From Soldiers to Drug Lords: Drug Trafficking as an Enemy of Democracy in Latin America

Democratization

"The drug trafficking phenomenon
is one of the most terrifying threats
to freedom and justice in the world."
Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento

On April 30, 1984, the Republic of Colombia received news that would mark a turning point in its political system and spark a social transformation across the country and the entire continent.

That night, history was split in two: the Minister of the Interior was assassinated[1] on the orders of a drug cartel, marking the beginning of a new phenomenon in society —the war between drug cartels and the State.[2]

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1 Jimmy Nomesqui Rivera, "La muerte de Rodrigo Lara, 40 años del magnicidio por el que comenzó la guerra contra el narcotráfico en Colombia", *Infobae*, April 30, 2024, https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2024/04/30/la-muerte-de-rodrigo-lara-40-anos-del-magnicidio-por-el-que-comenzo-la-guerra-contra-el-narcotrafico-en-colombia/

2 "Guerra contra el Estado: extradición y sometimiento de los narcos, Relato histórico del conflicto armado interno en Colombia", Comisión de

For the first time in Latin American history, the war was not between regular armies or guerrilla groups. Criminal organizations had decided to challenge the State with the sole purpose of bringing it to its knees and establishing a narcocracy in the country. Their method was *plata* o *plomo*, a phrase attributed to Pablo Escobar, meaning "take the bribe or take the bullet." Corruption was used as a tool of coercion to infiltrate every institution of the State and subordinate them to the power of the cartels. Alongside violence, fear was used to break the will of anyone who, for ethical or moral reasons, refused to accept the criminals' bribes.

This created an atmosphere of corruption and violence that spread throughout Latin America. The political, economic, and social conditions of our continent provided the perfect breeding ground for drug trafficking to establish itself as a new path to economic and social advancement. Over the years, this phenomenon has evolved, and drug cartels have transformed from mere financiers operating within the political system into a new political elite that makes decisions about the course of the countries where they hold influence.

For years, we have witnessed democracy lose ground across the world, just as the most longed-for "end of history" predicted by Francis Fukuyama,[3] appeared to come true: with the end of the Cold War and the defeat of communism, a global wave of democratization would follow. Liberal democracy would thus

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la verdad, https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/guerra-contra-el-estado-extradicion-y-sometimiento-de-los-narcos

3 Francis Fukuyama, *El Fin de la Historia y el Último Hombre: La Interpretación más Audaz y Brillante de la Historia Presente y Futura de la Humanidad*, Editorial Planeta, Barcelona, 1993.

become the dominant model worldwide. This led to excessive confidence among political and economic elites and, consequently, to a systematic erosion of democracy as the most desirable form of government for 21st-century citizens. Political organizations turned into mere electoral machines: they stopped responding to citizens' demands and, with the arrival of a more globalized world, political discourse became trivialized, replacing ideas with votes and real political work with likes on social media.

All of this has generated a wave of autocracies that differ markedly from the old 20th-century dictatorships, both in Latin America and Europe. These regimes present a democratic façade, showcasing the ability to hold elections, allowing for the existence of opposition political organizations, and maintaining certain limited freedoms, such as freedom of expression. In this way, they build a democratic veneer within which autocracies are actually consolidated: through the systematic erosion of institutions, they pervert the system, giving rise to a perfect dictatorship —far more sophisticated and, in some cases, enjoying high levels of public approval. This approval is often fueled by deliberate polarization through a "good vs. evil" narrative, rooted in Carl Schmitt's "friend and enemy" theory:[4] the idea that "if you're not with me, you're an enemy of the nation," rather than merely a political adversary, as would be expected in a normal democracy.

In this context, we have witnessed the rise of two major phenomena that are impacting the Western world: terrorism and drug trafficking. Each operates from the shadows, infiltrating

4 María Concepción Delgado Parra, "El criterio amigo-enemigo en Carl Schmitt. El concepto de lo político como una noción ubicua y desterritorializada", *Cuaderno de Materiales*, Revista de Filosofía, Nº 23, 2011, https://www.filosofia.net/materiales/pdf23/CDM11.pdf

Western societies through seemingly insignificant avenues: culture, education, and social media. At the same time, and in even more aggravated fashion, they exploit systemic failures such as the corruption of governing elites, severe inequality, poverty, economic crises, and institutional breakdown. Corruption has become systemic, especially within the judicial and security branches, where low salaries and lack of proper training have led law enforcement bodies to become the institutions most distrusted by society.

According to Latinobarómetro,[5] the countries with the highest levels of public trust in the police in 2023 were Chile, Uruguay, and Colombia. On the other hand, nations such as Mexico, El Salvador, and Venezuela —countries where the rule of law is absent, considered by some experts to be failed states, and where only Mexico can still be classified as a democracy, albeit one plagued by high levels of corruption, inequality, and abuse of power— were marked by low public confidence in their police forces.

In a continent where most countries have weak states and political systems riddled with corruption, criminal organizations see an opportunity to penetrate the State in order to serve their own interests. Paola Bautista de Alemán, a Venezuelan politician and academic, offers an insightful analysis of how these organizations have consolidated and weaken democracy. While in the 20th century the war among cartels, or between cartels and the State, was the arena in which they operated, in the 21st century, this phenomenon has evolved. The political crisis has

5 Juan Manuel Caicedo, "Autoridad y privilegio: confianza en la policía en Latinoamérica", *Revistas Uniandes*, April 1, 2022, No. 110, https://revistas.uniandes.edu.co/index.php/colombia-int/article/view/2983/1763

led many Latin American states down the path toward becoming failed states.[6]

In this analysis, we can see how the absence of the State becomes the perfect breeding ground for the consolidation of criminal organizations. A State that is unable to guarantee control and security over its own territory, where levels of inequality are rising, administrative corruption is growing significantly, and the mechanisms of popular election are weakening, ultimately paves the way for criminal organizations to usurp its role.

A clear example of this is the loss of territory by the Colombian state in the 1990s.[7] The vast majority of land transport routes, roads and highways, were taken over by various fronts of the narco-terrorist organization FARC-EP. The so-called *pescas milagrosas*,[8] or massive kidnappings, demonstrate how these organizations are capable of seizing significant geographic areas through violence. However, the advance of these criminal groups is not limited to territorial control.

The main strategy of these criminal groups in the 21st century has been to penetrate State institutions. Threats and bribes are no longer the only means used to control a few officials willing to turn a blind eye to their crimes. These organizations have evolved

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6 Rodrigo Castellanos, "¿Qué es un Estado fallido?", *El Orden Mundial*, November 17, 2020, https://elordenmundial.com/que-es-estado-fallido/

7 Luís Javier Orjuela Escobar, "El Estado Colombiano en los Noventa: Entre la Legitimidad y la Eficiencia", *Revistas Uniandes*, https://revistas.uniandes.edu.co/index.php/res/article/download/5060/4868/23173

8 Javier Alexánder Macías, "«Pescas milagrosas»: así funcionó la estrategia que financió a las Farc", *El Colombiano*, May 8, 2021, https://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/paz-y-derechos-humanos/asi-funcionaban-las-pescas-milagrosas-de-las-farc-FE15007534

to the point of infiltrating entire institutions and, little by little, have been transforming these failed states into what Bautista has called "Gangster States".[9] The goal of these organizations is not only to profit from criminal activity, but to gain greater control over political power in order to make their business more lucrative and ultimately seize total control of the State.

This new form of political power, where violence, corruption, and social control enable the consolidation of criminals in positions of authority, can be observed across several Latin American countries, with the most notable cases being Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela. In northern Mexico, we see how cartels exercise full control over municipalities. A clear example is when security forces capture a drug lord, only for that cartel's militias to launch such a massive revolt that the State is forced to release the captured boss.[10] Likewise, in some border municipalities of Colombia and Venezuela, the national currencies have lost all value. In certain local shops, such as small grocery stores, transactions are carried out using contraband goods, including drugs, gold, gasoline, and diesel fuel.[11] Moreover, the mayors either have no real authority or those who are elected have been appointed by the will of these

9 Paola Bautista de Alemán, "Tres rasgos del Estado gangsteril en Venezuela", *Forma*, July 28, 2023, https://red-forma.com/edicion-2/tres-rasgos-del-estado-gangsteril-en-venezuela-paola-bautista-de-aleman/

10 Abdiel Sepúlveda, "Ovidio Guzmán: La captura y liberación del hijo de «El Chapo», raíz del primer Culiacanazo", *El Universal*, August 30, 2024, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/tendencias/ovidio-guzman-la-captura-y-liberacion-del-hijo-de-el-chapo-raiz-del-primer-culiacanazo/

11 Daniel Pardo, "Qué hay detrás del insólito auge de estaciones de gasolina en Cúcuta, la ciudad colombiana fronteriza con Venezuela", *BBC Mundo,* November 7, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-63323077

irregular groups, forcing the population to vote for the candidates designated by the organization.

But how are such levels of obedience achieved within these communities? The truth is that violence plays a significant role, but it is not the decisive factor. The absence of the State creates needs in the population that the money from these organizations fills, thereby earning loyalty and legitimacy.

Since 2016, the Venezuelan state has been criminally exploiting the natural resources of the southern Bolívar State. This has resulted in the infamous Orinoco Mining Arc,[12] comprising legal and illegal mines where gold, diamonds, and coltan are primarily extracted. In many of these locations, the absence of public services is total, paving the way for criminal gangs to take control of the area and act as authorities: they repair roads, aqueducts, and electrical installations, provide security and cleanliness in public spaces, and, broadly speaking, ensure the traditional order that one expects in their community.

This rather twisted criminal system operates on two pillars: payment for these de facto services and absolute loyalty in the face of any external threat. In the first case, each resident must pay what is called a "vacuna," an extortion fee that, if not paid monthly, results in punishment, sometimes even death. This replacement of traditional political power, for example, a mayor, creates a dependency of the inhabitants on the criminals. Thus, when the State becomes inconvenient for these organizations and decides to act against them, residents often play roles as

12 Ramón Cardozo Álvarez, "El Arco Minero venezolano: una política depredadora", *DW*, May 25, 2022, https://www.dw.com/es/el-arco-minero-venezolano-una-pol%C3%ADtica-depredadora/a-61934013

informants or collaborators, or family members end up working for the criminal organizations. They come to see the State or its security forces as those disrupting the established order. All of this leads to the complete loss of that territory from the monopoly of legitimate violence, turning it into an operational theater for criminal benefit.

This cycle multiplies across many more areas, and in some cases, it is the criminals themselves who decide to become active participants in political life, either through economic influence or direct involvement in public affairs. Gradually, drug lords gain increasing influence: they control media outlets, large retail chains of clothing, appliances, supermarkets, shopping centers, restaurants, and sports teams. The public knows where this wealth comes from but prefers to remain silent or turn a blind eye. The State itself fosters the growth of these major drug lords because, through these underground economies,[13] they can finance electoral campaigns and contribute to illicit enrichment for their personal coffers. In sanctioned countries, they also use money laundering to evade sanctions on government officials. Slowly but surely, we see their growing influence spreading across the different branches of power.

In countries with democratic regimes, the process is gradual and slow, and it can even take many years. It begins within the executive branch at the third level: in municipalities, where either council members are bought off or like-minded individuals are elected to increase influence. Then it escalates to controlling mayoralties and, in some cases, governorships. At this point,

13 Marc Fortuño, "La economía sumergida y su papel en el mundo", *World Economic Forum*, December 1, 2019, https://es.weforum.org/stories/2019/12/la-economia-sumergida-y-su-papel-en-el-mundo/

they control significant territorial areas, establishing routes and drug labs that are, in most cases, protected by the State's security forces. Next comes the second phase: penetrating the legislative and judicial branches, to enact favorable laws, obtaining rulings that absolve them of crimes, or securing amnesties, always accompanied by large doses of corruption and violence. Cartels compete over who can gain the most political control, and the State sides with the cartel that helps it assert greater political and social dominance over the population. In the worst —and most common— scenario today, the cartel with the most support is the one with the highest number of members embedded in institutions, granting these cartels an unprecedented level of power.

There is a third source of growth for these cartels: when members of state institutions themselves found a cartel from within the organization, leading to the normalization of criminality inside the very bodies that should serve as examples for the citizenry. These drug cartels —operating under a veneer of legality and legitimacy— use the institutions to facilitate the acquisition of illicit profits, thereby normalizing their wealth and gaining even greater economic and political power.

Given the circumstances of the institutions and their top-down organizational structure, the elites corrupt all their members from the top down, creating institutional corruption that is not new to Latin American systems, but which —for the first time— does not originate from outside, but from within the institution itself. The political, economic, and business elites are the first to become corrupted, spreading the disease into every corner of society. As a result, anthropological damage gradually deepens, and a person's value is no longer determined by their belief system or moral values, but by the weight of their economic or social position.

This is how drug trafficking and its corrupt networks have achieved what Rubén Blades described in the late 1970s in his song *Plástico* —a portrayal of our societies as hollowed out, filled only with false social status, money, and performative appearances, where injustice no longer matters: "*mientras la política no afecte mi bolsillo, no me debería importar*", ("as long as politics doesn't affect my wallet, I shouldn't care".) At the same time, the very institutions tasked with confronting and combating the narco are nothing more than the mask worn by these new cartels.

The era of the great drug cartels —like Medellín, Cali, Norte del Valle, or Sinaloa— is long gone. While some old-school cartels still exist, much like those portrayed in television series, the reality is that criminal structures have evolved. Today, they prefer to maintain a much lower profile, one that goes completely unnoticed within the very institutions of the State —particularly those tied to public order and territorial defense. These institutions are first corrupted, then become active participants in the distribution of drugs and weapons, where the legitimacy conferred by the State allows them to exert absolute control over large spaces of territory, transportation routes such as highways, airstrips, ports, and even penitentiary centers. The countries where these phenomena have taken the strongest hold are Ecuador,[14] México,[15] Venezuela and

14 "4 gráficos que muestran la extensión y el impacto de las principales bandas criminales en Ecuador", BBC News Mundo, January 16, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cw0llyjqllro

15 "Homicidios asociados al narco han aumentado 300%, según el Índice de Paz México", Infobae, June 1, 2023, https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2023/06/01/homicidios-asociados-al-narco-han-aumentado-300-segun-el-indice-de-paz-mexico/

Colombia,[16] while in countries like Argentina[17] and Chile the trend has begun to emerge to a lesser extent.

Given the elements outlined above, drug trafficking can be defined as an octopus whose tentacles reach into every sector of society, especially the political and economic spheres —with the co-optation of the elites as a fundamental factor in the systematic destruction of society and all existing order. A nation with strong institutions and an active, conscious citizenry is less likely to be bought by the narco's tentacles, offering greater resistance because its policies are more effective in combating corruption, violence, and drug trafficking.

It is no secret that the republican history of Latin America has been marked by great political instability, trapped in a limbo between military-style autocracies and fragile democracies, plagued by high levels of corruption and elites disconnected from the population.

In that context, the military forces were a fundamental factor in legitimizing governments through armed force, or overthrowing them. The military were not institutional figures, but rather active political actors with significant influence who, for ideological reasons, removed and installed rulers, becoming

16 Valentina Parada Lugo, "Colombia bate su récord de cultivos de coca por tercer año consecutivo, con 253.000 hectáreas en 2023", *El País*, October 18, 2024, https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2024-10-18/colombia-bate-su-record-de-cultivos-de-coca-por-tercer-ano-consecutivo-con-25300-hectareas-en-2023.html

17 "Cómo la violencia convirtió a Rosario en «una anomalía narco» en Argentina y la polémica que causa la propuesta de enviar al ejército que analiza Milei", BBC News Mundo, March 14, 202, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cy6zd2gv734o

the most blatant enemies of the democratic system. Examples of this include the dictatorships[18] of Videla in Argentina, Stroessner in Paraguay, Pinochet in Chile, and Somoza in Nicaragua, among the most notorious —along with Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela, countries that also experienced military dictatorships.[19]

The method of operation was similar across all countries, with minor variations, but through a coup d'état the military seized power, subjugating all political dissent through state terrorism and imposing a dictatorial regime devoid of any freedoms, marked by grave human rights violations. All of this was done under the pretext of restoring internal order, allowing them to remain in power for extended periods.

These were undoubtedly the main enemies of Latin American democracies. Over time, everything changed, and authoritarianism began to feed on other means to attain power: no longer are coups d'état or military uprisings the mechanisms used to overthrow the democratic system. Today, populism and corruption serve as tools to dismantle institutions, and through the gutter's crack of immorality, drug trafficking has crept in —not only as a mechanism to seize power but also to remain in it, with the backing of far-left governments belonging to the São Paulo Forum or the Puebla Group, which view drug trafficking as an ideological tool for the destruction of their greatest enemy, the

18 "Dictaduras en América Latina", La Vanguardia, June 4, 2021, https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/junior-report/20200304/473796480155/dictaduras-america-latina.html

19 Álvaro Merino, "Las dictaduras en América Latina desde 1945", *El Orden Mundial*, November 17, 2019, https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/dictaduras-en-america-latina/

United States, and for securing definitive power in their respective countries.

What began as a modest pact to finance and facilitate operations in the territories has evolved into an inseparable union, where the distinction between drug traffickers and State representatives has all but disappeared. The countries have, in effect, become a kind of abstract cartel in which criminality and institutions seem blend together.

This undoubtedly gives us a shift in perspective regarding the fight against drug trafficking and democracy. For many years, it was believed that it was easier to eliminate drug trafficking through authoritarian regimes —with no respect for human rights, no solid rule of law, security forces operating without oversight, and lacking any training in due process.

For many security experts, it was easier to succeed under authoritarian regimes than in democracies, but the reality is that authoritarianism —due to the lack of any checks and balances among institutions— generates more corruption than democracy itself. There is no such thing as what Giovanni Sartori would define as "Demo-Control," which is nothing other than institutions limiting the "Demo-Power"[20] of other institutions. Everything becomes shady regarding the audits that state organizations should undergo, and gradually their members enjoy total impunity, which facilitates that, in order to maintain power, anything goes and drug trafficking money becomes highly attractive.

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20 "Transparencia y regimen democratico", Cap. II, https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/bjv/libros/5/2418/5.pdf

The operational model of the cartels is transplanted into institutions, where a hierarchy prevails, loyalty outweighs merit, and anyone who opposes becomes an enemy, thus representing a risk to the system and must therefore be eliminated. These practices, within a democracy, are met with widespread rejection because there are mechanisms to counteract such corruption, and society unites in total repudiation of these phenomena. However, in authoritarianism, there are no voices raised against the system; the few that do rise are silenced, and the public sphere disappears because fear controls all layers of society —especially the poorest—where police abuse is constant, and dignity and conscience are punished by criminal gangs that exploit the absence of progress and development generated by the political system itself. Thus, they propagate the idea that the only way to advance is through corruption and criminality in their various forms.

In conclusion, it is essential that everyone engaged in the practice of politics assumes the commitment to recognize narcotrafficking as a real adversary, one that is dismantling democracy and establishing itself as a new way of doing politics. Where —through money and connections— seats in legislatures, party positions, and influencers are bought to launder their image. Where the goal is not merely to gain power to strengthen their businesses, but to dismantle the democratic system to consolidate the political model of 21st-century socialism: sheer authoritarianism. Where, under an ideological pretext, they seek to eliminate democracy across the continent, consolidating a single thought without dissent, full of superficial societies devoid of belonging, stripped of values or morality.

The best remedy for this phenomenon is none other than freedom. There can be no progress or development in Latin

America without freedom and democracy. There is no other model capable of defeating narcotrafficking than a strong society, with well-established and educated political parties that understand accepting narcotrafficking is nothing more than voluntarily ingesting poison for their own self-destruction. A model in which business elites comprehend that laundering narco money is the fertile ground for the demise of financial freedoms and the rise of common crimes such as extortion, kidnapping, and contract killing. Also, a citizenry that is educated and determined to reject corruption at every level, from the highest spheres to the lowest, where bribery is socially condemned, and the State is compelled to act decisively against corruption through its officials.

The recipe against narcotrafficking is nothing other than the democratic values we already know and are familiar with: freedom, transparency, honesty, business ethics, institutional strength, and respect for the rule of law. Something we often take for granted, freedom of expression, is fundamental in this fight, as it constitutes one of the pillars to overcome the authoritarianism driven by narcotrafficking: courageous journalists, training institutes, media outlets, non-governmental organizations dedicated to promoting state transparency and respect for the rule of law, as well as organizations committed to combating the normalization of violence and restoring the social fabric, especially in territories affected by the violence generated by narcotrafficking.

It is an irrevocable duty to provide human rights training to public security officials, as these organizations cannot exploit the war on drugs to further widen the gaps in a social fabric already deeply harmed by violence.

Freedom is the greatest value inherent to democracy. It is the primary means to defend our societies from the authoritarianism driven by narcotrafficking. No longer are the enemies of democracy military forces striking at midnight with decrees broadcast over old radio stations. Today's enemies are drug traffickers disguised as politicians, businessmen, outsiders, or criminals reintegrated into society through the laundering of their crimes with money. Their work is slow but relentless. They are silent, cautious, and above all, authoritarian. For them, democracy is the enemy, and they will not rest until they defeat it.

The question we must ask ourselves is: how far are we willing to tolerate this new enemy?