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Ecuador

Capitalism and drug trafficking in Ecuador: Two sides of the same coin

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The spread of drug trafficking in Ecuador is an acute illustration of the degeneration of neoliberal capitalism, for which the Ecuadorean elite itself is the main culprit. To no one's surprise, however, the "war on drugs" conceals a series of measures that target the poorest sectors of the population.

Ecuador is experiencing a wave of organized criminal violence that has made the headlines around the world. However, these events cannot be understood unless we look at the structural problems. The situation in Ecuador has become increasingly complicated in recent years: deepening poverty, new international drug routes and the emergence of a local narco-bourgeoisie, have developed in the context of a global crisis of capitalism in its neoliberal version, leading to a decomposition and rupture of the social pact between classes, nationalities and hegemonic blocs.

In this situation, the government of Daniel Noboa has decided to 'confront' the wave of drug-related crime that is engulfing Ecuador by declaring an 'internal armed conflict'. In other words, a war against the poor, financed on the backs of the poor, which has been supported by the middle class and certain lower class sectors that have been captured by the government's punitive discourse. The premise behind the government's action appears to be that "violence can be remedied with more violence", revealing an attempt by the elites to discipline society by way of death.

The evidence worldwide shows that more than 40 years of the war on drugs have been a failure: the psychotropic industry has grown and so has the consumer population, money laundering has increased and social fragmentation has deepened. Colombia, Mexico and Peru are notable examples of the utter failure of this strategy, driven by what was once the world's biggest consumer of cocaine, the United States. (According to a 2023 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the United States is now the third biggest consumer of cocaine in the world, relative to population, behind Australia and the United Kingdom.)

The true background to the declaration of war by the government does not lie in the current explosion of the narco-economy in Ecuador, or in the 'unexpected takeover' - broadcast around the world - of the TC Televisión channel. Analysis of the way the operation was carried out and the subsequent murder of the prosecutor César Suarez, in charge of investigating this "armed assault" on the TC Televisión channel, suggests that it was either a staged operation or at least one tolerated by the security forces with the aim of blaming "terrorism" and justifying the declaration of an internal armed conflict.

The economic elites, especially during the Correa, Moreno and Lasso administrations, have slowly been preparing - mainly after the plurinational rebellions of October 2019 and June 2022 - a strategy for eliminating the only left-wing opposition with a real capacity for social mobilization: the Ecuadorean Indigenous movement (Zibechi, 2024).

Cocaine, geopolitics and spectacle

Beyond the spectacle of violence that Ecuador has been experiencing for some time now, the root of the problem is that cocaine continues to flow through the main ports. Why? The answer is simple, and to some extent obvious: the exporting elites continue to benefit from it, and the money continues to be laundered. The problem is not so much Fito - one of the most important local drug traffickers - as the participation, over several decades, of the bourgeoisie

as a class in the drug business.

You only have to look at the press reports that point to the export shipping fleets belonging to President Noboa's family, on which bananas and cocaine leave for Europe. How can billions of dollars be laundered if not through the financial system and the real economy (real estate, agro-industry, mining and commerce)? In short, certain groups living in Samborondón or Cumbayá (exclusive areas of Guayaquil and Quito) continue to become more powerful, in collusion with local gangs and transnational groups, like the Sinaloa, Jalisco Nueva Generación, and 'Albanian' cartels, among others.

The government's declaration of an internal armed conflict has dodged the central problem: the bourgeois drug economy. Without attacking the root of the problem, this bombastic declaration translates, in practice, into a war against the poor, not against drug trafficking. No one in Ecuador has ever seen a single member of the drug-trafficking bourgeoisie in their wealthy suburbs imprisoned or mistreated. However, the militarization and humiliation of the poorer communities is commonplace.

In this tragedy, poor and racialized young people - many of them Afro-Ecuadoreans - from the slums of cities with a grotesque gulf between rich and poor (like Guayaquil, Durán, Portoviejo, Santo Domingo, Esmeraldas, Machala, Quevedo, Babahoyo, and others), have been the main victim. The vulgar dichotomy between "bad guys" and "good guys" is exacerbated at every turn. The former, the "terrorists", are the poor, the blacks, the cholos, the montubios, the delinquents, the precarious workers, the young men, the objectified women and the organized people in general; in short, the subaltern classes. The second are the really-existing 'powers that be', which take advantage of the idea of Ecuadorean "national unity" to bolster their interests.

For the subalterns there is only public humiliation, mistreatment, beatings, torture, humiliation and death (the latter often described with the macabre euphemism of "casualties"); all of this is meticulously conveyed through the corporate media. In contrast, the powers-that-be violently attack one part of the economic chain of drug trafficking, the one that operates in the poor neighbourhoods, while making invisible the other part of the narco-economy - the main one - that operates as a lumpenized bourgeoisie and controls the main part of the drug market.

This operation turns the poor into a synonym for criminal or terrorist. In the process, it seeks to dynamite the concept of human rights in public opinion. It intentionally overlooks the fact that the popular sectors are the victims of drug violence, not its cause. The people are caught in the crossfire of the narco-bourgeoisie, which pits the gangs against each other and against the government (where the gangs also have a presence, as has been shown by the denunciation of the US ambassador to Ecuador, Michael Fitzpatrick, who a couple of years ago said on CNN that he was very concerned "about the penetration of drug trafficking in Ecuador and in the forces of law and order").

This scenario implies a twofold triumph for the really-existing power. On the one hand, it has managed to discipline society through fear and a one-sided official account of what is going on in the country. The state legitimizes itself as the main political actor, and justifies its anti-people reform package by normalising the use of violence against so-called "terrorism" and by winning support among frightened subaltern sectors of the population. Any dissenting voice is considered an ally of the drug traffickers. This facilitates the implementation of the government's neoliberal package because it finds no opposition in the terrorized society, or if it does, it eliminates it through the violence of war.

On the other hand, it opens the door to a military presence of the U.S. in Ecuador, and of Israeli Zionism through the export of its military technology. This objective, justified on the grounds of the uprisings of 2019 and 2022 – seeks to give an anti-communist character to the government's stabilization strategy. And it gives a glimpse of what has been going on behind the scenes of this whole operation: the underlying geopolitical and geostrategic issue is that the US wants to win more ground in the southern hemisphere in the midst of its dispute with the Beijing-Moscow-Tehran

axis.

Other aspects also affect the chaotic map of the drug trafficking business in Ecuador. Firstly, we should mention the 'peace process' in Colombia, which disrupted the northern border by in large part removing one of the ideological poles in the dispute. The former FARC-EP has been replaced by weak and scattered groups of dissidents, and led to the growth of multiple narco-paramilitary gangs. Secondly, the assassination in December 2020 of alias 'Rasquiña' (leader of Los Choneros) fragmented the gang landscape into multiple groups (Tiguerones, Chonekillers, Los Fatales, Águilas, etc.) which fought for territory against other groups with different origins such as Los Lobos. 3)

The arrival of the Mexican cartels, to expand the cocaine export trade to Europe, given that it is more convenient to transport the drugs from dollarized Ecuador than from Peru or Colombia, was a third factor. The emergence of synthetic drugs, such as fentanyl, has reshaped the geography of the drugs trade, and has been one of the triggers for the escalation of violence in Ecuador. As the Colombian government says, the growth of consumption of this drug in the United States decreased the demand for cocaine, strengthening other cocaine markets in Europe, Asia and Oceania. The traditional Pacific coast route was now joined by the Amazon basin route towards the Atlantic and the South Pacific. This brought about an important change in the epicentre of cocaine production: historically located on Colombia's Pacific coast, it shifted to the area bordering the north-east of Ecuador (Sucumbíos province), a region that is currently the main cocaine production centre in the world. With this shift came also the transfer of drug-trafficking know-how to Ecuador, including the pedagogy of terror and professional training in the use of violence, for example Albanian Mafia's "schools for hitmen".

The final factor to take account of is of course the desperate poverty that afflicts especially the poor neighbourhoods all along the Ecuadorean coast. There, the brutal inequalities of capitalism have forced young people into the ranks of the drug gangs. With almost no legal opportunities open to them, the gangs seem to be their only option, offering at least a minimum wage and some sort of future. It may be brief, but it's better than nothing.

Narco-bourgeoisie

As in any other sector of the capitalist economy, large business groups invest in certain branches of production and profitable markets (regardless of whether they are lawful or immoral), diversifying their returns and, in this case, laundering billions of dollars of proceeds from criminal activities. The narcos have penetrated the economy of a dollarized country, as exemplified in particular by the mining sector. Data on the intensive presence of mining in the southern subtropical areas of the country show the level of penetration of one of the local gangs, Los Lobos, allied to a transnational cartel, the Jalisco New Generation. They control 20 mining concessions directly, while in another 30 they exercise their power through extortion, collecting protection money from the mine operators. In this part of the country alone, Los Lobos are linked to at least 40 local mining mafias, with a monthly turnover of 3.6 million dollars (Ojo Público, 2024). Meanwhile, Los Choneros launder their resources through real estate and public works, and the Albanian Mafia through the domestic financial system (cooperatives and banks).

As in other countries in the region, such as Mexico, the declaration of a "war on drugs" by the government implies a siding with one of the drug-trafficking cartels in the conflict. In other words, an alliance with one or more of the dominant drug cartels in order to limit or eliminate other cartels, whose relationship with the really-existing powers-that-be is of lesser relevance.

In other words: conflicts over the drug trafficking business relate to local, regional and global inter-bourgeois disputes - disputes between drug lords and drug businesses that have a closer or lesser relationship with the government and the state. By way of illustration, it is worth noting that Genaro García Luna, Secretary of Security and ideologue of the

war on drugs during Felipe Calderón's government in Mexico, worked directly for the Sinaloa Cartel. This strategy has functioned as a business model, and even as a way of continuing the counterinsurgency policy, which, applied to the Ecuadorean case, would translate into a hardening of the government's approach of criminalising social struggles.

Why is the persecution of Los Choneros and the Albanian Mafia not as intense as that against Los Lobos and Los Tigüerones? Have successive governments been soft on the drug gangs? These questions are not just fundamental questions, but plausible hypotheses². Look for example at the murder of Rubén Chérrez, a close friend of Danilo Carrera, brother-in-law of Guillermo Lasso, and linked to drug trafficking, corruption, influence peddling and a key player in the impeachment trial against the former president.

The orchestration of prison massacres in 2021, 2022 and 2023, the infiltration of drug traffickers into the National Service for the Comprehensive Care of Adults Deprived of their Liberty and Adolescent Offenders (SNAI), in the ports, customs and border force, in short, the politicization of the drug trade, are all part of a demobilization strategy. The argument, put forward by both Moreno and Lasso, that the 2019 and 2022 strikes were financed by groups linked to drug trafficking, clearly points in this direction.

The entry of the drug trade into Ecuadorean politics is a phenomenon that can be traced back to at least the last five governments (some accounts suggest that the possible arrival of the Sinaloa cartel occurred during the administration of Lucio Gutiérrez). The lumpenization that this entails is mainly associated with the degradation of neoliberal capitalism which, deepened in recent years, has led to a systematic dismantling of the state, budget cuts and the loss of acquired rights.

In the absence of a common class project, the dominant elites became entrenched in disputes that disrupted the framework of public security. At the same time, poverty was on the rise. All this produced a breeding ground for the growth of phenomena associated with the drug-trafficking economy. Based on the adaptive capacity of capital (Marx) or capitalism's need to codify deterritorialized flows (Deleuze), the drug trafficking business gradually adapted to the needs of Ecuadorean capitalism, from the point of view of economic accumulation, state domination and the building of consent among the population with regard to an expanded repressive strategy.

In this maelstrom, the government has seized the opportunity to legitimize itself with a view to its re-election in 2025, whether through painting itself as the victim ("the violence of the narco is a legacy of past governments"), whether by carrying out false flag operations (such as the TC Televisión simulation) or through the deepening of violence (the use of rival groups, terrorism as a political resource, etc.). The idea has been planted in Ecuadorean society, not only that the problem is the absence of the state, but also that this must be solved by building an apparatus centred on internal militarization and repression. This suggests a number of possible options for government action in the coming months:

- 1) Promote reforms to the Integral Penal Code to toughen the penalties for terrorism, intensify Bukele-style repression and legitimize the state of emergency, provisions that in due course will not discriminate between a social movement activist and a lumpen.
- 2) Moves from the Assembly and the Executive to adopt packages of reforms and anti-popular actions: labour deregulation, VAT increases, Free Trade Agreement with China, the elimination of subsidies, etc.
- 3) Defend the agreements made by the government of Guillermo Lasso to allow the presence of US military personnel and contractors in Ecuador, against the backdrop of a "Plan Ecuador -the local version of Plan Colombia-, one more step towards the militarization of society and the loss of sovereignty.

4) Giving free rein to large-scale mining, raw material exports and liberalization of the economy as a means of generating profits for the local bourgeoisie, based on the needs of capitalism in the metropolitan countries.

5) Implementation of cosmetic measures in the investigation of the drug cartels' infiltration of the security forces, the judiciary, customs, etc., with the aim of covering up the absence of significant arrests of bourgeois bosses of the drug trafficking business and local criminal gangs (at most, a few selective arrests as a "smokescreen").

6) Strengthening the supposed Correism/anti-Correism dichotomy and deepening the criminalization of the leadership of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) as a way of creating "false positives".

Possible responses from below

Given this state of affairs, it is natural that the Ecuadorean situation should seem quite confusing for the popular organizations. But there are fundamental elements within this panorama that should guide our actions. The first, of course, is that the growth of drug trafficking has not been caused by the popular sectors. Those responsible are well entrenched in the drug bourgeoisie.

The debt owed by the left, which did not recognize this in time, lies in not having sufficiently organized the poor sectors most vulnerable to being recruited by the gangs, into an organizational project capable of offering an alternative to the transformations of the capitalist economy (among which drug trafficking is one). The second, despite the above, involves continuing to insist on building unity from below, in order to accumulate forces and confront a comprehensive offensive from above. The narrative of "national unity" promoted by the government is a pus-filled shell, and the popular sectors must dissociate themselves from this discourse.

The popular movement - and this is the third guiding element - must present itself as the real opposition to the drug trafficking business, a business that is built by powerful economic groups working with international cartels and local criminal gangs, and which has the blessing of the government of the day. The strategy of labour deregulation and the anti-popular reforms that the Noboa government intends to impose under the pretext of "financing the war" must meet with the fiercest opposition. Those who caused (and benefited from) the narco boom were the rich: they are the ones to blame and they must bear the consequences.

We must demand a change in the state's anti-drug strategy. Firstly, by condemning the racist practices and the criminalization of poverty that humiliate the popular sectors and try to hide the conditions of misery in which the majority of the Ecuadorean people live. Secondly, by rejecting the build-up of repressive forces, which only serve to encourage corruption in public and private institutions, and to make invisible the precarious social conditions of the majority of the affected population and to increase senseless violence.

The defence of the territories of the Indigenous nationalities and peoples, and of any land where there are organized communities, by means of the community, Indigenous and people's guards (the self-defence forces developed by the Indigenous movement and some other local communities), must also be one of our priorities. Hand in hand with the above, we must reject any building of prisons in areas where there are organized social movements (as the government proposes to do in the provinces of Pastaza and Santa Elena).

In short, the proliferation of drug trafficking in Ecuador is an acute symptom of the degradation of neoliberal capitalism and marks a point of no return between barbarism and a profound transformation of our country. It brings face to face the narco-bourgeoisie with the subaltern sectors, whose main organizational reference point is the Indigenous Movement. The declarations of the President of the Republic, ignoring the obvious use of the current

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situation to accentuate anti-popular measures, clearly illustrate that the target of the “war” is not and never will be the drug trade, but the people at the bottom. We must understand this battle for what it really is and unite and organize ourselves accordingly.

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Translated for *International Viewpoint* from [Jacobin América Latina](#).

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