



**VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA:
FSR INTERVIEWS MÓNICA SERRANO**

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Mónica Serrano is Professor of International Relations at El Colegio de México, Senior Research Associate at the Centre for International Studies, Oxford University and a Senior Fellow at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, CUNY. Between 2008 and 2011, as Executive Director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, she worked closely with the UN and other human rights organizations to build momentum behind an emerging international norm to prevent mass atrocities. Dr. Serrano has written extensively on international security, and on the international relations of Latin America, with particular reference to international institutions, security, human rights, transnational crime and civil-military relations.

FSR: We are very happy to have the chance to interview you, particularly because we think that the things that you look at are so on point [from the perspective of violence in Latin America].

Serrano: Well in fact... the violence that is now part of the reality of Latin America and clearly part of places like Mexico and Colombia is a violence that, while homicidal in nature, and not as yet characterized as reaching the level we tend to associate with conflict in terms of the casualties and so on and so forth, I think that it is a violence of such an order of magnitude that it accounts for what many have identified as a humanitarian crisis. So it is driven by different factors from those we tend to associate with political conflict, but in terms of violence and human rights violations, it is clearly very problematic and troublesome.

FSR: You speak a lot about synergies between international crime, particularly in the era after globalization... How would you relate globalization and criminal organizations when it comes to international security?

Serrano: Well that is a theme that of course is part of the conversation on transnational organized crime, but it is not the only dimension and perhaps not the most important. If we look at the history of drug trafficking in the Americas, what we see is that perhaps the main factor driving that illicit business has been an international norm that we associate with the drug control regime — prohibition. It is prohibition that creates the basis for the profit and the motivation for criminal actors to establish, if needed, relations with other criminal organizations in other latitudes and other parts of the world. But if it is not needed, what we tend to see is that the international connections may not be as big or grandiose as some accounts would like them to sound or to be.

Let's take as an example the Mexican and Colombian criminal organizations that were very much in place before the period that we more closely associate with the flourishing of globalization. In the case of Mexico, these criminal organizations date from the mid-20th century, even the 1930s and 1940s. They clearly took off in the post-war period. In the case of the Colombian organizations, the two main criminal organizations that we tend to associate with Colombia — the Cali Cartel and the Medellín Cartel — were by most accounts disassembled by the early 1990s. These were significant organizations with links established in an *ad hoc* manner between the Colombians and the Mexicans. But what we saw was that once one of these organizations prevailed, the others tended to be eclipsed.

FSR: You said that prohibition was a major driver of the problems associated with trafficking. How does prohibition effect the security situation in Latin America?

Serrano: The way prohibition has impacted the security dimension of states, societies and regions... empowers those actors who decide to participate in the business [of illicit narcotics trade] both through money and through huge levels of impunity. In the earlier period, the money that they accrued from the illicit production, trafficking, and trade in drugs enabled them to buy — through corrupt practices — the authorities of the countries in which they

operated and in that way expand their businesses.

When corruption money was not enough to subdue authorities, they resorted to violence. We are talking about a period when human rights standards and human rights norms did not have the bearing that they now have. If we take that into account for the current period, then what we see is a situation which creates an impossible scenario for countries like Colombia and Mexico, in which state agencies end up confronting brutal organizations... [But these states are] restrained by human rights standards and human rights norms. I'm not suggesting that the human rights norms are to be blamed, but it is a factor that makes it impossible for governments to be able to come up with responses that can deal with these organizations while abiding by human rights standards.

FSR: In Latin America, why are some countries more prone to this type of violence, drug trafficking and transnational crime?

Serrano: Experts have identified a number of factors that may influence the propensity of certain countries to enter into the business. They do not necessarily correspond with those features that we tend to associate with weak or failed states. In fact, these factors include a clear connection with the international economy. So countries like Mexico and Nigeria are countries that from decades ago and before the acceleration of liberalization and the new global era, were pretty much integrated into the international economy.

Another feature that can play a part in this is the presence of migration patterns. And of course, state weakness and state failure can also become important factors in that they offer little resistance to criminals seeking to establish a base. But there will be a trade-off: The weaker the state, the more difficult it will be for these organizations to operate.

FSR: What effect does prohibition in the United States have on the drug trade in Latin America?

Serrano: It did have an immediate effect. When prohibition was established in the U.S., what experts refer to as a "vice industry" in Mexico flourished. If you take just one figure, which is the number of people crossing the U.S.-Mexican border to get access to this vice business in the cities along the U.S.-Mexican border. This number jumped from about 19,000 to nearly half a million in the course of one year.

FSR: Is this a regional problem, or is it a global problem? What role can the United Nations play?

Serrano: I think it is a global problem. The fact that someone like Kofi Annan has taken such a public stand after West Africa became a very important route for cocaine bound to Europe coming from the Americas tells you that very prominent figures are seeing that if countries like Mexico, which was considered at one point one of the strongest states in Latin America, was not able to cope with this, what can you expect from countries in West Africa that have been stabilized with so much effort and pain? How can they resist what many refer to as the impact of the hurricane of the drug trade?

FSR: Do you think that the state weakness and state capture that happens as transnational criminal networks grow strength make R2P [Responsibility to Protect]¹ more necessary as a

¹The United Nations, at the UN World Summit of 2005, defined the R2P through the following three pillars: 1. The State carries the primary responsibility for protecting populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, and their incitement; 2. The international community has a responsibility to encourage and assist States in fulfilling this responsibility; 3. The international community has a responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other means to protect populations from these crimes. If a State is manifestly failing to protect its populations, the international community must be prepared to take collective action to protect populations, in accordance with the Charter of the UN.

standard because we have more situations in which we are unwilling and unable [to intervene]? Or has it just opened the standard up to abuse?

Serrano: I wish R2P could be the magic bullet that could rescue countries in Latin America and West Africa and other parts of the world from these nightmares, but I fundamentally disagree with that proposition.

I see this state weakness and state capture as different from the type of state capture that was used in the 1960s and 1970s by scholars such as Evans and others to refer to the way in which corruption had eroded the capacity of the state to establish a sound economic basis for economic development. But when we think about that type of corruption, it basically referred to the way in which either [government] positions were filled in an irregular way or public funds were wrongly appropriated or money from state enterprises was diverted for private purposes.

This is what I have referred to in some publications, in the case of Latin America, as a Habsburg type of corruption, which is not exclusive to that period in Latin America but that was in fact present in previous centuries under Spanish rule. There was a tolerance for corrupt practices that oiled the system of government in the colonies, but at that price created the basis for a lax, relatively corrupt type of political stability.

The type of state weakness and state capture that we are witnessing now in Latin America and in West Africa is a totally different type of state capture. It is not a state capture that is based on the diversion of profits that were the result of a market economy, but rather a state capture that is anchored in the exponential profit making associated with regimes of prohibition. That enables state actors to allocate the right or the permits to exploit those illicit economies to a number of partners and in doing so what we have is a completely different type of state weakness and state capture that comes at the cost of the viability of the state itself.

FSR: Could you discuss how state failure and organized crime relate to terrorism?

Serrano: There is a trend in the academic literature to establish a connection between state failure, conflict and terrorism. It's not a new connection — it's been going on for quite some time. But the more scholarly works on these matters have come to a number of conclusions. If we take, for example, all the literature on civil war and political conflict, the conclusion would tend to emphasize the political motivations of conflict actors over the impact of economic factors. That doesn't mean that economic factors do not play a part in conflict and may not create incentives to prolong a conflict or to keep a situation moving in a given direction. But even if that is the case, it would be very difficult to characterize a given conflict that is driven by political motivations and political grievances as the result of organized crime.

In the same way, those who have looked at the links between illicit money and terrorism, like Michael Levy, would remind us that if we look at those cases of the most brutal terrorism, in fact the cost of that activity is very minor. You wouldn't need to make the amount of money that drug traffickers may be able to make if your intention is to push the Peruvian government to its knees, as was the case with one of the most brutal insurgencies: Shining Path. All that it required was for Shining Path to steal dynamite and to be ready to engage in the most brutal type of terror to subdue the society and the state.

FSR: Did Shining Path become involved in the drug trade after they began their terrorist activities?

Serrano: It has come and gone, and I think that this shows the perverse effects of not only the policy of prohibition, but the policies by which countries have tried to deal with the drug

problem within the framework of a drug control regime. Yes, Shining Path was in the early stages linked to the cultivation of cocaine in Peru and it resulted in Shining Path securing the support of, in particular, the peasant population. But when the Peruvian government realized that they faced the type of insurgency that it was facing, with some interesting international advice — probably British — they decided that it was in their best interest to let the population cultivate cocaine so as to separate the peasant population from Shining Path. . .

FSR: You were saying that the economic motivation would not be enough to bring together criminal and terrorist organizations. What other motivations might create a synergy between organized crime and terror networks?

Serrano: I don't see a link between organized crime and terror networks. I don't see that necessarily happening. . . While I don't necessarily see a link between organized crime and terrorist groups, I have to underline that there have been different moments in which organized crime groups — drug trafficking criminal organizations — have resorted to terrorist measures to try to resist certain measures enacted by governments. This was the case in Colombia, when they resorted to brutal terrorist tactics that impacted by civilians and state authorities to resist extradition to the U.S. In the case of Mexico, there have been signs that make clear that the propensity of criminal organizations to resort to violence, including brutal violence, has changed. . . On the one hand, competition for market share has intensified among the criminal organizations themselves. But at the same time, that competition has been exacerbated by. . . counternarcotic policies that have translated into pressures on drug trafficking organizations. We have seen a very flux scenario where at one point they may resort to more violent practices among themselves, state authorities and even social groups, or they may. . . resort to tacit alliances.

FSR: Do you think that there is a tendency in Latin America for insurgent groups over time to become criminal networks, or for there to be a merging of some sort?

Serrano: I don't think so. The only case you really have to substantiate that point, and it is not really strong enough to really maintain it, is the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] in Colombia. While there is agreement and consensus in that the way that the FARC became involved in the drug trade explains a lot of the deterioration of its political identity. . . there is a very clear realization, including by the military, that the FARC [remnants] are very politically motivated actors. That core [political] identity of the FARC remains its defining feature. There is an acceptance and realization that the links with the drug trade degraded [the FARC's identity], that it created an impression of empowering it but ultimately weakened it, but I think it is the only [group like this].

Shining Path I hope can be dealt with differently, so as to spare Peru yet another tragic period. But, Shining Path was a movement that lost all recognition and all acceptance across the board in Peruvian society.

What you see in Latin America, very clearly, is a tradition of the [political] left that glorified violence. And that, through various ways and strands, not least the impact of the human rights discourse, including through the [Catholic] Church, [societies] started to more critically approach and deal with the issue of violence. But I don't see the insurgencies [having a] propensity to become criminal. The criminal groups in Latin America are very clearly drug organizations, which started with a very clear profit maximizing motivation. Then you have the *maras*, which is the other prominent organization [in Central America], which is an export from U.S. prisons. So, what you had was a period back in the 1970s and 1980s of some insurgent groups — some of the most radical and more violent ones — resorting to illicit measures, but these were kidnappings and ransoms, rather than [involvement in] illicit

economies.

FSR: What is the current relationship between the arms trade and drug trafficking?

Serrano: As you know, illicit drugs are very difficult to document because you don't have the sources. . . So what are the sources of arms in the region? You have on the one hand the local industry, very clearly in Brazil. Then you have the other source, which has been traced to the demobilization of armed groups, in Central America in particular. But then you have the most important for Mexico, which is the U.S.

[Weapons coming from the U.S.] are not necessarily illegal. It could be totally legal. So what you have in fact is the one mechanism that the [Ernesto] Zedillo administration put in place, out, I think, of frustration and desperation, which was on the one hand to negotiate an inter-American convention on arms trafficking. The other initiative (which was the only thing they could get from the U.S.) was to get the U.S. government to accept the marking of weapons so as to be able to trace them. So there have been a number of instances in which weapons legally acquired in the U.S. have been traced thanks to that procedure, but that's about it. . .

FSR: What are the financial channels for the licit and illicit arms trade?

Serrano: They have to improvise, particularly in light of the clamping down of financial flows through anti-money laundering laws. It is true that the anti-money laundering measures have made their lives more difficult, but has it dried the business? I don't think so. It just pushes it somewhere else, or further down into the underworld. There are various ways in which this can be done. . . There are all types of varieties, and the reality is that. . . it may make their lives more difficult, but it doesn't stop the business. It also makes their lives more difficult at huge cost on other fronts, including on the economy, for the freedoms and entitlements of persons sending remittances and people opening a bank account.

FSR: So what you are saying is that the policy here has been so myopic and so focused on confronting criminal activity that policymakers haven't weighed the pros and cons in terms of the damage that these types of laws do to everybody else.

Serrano: What I am saying is that the drug problem is a real problem and I don't want to underestimate that in any way. Addiction is a real problem. . . it is a tragedy. The tragedy for the most part has to do with the fact that those who fall into addiction may not be able to come back. It is a real problem and I have no intention of underestimating that. But, the problem was that instead of dealing with one problem, we have created two, or even many more problems, intractable problems. This is a public health problem.

FSR: In your view, what would be an effective strategy to actually tackle these diverse issues? And is there momentum toward tackling the broader issues?

Serrano: There is no magic bullet, there is no magic wand. But, I do think that if we go back to basics and understand. . . that this is a public health problem and that we need to persuade people that it is in their best interest not to do certain things. Or, if they decide to do them, to do them in such a way that minimizes the risk. I think that would be a beginning and that would be a start. . .

What we have heard from those who have favored prohibition is that we have, through prohibition, protected people. But the reality is that drugs are available on the streets. The records are there to show that that has not been the case. And the people that stand for this policy course will insistent on the need of abiding by prohibition and using oppressive measures because of the way in which drugs are continuing to flow. So it is more of the same. If we go back to basics, we might be able then to deal with that at a lower cost, both in

terms of the risk of addiction itself, but also in terms of the problems that we have created as we have tried to deal with the problem in this way. . .

There will always be problems. It is like a family: You confront the problems that come at different stages of your life. In the case of Latin America and other countries, if we were to be ready to deal with this issue as a public health issue, you would then be, for all purposes, taking away the profit from the organizations, which has empowered them to buy authorities. . . and to buy the arms by which they push to their knees countries and state agencies that are struggling to become democratic and respectful of human rights standards.

**Interview has been lightly edited for clarity. Brackets indicate editorial additions.*