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June Roundtable: Human Rights in Central America, Introduction

Claudia Fuentes

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Abstract

An annotation of:

"The Tormented Isthmus ". The Economist. April 14 2011.

Keywords

Human rights, Central America, War, Violence, Drug trafficking, Politics

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Human Rights in Central America

Article under review: "[The Tormented Isthmus](#)". *The Economist*. April 14 2011.

In the appropriately titled article, "The Tormented Isthmus," *The Economist* illustrates the multiple, recurrent, and severe human rights abuses occurring in Central America today. Despite the end of the civil wars in the region, Central American nations are still struggling with weak political regimes (Honduras experienced a coup d'état in 2009), high levels of impunity and violence, alarming levels of economic and social inequality (certain populations in Guatemala have malnutrition rates of eighty percent), and states and civil societies that are just too weak to generate appropriate responses to multiple demands.

The security sector is one of the areas in more urgent need of reform, and where the human rights abuses affecting the daily lives of Central American citizens are more prominent. The article provides an excellent overview of the security challenges in the Isthmus: "Guatemala's rate of 46 murders per 100,000 people is more than twice as high as Mexico's, and nearly ten times greater than that of the United States. Honduras and El Salvador—the other two countries that make up Central America's 'northern triangle', as it is called—are more violent still. Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, the quietest members of the group, have also seen violence increase in recent years, as has Belize."

Drug trafficking is an important driver of homicides rates in Central America, and one of the single most important factors in the increasing violence in the region. Therefore, reducing illegal drugs should be a central strategy to reduce crime and insecurity. This is particularly important in light of the enormous quantities of drug flows in transit through Central America. As indicated in *the Economist* article: "Somewhere between 250 and 350 tons of cocaine—or almost the whole amount heading for the United States—now pass through Guatemala each year, according to American officials. Whereas a decade ago Central America seized less cocaine than either Mexico or the Caribbean, in 2008 it intercepted three times more than the other two combined."

Security-related issues feed on Central America's other weaknesses. *The Economist* indicates the need to generate better policies in the areas of educational access and quality, job provision in the formal and informal sectors, infrastructure, and bureaucratic efficiency to increase trade and decrease economic dependency. One aspect that is particularly highlighted is the poor capacity of states in this region to collect money through taxes: "Even by Latin American standards, the state in Central America is weak and poor. In Guatemala the tax take is just 10.4% of GDP."

However, when looking for possible policy alternatives, there are no clear-cut options in a regional context of urgent and multiple social demands. As indicated by Edzia Carvalho in this Roundtable, "Generic wish-lists do make for good reading, but also for bad policy." Each one of this month's Roundtable panelists offers different insights, ranging from the conceptual and practical implications of differentiating between criminal and political violence, the consequences of militarizing security problems, the prospects for a more inclusive political system that has been traditionally characterized by polarization, and the role of international actors in fostering and/or hindering human rights protective mechanisms.

Claudia Fuentes

Roundtable Editor