Latin America Goes GLOBAL
DATA, OPINION, AND ANALYSIS

GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Militarizing the Police Undermines Democratic Governance

By Orlando J. Pérez / August 3, 2015

The police killings of African-American citizens in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland have focused attention on the militarization of police forces. Part of that attention has turned to the transfer of weapons, equipment and training from the military to local police units. As a result, a previously overlooked practice has come under intense criticism over concerns of the impact on civil liberties and the transformation of the police into heavily armed, martial forces.

But the militarization of police units has been a longstanding policy in Latin America well before it received attention from the U.S. media. U.S. bilateral assistance to countries in Latin America has encouraged the adoption of military equipment and military training for local police forces. While the U.S. prohibits the armed forces from

assisting police forces at home, the practice of technology transfer and military training in-country has been a cornerstone of U.S. policy in Latin America and the Caribbean for years. The logic is that crime and violence have overwhelmed local police forces—weak and corrupt to begin with—and therefore the armed forces are necessary for the state to provide security. But that comes with huge risks.

Whether the policy has been successful is questionable. In the meantime, the militarization of the police—without regard to its effectiveness—has become ubiquitous.

Latin American police forces—across the region—have become militarized in three ways. First has been in the transmission of material—military weaponry, equipment, and advanced technology. Second, the culture of the armed forces—distinct from that of police forces—has become dominant, with a growing use of martial language, police officers viewing their own role and purpose more in militaristic terms, and even in the changing of their appearance. Third has been in organization, with elite officers squads often patterned after military special operations. Local constabulary forces often mimic military models in areas of intelligence, supervision and handling of high-risk situations.

The classic case is Brazil. In the region's largest country, the federal government relies on the military police to carry out raids and operations in high risk areas instead of directly sending in the army. But as pressure has mounted for a more effective response to the country's rising crime rate the federal government has come to rely on the military in high-crime areas. Under former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and now President Dilma Rousseff, the military has

been called out of the barracks for the pacification of *favelas,* for the protection of oil fields and for patrolling the streets during the Pope's visit and the FIFA World Cup.

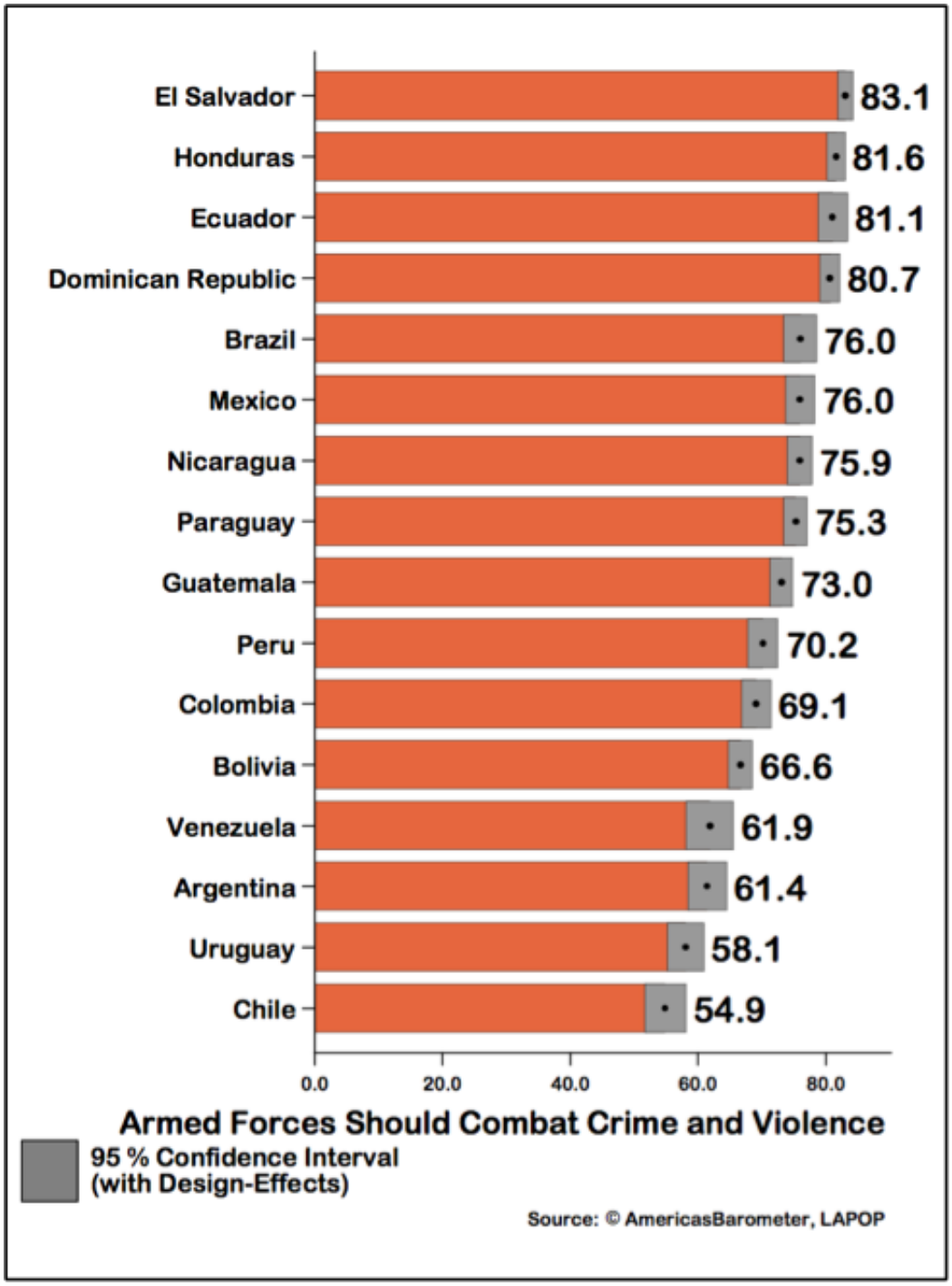
The problem is particularly acute in violence-ridden Central America. In Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador rising violence has overwhelmed police forces. As a result, in all three countries, the armed forces now routinely engage in public security, providing personnel and equipment for specific tasks such as urban patrols and commandos for fighting organized crime. According to the Ministry of Defense, 39 percent of El Salvador's armed forces play some role in domestic security missions. This breaks down to having 2,940 of El Salvadoran boots on the ground work in citizen security; 2,575 work in the prison system; and 580 work in controlling immigration.

At its core, the use of the military is part of a policy of applying "*mano dura*" to the problem of crime and violence. Beyond putting the military on the street in domestic security issues, "*mano dura*" policies also include lengthening prison sentences, suspending due process guarantees and other protections for alleged criminals, and aggressively arresting youth suspected of gang membership. But despite the trend, evidence has shown that these policies don't work.

Criminal activity has not been disrupted by these strategies. According to a study I recently completed, homicide rates in Central America have remained among the highest in the world despite the militarization of police there. At the same time, according to Steven Dudley and Insight Crime, gangs and other criminal networks have increased their level of organization, technological sophistication, and international links. In fact, the evidence suggests that relying on the

military tends to increase human rights abuses, including torture, disappearances and extra-judicial killings. Despite the limited success, however, public opinion still supports the use of the military in domestic security.

In its 2014 surveys, AmericasBarometer asked the following question: *¿Hasta qué punto está de acuerdo o en desacuerdo que las Fuerzas Armadas deben participar en el combate del crimen y de la violencia en (país)*" [To what extent do you support the involvement of the Armed Forces to combat crime and violence in (country)?]. Across the region, a majority of respondents supported a greater role for the military in domestic security, from a low of 54.9 percent in Chile to a high of 83.1 percent in El Salvador.



The above figure shows the average level of support for using the military in the 16 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean that possess traditional military institutions—thus excluding Costa Rica, Panama and Haiti. In addition to El Salvador—the country with the highest support for greater military involvement, in which the armed forces are already routinely working with police to fight crime—

significant majorities also support military involvement in crime prevention in Honduras, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic. The lowest level of support is expressed in Uruguay, Argentina and Chile countries where the armed forces are mostly not involved in domestic security. Yet, even in these countries majorities still support the use of the armed forces to help fight crime.

Statistical analysis suggests that trust in the military versus the police is a significant factor determining support for using the armed forces to combat crime. Police forces are generally considered weak and corrupt. In contrast, the military is generally considered disciplined, apolitical and effective. Evidence from the *Americas Barometer* shows the armed forces are the most trusted state institution in Latin America, second only to the Catholic Church. For example, in 2014, the police received an average level of trust of 46 on a 0-100 scale, whereas the military averaged 60. Citizens who have been victims of crime and those who have a higher perception of insecurity also have higher levels of support for the use of the military. Demographically, men and those with less education tend also to support the militarization of crime fighting. Indeed there is a certain circularity in perception of insecurity, declining trust in the police and support for the use of the military and more repressive policies.

The problem is that police and military functions are quite different in scope and nature. The former is intended as law enforcement with the emphasis on investigation, prevention and capture of those engaged in criminal activity. The latter are traditionally focused on maximum lethal force to defend against enemies of the state or its territory. While modern militaries tend to be multi-dimensional organizations, and have acquired roles and missions well beyond

traditional defense, their constitutional functions and core missions remain very different from the police.

Use of the armed forces for domestic security is constitutionally and legally intended to be a short-term measure used in extreme circumstances. While crime and violence in certain countries might rise to the level of "extreme," the permanent use of the armed forces undermines constitutional norms and the institutional integrity of both the military and the police. The use of the military has some short-term positive effects, particularly when police forces are completely overrun and crime is localized, but, in the long-term, criminal networks become more sophisticated and lethal, the police are not strengthened, the military's mission is undermined and the underlying causes of crime—inequality, poverty, corruption—are not tackled. And as a result, violence increases.

Popular support for militarizing the police has to be understood as a function of the public's overwhelming concern for the effects of crime and violence. Governments respond to public pressure by using the most expedient tactics. The responsibility of policy makers, both in the region and in Washington, is to understand that crime can only be tackled effectively by a multidimensional approach that includes economic and social reforms, reducing corruption, controlling the availability of weapons, and strengthening the judicial system and the police. Conversely, continued militarization of policing functions will perpetuate a vicious cycle of repression, crime and institutional weakness that together will increase violence and undermine democratic governance.

For more on this topic, please see the recent Amnesty International report on homicides by military police in Rio de Janeiro.

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