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A Centrist Solution to Central American Violence and Inequality

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A Centrist Solution to Central American Violence and Inequality

Abstract

The northern triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) has experienced horrific violence, poverty, and a vicious cycle of human rights violations for decades. Repeated natural disasters and the re-routing of the drug trade through Central America are not helping the situation. On the other hand, nearby Costa Rica has achieved a much higher standard of human rights, public safety, and political stability. Why? Costa Rica has put in place four pillars of development and stability lacking in most other countries in the region: a stronger state, an educated population, inter-racial cooperation, and a more inclusive democracy. For the northern triangle to catch up, it will need to achieve at least the first three of these pillars as soon as possible.

Keywords

Human rights, Central America, Violence, Poverty, Natural disasters, Drug trafficking, Government, Education, Ethnicity, Democracy

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A Centrist Solution to Central American Violence and Inequality

by Devin Joshi

The northern triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) has experienced horrific violence, poverty, and a vicious cycle of human rights violations for decades. Repeated natural disasters and the re-routing of the drug trade through Central America are not helping the situation. On the other hand, nearby Costa Rica has achieved a much higher standard of human rights, public safety, and political stability. Why? Costa Rica has put in place four pillars of development and stability lacking in most other countries in the region: a stronger state, an educated population, inter-racial cooperation, and a more inclusive democracy. For the northern triangle to catch up, it will need to achieve at least the first three of these pillars as soon as possible.

Firstly, a stronger state is necessary to combat violence, drug trafficking, corruption, and tax evasion. Without sufficient qualified security personnel, administrators, or technology, the state will be no match for well-financed criminal organizations and drug traffickers. The primary means for developing this capacity is to raise government revenue through more efficient and effective taxation. Whereas successful governments in industrialized OECD countries collect between thirty and fifty percent of GDP in revenue, Guatemala collects a measly ten percent. With more revenue, Central American states will be able to afford to attract the highly skilled and trained professionals needed to combat corruption, guarantee security, develop infrastructure, and educate the population. In both the short and long run, these crucial measures should help to attract investment, prevent brain drain, and reduce capital flight.

Secondly, compulsory public education would foster Central American development of human and social capital. Here it might be useful to take a lesson from East Asia, where a commitment to universal education and public investment in quality government schools were central to the East Asian Miracle. In much of Central America, the upper classes send their children to private schools, while lower class children are stuck in low quality government schools; in places like Guatemala, they may be trapped in child labor. By contrast, in South Korea, a country that used to be as poor as Ghana but is now a global technological leader, even back in 1960, ninety-nine percent of elementary school students attended government schools. Not only was this important for building human capital, but also for developing cross-class cohesion and national solidarity.

Thirdly, inter-racial cooperation is essential. One dimension of Central American political failure that is often underestimated is the politics of race. Simply put, regions with more indigenous people tend to operate more on a caste-system basis, with indigenous Central Americans at the bottom and those of pure European extraction at the top. In some ways, the situation of ethnically heterogeneous states in Central America resembles conditions in Asia. For example, while inter-ethnic intolerance has led to decades of civil war in places like Afghanistan and Burma, the Singaporean state has made effective use of multi-ethnic public education, multi-ethnic public housing, and compulsory multi-ethnic military service. Although Singapore is perhaps an extreme example (also having the advantage of being a city-state), it holds lessons for Central America on ways to use the rule of law, equalization of public services, and selective incentives to prevent inter-ethnic violence and instability.

Fourthly, inclusive democracy is what the northern triangle ultimately needs in the long run. Political scientists comparing government performance in the region often contrast Costa Rica with Guatemala. The difference is painfully obvious. Whereas since the mid-twentieth century Costa Rica has opted for inclusive, centrist, and democratic politics, with alternation between civilian center-left and center-right parties in power, Guatemala has a long legacy of right-wing politics, authoritarianism, and intense inter-racial inequality, which in turn has provoked radical left wing opposition. Although center-left social democratic politics in Costa Rica have given way to a more inequality-increasing center-right “third way” in recent decades, the avoidance of a pure right-wing neo-liberalism has served the Costa Rican state well both economically and socially.

In conclusion, the policies needed to revive Central American fortunes are not a mystery, but it has been difficult to forge the leadership and social solidarity necessary to launch and sustain serious long-term oriented reforms. On this issue, the US can play a constructive role in encouraging a centrist approach to development and security in Central America. Unfortunately, too often in the past the US government has leaned too far to the right, being more concerned about what narrow special interests could take from the region than with planting the seeds for long-term mutual gains. A willingness to also ally with the poor as opposed to only the elite of Central America might offer the best chance for stable long-term peace and development.

Dr. Devin K. Joshi is an assistant professor at the University of Denver’s Josef Korbel School of International Studies where he teaches courses on democracy and development. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Washington, an M.A. from the East-West Center, and a B.A. from Stanford University. His research focuses on the relevance and application of democratic and good governance interventions to improving human development and human security in the developing world. His recent articles have appeared in Economic and Political Weekly, International Studies Review, Socio-Legal Review, and The Human Rights Dictionary.