El Salvador and Honduras: Punitive governance as a response to lethal violence and extortion

30 March 2023

**In March 2022, authorities in El Salvador imposed a state of emergency to contain the growing crime and gang violence besieging the nation. A year later, this measure appears to have provided communities with a long-sought-after sense of security – at the expense of people’s fundamental rights.**

Enshrined in the country’s constitution to respond to extreme circumstances such as war, rebellion, sedition or severe disturbances to the public order, the decree allowed the suspension of the rights to freedom of movement, expression and association, and extended legal detentions from 72 hours to 15 days without legal defence. As of March 2023, more than 66 000 Salvadoreans have been incarcerated without due process and over 100 have died while in state custody.

Honduran authorities have also resorted to harsh governance measures – still in effect today – to contain increasing extortion levels. The results have been underwhelming and there is a lack of public information available to better analyze the consequences.

As the situation in El Salvador gains international attention for an alleged reduction in gang violence, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)’s forthcoming policy brief analyzes and compares the effects of the state of emergency in both countries.

Punitive responses harnessed in the past to control criminality in the Central America region have shown that, although bringing short-term results, the effects are not sustainable over time. Addressing the root causes of violence and crime, such as corruption and impunity, and providing solutions to structural problems, including better education and job opportunities for young people, are some of the policy interventions that authorities should focus on instead of heavy-handed governance impositions. Although law enforcement institutions need to be strengthened in the region, fundamental human rights must also be upheld at the same time.

The policy brief, authored by Celia Medrano, Salvadorean human rights expert and journalist; Andreas Daugaard from Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa, the Honduran chapter of Transparency International; and Guillermo Vázquez, senior analyst at the GI-TOC, will be available in April in English and Spanish.

If you are interested in covering this story or speaking with the authors, please contact us at latam@globalinitiative.net.

**About the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime**

The GI-TOC is a non-profit international organization comprising a network of over 600 independent global and regional experts. The GI-TOC seeks to open new lines of analysis to provide creative solutions to the challenges of organized crime, and to serve as an exchange and collaboration platform among governments, civil society, scholars, the private sector and other actors. Founded in 2013 and headquartered in Geneva, the GI-TOC has representation on every continent (more information [here](https://globalinitiative.net/our-story)).

**About GI-TOC Latin America**

The foundation for the GI-TOC’s work in Latin America began in 2017 with the launch of the #GIResilience Project in Mexico, a pilot initiative to document community responses to organized crime and boost local resilience to it. In 2018, our work expanded to Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama to understand extortion, build local capacities against it, and work on innovative approaches to prevent and control it. The GI-TOC's work in Latin America aims to advance policies that counter organized crime and build community resilience through a human rights-based approach. Additionally, through the Resilience Fund, our organization has supported crime prevention projects and community resilience initiatives with grassroots organizations and community members.

Today, the GI-TOC’s presence in the region covers 12 countries: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Dominican Republic (more information [here](https://globalinitiative.net/initiatives/gitoc-latam/)).