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Venezuela's Crime Debacle: A Cautionary Tale

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The [January 30 kidnapping](#) of Carlos Pujalte, the Mexican Ambassador to Venezuela, and his wife, has cast unflattering light on the South American country's public safety plight. The couple was freed soon afterwards and is in good condition after experiencing a classic example of what has become a burgeoning industry in Latin America – the “express” kidnapping. In these types of abductions the victim is retained for just enough time to elicit a relatively small ransom or pay a visit to an ATM. This occurrence is neither new nor exceptional in Venezuela. Over the past year several diplomats have suffered a similar fate in Caracas, including the Chilean consul who wound up in a local hospital after being shot by his captors. According to a victimization survey conducted by Venezuela's National Institute of Statistics, in the year leading up to July 2009, 46 kidnappings took place every day in Venezuela, a much larger figure than that of neighboring Colombia, once the world's epicenter of the kidnapping business.

The recurring abduction of diplomats –something more frequently associated with war theaters or guerrilla tactics—is a clear symptom of the extraordinary deterioration of public order in Venezuela. No country in Latin America –not even the highly violent nations in Central America's “Northern Triangle”—has experienced in the past few years an increase in crime rates that nears Venezuela's. The 4,550 murders recorded in 1998, when President Hugo Chávez took office, skyrocketed to 19,336 by 2011, an astonishing figure that dwarfs the number of murders in the United States and the 27 countries of the European Union combined. Following the steep increase of 2011, which put the homicide rate at 67 per 100,000 people, Venezuela today only trails Honduras and El Salvador. The situation is worse in Caracas, the capital city, which has in all likelihood become the world's most dangerous city. At approximately 210 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, Caracas' rate has surpassed that of Mexico's troubled Ciudad Juárez—Ground Zero of the “War on Drugs”—where the number of murders diminished 38% last year. In comparison, New Orleans, long regarded as the U.S. murder capital, seems positively mellow – its 2011 murder rate was 51.

The Venezuelan security debacle is as tragic as it is enlightening. Above all, it offers a cautionary tale about the limits of easy explanations, prescriptions and predictions when it comes to crime.

Standard narratives about high crime levels in Latin America –particularly of the center-left variety—put income inequality at the heart of the problem and growing human development levels at the core of the solution. This is not concocted out of thin air: We observe a strong and positive relationship between inequality and crime almost everywhere in the world. Yet, income inequality has fallen dramatically in Venezuela in the recent past.

The country's Gini Coefficient—a widely used index to measure inequality by placing countries on a 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality) scale—moved from 0.498 in 1999 to 0.412 in 2008, a drop unparalleled in Latin America. Meanwhile, human development levels have improved consistently and considerably in the country. The UNDP's Human Development Index (which combines measures of income, health and educational attainment also on a scale from 0 to 1, with higher levels of prosperity being closer to 1) has gone from 0.656 in 2000 to 0.735 in 2011, an increase of 1% per year. No one would guess Venezuela's crime crisis from looking at these figures.

These numbers should give social scientists and policymakers pause. The truth is that even factors that are related to crime in general may have very limited predictive power in specific circumstances. Explanations to crime tend to be idiosyncratic and linked to complex social dynamics that do not lend themselves to easy or uniform solutions. Moreover, factors associated to crime never act in isolation. Criminal violence is a syndrome in which multiple causes converge and reinforce each other in ways that generate problems greater than the sum of their parts. It is the convergence of multiple factors in a specific context that matters. In the case of Venezuela, some of these factors are very likely attributable to President Chávez's failings. In a [previous article](#), written just before the 2010 congressional elections, I singled out the collapse of law enforcement institutions, the systematic weakening of local governments, and the country's increased role in the narcotics trade, partly related to the Venezuelan government's semi-official policy of sheltering the FARC narco-guerrilla army. While I am going to restate those factors here, I will also say that I am under no illusions that it is very difficult to know their precise contribution to the crisis. The enormous complexity of crime as a social phenomenon calls for more than a little intellectual humility, a greater tolerance to untidy explanations, and more sensitivity to local realities. The latter point hints at why the emasculation of local governments—that have a greater chance of decoding those realities—is a grave mistake in the fight against crime, something that the recent Venezuelan experience seems to bear rather well. The message is simple: beware of soapbox preachers—including those clad in academic robes—that offer easy explanations and blanket prescriptions to Latin America's crime riddle. The case of Venezuela shows that this is very messy.

Similar reservations apply to predicting the political ramifications of high crime levels. Perhaps the most vexing question about Venezuela's decade-long crime predicament is why President Chávez has been largely spared from the wrath of citizens over this issue. Let us remember that over the past 10 years the government has launched, literally, tens of plans and strategies to bring crime under control, to little avail. The latest incarnation of such efforts is the creation of the so-called People's Guard, a military outfit that has been met with the same blend of skepticism, indifference, and resignation as all the previous announcements made by the President on this subject. True, according to Latinobarómetro, a regional opinion poll, 61% of the Venezuelan population thinks that crime is the country's most important concern, the highest figure in Latin America. But it was already the most important concern, by a long margin, in 2006, right before President Chávez was comfortably reelected. As of this writing Chávez's approval rating hovers around 60% despite the horrific state of public safety in the country. The Venezuelan experience suggests that the country's citizens care a lot about crime but end up defining their political preferences according to other motives, mostly related to economic welfare and ideological leanings.

The case of Venezuela may be indicative that the deterioration of citizen security is less politically explosive than often assumed. Despite some survey data that point to the contrary, there is precious little evidence that voters in Latin America are actually willing to trade democracy for greater public security. This is true even in countries with flimsy democratic institutions and absurdly high levels of violence such as those in northern

Central America. Furthermore, there is just as little support for the notion that violence-related issues are enough –in and of themselves—to move people to throw incumbents out. Indeed, it is hard to think of a single instance in which the deterioration of public security sealed the fate of an incumbent party in Latin America, a point that Mexico's ruling Partido Acción Nacional would do well to bear in mind. Rampant though they are it is unlikely that Venezuela's crime problems will prove President Chávez's undoing.

Such political inaction in the face of worsening crime points to a mildly depressing, but empirically supported conclusion: when it comes to crime, people adapt. They simply change their behavior, accept a greater encroachment in their civil liberties, and embrace an ever more cavalier attitude towards the rule of law. The real political implications of crime in Latin America are to be found less in potential support for coups or dramatic electoral results than in the 40% of the population that, according to the 2010 Americas Barometer, fully support the idea that authorities are entitled to violate the law to persecute offenders or in the 27% that still harbor a positive opinion about meting out punishment to criminals with their own hands. In the Latin American context this means that more than 100 million citizens are reluctant to accept the most basic principles underpinning not just the rule of law but indeed the state's monopoly over legitimate violence. This is the real threat. It is a threat not to President Chávez's rule but to the quality of democratic coexistence in Venezuela and, more generally, Latin America. And the fact that it is less visible makes it all the more ominous.