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From “Iron Fist” Policies to Comprehensive Social Intervention

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From “Iron Fist” Policies to Comprehensive Social Intervention

Abstract

The latest effort by Brazilian authorities to control crime in Rio's favelas confronts us with several complex questions regarding democracy, the rule of law, and civil-military relations, not only in this case, but throughout Latin America. What conclusions can we derive from the military and police interventions in Rio about the state of affairs of these third-wave democracies?

Keywords

Human rights, Brazil, Military intervention, Drug trafficking, Organized crime, Poverty, Police

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From "Iron Fist" Policies to Comprehensive Social Intervention

by Claudia Heiss

The latest effort by Brazilian authorities to control crime in Rio's *favelas* confronts us with several complex questions regarding democracy, the rule of law, and civil-military relations, not only in this case, but throughout Latin America. What conclusions can we derive from the military and police interventions in Rio about the state of affairs of these third-wave democracies?

Brazil is among the most unequal countries in the most unequal region of the world. The goal of preparing Rio for the Olympic Games of 2016 clashes with a hard-to-win battle against poverty, unemployment, organized crime, and drug trafficking. Impressive military interventions seek to dismantle the armed networks of drug dealers in order to prepare the way for special police pacification units, part of a program that began in December 2008. "City of God," the shanty town made famous by the 2002 movie of the same name, was the second to receive one of these special police forces in 2009. While the police intervention is a step intended to bring some state presence into areas where the state has been absent for decades, the reality of violence, corruption, and social segregation seems hard to overcome.

Latin America has a legacy of authoritarian political development, as shown—among others—in Brian Loveman's "The Constitution of Tyranny: Regimes of Exception in Spanish America." The region had a late process of democratization, with some of its countries reaching democracy for the first time after the fall of the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. The inability of the state to satisfy basic needs of its citizens—a feature often underlined by the late Argentinean political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell—adds up to models of economic development marked by extreme inequality.

In this context, the emergence of drug trafficking networks in Colombia and their expansion to Brazil and other Latin American countries in the 1990s meant in practice the development of a sort of informal parallel state in vulnerable sectors of society. These organized criminal networks often brought health, security, and other services for the first time to poor populations. A twofold dilemma arises from this situation: first, how can a state apparatus that historically has been weak contribute to fulfill basic needs and protect the rights of those who have been marginalized by its institutions? Second, what role should the police and the armed forces play in this process?

The police and the armed forces have been a tool for social and political repression in Latin America. People often show low levels of confidence in these institutions, and democratic political authorities have not sufficiently reformed their structure and functions. With the arrival of democracy, countries that had major internal conflicts in Central America and the Andean region used the same armed forces that had previously committed human rights violations to fight organized crime and drug trafficking. In the Southern Cone, countries such as Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil implemented policies intended to clearly distinguish between the internal role of the police and the provision of external security by the armed forces. But when organized crime spiraled out of control a few years ago, Brazilian authorities decided to change their strategy and use the armed forces to help resolve these new internal problems. Are the armed forces as prepared to deal with citizens as they are to deal with war enemies? The

situation brings back the ghost of the Cold War-era National Security Doctrine, which turned political opponents into internal enemies, and which spread to a great extent in Latin America through Brazilian military education.

The models of intervention of the armed forces usually follow policies of iron fist or "mano dura." This implies a militarized vision of social conflict by institutions that have not been sufficiently reformed in order to guarantee their compliance with democratic procedures. Insufficient judicial guarantees and an excessive role of military justice add up to accusations of bribery and corruption, creating an important challenge in the goal of increasing police legitimacy.

Civil society may be a means to overcome these problems. Unlike many other countries experiencing high criminal violence, Brazil has developed a strong civil society, as exemplified by the NGO Viva Rio, the biggest in South America. This is an interesting case of the role civil society can play in mediating between a repressive vision and those who seek to address the multiple causes of violence. The latter includes social action and efforts to offer the youth alternatives to violence and the hope of a better life.

The need to involve local actors in recuperating their own public space, their rights, and the institutions to support them seems inescapable. Today, mistrust of the pacification police units is widespread. Public policies oriented only toward ensuring order seem insufficient to resolve conflicts deeply associated with inequality. Judicial persecution should focus on the heads of drug dealing groups, and be complemented with programs for the social rehabilitation of young gang members. A comprehensive intervention should include social dimensions such as health, education, and urban planning. An exclusive focus on the repressive and criminal side of the problems seems unlikely to achieve positive results, even in the face of Brazil's impressive rate of economic growth, and even with the pressure of the upcoming Olympic Games.

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