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Perspectives on Ecuador: The Sky Isn't Falling

R. Evan Ellis | January 19, 2024



Image Source: [United Press International](#).

The takeover of [Ecuadorian TV station TC](#) in the middle of a widely watched news broadcast, Ecuadoran President Daniel Noboa's declaration of a state of [internal armed conflict](#), and his [deployment of the military](#) as part of the response dominated [international news](#) and captured the [attention of Washington policymakers](#) last week. Ecuador's homicide rate has [increased eightfold over the past eight years](#), including almost [doubling last year to over 8,000 murders](#), giving the country a murder rate of [46.5 per 100,000](#), one of the highest in the region. The number of murders in prisons has similarly almost doubled to [over 400 last year](#).

Ecuador's security situation is grave and has deteriorated with a speed that has shocked the country's residents, long accustomed to relative security and

Despite media hyperbole that violence has reached apocalyptic proportions, the country is not on the verge of collapse. The temporary social and political consensus strengthened by the gangs latest overreach, and the legal conditions created by the Noboa government response, have arguably created the conditions for the government to achieve significant results against the immediate threat in the coming weeks.

Even so, the prudent and necessary actions taken by the Noboa government through Decree 111—which names the gangs as terrorist organizations, declares Ecuador in a state of “internal armed conflict,” establishes an associated 60-day a state of emergency, and mobilizes the military to combat the gangs—will not will not stop the flood of drugs, largely from Colombia, nor the associated arms and illicit revenues funding gang terrorism. The Ecuadorian military will make mistakes as it engages the gangs and will be unfairly represented in the international press. It will also adapt and become more effective. The government will struggle to break the bond between criminals in Ecuador’s jails and those on the outside. Furthermore, the Noboa government will be forced to navigate this delicate path while maintaining one eye on the political environment, especially those with an interest in exploiting Ecuador’s troubles to capture power for the populist left in the national elections of 2025.

Background to the Crisis

Ecuador’s current problems were almost tragically inevitable. The small, prosperous country’s relatively low levels of violence gave it the luxury of underfunding its security forces despite its geographic location between two of South America’s biggest cocaine-producing states.

The shakeup in the criminal economy driven by Colombia’s flawed 2016 peace accords with the FARC, followed by the stresses of the Covid-19

Colombia's porous southern border to export it via Ecuadorian ports that received less scrutiny than Colombia's.

A once obscure Ecuadorian gang, the Choneros, capitalized on this opportunity, working with Colombian narcotraffickers, and eventually with Mexico's Sinaloa cartel, to move drugs through Ecuadorian ports to the U.S. via Mexico, as well as to Europe and Asia.

The 2020 murder of Choneros leader Jorge Zambrano Gonzalez (alias "Rasquiña"), and the initiative by Sinaloa's rival Jalisco Nuevo Generacion (CJNG) to use Ecuadorian routes as well, opened up a new phase of competition between the weakened Choneros, which began to fragment, and past and emergent rivals including the Lobos, Chone Killers, and Tiguerones.

As has occurred repeatedly in the region going back to "Mano Dura" responses against Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 in El Salvador and Honduras, the flood of new, more violent, better-connected gang members into Ecuador's already crowded, imperfectly controlled prisons set the stage for escalating violence there, in coordination with gang members outside. In Ecuador's coastal provinces, the newly empowered gangs took inspiration from their Mexican and Colombian partners, who have long used targeted extreme violence at the subnational level to intimidate local governments into submission while seeking to avoid a national government response.

The Political Context

In this context of expanding violence, the November 25, 2023 election of 36-year-old Daniel Noboa was ironically shaped as much by worries among conservatives and moderates over the return of Ecuador's leftist populist former President Rafael Correa—in the form of Luisa Gonzalez as his perceived surrogate—as it was by the violence. Indeed, while the murder of

murder of the man who had long been a thorn in his side,^[i] it was not the principal anticrime candidate Jan Topic who prevailed, but rather Daniel Noboa, son of one of Ecuador's wealthiest businessmen, indirectly representing the resurgence of the country's traditional Guayaquil-based business elite.

The May 2023 invocation of early elections by prior President Guillermo Lasso meant that Noboa was elected only to finish out Lasso's presidential term, giving him 15 months to showcase his ability to combat Ecuador's multiple challenges before the next election in May 2025. With limited time, a deeply polarized society, and a minority in Congress, Noboa chose to collaborate with his principal opposition, the *Revolución Ciudadana* movement led by Correa from exile. In the process, Noboa temporarily escaped legislative paralysis and leftist mobilization against his agenda by pacting with political actors with an inherent interest in seeing him fail, so that they themselves can take power in 2025. Some evidence, including the criminal "Metastasis" case now under investigation, even points to ties between the narcotraffickers, and Correa, and those close to him. One of the organizations that Correa allegedly collaborated with as President is now named on the list of terrorist organizations by Decree 111.

The Current Situation and Challenge

Decree 111 and the Noboa government's actions in the days which have followed have arguably created the conditions for the country's military^[ii] to achieve short-term successes against the current gang threat. Under Ecuador's constitution, the declaration of a "state of internal conflict" was one of the few conditions legally enabling the military to take the required military actions against the terrorists, including the use of lethal force where necessary. Within 48 hours of the decree and deployment of the military, over 300 gang members had been arrested, 57 personnel taken as hostages in associated prison riots

The Ecuadorian military has been deployed in a more limited role against Ecuador's expanding public disorder before. While not trained and equipped to act in an investigative or community policing role, it brings a certain level of experience and preparation, as well as numbers, mobility, and firepower. The Ecuadorian military also has the benefit of executing an operation on territory and with people they know well, rather than on foreign soil with a hostile population. Nor does it need to worry about opponents being harbored or supported by the population as in a guerilla conflict.

Noboa's efforts—including recent travel to the country by senior U.S. military and State Department leaders and commitments to assistance likely to include material, intelligence, and other support—will further add to the prospects for initial successes against known gang leaders and organizational structures.

Despite such reasons for optimism, the Noboa government will face the same long-term challenges confronting other states substantially penetrated by illicit groups and economies. The flood of drugs from Colombia through Ecuador, and the criminal armies it funds, is only like to grow as drug production and competition between criminal groups in Colombia continues to expand under the Petro government.

Successes by Ecuadorian security forces against the narco-terrorists will further fragment the groups, initially increasing uncertainty, competition for drug routes, and violence. Those eliminated or jailed by security forces will be replaced by others, and the government will be hard pressed to fully control frontiers and block illicit flows. The government will similarly be challenged to assert control in existing prisons and complete new ones to cut off incarcerated gang leaders from narco networks on the outside.

Ecuador will not crumble under the current wave of criminality, but the country will arrive at May 2025 national elections deeply divided over the

due to the gravity of the challenge and limitations of time, but for better or worse, their perception of his achievements and errors in the coming campaign will strongly shape the future direction of the country.

[i] Based on multiple off-the-record author interviews with Ecuadorans in the immediate aftermath of Villavicencio.

[ii] Based on the author's interactions with the Ecuadoran military over numerous years at both the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies and the U.S. Army War College, including 5 years as professional colleague with former Ecuadoran Minister of Defense Dr. Oswaldo Jarrin.

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