2023 and the first months of 2024 (II.). In the main section, we turn to the escalation of criminal violence in the country (III.). After reviewing the most important developments, we draw on the existing scholarship on the topic to identify and discuss three interrelated sets of causal factors that help explain Ecuador’s shift from a relatively peaceful to a violence-ridden country: Ecuador’s increasing role in the transnational drug business; the reconfiguration of Ecuador’s criminal groups; and the social and political context in Ecuador. Section IV, then, analyzes the consequences of the security crisis for Ecuadorian politics, discussing potential implications for the stability, the quality, and the legitimacy of democracy.

II. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN ECUADOR IN 2023 AND EARLY 2024: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Since his election in 2021, President Guillermo Lasso only ever had a tiny core support base in parliament and, for the most part, failed to gain majorities for his legislative projects (Abad et al. 2022). In February 2023, the attempt to circumvent parliament by means of a referendum also failed, with majorities of the voters rejecting each and every of Lasso’s eight policy proposals (Sánchez and Granados 2023: 291-295). At the same time, responding to corruption charges leveled against the president, parliament initiated an impeachment process that Lasso could only thwart by declaring the so-called *muerte cruzada*, the mutual dismissal of both president and parliament, with the implication of new general elections (Ospina 2023).

These elections took place in August 2023 (parliamentary elections and first round of the presidential vote) and October 2023 (second round of presidential elections).³ Just as in 2021, the presidential candidate of Rafael Correa’s political movement *Revolución Ciudadana* (RC) – this time, Luisa González – received the highest share of the vote in the first round (33.6 %), but eventually failed to make it to Carondelet, Ecuador’s presidential palace. She was narrowly defeated by young businessman Daniel Noboa, who had received 23.5 % in the first round, but won the run-off with 51.8 % (CNE 2023).⁴ Interestingly, the regional distribution of the presidential vote roughly corresponds to the spatial distri-

³ While this is not the topic of this article, it is important to mention that the August elections also saw two referendums: At the national level, a clear majority of the voters supported halting oil extraction in the Amazonian Yasuní national park; in addition, at the local level, citizens overwhelmingly voted against mining concessions in the Chocó Andino near the capital Quito.

⁴ Overall, eight candidates participated in the first round of the presidential elections. In addition to González and Noboa, Fernando Villavicencio – the candidate of *Construye*, who was assassinated during the campaign but remained on the ballot – received 16.4 %, followed by right-wing candidate Jan Topic (electoral alliance *Por un País Sin Miedo*) with 14.7 % and former vice-president Otto Sonnenholzner (*Actuemos*) with 7.1 %. Yaku Pérez – who had almost made it to the second round in the 2021 elections, but had left the indigenous party *Pachakutik* afterwards and, in 2023, ran for the leftist electoral alliance *Claro que se puede* – received a mere 4 % (CNE 2023).

bution of violence: In the run-off, majorities in the coastal provinces, which are mostly affected by the current dynamics of violence, voted for the *Correísta* candidate González. Noboa, in contrast, won throughout the highland region and in the Southern Amazon provinces. Still, a comparison with previous elections shows that this voting pattern does not reflect an electoral response to the current security crisis but rather a more general shift in the support base of RC towards the Coast and the Northern *Amazonía* that could already be observed during the 2017 and 2021 elections (Ospina 2023; Wolff 2018: 289).

Before his presidential bid, businessmen Daniel Noboa had little political experience, with the exception of a brief stint as a member of the National Assembly (2021-2023). He is the son of Álvaro Noboa, one of the wealthiest men in the country, who controls one of Ecuador's most important business groups (Grupo Noboa). Between 1998 and 2013, Álvaro Noboa unsuccessfully ran for the presidency five times. During the campaign, Daniel Noboa presented himself as new, moderate and modern political force that would be able to bridge the divide between *Correístas* and *Anti-Correístas*. In the parliamentary elections, however, Noboa's newly founded electoral alliance *Acción Democrática Nacional* (ADN) gained a mere 15 % of the vote, while the *Correísta* movement RC won almost 40 % (CNE 2023). After minor changes following the repetition of the parliamentary elections in the exterior (which were necessary because of technical problems), RC secured 52 of the 137 seats in the National Assembly. The party of assassinated presidential candidate Villavicencio gained 29 seats, and ADN as well as the conservative *Partido Social Cristiano* (PSC), which supported Noboa in the second round, came to hold 14 seats each (Celi 2023).⁵ Both the president and the members of parliament were elected for merely 18 months, to complete the terms of their predecessors, with regular new elections being scheduled for early 2025.

With the premature replacement of the elected president and parliament through new elections, the political deadlock that had characterized the final stage of the Lasso government was solved by institutional means, thereby avoiding a further escalation of the conflict between the executive and the legislative branches of government. In contrast to previous ousters of Ecuadorian presidents, the current political crisis was thus solved through a constitutional procedure and subsequent popular vote – even if Lasso's application of the *muerte cruzada*, as a means to prevent an impeachment, was certainly contested. The new elections did not *per se* substantially change the political configuration that led to the political stalemate in the first place: An elected president confronted with a fragmented parliament in which his own party only controls a small minority of the seats. In contrast to Lasso, however, newly elected Noboa decided and managed to strike a deal with Correa's party, which, at least temporarily, allowed him to build a parliamentary majority around ADN, PSC and

⁵ The remaining 28 seats are controlled by minor national and local parties, as well as independent candidates (Celi 2023).

RC. In doing so, Noboa acted on his campaign promise to move the country beyond the divide between *Correístas* and *Anti-Correístas*. The new majority not only succeeded in electing the parliamentary authorities, but in December 2023 also enabled the approval of Noboa's first economic reform. Still, this alliance has quickly proven fragile.⁶

Although at the end of 2023 the political situation seemed to have stabilized, early January 2024 saw a dramatic escalation of the security crisis. On January 7, apparently to avoid being transferred to another prison, Adolfo Macías alias "Fito", leader of one of Ecuador's most powerful criminal groups (*Los Choneros*), disappeared. The security forces responded with a massive manhunt. At the same time, rival criminal group *Los Lobos* responded to Fito's escape by mounting prison riots and taking prison guards hostage across the country. On January 8, President Noboa responded as his predecessor Lasso had done on several occasions, by declaring a national state of exception for 60 days. Yet, this time, unlike previous occasions, the criminal groups responded by a violent show of force, which included lootings, bomb attacks as well as the storming of a TV station. In addition, further prisoners escaped, including the leader of *Los Lobos*, Fabricio Colón alias "Pico". Noboa, on January 10, reacted with a further escalation, declaring the country to be in a state of "internal armed conflict", while officially designating 22 criminal groups as terrorist. A day later, Ecuador's National Assembly provided unanimous approval of the president's decision (González Calanche 2024). At the time of finalizing this manuscript (early May 2024), the national state of exception had ended. But as President Noboa declared the internal armed conflict to persist, the military has continued to fight criminal groups and support the police in the control of the prison system and the national territory at large (Primicias 2024a).

According to the government, the massive intervention of the armed forces during the 90-days state of exception has had a positive impact on the security situation. Reportedly, between January 9 and April 6, the security forces together arrested more than 18,000 people, 300 of them for alleged terrorism. More than 260 operations against "terrorist groups" were conducted (Primicias 2024a). Homicides went down significantly during the first two weeks of the state of exception: From 202 during the first week of January to 115 and then 66 in the following two weeks (Ecuavisa 2024a). After this short drop, however, the number of violent deaths started increasing again, reaching an average of more than 100 homicides per week. Overall, the number of homicides reported for January until April 21 of 2024 (1,707) is 378 below the figure for the same time period in 2023 (2,085).⁷ Violence, thus, has far from stopped and, in particular, the numbers of extortion and kidnapping have reportedly "skyrocketed" during the state of exception (Austin and Voss 2024). Attacks on

⁶ In early April 2024, RC officially broke with the president after the police had raided the Mexican embassy to capture Correa's former vice-president Jorge Glas (Rueda 2024).

⁷ This data on homicides is taken from Ecuavisa (2024a, b) and based on official numbers reported by the National Police.

police buildings and state institutions also did not cease with the military intervention (Labayen Herrera 2024b). In the weeks between late March and the end of April Ecuador again saw a series of massacres, and the killing of three mayors signaled the return of political assassinations (Austin and Voss 2024; Ecuavisa 2024b).

Initially, Noboa's decision to declare war on criminal groups was met with overwhelming approval from the population. Over time, however, public support for the president has gone down. From a peak of 85 % in late January 2024 to 74 % in early March (Abad 2024), it has dropped to 58 % around mid-April (CB 2024). On April 21, Noboa received official popular support for his militarized approach to the security crisis: During a referendum, broad majorities of mostly around two-thirds of voters approved a set of security-related questions, which included permitting the military to support the police in the fight against organized crime, increasing sentences for criminal offenses, and allowing for the extradition of Ecuadorian citizens. At the same time, however, the referendum confirmed the persistent lack of popular support for Noboa's business-oriented economic agenda: Equally broad majorities (65-70 %) rejected the government's proposals to permit hourly work contracts, and to allow for Ecuador's return to international investor-state dispute-settlement mechanisms (Austin and Voss 2024; Ospina 2024).

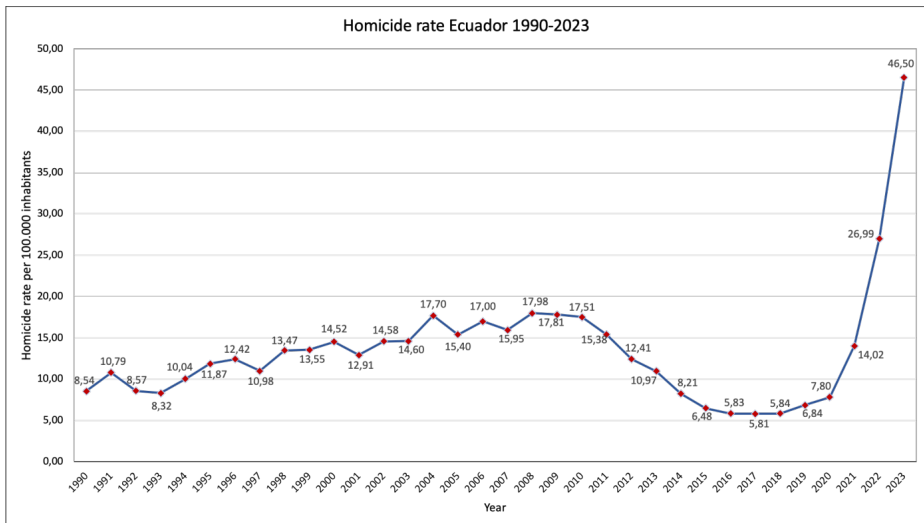
III. THE ESCALATION OF CRIMINAL VIOLENCE: KEY DYNAMICS AND CAUSES

While the type of political instability Ecuador experienced in 2023 is hardly new for the country, the current level of violence definitively is. Traditionally, Ecuador has been considered an "island of peace" when compared to other countries of the region, Colombia and Peru in particular (Carrión 2022: 15-16; Crisis Group 2022; González Calanche 2024). Yet, since 2018, Ecuador has experienced a massive increase in criminal violence, reflected, *inter alia*, in a sharp rise in homicides, as can be seen in Figure 1.⁸ While there were 5.8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018 (994 homicides in absolute numbers), this figure reached 46.5 in 2023 (7,878 homicides in absolute numbers), making Ecuador the deadliest country in mainland Latin America (Dalby 2024; El Universo 2024). In fact, violence in Ecuador has risen exponentially since 2020 – the steepest increase in the history of the region. Since 2022, Ecuador's average murder rate is higher than the entire region's average murder rate, which was 23 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2022, not to speak of the global average, which in 2022 was at 6.2 (Carrión and Silva 2023: 41). In the last two years, Ecuador has recorded its highest homicide rates in over 40 years, making 2023 the most violent year in the history of Ecuador (Carrión 2023: 76; Córdova Alarcón

⁸ For overviews, see Andrade (2023); Andrade de Santiago et al. (2021); Brotherton and Gude (2018); Carrión (2022, 2023); and Córdova Alarcón (2024).

2024). Over three decades, from 1980 to 2010, albeit not nearly as dramatic as in recent years, Ecuador already experienced a threefold increase in homicides (from 6.3 in 1980 to 17.5 in 2017) (Carrión 2022: 19; Freeman 2024: 57). During later years, between 2010 and 2017, an important reduction in the homicide rate could be seen (Andrade de Santiago et al. 2021: 102-103). With 5.8 in 2017, Ecuador ranged among the region’s most peaceful countries, such as Chile (4.2), Cuba (4.6) and Argentina (5.3) (UNODC 2023).⁹

Figure 1: Ecuador’s homicide rate, 1990-2023



Source: Data from 1990 until 2022 from UNODC (2023); data for 2023 from El Universo (2024).

This violence, to an important extent, is perpetrated by local criminal organizations, the main ones being *Los Choneros* and *Los Lobos*.¹⁰ These groups are engaging in violent rivalries with each other, and with the state. They also use violence vis-à-vis the civilian population. Homicides are only the most visible element in the sharp rise in violence (Carrión 2022: 22, 2023: 79). Other types of violence, such as protection rackets, extortion, kidnapping or robbery, are also experiencing a strong increase, showing a diversifi-

⁹ Critics have noted that these official numbers, as also reported in Figure 1, may overestimate both the reduction and the most recent increase in the homicide rate because of a countervailing trend in the rate of lethal “events with undetermined intention” (see Tomasi 2024). Yet, the overall trend is not affected by this controversy.

¹⁰ In addition to these two main groups, the list of 22 organizations designated as terrorist by President Noboa includes other well-known groups (Chone Killers, Lagartos, Latin Kings, Tiguerones and Águilas) as well as a broad range of smaller and, in part, hardly known local groups (including Águilas Killer, AK47, Caballeros Oscuros, Corvicheros, Cuartel de las Feas, Cubanos, Fatales, Gánster, Kater Piler, Los p.27, Tiburones, Mafia 18, Mafia Trébol, Patrones, and R7). Taken together, these groups are estimated to have around 50,000 members, a significant number when compared to Ecuador’s 40,000 soldiers and 60,000 police officers (Carrión 2024).

cation of the criminal violence (Carrión 2022: 21-22, 2023: 79; Freeman 2024: 60). In addition, homicides increasingly occur in the context of collective killings and massacres (Carrión 2023: 79). Initially, since 2019, the country saw a whole series of prison massacres, driven by intra-gang rivalries. Over the years, however, such incidents also spread to public places, cemeteries or harbors (Andrade 2023: 58; Carrión 2023: 79; Ojeda Segovia 2023: 112; Mantilla et al. 2023). Carrión suggests that this form of violence is meant to send messages (“*cadáveres mensaje*”) to the state, the society and/or rivaling criminal organizations (Carrión 2022: 24). The same applies to the threats and killings of journalists and activists. Under former presidents Lenín Moreno (2017-2021) and Guillermo Lasso (2021-2023), the main political response to the dramatic increase in violence consisted in the declaration of a whole series of states of emergency, and the attempt to regain state control over prisons and public spaces by deploying the police and the military (Andrade 2023; Núñez 2023; Ojeda Segovia 2023).

These historically and comparatively exceptional developments raise crucial questions for both the academic and political debate. In particular, scholars have started to analyze the causes that explain the recent spike in violence in contemporary Ecuador. While there is disagreement about individual causes as well as their relative weight, observers agree that the causes behind the current dynamics of violence in Ecuador are manifold and include both internal and external factors, the complex interplay of which has led to the current security crisis.¹¹ In this section, based on a broad review of studies on the topic, we identify and discuss three overall sets of causal factors: (1) Ecuador’s increasing role in the transnational drug business; (2) the reconfiguration of Ecuador’s criminal groups; and (3) the social and political context in Ecuador.

1. Ecuador’s increasing role in the transnational drug business

The most obvious and widely discussed set of causal factors for the spike in violence is related to Ecuador’s increasing role in the transnational drug business. Being located between the two main coca and cocaine producing countries, Colombia and Peru, and with access to the Pacific Ocean and important ports, Ecuador has for many years been an important transit country.¹² Since 2000, the dollarization of the Ecuadorian economy has further increased the attractiveness of the country for transnational drug-trafficking organizations, given that the use of the US dollar facilitates money laundering (Crisis Group 2022; Carrión 2022: 28). It is in the more recent past, however, that Ecuador’s strategic role in the transnational drug trade has increased significantly. On

¹¹ Different explanations are discussed by Andrade (2023); Carrión (2023); Carrión and Silva (2023); Córdova Alarcón (2024); Ojeda Segovia (2023); and Posada and Loaiza (2023).

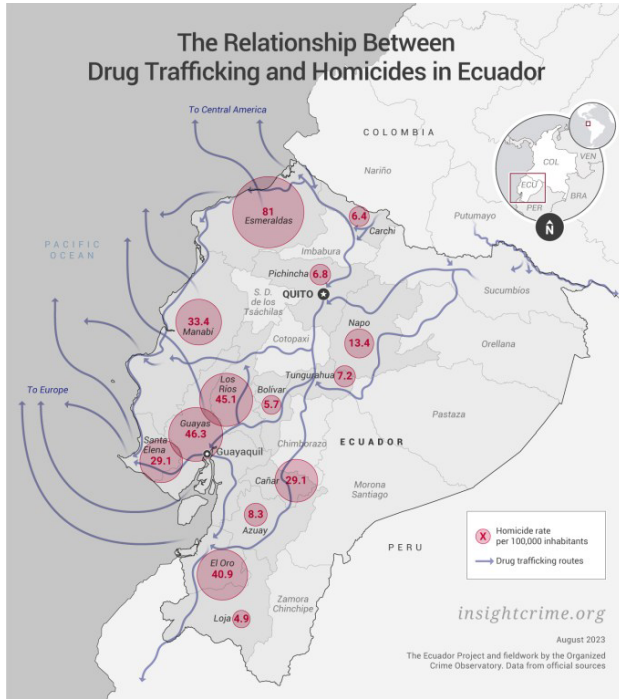
¹² In 2022, Colombia cultivated around 61 % of the world’s coca, Peru around 26 % and the non-neighboring-country Bolivia around 13 % (Global Report on Cocaine 2023: 15).

the one hand, there has been a general, global rise in drug consumption as well as a related increase in coca cultivation and cocaine production. In particular, the later stage of the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by a sharp increase in cocaine production and consumption (Carrión 2022: 21; Global Report on Cocaine 2023: 12). On the other hand, a combination of factors that we will discuss in this section, has meant that transnational drug-trafficking routes have shifted as to make Ecuadorian ports much more important than before. In recent years, the Atlantic route – traditionally the most important route for drugs from Colombia to the US – has lost importance, with Colombian organizations adapting the drug-trafficking routes and outsourcing parts of the supply chain to other transnationally operating organizations, such as Mexican cartels. Today, most of the cocaine that flows north from South America – 74 %, according to the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) – is shipped via the Pacific Ocean to Mexico or other Central American countries, and is then transported overland, mostly to the US and Canada (Global Report on Cocaine 2023: 53-55).¹³ In addition, Ecuador is also one of the main hubs for drug-trafficking to Europe, which has seen important increases in cocaine consumption as well. Here, the cocaine is usually hidden in containers loaded with agricultural goods in the larger ports of Guayaquil and Esmeraldas, and then shipped through the Panama Canal to Europe (Global Report on Cocaine 2023: 58; Córdova Alarcón 2024). Between 2018 and 2021, the proportion of cocaine departing from Ecuador, destined for Europe, more than doubled (Global Report on Cocaine 2023: 58). Accordingly, Ecuador is nowadays a major departure country for cocaine leaving South America (Global Report on Cocaine 2023: 55).

Within Ecuador, the coastal provinces of Esmeraldas, Manabí and Guayas are particularly affected by the transnational drug-trafficking routes (Carrión 2022: 21, 2023: 86-87). Not by chance, these provinces are also among the most violent ones in Ecuador (Figure 2). Although coca cultivation and cocaine production have also spread from Colombia to Ecuador over the last years (Rivera-Rhon and Bravo-Grijalva 2020), Ecuador is still primarily – and increasingly so – a key transit hub in the illegal drug supply chain.

¹³ The Atlantic route still exists as well, but instead of the cocaine being directly flown into to the US from Colombia, nowadays the drugs pass by Caribbean Islands, Mexico or depart from Venezuela (Global Report on Cocaine 2023: 54-55).

Figure 2: The relationship between drug trafficking and homicides in Ecuador



Source: InSight Crime (2023). Provincial homicide rates are from 2022.

These shifts in the main drug-trafficking routes have not only significantly increased drug trafficking in and through Ecuador, they have also brought about a diversification of the actors involved. Nowadays, alongside local Ecuadorian groups, Mexican Cartels, Colombian armed groups, Brazilian and Venezuelan gangs, and European Mafias are present in Ecuador (Carrión 2022: 26; Andrade et al. 2023; Global Report on Cocaine 2023: 148; Freeman 2024: 56-57). An important external development that has contributed to the fragmentation of transnational drug-trafficking organizations involved in Ecuador, is the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP) (Da Frota Simões et al. 2024; Freeman 2023; Posada and Loaiza 2023). Previously, the FARC-EP essentially controlled drug trafficking in and out of southern Colombia, using Ecuador as a trade route and an area of retreat. With the demobilization of the FARC-EP, a whole series of criminal actors, including competing FARC-EP dissident groups, took over the drug economy in Colombian provinces such as Nariño, thereby bringing in new transnationally operating groups (Carrión 2022: 28, 2023: 82; Posada and Loaiza 2023; Salas et al. 2019). As a consequence, Ecuadorian groups such as *Los Choneros* and *Los Lobos* have assumed a much more active role, directly collaborating with external partners that have increased their control of the transnational drug business such as the Mexican

drug cartels *Cártel de Sinaloa* and *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* as well as European players like the Albanian mafia (Andrade et al. 2023; Córdova Alarcón 2024; Freeman 2024: 56).

Dynamics associated with the US-led “war on drugs” have also contributed to this picture. Firstly, with the US improving the control over its sea and air routes, the extensive land border with Mexico has become the easiest way to smuggle drugs into the USA (Global Report on Cocaine 2023: 53). This has not only contributed to the shift in the drug routes mentioned above, it has also strengthened the role of the Mexican drug cartels in the transnational drug business, including in Ecuador. Secondly, in Colombia, the US-supported “*Plan Colombia*” under former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) led to a displacement of coca cultivation and drug trafficking into remote areas and neighboring countries (“*efecto globo*” / balloon effect) (Carrión 2023: 81). Colombia’s border regions with Ecuador and Venezuela were particularly affected by this shift, which was accompanied by an increased presence of armed actors (Crisis Group 2022; Carrión 2023: 81; Polga-Hecimovich 2023: 93; Salas et al. 2019). At the same time, in Ecuador, former president Rafael Correa (2007-2017) significantly reduced cooperation with the US in security and antinarcotics affairs (Córdova Alarcón 2024; Freeman 2023). Most notably, the US military base in Manta was closed in 2009, ending US drug interception efforts and US monitoring of Ecuador’s extensive territorial waters, which has contributed to making Ecuador’s ports increasingly attractive hubs for the transnational cocaine trade (Freeman 2023, 2024: 59).¹⁴

As comparative studies have shown, booming illicit economies and the presence of strong criminal organizations do not necessarily lead to high rates of criminal violence (see, e.g. Blume 2022; Lessing 2018; Trejo and Ley 2018). As will be seen in the next section, however, Ecuador’s increasing integration into the transnational drug economy has been accompanied by a violent reconfiguration of the local landscape of criminal groups and their international allies.

2. Reconfiguration of Ecuador’s criminal groups

When it comes to the reconfiguration of Ecuadorian criminal groups, it is the shift from one hegemonic group – *Los Choneros* – to a high level of fragmentation that most obviously and directly contributed to the recent spike in violence. According to the literature, the fragmentation of the *Choneros* began with the assassination of its former leader Jorge Luis Zambrano, alias “*Rasquiña*”, in December 2020 (Dalby 2023). As a consequence, a series of splinter groups emerged, including *Los Lobos*, *Los Tiguerones* and *Los Chone Killers*, which have

¹⁴ Furthermore, during the Correa administration, foreign companies were granted concessions for Ecuadorian harbors and airports, making it even more difficult for the state to control incoming and outgoing vessels, and freight (Freeman 2023, 2024: 59). Critics claim that the Correa government deliberately turned a blind eye to the growth in narcotrafficking through Ecuador (see, e.g., Tomasi 2024).

been fighting over supremacy ever since (Dalby 2023; InSight Crime 2024). In 2023, the weakened *Choneros* and the emerging *Lobos* were generally considered the two most powerful groups in the country, with around 12,000 – 20,000 and around 8,000 members, respectively (Alonso 2023). Both groups are part of competing transnational drug-trafficking networks which operate on the basis of “franchising or outsourcing modalities” (Carrión 2022: 26, emphasis in the original; see also Andrade 2023: 63; Freeman 2024: 61).

The alliances between the different groups both within Ecuador and beyond are quite volatile and can, at times, swiftly shift. Available reports paint the following picture: At the international level, *Los Choneros* are associated with the Mexican *Cártel de Sinaloa* and reportedly collaborate with Colombian groups like the *Frente Oliver Sinisterra* (FOS), a dissident FARC-EP faction that emerged after the 2016 peace agreement and operates in the border region with Ecuador (Da Frota Simões et al. 2024: 120-121; Manjarrés 2024). With the drug supply from the FOS and the cooperation with the Sinaloa cartel, the *Choneros* reportedly have come to control several of the most important cocaine trafficking routes throughout and out of Ecuador (Dalby 2023; Manjarrés 2024). Within Ecuador, the *Choneros* are said to cooperate with smaller local gangs such as *Los Gangsters*, *Los Águilas*, *Los Fantasmas* and *Los Fatales* (Andrade 2023: 63; Goette-Luciak 2024). *Los Choneros* have traditionally focused on the coastal province of Manabí, where they emerged (in the city of Chone) as a local drug-trafficking group, but they later expanded to prisons, becoming one of Ecuador’s most important “prison gangs” (see below), as well as to other parts of the country (Dalby 2023; InSight Crime 2024). Due to killings and imprisonment of important leaders of the *Choneros* and the strengthening of rival groups like *Lobos* and *Tiguerones*, the *Choneros* have largely been pushed out of Guayaquil and other important areas of drug trafficking; yet they remain strong in Manabí (Dalby 2023; InSight Crime 2024). The *Choneros’* main rival group, *Los Lobos*, is in turn associated with the Mexican *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG). Within Ecuador, this group cooperates with *Los Tiguerones*, *Los Lagartos*, *Los Chone Killers* and *Los Ñetas* (Andrade 2023: 63; Goette-Luciak 2024). Its cocaine supply is said to primarily come from the Colombian *Columna Móvil Urías Rondón*, another FARC-EP dissident group that is competing with the FOS (Da Frota Simões et al. 2024: 120-121; Manjarrés 2024). *The Lobos* have equally spread throughout Ecuadorian prisons and throughout the country (InSight Crime 2022; Andrade 2023: 64; Dalby 2023). In addition, European mafia organizations are also involved in the reconfiguration of local criminal groups in Ecuador (Andrade et al. 2023; Córdova Alarcón 2024; Freeman 2024: 56). Especially the Albanian mafia, carrying out business for the Italian mafia, *Ndrangheta*, is particularly strong in Latin America (Ecuador Times 2024).

Intra-gang violence in Ecuador first escalated within prisons, before it spread to the rest of the country. Since 2019, the country has seen a wave of deadly clashes and massacres within prison walls (Pontón 2022; Andrade 2023). This is related to the fact that the imprisonment of gang leaders and members did

not weaken their groups, but instead turned prisons into safe havens under the de facto control of these criminal groups (Carrión 2022; Crisis Group 2022). Former street gangs transformed into prison gangs that used the penitentiary system to recruit new members and organize their activities outside prisons (Crisis Group 2022). In addition, prisons have become a source of income, as inmates or their families must pay for everything needed, i.e. food, mattresses, water to drink and showers, medicine and even visits (Kaleidos 2021: 80-81; Freeman 2024: 60). Corruption and fear among security staff has helped consolidate these criminal structures, as did the policy of spatially placing inmates according to their gang affiliation instead of their criminal offense (Carrión 2022: 33-36; Núñez 2022, 2023, 2024; Pontón 2022: 176). Prisons, thereby, became “a dangerous ecosystem for the reproduction of complex criminality” (Pontón 2022: 174; Núñez 2022, 2024).¹⁵

A structural cause that has facilitated this development is the overcrowding of the penitentiary system, which – in Ecuador as elsewhere in the region – is driven by the large number of prisoners. This is due to the above-average use of pre-trial detention, the imposition of long prison sentences, and the imprisonment for minor offenses instead of other rehabilitation measures (Carrión 2022: 33; Crisis Group 2022; Pontón 2022: 183; Freeman 2024: 59). Between 2009 and 2017, during the Correa administration, prison population more than tripled from 11,517 prisoners in 2009 to 35,967 in 2017. During the first years of the Moreno administration, the number of prisoners further rose, reaching 39,251 in 2019 (Pontón 2022: 183). After the first prison massacres happened in 2019, the governments of Moreno and later Lasso tried to reduce prison overpopulation, which is considered one of the main risk factors for such massacres (Primicias 2024b). In fact, between January 2021 and January 2023, prison overpopulation was reduced from 29 % to 4 % (Primicias 2024b). Since February 2023, however, the need to demolish and renovate or build anew (parts of) prison buildings has meant that the overcrowding rate increased again, reaching 12 % in December 2023 (Ecuador Chequea 2024). This situation has probably worsened during the most recent state of exception, which has led to the arrest of more than 18,000 people between January 9 and April 6 (Primicias 2024a).

In many ways, the violence that has shaken Ecuador’s penitentiary system since 2019 can be seen as an anticipation of what would later become the norm throughout the country, particularly in Ecuador’s coastal region. Historically, most of the Ecuadorian criminal organizations were local street gangs, largely detached from transnational drug trafficking. These groups would usually do the local groundwork (micro-trafficking, contract killings, extortion and contraband) for transnational drug trafficking organizations (Dalby 2023). Since the 2000s, when drug trafficking became increasingly important within Ecuador, these locally anchored and informally organized *pandillas* transformed into or became junior members of larger national and international criminal groups,

¹⁵ For detailed analyses of Ecuador’s penitentiary system, see Kaleidos (2021) and Núñez (2022).

running local and national hubs of transnational drug business. Simultaneously, these groups have expanded their local businesses by engaging in illegal mining, money laundering, protection racketeering and other forms of criminal governance. Of particular relevance is the rise in sales of supposed security services by criminal organizations, mostly occurring in areas where the state is unable and/or unwilling to provide basic security (Carrión 2022: 22; Crisis Group 2022; Núñez 2023). These protection rackets constitute an increasing source of income for many criminal groups (Freeman 2024: 61). They require a form of territorial control that implies violence vis-à-vis the local population, putting criminal groups in direct competition with each other as well as with the state. The result is, again, an escalation of violence but also an increasing collusion between criminal organizations and (local) state authorities and security forces (Crisis Group 2022; Córdova Alarcón 2024; Freeman 2024: 56). Increasingly, politics, administration, the justice system, the police and to a lesser extent the military, are infiltrated by criminals and criminality, resulting in a “gray zone of criminality” (Trejo and Ley 2020: 37; see also Córdova Alarcón 2021; González Calanche 2024).

3. The social and political context in Ecuador

A third set of factors concerns the social and political context in Ecuador that have facilitated the rise of illicit activities and criminal organizations as well as the spike in criminal violence. Existing studies, in particular, emphasize the lack – and, in fact, loss – of state capacity.¹⁶ Under presidents Moreno and Laso, austerity policy and institutional reforms have led to a significant reduction in the state’s capacity to combat violence and crime (Carrión 2022: 20; Andrade 2023). At the beginning of the Moreno government, in 2017, the budget for the penitentiary system was cut by 30 %, and in 2018 the national security budget was also reduced, decreasing spending in key areas (Carrión 2022: 20; Crisis Group 2022; González Calanche 2024).¹⁷ In terms of institutional reforms, president Moreno dissolved the *Ministerio Coordinador de Seguridad*, the ministry in charge of coordinating the work of the ministries of the interior, defense and justice and the National Intelligence Secretariat (*Secretaría Nacional de Inteligencia* – SENAIN) (Andrade 2023: 62). Later, the ministries of justice and of the interior as well as the Secretariat for Political Administration (*Secretaría de Gestión Política*) were merged to form the *Ministerio de Gobierno* (Carrión 2022: 20), responsible for the national police, public policy on national security, and the government’s political administration (Andrade 2023: 62). Also, the SENAIN – which was involved in a domestic spying scandal – was dissolved and replaced

¹⁶ For a more detailed description of the political changes in Ecuador that have contributed to the recent rise in criminal violence, see Andrade (2023); Carrión (2022); Freeman (2024).

¹⁷ As a result, for instance, the school for prison officers, which had only opened a year earlier, was closed again in July 2017. It was intended to ensure continuous preparation for the deployment of prison officers in the national prison system (Andrade 2023: 62).

by the Center for Strategic Intelligence (*Centro Estratégico de Inteligencia*) (Andrade 2023: 62). Shortly after, the ministry responsible for social reintegration and for monitoring the penal system (*Ministerio de Justicia, Derechos Humanos y Cultos*) was transformed into a Secretariat for Human Rights (Andrade 2023: 62; Freeman 2024: 60; González Calanche 2024). At the same time, the control of the penitentiary system was transferred to the National Service for the Integral Care of People in Custody (*Servicio Nacional de Atención Integral a Personas Adultas Privadas de la Libertad y Adolescentes Infractores – SNAI*) (Andrade 2023: 62). The weakening of state capacities through institutional reforms continued under President Lasso (Freeman 2024: 60). In March 2022, Lasso reestablished the Ministry of the Interior as the entity in charge of public security alongside the Ministry of Government, but bureaucratic obstacles meant that the administrative separation was never fully implemented during his regime (Primicias 2023a). In August 2022, the National Secretariat for Public and State Security (*Secretaría Nacional de Seguridad Pública y del Estado*) was created as a new coordinating entity for public security – replacing the previous Coordinating Ministry for Security, but five years after the latter's dissolution (Andrade 2023: 63).

In addition to such deliberate policies that weakened state capacity, widespread corruption and collusion have also meant that state institutions de facto tolerated or even facilitated the spread of criminal activities inside and outside of the prison system. Corruption networks span the public administration, the judiciary, the police and local politics, but also reach the highest levels of the political arena and the military (Freeman 2024: 60-61; Ojeda Segovia 2023: 117-119; Polga-Hecimovich and Sánchez 2021: 15). During the Correa government, a series of criminal cases indicating the involvement of several state officials with the drug business "suggested that narco-traffickers were gaining access to the state" (Freeman 2024: 58). Under Lasso, scandals of alleged corruption indicated ties from the president's inner circle to the Albanian mafia (Sánchez and Granados 2023: 290-291).

During the first months of the Noboa administration, the public prosecutor made public two huge corruption cases. The *Metástasis* case (revealed in December 2023) and the *Purga* case (announced in March 2024) allegedly connect networks of high-level individuals from the justice system, the prison administration, the police and politics to important drug traffickers (González Calanche 2024; Labayen Herrera 2024a; Primicias 2023b). So far, the most important people prosecuted in the *Metástasis* case are General Pablo Ramírez, who was responsible for the anti-drug police and the prison authority SNAI, and the president of the Judicial Council and former judge of the National Court of Justice, Wilman Terán (Primicias 2023b; Labayen Herrera 2024a). In the *Purga* case, twelve people have been detained, including a former member of parliament from the PSC (Pablo Muentes) and a former president of the provincial court of justice from Guayas (Fabiola Gallardo) (Primicias 2024c). While investigations are still ongoing and are in part criticized as (also) politically motivated (Labayen Herrera 2024a), it is hard to doubt that criminal organiza-

tions have generally gained widespread and also high-level influence within the Ecuadorian state.

In addition, observers point to years in which governments have simply ignored the problems at hand. This concerns the Correa government, which shut down US-led monitoring and interception efforts as well as the Special Investigative Unit (UIES) of the police for its alleged ties to US intelligence, without rebuilding alternative capacities (Freeman 2024: 58-59). Also, governments ignored the mounting problems of the penitentiary systems until massacres forced presidents to react. And still, presidents Moreno and Lasso have been widely criticized as failing to devise a broader strategy in response to the security crises at hand (see, e.g. Andrade 2023; Ojeda Segovia 2023).

While the political context outlined so far has facilitated the growth of criminal groups, the repressive governmental response unintentionally contributed to the escalation of violence (Mantilla et al. 2023; Ojeda Segovia 2023: 124; see also Lessing 2017). The various states of exception – in the prison system, in regions particularly affected by criminal violence, or nation-wide – allowed for a temporary militarization that calmed the situation. Yet, they were not used to significantly strengthen state institutions or structurally weaken criminal groups. As soon as the states of exception ended, the path of escalating violence continued unabated. What is more, criminal groups responded to the state's repressive strategy by retaliating with violent means, including with car bomb attacks on police stations (Mistler-Ferguson 2022; Austin 2024; Córdova Alarcón 2024). The high point of this escalatory logic, so far, was reached in January 2024, when criminal groups responded to President Noboa's first declaration of a state of exception with a massive violent campaign throughout the country (Austin 2024).

Finally, existing research on criminal violence and studies on contemporary Ecuador, emphasize the socioeconomic root causes (see, e.g. Buonanno 2003; Ojeda Segovia 2023; Vasquez et al. 2023). During the years of the commodities boom and the expansion of social programs under the Correa government, most socioeconomic indicators had improved significantly. Yet, with the decline in international oil prices in 2014, the trend began reversing. The turn to austerity measures further aggravated the situation of the socioeconomically disadvantaged segments of the Ecuadorian population. On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Ecuador particularly hard, had devastating socioeconomic consequences (Abad et al. 2022: 284-288; Castellanos et al. 2021). Generally speaking, this deterioration of socioeconomic indicators combined with the state's retreat from social policies and public services have facilitated the recruitment strategies of criminal groups (Freeman 2023, 2024: 59-60; Ojeda Segovia 2023: 114). According to estimations by Fernando Carrión, criminal organizations in the country are paying salaries to around 50,000 young people that have no other prospects (Carrión 2024).

IV. CONSEQUENCES FOR ECUADORIAN POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

The escalation of criminal violence, the increasing strength of criminal groups, and the repressive response by the state all have significant political consequences. In this section, we discuss these consequences by focusing on three dimensions: the stability, the quality, and the legitimacy of democracy.

Stability of democracy: Interestingly, the dramatic increase in criminal violence discussed above was not a relevant factor in the political destabilization and the premature end of the Lasso presidency. Instead, political instability was driven by partisan conflict and fueled by allegations of corruption against the president and its inner circle. These allegations, however, did include charges concerning links to narcotrafficking organizations, namely to the Albanian mafia (Sánchez and Granados 2023). One might even argue that the escalating violence is, so far, having a politically stabilizing effect, in that it is contributing to a general reduction in social protest. The high levels of violence in general, and the territorial control exercised by criminal groups in parts of the country in particular, have demobilizing effects on society, while increasing the risks associated with (contentious) collective action (see below). In addition, it is important to note that the violence, including the assassination of a presidential candidate, did not prevent the electoral process from taking place according to usual standards. Electoral participation was, with 82.94 %, even slightly higher than in previous elections (CNE 2023). Furthermore, as seen in the unanimous endorsement of Noboa’s declaration of war by the Ecuadorian parliament in January 2024, the escalation of the violent crisis has also had the effect of at least temporarily unifying the country’s notoriously fragmented political parties.

Quality of democracy: The overall stability of the democratic regime notwithstanding, it is clear that the quality of democracy is already negatively affected by the steep rise in criminal violence and criminal activities. Firstly, the apparent infiltration of state institutions by organized crime undermines the functioning of democratic institutions. Recent major corruption scandals, while still not resolved, clearly suggest that criminal groups have gained influence on all powers of the state including the highest levels of government, and the state’s security apparatus. Secondly, the security crisis factually implies severe constraints on the exercise of core political rights and civic freedoms. By threatening and actually exercising violence, criminal groups impose restrictions on the work of politicians, public officials, journalists, and civil society actors of all kinds. The state response, including the series of states of emergencies that have been declared since 2021, and the militarization of internal security in the context of the “internal armed conflict” since early 2024, further adds to restricting key civic freedoms.

Interestingly, these negative effects are only beginning to show up in global democracy indices. In V-Dem’s Democracy Reports, for instance, Ecuador in 2022 reached the highest score on the Liberal Democracy Index that was ever

recorded for this country (0.5), with the country being discussed as one of the top “democratizers” worldwide (V-Dem 2023: 27-31). For 2023, this score was reduced somewhat (to 0.47) (V-Dem 2024: 62). Freedom House, in the Freedom in the World reports, similarly ranked Ecuador as “free” in both 2021 and 2022, after having categorized the country as only “partially free” in the years before. Still, in the 2023 report, which covers the year 2022, Ecuador was downgraded by one point (from 71 to 70 on a scale of 100) because of “criminal organizations whose numerous bombings and other attacks undermined state control in some areas” (Freedom House 2023). While for 2022, Freedom House still considered “Indigenous protesters who used blockades and threats of violence to force policy changes” as just as important an “unelected” force that was unduly constraining “the ability of the elected leadership” (Freedom House 2023), this has changed with the most recent Freedom of the World report. For 2023, Ecuador was downgraded to “partly free” again, and this explicitly “because a rise in violent crime, largely perpetrated by organized criminal groups that targeted officials, rivals and ordinary citizens, resulted in a deep security crisis” (Freedom House 2024).¹⁸ Similarly, the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) reduced Ecuador’s overall score from 5.69 (2022) to 5.41 (2023) noting that “Ecuador’s election was characterised by a high level of political violence” (EIU 2024: 45).

Legitimacy of democracy: Finally, Lasso’s obvious failure to bring the escalating security crisis under control has contributed to reducing trust in the government and the democratic state as such, as have scandals revealing connections between criminal groups and high-ranking officials and individuals close to president Lasso. According to the Latinobarómetro survey from early 2023, 87 % of the respondents in Ecuador showed themselves dissatisfied with democracy, a share higher than in Venezuela (84 %) and lower only than in neighboring Peru (91 %) (Latinobarómetro 2023: 38). 50 % of the respondents in Ecuador also stated that they would support a military government if things would turn very difficult (Latinobarómetro 2023: 45). According to 2023 data from LAPOP’s Americas Barometer, trust in important political institutions such as elections (26 %), the National Assembly (22 %), the National Court of Justice (21 %) and, above all, political parties (14 %) is below the Latin American average, and has been declining for years (Moncagatta 2023: 12-15). It is safe to assume that the most recent corruption scandals (*Metástasis* and *Purga*), suggesting intimate links between organized crime and high-ranking public officials, have only further eroded citizen trust in Ecuador’s democratic institutions. The only

¹⁸ More specifically, this downgrading reflects a worsening in three indicators: In the area of political rights, Freedom House sees the rise in politically motivated violence, including the assassination of presidential candidate Villavicencio, as well as “concerns about illicit campaign financing by organized crime groups” as indicating limitations on the freedom of the people to freely choose their representatives “free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere”; in the area of civil liberties, the security crisis is seen as restricting the freedom of the press and showing the lack of “protection from the illegitimate use of physical force” (Freedom House 2024).

state institution that is trusted by the majority of Ecuadorians (63 %) are the armed forces (Moncagatta 2023: 16).

The most recent escalation of the security crisis – the dramatic eruption of violence in January 2024 followed by the declaration of an “internal armed conflict” and the massive intervention of the military – involves significant threats to democracy that may well also affect the basic stability of democracy. A first trajectory “out of democracy” that is currently much discussed across Latin America, is the authoritarian “solution” presented by El Salvador under Nayib Bukele (for a critical assessment, see Isacson and Walsh 2024). During the 2023 elections, the candidate most explicitly articulating such a repressive response, Jan Topić, received a mere 15 % of the vote. But after the dramatic escalation of violence in January 2024, an opinion poll found 85 % approval for President Noboa as he embarked on a military response to criminal violence (Abad 2024). While, in Ecuador, constitutional limitations as well as a reasonably independent Constitutional Court still exist, an additional round of violent escalation might well prepare the electoral ground for an even more authoritarian response, either by the current or by the future president to be elected in 2025. A second, informal path of de-democratization is a progressive “criminal takeover of state institutions”, up to the point of transforming Ecuador into a “narco-state” (Freeman 2024). Given the anticipated domestic and international resistance, it is hard to imagine how the country might move towards a full-blown state capture by criminal groups. Yet, a third, more hybrid pathway seems quite possible, if not already in the making: A configuration that combines the persistence of democratic institutions with relative autonomy from criminal groups, in particular at the national level, with high levels of violence and areas of criminal governance at the subnational level. This scenario is, in fact, well-known from other Latin American countries.¹⁹

V. CONCLUSIONS

The year 2023 in Ecuador was definitively a turbulent one. Politically, it was characterized by averted impeachment proceedings against the president, the first application of the constitutional figure of the *muerte cruzada* in the country’s history, the subsequent dissolution of parliament, and the ensuing new elections of both the executive and the legislature. However, after the new, young, and inexperienced president Daniel Noboa took office in the last few weeks of 2023 and managed to build a majority in Ecuador’s notoriously fragmented parliament, the political situation seemed to have calmed down. Yet, different from Noboa’s predecessors during the 1990s and 2000s, the new president’s main challenge concerns neither the complexity and volatility of Ecuadorian politics nor the difficult economic situation. Adding to a dramatic increase in homicidal violence that made Ecuador end 2023 as the most violent country in

¹⁹ For an overview of the corresponding literature see Feldmann and Luna 2022

the region, January 2024 saw a further escalation of the violent confrontation between the state and a set of competing criminal groups that openly dispute the state's monopoly of violence and territorial control. At the time of writing, a massive use of armed forces in what the president officially calls a state of "internal armed conflict" has somewhat tamed the situation. But, as the number of violent incidents has again risen after a first phase of relative calm, the situation remains extremely fragile, to say the least. Most recently, the referendum demonstrated broad popular support to Noboa's security agenda. Yet, there are serious doubts as to whether the current approach to the security crisis will produce sustainable improvements. In addition, the country continues to struggle with serious socioeconomic problems. As the referendum has also shown, the president's pro-business course in economic policies is met with widespread rejection among the population. In this regard, Noboa's situation resembles that of his predecessor Guillermo Lasso (Crabtree et al. 2023: 170, 198-199).

Given that the levels of violence currently observed in Ecuador are highly unusual for this country, there is not an extensive scholarship that would systematically analyze the causes, dynamics and consequences of criminal violence in the country. Comparative research on criminal groups, criminal violence, and criminal governance in Latin America has so far largely ignored Ecuador. In this article, we have reviewed existing academic studies and policy-oriented reports that try to make sense of the dramatic increase in criminal violence in the country's recent past. As seen, according to the literature, three interrelated sets of causal factors are of particular relevance: Ecuador's increasing role in transnational drug business; the reconfiguration of Ecuador's criminal groups; and the social and political context in Ecuador. Further research, however, is clearly needed to assess, in methodologically more refined studies, the relative weight as well as the precise interplay of the different factors at work. It is also important to compare the developments and the situation in Ecuador more systematically with countries such as Colombia, Brazil, or Mexico which have much more experience with similar challenges. Comparative studies will also be crucial when it comes to assessing potential responses to Ecuador's current security crisis.

International democracy indices are only beginning to reflect the political implications of Ecuador's security crisis. Still, there is no doubt that the latter has important and manifold consequences for Ecuadorian democracy. Even if the country's democratic regime should prove resilient in the face of criminal violence – which is far from guaranteed – the quality and the legitimacy of Ecuadorian democracy are already suffering significantly. Whether the situation in Ecuador might appropriately be categorized as an "internal armed conflict" or not, the very political decision of the president to deal with the crisis in this way shows that the threat to democracy is at least twofold: In addition to the criminal groups that challenge the democratic state from the outside, an overly militarized response by the state is also hardly compatible with democratic norms and, thereby, challenges democracy from within. The confrontation between the state and organized crime, however, should not divert us from the fact that there is also another challenge to democ-

racy, which is already all-too observable in Ecuador: The subversion of state institutions through corruption, collusion, and outright politico-criminal networks which systematically eludes the distinction between formal, democratic politics, and organized crime. While such evolving patterns of state-criminal relations and their impact on the forms and levels of violence have been much studied in other Latin American countries,²⁰ it has yet to be systematically investigated how these dynamics are playing out in contemporary Ecuador.

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²⁰ See, e.g., Blume (2022), Lessing (2018) and Trejo and Ley (2020) as well as the literature review in Feldmann and Luna (2022).

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