

Ecuador, on the edge of a precipice

Monday 14 August 2023, by [OSPINA Pablo](#), [RAMÍREZ Franklin](#), [STEFANONI Pablo](#) (Date first published: 12 August 2023).

The murder of a presidential candidate after a campaign rally shocks Ecuador just days before the elections.

The assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was the latest episode in a rapid and profound degradation of public life in the South American country, with an impressive rise in the power of organised crime. A former trade unionist, journalist and politician, Villavicencio built his identity as an anti-corruption figure, while positioning himself in radical opposition to the government of Rafael Correa. As a [profile in the daily *El País* recalls](#), his electoral proposals included the construction of “a very high security prison” to lock up the most dangerous criminals, the militarisation of ports to control drug trafficking and the creation of an Anti-Mafia Unit that, “with foreign support”, would pursue “drug traffickers, kidnappers and all types of criminal structures”. During Correa’s government, he went into exile in Peru and then returned during Lenín Moreno’s presidency, when he resumed the political activity of his youth but in another political party.

His murder, [allegedly at the hands of organised crime](#), has shocked the country and disrupted the electoral campaign for the 20 August elections, called after the [“death cross” decreed by Guillermo Lasso](#) to avoid impeachment by Parliament.

In a separate interview with *Nueva Sociedad*, Pablo Ospina and Franklin Ramírez analyse the causes of the country’s decline. Pablo Ospina is a historian and teaches at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar and is a researcher at the Instituto de Estudios Ecuatorianos. Franklin Ramírez is a sociologist and professor-researcher at the Department of Political Studies of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (Flacso). Both have written several articles for *Nueva Sociedad*.

Ecuador used to be characterised as a fairly peaceful country in the Latin American context. How can one interpret an assassination reminiscent of Colombia in the 1980s?

Pablo Ospina: It is difficult to understand such a rapid change and such a radical degradation in the security situation. There was a perceived increase in the activities of organised crime since dollarisation, which greatly facilitated the laundering of drug money and, therefore, the progressive installation or development of different criminal groups linked to transnational crime. But two recent events seem to have triggered the rapid deterioration of the situation. First, the Peace Agreement in Colombia in 2016, which removed from the scene a group that offered order and a certain state rationality on the border. Above all, it was a group that had a practice of generally avoiding attacking Ecuadorian targets, because it wanted to avoid closer collaboration between the Ecuadorian and Colombian militaries in counter-insurgency operations. Ecuadorian territory was also a resting place, as evidenced by the Angostura attack in 2008, in which Raúl Reyes, then leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), was killed. Once the FARC demobilises, the border begins to be dominated by a dozen smaller dissident and irregular groups that dispute territory and trafficking channels, and which do not have the same policy towards Ecuador; they can assassinate Ecuadorian journalists (in March 2018) or penetrate the country’s rather weak and lax

defences. The second fact is the pandemic, which seems to have held back trafficking and created a certain crisis in drug distribution, along with disputes between Mexican and Colombian cartels, but which also increased the recruitment possibilities of criminal groups in Ecuador due to the desperation of a significant part of the population: not only crime, but also emigration have reached levels similar to those of the 1999 crisis.

Franklin Ramírez: There are various elements, but undoubtedly a central one is the signing of the Peace Accords in Colombia, which reorganised the deployment of narcos, paramilitaries and FARC dissidents, and which in Ecuador's case had an impact on the northern border, with two of the Colombian departments with the highest historical cocaine production. With the fragmentation of the FARC, small gangs and militias emerged and began to mobilise and move more easily across the borders, in the context of a virtual abandonment of these territories by both Colombia and Ecuador. The murder of three *El Comercio* journalists in 2018 at the hands of one of the FARC's dissidents set off alarm bells. There is also illegal mining, smuggling, human trafficking, arms trafficking. And all of this, in the context of the weakening of the state in recent years, leaves this border a particularly vulnerable area that is permeable to gangs entering and leaving the country. This is why Esmeraldas, a province with a large Afro-Ecuadorian population and one of the most forgotten in Ecuador, is one of the most violent and crime-ridden areas, often linked to Mexican cartels. We have lived through a cycle of state weakening.

How do you explain this degradation, which combines murders in prisons, political crimes - before Villavicencio, the mayor of Manta was assassinated - and the feeling that the state is out of control?

PO: In the March 2023 local elections there were also a dozen attacks on local candidates and politicians, including the assassination of a candidate the day before the elections, who won the elections *post mortem* (in the coastal municipality of Puerto López, a place known to be part of the trafficking routes for illegal migrants and drugs). The [prison massacres](#) are also unprecedented in Ecuador and are said to be linked to the loss of the trafficking monopoly by the criminal group called "Los Choneros" (for Chone, municipality of Manabí), which was mentioned by Fernando Villavicencio as the group that directly threatened him, and in a way he characterised as most credible and worrying, on the very day of his death. The division of Los Choneros into different contending leaderships is part of the conflict in the prisons. But beyond this, it is clear that drug trafficking is unthinkable and unviable without the collaboration or complicity of state authorities, customs officials, judges, members of the police and armed forces, and port administrators. These officials may collaborate out of fear or because they are part of the business, and sometimes fall victim to the disputes between these groups; or they may oppose and also suffer the consequences. It is very likely that an aggravating factor is the general weakness, incompetence and indolence of the governments of Lenín Moreno and Guillermo Lasso, completely overwhelmed not only by the security crisis, but even by the most basic governmental tasks.

FR: There was an institutional reform that began with Lenín Moreno and his agreement with the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and continued with Lasso, which weakened a state intervention that had historically worked (until 2013-2014, Ecuador had record low homicide rates). These reforms lacked a strategic vision of how they affected different sectors and public policies and reduced state capacities. Not only on the northern border but also in Guayaquil, Quito, Manta... Moreover, these are years in which the increase in cocaine production in Colombia, added to the fact that Ecuador is a dollarised country with a deregulated financial system, meant that Ecuador is no longer just a transit country but also a country of stockpiling and processing. Ecuadorian drugs leave the ports of Guayaquil and Manta, and this has exponentially multiplied the disputes between gangs seeking to control these export circuits, but also micro-trafficking. And this is where the prisons play a very important role, from where the business is run, and which are places where the

state has completely lost its monopoly on violence. The police and armed forces have gained autonomy, while at the same time they have been penetrated by organised crime, with very little civilian control over them. The control of prisons by gangs cannot be understood without the complicity of the police. We are in the 17th state of emergency, but this is not linked to any institutional strategy or state presence. Nor is it linked to a social strategy: many students dropped out of school during the pandemic and have not returned, and are cannon fodder for the gangs. We see a growing penetration of the criminal economy into the formal economy, as well as into the state.

Villavicencio appeared close to President Guillermo Lasso and had a profile associated with anti-corruption and anti-correism. What could explain why he was targeted by organised crime when his chances of victory were very low?

FR: Villavicencio came from the oil trade union movement and gained a lot of notoriety as an opponent of Correism. He was a character who constantly denounced, after becoming a journalist, and always had privileged information, within the framework of a certain opacity. Even in this campaign, the electoral body pointed him out as the candidate with the most resources, which he denied. In his party there are several ex-military and ex-police officers, some of whom promote a way out of the political crisis through a civil-military junta. His assassination must be seen in the light of other murders in this cycle opened with the “death cross” decreed by Lasso. There is [the case of Agustín Intriago in Manta](#), of a high-ranking official in the municipality of Durán - one of the largest in Guayas - but already in [last February's elections](#) more than 30 attacks of different kinds against political figures had been reported. It is already a systematic deployment against political actors. This should be interpreted as a conditioning of the democratic process, and more specifically, of the 20 August elections. There has even been speculation that the elections might be postponed. There is a situation of panic that is conditioning the whole process. The armed actors want to make their presence felt. And from now on, candidates will have a gun to their heads. These organised crime sectors seek to become actors with whom the state must negotiate and without whom the dynamics of the country cannot prosper. I wouldn't say that Villavicencio had such a low chance, underneath Correism there is a very open situation.

PO: Villavicencio had been growing in the polls and appeared as a potential electoral surprise. In my opinion, this could be due to two factors. First, the Correista strategy of focusing the entire campaign on the achievements and successes of Rafael Correa's administration, on the omnipresence of the former president in all campaign materials, in a way that far surpassed what happened in 2021 and reinforces the feeling that in case of victory, it will be Correa himself who will govern and not Luisa González, the candidate of Revolución Ciudadana. Anti-Correism grew, was activated or awakened in the shadow of this propaganda and strategy. Villavicencio was one of the main beneficiaries of this resurgence. Secondly, the murdered candidate had a discourse strongly linked to the dismantling of the mafias, corruption and organised crime that took control of the state. He spoke of a “strong hand” and backed it up with his robust and energetic personality, and sought to radiate the image of an incorruptible cleaner of the “Augean stables”. Moreover, his denunciations often included specific names and surnames. Thus, although Jan Topić was the candidate who [promoted himself as the “Ecuadorian Bukele”](#), it is possible that a growing fraction of the electorate identified Villavicencio's style with the Salvadoran leader's proposals, being, moreover, a much better known candidate than Topić. So his chances were far from zero. It is possible to speculate that his real chances of making it to the second round worried some of these criminal groups.

Correísmo is strong in the first round, with around 30%, but weak in the second, how do you think the new context will affect Luisa González's presidential candidacy?

FR: Villavicencio was running for the Construye Movement, founded by María Paula Romo, ex-minister of Lenín Moreno and previously ex-assembly member of Revolución Ciudadana for Ruptura 25, a force that expressed Quito's middle-class progressivism. The Construye Movement is also running Patricio Carrillo, who was chief of police under Moreno and then Lasso, and was at the head of the repression in 2019 and 2022, as its first assemblyman. It is likely that part of his votes, very anti-correista, will go to Topi, of the Social Christian Party, who has taken on a very Bukele, RoboCop role against insecurity, but votes may also go to Otto Sonnenholzner, a young candidate of the old Guayaquil oligarchy, who has quickly come out with a hard anti-correista discourse. But the null vote could grow, and if it grows a lot, it could favour Correism in the first round. [Another well-placed contender is Yaku Pérez, with support from indigenous sectors.]

PO: With such an unprecedented event, it is difficult to predict what might happen. However, it is difficult to assume that this could favour the Correista candidate, Luisa González. The sympathy for the victim and the emotionality that accompanies such an event are inextricably linked to the fact that Villavicencio was the most frontal and declared enemy of Correism in the entire electoral race. Rumours and veiled or direct accusations of complicity or tolerance of Correism with different organised crime structures were already circulating, and these will surely become much more widespread. It is clear, then, that it will be negative for this candidacy; what is difficult to know is the exact extent to which it will be so.

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