

Deepening Democracy under Criminal Governance? Comparative Insights from Mexico City

by **Eduardo Moncada** | Barnard College, Columbia University | emoncada@barnard.edu

Is it possible to deepen democracy in territories where criminals govern? Across much of Latin America, populations live and work in places where organized crime intervenes in social, economic, and political life in ways that constrain the quality of democracy (O'Donnell 1993). Far from the assumption that organized crime and democracy are incompatible, however, criminal governance can either limit or enable democratic deepening, depending on the nature of the criminal regime. Much existing literature details the dismal track record of top-down reforms to police (González 2021) and judicial (Magaloni and Rodríguez 2020) institutions that governments pursue to strengthen democracy. But we know surprisingly less about the challenges of trying to deepen democracy from below in such settings. Can marginalized citizens mount and sustain deliberative and participatory democratic processes to address pressing, everyday needs in territories where criminal actors govern?

In this essay I explore how variation in two defining features of criminal regimes—the nature of relations among criminal organizations and between these organizations and the state—impacts the ability of citizens to enact democratic practices collectively from the bottom up. I draw on empirical insights from fieldwork in Mexico City that is part of a broader ongoing research project on the comparative politics of nonstate security provision in the urban Americas. I zoom in on two similar neighborhoods with contrasting experiences in citizen-led efforts to deepen democracy as part of addressing a concern that afflicts many communities in Latin America: limited access to water. In one neighborhood, citizens failed to mobilize around this pressing

issue, whereas in the second, citizens worked collectively to advance deliberation and participation in authoritative local decision-making while maintaining autonomy from traditional clientelist networks. While the two communities have similarly high levels of crime and violence and share important socioeconomic and political features, they differ in the forms of criminal governance that predominate in each.

Criminal Governance and Democracy

How does criminal governance impact democracy? Cross-national survey analyses find that crime and violence are negatively associated with individual-level support for democratic systems, values, and institutions (Carreras 2013). Scholars do identify a positive relationship between crime victimization and nonelectoral forms of political participation, such as engagement in civic associations (Bateson 2012). But the picture gets more complicated once we scale down from the level of entire countries to that of the municipalities and neighborhoods where criminal governance is rooted and shapes everyday life. Survey-based studies in those specific spaces find that crime, violence, and insecurity negatively affect both electoral (Ley 2018) and nonelectoral (Córdova 2019) forms of political participation.

Conceiving of citizens solely as bystanders in contexts of crime and violence overlooks how they respond to and confront criminal actors in ways that also impact democracy. Recent research finds that Indigenous communities in Mexico, for example, use historical institutions of democratic self-governance to stop drug-

trafficking organizations from taking over their territories (Ley, Mattiace, and Trejo 2019). Where Indigenous communities succeed in safeguarding their territories they can sustain their traditional institutions of democratic self-governance. But what about in settings already under the control of criminal actors? Elsewhere I have analyzed the conditions under which victims resist criminal extortion in territories controlled by criminal actors using strategies outside of the rule of law to end, negotiate, or prevent their victimization (Moncada 2021). Strategies of resistance can differ in their intent and social organization, among other features, but all carry complex implications for democracy. For example, victims may engage in individualized negotiations with criminal actors that reduce the rate or level of extortion they must endure but enable criminal actors to retain territorial control. Victims may pursue collective extralegal violence against criminal groups and even target police and politicians colluding with criminals. And in still other cases, victims may threaten or use extralegal violence to shape electoral outcomes and put into power allies sympathetic to citizens' continued use of violent practices that undermine the rule of law. Strategies of resistance to criminal governance can thus challenge core aspects of conventional democracy.

But Latin America is also fertile terrain for experiments in nonconventional forms of democracy (Fung 2011). Decentralization starting in the late twentieth century theoretically gave citizens opportunities to influence local policymaking. And participatory institutions were supposed to enable citizen deliberation to inform local governance. However, in some cases these state-sponsored and top-down reforms also generated incentives for criminal actors to capture subnational territorial units, which were now endowed with economic resources (Eaton 2006) and political power (Arias 2017). But we know less about the ability of citizens to use deliberative and participatory democratic practices to address pressing everyday needs while living under criminal governance.

Criminal Governance and Implications for Deepening Democracy from Below

Criminal governance refers to the enforcement of rules by a criminal organization on its members, other criminal groups, and/or civilians (Lessing 2021). Two features of criminal regimes are the nature of relations among criminal actors and the nature of relations between the criminal actors and the state. Variation along these dimensions have different implications for everyday life (Arias 2017; Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, and Melo 2020). Here I explore how differences in these dimensions can have contrasting effects on bottom-up efforts to deepen democracy. I focus on a territorial setting where there is a single criminal actor that has collaborative relations with the state, and another territorial setting where there are multiple competing criminal actors that have conflictive relations with the state. The two forms of criminal governance have distinct implications for three aspects of bottom-up efforts to deepen democracy: physical mobility, public display, and social cohesion.

A fundamental prerequisite for deepening democracy is *physical mobility*, which makes possible face-to-face deliberation. Citizens need to be able to travel through streets to gather, discuss, and debate issues in person as part of contributing to localized democratic processes. In these processes citizens can share information, reflect on communal concerns, and arrive at and enact collective decisions (Barber 1984, 151; Fung 2003). Such face-to-face engagement is where citizens develop democratic skills, including how to cooperate, listen to divergent viewpoints, and amend individual preferences for the collective good (Warren 2001, 73), as well as the logistical skills of organizing meetings, developing agendas, and establishing rules of engagement (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). But face-to-face engagement is only possible when citizens feel safe physically moving through and being in public spaces—a challenge in contexts where the violence and insecurity associated with criminal governance largely take place in public spaces.

Public display refers to citizens making themselves visible as part of deliberation with each other and participation in claims-making processes. Avritzer (2002) refers to this as the “public space” of democratic participation—where communication takes place, both among citizens and between them and actors in political and economic spheres. But a second meaning of “public” is that citizen participation in deliberation and claims making is also freely observable to other actors. This is particularly the case for citizens who organize meetings, encourage neighbors to participate, engage with state authorities, and pursue contentious actions, such as protests intended precisely to garner widespread attention. But public display as a component of deepening democracy from below belies the unstated but widespread rule in territories under criminal rule of maintaining anonymity in everyday life: “*ver, oír, y callar*” (see, hear, and shut up). In settings where even being suspected of engaging in behaviors that might threaten criminal rule can elicit violent punishment by criminal actors, maintaining anonymity is a rational survival strategy, thus generating a barrier to a key aspect of deepening democracy from below.

Social cohesion refers to the bonds of trust within a community that underwrite collective action (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1994). Trust enables generalized trust through which citizens are willing to amend individual preferences for the collective good and forego freeriding (Knack and Keefer 1997). But the corrosive effects of violence and insecurity on physical mobility and the dangers associated with public display limit the ability of citizens to build and sustain bonds of trust. Collective mobilization is difficult in settings when citizens distrust fellow community members amid suspicion of possible collusion with criminal actors (Moncada 2021, 32–33).

Higher levels of criminal competition and state-criminal conflict should constrain citizen-led efforts to deepen democracy from below. Increased violence and insecurity as criminals clash over territory and illicit markets while confronting state security forces reduce physical mobility because people fear being in and

traveling through public spaces. The incentives for public display should also decline as citizens will favor keeping out of the spotlight. And criminal competition and state-criminal conflict increase the potential opportunities for citizens to report on the activities of criminal actors to their rivals, as well as to the state. This leads criminal actors to engage in greater monitoring of local populations to detect and punish potential denunciation, including recruiting locals as informants on their neighbors, thus weakening social cohesion and citizens’ ability to coordinate and enact practices to deepen democracy from below.

Mexico City: Shared Neighborhood Concerns and Different Implications for Democracy

Many residents of Mexico City face scarce access to clean water due to several factors, including rapid urban growth, limited wastewater treatment infrastructure, public sector corruption, politicization of the issue, and climate change. But it is poorer communities that are more likely to struggle with dry taps, lower levels of water pressure, and contaminated water sources. These conditions are present in two neighborhoods (*colonias*) in the southeastern part of Mexico City where I have been conducting research. The first neighborhood, which I call “La Yogona,” is in the borough (*alcaldía*) of Tláhuac, and the second, “La Soledad,” is in the adjacent borough of Iztapalapa. The two neighborhoods began as informal settlements in the second half of the twentieth century, have high levels of poverty, histories of supporting the political Left, and the presence of armed criminal groups involved in the illicit drug trade. The communities differ, however, in their responses to water scarcity.

La Yogona’s residents began mobilizing collectively to address water concerns in 2019. They established an informal association that I call “Vecinos Unidos” (United Neighbors), elected a leadership council, appointed a spokesperson, held regular community meetings, and organized protests. Residents purposefully structured their mobilization to deepen democracy from the bottom up, emphasizing citizen deliberation and

participation regarding the steps they would take to collectively address water scarcity. Through their deliberations, residents collectively decided to forego turning to the clientelist networks that had historically offered only temporary and partial access to water and instead make their collective efforts apolitical, by refusing to support political parties or candidates. But without a political patron, this meant that obtaining water necessitated sustained citizen participation. Residents structured their mobilization by designating “coordinators” on each street in La Yogona who worked constantly with their neighbors to keep records on tanker truck deliveries of potable water (*pipas*) to household cisterns and information on how long each household had water running from its taps. This data was then aggregated and shared with another group of residents who produced graphs and tables showing patterns of access to water at the individual street level, which leaders of Vecinos Unidos brought with them to meetings with the city’s water agency to prove that La Yogona was not receiving the amounts of water that authorities claimed to be providing. Engaging in deliberative processes and participating in the monitoring of water deliveries and community-wide meetings required neighbors to physically traverse and occupy public spaces. The number of archives generated through the monitoring practices led neighbors to collectively pool resources to rent a one-room office on a busy thoroughfare in the neighborhood, which was widely known as the headquarters for Vecinos Unidos. Other highly visible acts included blocking busy intersections in La Yogona to bring traffic to a standstill and attract media attention, which Vecinos Unidos used to publicize their claims for access to water. Over time, residents leveraged the cohesion used to advance claims on access to water to collectively address other community concerns, including creating an online marketplace where residents could advertise homemade goods for sale during the COVID-19 pandemic, and collecting and distributing medications to neighbors unable to afford them.

By contrast, and despite facing a similar lack of access to water, residents in La Soledad failed to mobilize in ways that deepened local democracy. The lack of mobilization in La Soledad is particularly striking given that it is geographically adjacent to La Yogona. Yet neighbors in La Soledad opted not to mobilize collectively in a similar fashion, despite the fact that limited access to water negatively affects the community. A woman who helps to run an educational center in La Soledad lamented the difficulty of teaching neighborhood children when the lack of water means that they cannot use the bathroom. She noted that neighbors resort to stealing water from each other, and she was forced to install a lock on the opening to the water cistern on her roof after a supply of water she bought from a private vendor was stolen overnight. Other residents similarly indicated that working with neighbors to address collective concerns is not an option, specifically because they fear for their safety moving through the neighborhood and drawing attention to themselves.

What explains these contrasting responses to similar contexts of limited access to water in adjacent communities that also share important socioeconomic and political features? A focus on contrasting forms of criminal governance can help answer this question.

La Yogona forms part of a set of municipalities in Tláhuac that in 2011 came under the control of the Cartel de Tláhuac (CdT), a drug trafficking organization (DTO) that emerged in Mexico City. The CdT coordinated the distribution chain of illicit drugs traveling north into Mexico City’s neighborhoods and monopolized street-level sales in Tláhuac. It was widely rumored to have collaborative ties to local politicians and police that enabled it to operate as an open secret without needing to use extensive force against residents of the neighborhoods it controlled. For example, one of its leaders, Gregorio Sandoval Hernández, was renowned for using minimal violence to govern the drug trade. A resident remarked that another of the DTO’s leader, Felipe de Jesús Pérez, paid to pave sidewalks and streets, acting like a local “Robin Hood.” The DTO was able to sustain territorial control in this way

for several years and continued to do so, after Federal Police captured or killed several of its leaders between 2017 and 2021, by bequeathing control of the DTO to the children of its leaders. It was during this time of relative order in La Yogona, given limited criminal competition and state-criminal conflict, that neighbors leveraged the lack of violence and insecurity to participate in public meetings where they deliberated on water scarcity, organized publicly visible activities to draw attention to water scarcity (and themselves), and leveraged social cohesion to address other community concerns. Authorities in the city's water agency and city government were forced to respond to the demands of La Yogona's residents and to begin providing stable access to water in the neighborhood.

The contrasting nature of criminal governance in La Soledad has different implications for the ability of residents to address water scarcity. La Soledad has a history of numerous competing street gangs that control the local drug trade. Violent confrontations between gangs over turf from where they sell drugs regularly take place in neighborhood streets and other public spaces. Unlike the CdT, the gangs in La Soledad do not have collaborative relations with state authorities. Police regularly extort gang members by demanding bribes in exchange for not arresting them. Significant police operations against the gangs, however, tend to produce violent battles in the labyrinth of alleyways that crisscross the neighborhood. These conditions lead community members to avoid public spaces for fear of getting caught in the cross fire, meaning they also prefer to remain anonymous in the public sphere. The fragmentation of the neighborhood into multiple armed actors strains social cohesion as residents are unable to trust each other for fear that neighbors might be working with one of the multiple drug gangs that are monitoring local behavior. Water scarcity continues to be a major challenge in La Soledad.

Conclusion

In this essay I argued that the nature of criminal governance influences the ability of marginalized citizens to deepen democracy from below.

Variation in relations among competing criminal actors and between them and the state has implications for physical mobility, public display, and social cohesion—crucial requisites needed to engage in bottom-up projects of deliberative and participatory democracy. I illustrated the effects of criminal governance through a comparison of urban neighborhood-level cases of citizen efforts to address water scarcity in Mexico City, where variation in criminal regimes enabled but also precluded citizen experiments in deepening democracy even in settings of criminal governance.

More broadly, the analysis shows that criminal governance and democracy do not have a zero-sum relation. The two interact with each other in ways that are complex and consequential. Further unpacking this intersection requires disaggregating both the processes of democracy—such as elections, campaigns, institutional legitimacy, and policymaking—as well as the actors involved in democratic politics, including the state, bureaucracies, business, and criminal organizations. Some of the emerging research that I discuss above uses exactly this approach and yields counterintuitive findings that invite rethinking classic understandings of how politics functions in Latin America and much of the developing world. But we also need to consider the role of citizens in the politics of democratic and criminal governance, and particularly to consider whether and how they can deepen democracy in settings of criminal governance.

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