Corruption in the Security Forces. An Isolated Fact or a Generalization? A Brief Study of the Ecuadorian Case

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Abstract. With the appearance of new dissident groups of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP), the perception of insecurity has increased in Ecuador, especially on the northern border. These criminal organizations have tried for a long time to insert themselves into institutions responsible for security to facilitate their criminal activities, mainly associated with transport, collection, custody, and sale of narcotics and illegal substances, kidnapping, illegal mining, among others. This article carries out a generic analysis of the level of corruption and the evil effects generated in the Latin American region and why the irregular armed groups have tried to infiltrate the State security forces and led the Ecuadorian case as a study model. This paper also verifies the situation of participation of the uniformed in acts of common or organized crime, and its analysis on whether cases of non-compliance with the law can be considered as isolated or as the beginning of a process of contamination and low professionalization of these security institutions. The study carried out shows that participated in acts of corruption, or common crime, representing 0.02% of the Ecuadorian Security Institutions’ total personnel.

Keywords: National security institutions · Corruption · Drugs trafficking · Irregular Armed Groups (IAG)

1 Introduction

The report prepared by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 2002 indicates that many of the Latin American countries have the highest corruption rates globally, being one of the main obstacles for these countries to achieve economic and social development [1].

We must recall that corruption is not an exclusive problem of developing countries, nor only of the State or public entities, but has also affected countries considered developed and private entities.

As part of each country’s public sector, the tentacles of corruption have also affected, including Armed Forces and the Police, control entities, and especially the security forces. In these entities, two types of corruption could be evidenced: An administrative and an operational one. The first could include administrative acts that seek to benefit
their own or third parties within internal processes through the convenient management of human and/or economic resources in consideration of the execution activities such as promotions, passes, contracts, purchases, etc. The second type of influence occurs in the operational field, where the security forces carry out their fundamental missions of border control or the commission of crimes, which opens up a series of opportunities for them to carry out acts of corruption [2].

In the Ecuadorian case, the military institution from its origin has enjoyed prestige and trust, due to the approach and inclusion that this institution has shown to Ecuadorian society. This evidence is shown by the variety in recruiting their cadres, supporting state institutions in risk, management missions, and immediate response.

On the other hand, in recent years, the police force has been increasing the level of trust and credibility. This fact is also the product of a communication strategy and of linkage with Ecuadorian society. Undoubtedly, the prestige achieved by the Ecuadorian security forces, which have become public knowledge, could be affected by cases involving elements in criminal activities.

From the signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian State and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC - EP), new dissident groups of these criminal organizations have emerged. These groups have increased their actions on the northern Ecuadorian border, especially in the province of Esmeraldas, forcing the Ecuadorian State to increase the military and police presence in said region [3].

The FARC - EP has tried for years to infiltrate several Latin American countries’ security institutions and bordering the Republic of Colombia to facilitate their criminal activities as part of their operating doctrine. Indeed, part of the strategy of these irregular armed groups is to involve the personnel of the security forces in active service. Besides, affecting the institutional image in the sense of knowing if these institutions are facing a low professionalization effect or are simply isolated events.

The present work tries to establish conclusions to know if corruption has effectively managed to penetrate the Ecuadorian security forces. This study’s is a false perception motivated by society’s sectors disaffected to institutions that manage agendas under their interests. This work has the following contents:

– Section 2: analyzes the level of relationship of the Latin American security forces with the population.
– Section 3: presents corruption as a national and regional problem.
– Section 4: analyzes FARC-EP dissidents’ presence as a cause of corruption in Ecuadorian security forces.
– Section 5: shows the generalization of corruption as a State security problem and finally,
– Section 6: presents the conclusions of this work.

2 Relationship of the Security Forces in Latin America and the Citizens

Hobbes in his work “Leviathan” mentions that the State comes from a pact of submission of men to a monarch, to whom he gives all his individual rights and freedoms to obtain
a minimum of security. From this statement, we can deduce that the State, through its coercive power, oversees providing security to the individuals who are part of it [4].

The security that the State provides to its population generates a relationship between them, aiming to guarantee stability and social order, depending on the views; these can be positive or negative. In Latin America, there are various types of relationships between the states’ security forces and their respective societies. Some of these are very good since the beginning of their respective republics, and others not very close. Essentially, due to the variety of doctrinal and philosophical schemes that have sought to establish itself in Latin American societies, especially because of the Cold War.

From this Geopolitical-Historical event of humanity, the doctrine of National Security is spread in Latin America through the revolutionary war. This doctrine was supported by various techniques of irregular combat and strategies of collective control of masses and territory. The objective of the State Security Forces is to control the people; in this way, the necessity to fight an “internal enemy” is justified. According to this doctrine, the main objective of these State security institutions is to control the people, as a need to combat an “internal enemy” [5]. In reply, the Latin American States applied the national security doctrine. The confrontation between the state security forces and ideologically opposed sectors of the population was imminent. The results were a negative relationship and rejection from certain sectors of the community population, generating reductions in acceptance level.

On the other hand, the Ecuadorian Armed Forces have written outstanding historical pages regarding safeguarding national sovereignty, such as what happened in the Cenepa War in 1995. After signing peace between the republics of Ecuador and Peru, the Ecuadorian soldier has become a “flexible military” since its role is adapted to the fulfillment of new missions and challenges related to humanitarian support, support for risk management, strengthening civil-military relations, coordination with the National Police for the fight against organized crime, among others. All these activities bring closer and increase the relationship with society; evidence of this is the high acceptance rates of the Ecuadorian armed forces after the Cenepa War.

In April of 2016, acceptance increased the level of approval of the armed forces and the National Police after the earthquake occurred in the provinces of Manabí and Esmeraldas. The deployment capacity and means of the Armed Forces in general and the Land Force were demonstrated through the use of 36 operational and administrative units that carried out a search, rescue, and evacuation operations for victims, logistical support, construction temporary camps, and security [5].

During 2019, large-scale social protests took place in some Latin American countries, specific in Ecuador; there were several acts of violence and destruction. The response of the Ecuadorian Armed Forces to these events was aimed at respect for human rights, control, and progressive use of force; this attitude allowed to avoid an escalation of social shock [6].

This year, the Ecuadorian security forces are playing a fundamental role during the health emergency that occurred due to the global pandemic of COVID-19, executing crisis response operations and allowing compliance with the different measures and provisions adopted by the Government National.
Indeed, it is evident that at present, the security forces and especially the military forces carry out complementary missions that add value to society, and that broadens the conception of its structural doctrinal base where the scenarios are uncertain and the answers must be creative, fast, and attached to the legal order [7].

This new reality of employment of the Ecuadorian security forces has allowed them a close approach with the people, reaching the first places of institutional trust level. The latest survey carried out by CEDATOS in the cities of Quito, Guayaquil, Cuenca, and Manta, closed at the end of 2019, confirms the following: After family with 97.3%, the Armed Forces received the highest response 78.4%, followed by the Ecuadorian Army 76.5%, youth with 75.8%, Ecuadorian Air Force with 73.7%, Navy with 72.04%; Church with 70.02% and the National Police with 53.7% and the private media, 50.1% [8].

3 Corruption: Regional and National Concern

One of the biggest concerns, not only in Ecuador but also throughout the region, is corruption. The Círculo de Estudios Latinoamericanos (CESLA) has updated the corruption report on the region, revealing that 67.65% of the countries that make up Latin America present high levels of corruption, according to the results of the CESLA-2020 indicator. The study shows that Perú and El Salvador place it above the average (69), Bolivia is among the countries with high corruption indicators as it has a scale of 75. Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, have a high corruption level too. Nicaragua, Haiti, and Venezuela appear on the blacklist. For Ecuador, the synthetic indicator of corruption receives a score of 67/100; in other words, it is a high level of corruption and extreme weakness in anti-corruption policy [9].

As shown in Fig. 1, the corruption index in Ecuador places it near the average for the Latin American region. This figure should be taken as a wake-up call to rethink anti-corruption policies as a society and as a State.

In the Ecuadorian reality, the perception of corruption does not vary much from the regional one. According to CEDATOS, this is one of the social problems that most afflicts Ecuadorian society with 15% occupying the third place among the main issues that worry the population, and added the percentages between corruption, drugs, insecurity, and crime add up to a total of 30.5% [8]. Conceptualizing this problem, corruption is defined as the intentional breach of the principle of impartiality to derive from such behavior a personal or related person’s benefit. This definition of corruption can be broken down into three parts:

1. Intentional non-compliance means that someone aware of what they are doing commits the act and knows it is wrong.
2. The principle of impartiality refers to the absence of inclination in favor of or against one or another position.
3. Personal benefit or for related people which is seen as the result of the act committed.

For this reason, corruption is an act committed consciously in favor of some interest to achieve a result or benefit for itself or third parties. Although it is true throughout
history, the security forces have been considered and are until today’s example of honor, discipline, and loyalty; neither can it be thought that they possess an impenetrable shield to this great social problem of corruption. It is unacceptable for the institutions of order and society in general that active members of the security forces are involved in corruption acts. However, among the causes for the occurrence of these acts, it could be argued that this happens as a logical and, to some extent, expected consequence due to the increase in the number of Armed Irregular Groups (AIG) and their criminal activities within the region.

4 Actions of the FARC - EP Dissidents on the Colombian-Ecuadorian Border, as a Possible Cause of Cases of Corruption in the Ecuadorian Security Forces

During the peace negotiations between Colombia and the FARC - EP, some components did not agree with the terms and agreements, such as the announcement on June 10, 2016, by the Front First Armando Rios FARC. They operated in Vaupés, Guaviare, and Meta’s departments, a statement that expressed its decision not to participate in the demobilization process, dereliction of weapons, and continuing hostile activities [10].

These groups were called FARC dissidents, and their actions increased as the negotiations progressed. They reached their peak of criminal activities after the signing of
the peace agreement on September 26, 2016. Figure 2 shown the percentage of actions by place of occurrence attributed to dissidents.

Fig. 2. Percentage of actions by place of occurrence attributed to dissidents [10]

As shown in Fig. 2, 5% of the actions attributed to the confirmed FARC dissidents have been carried out in Ecuadorian territory, which has somehow influenced the decrease in the perception of security in Ecuador, especially on the northern border. This 5% reflects five terrorist attacks that occurred in the first quarter of 2018. Table 1 shown a detail of the attacks that occurred in Ecuador (2018).

For their criminal actions, the AIG must finance themselves with crimes related to drug trafficking. Therefore, they need weapons, which are under the exclusive custody, control, and management of the Armed Forces and the National Police. Besides, they will seek in any case the involvement of its members, infiltrating, penetrating, and corrupting to achieve their objectives.

After the signing of peace with Peru and due to its geographical position, Ecuador became a strategic place for the exchange, transport, and mobility of illegal substances, as well as for arms trafficking. As the UNODC points out, arms trafficking in Ecuador uses land and sea routes and connects a network of national towns that invariably culminates in Colombian territory. In this sense, the State Attorney General’s Office has detected light weapons from Chile and Peru, some of them belonging to those countries’ military arsenals. The weapons enter through the southern border provinces, which are then dispersed in different Ecuador locations - Quito, Santo Domingo, San Lorenzo, Manta, Guayaquil, Ibarra, Tulcán, Lago Agrio, among others, to reach Colombia as their final
Table 1. Detail of attacks that occurred in Ecuador (2018)

| Ord. | Attempt                        | Location             | Date          | Effects                                      |
|------|--------------------------------|----------------------|---------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 1    | Car bomb                       | San Lorenzo          | January 27    | Destruction of the Police headquarters       |
| 2    | Explosive charge               | Borbón               | March 17      | Damage to naval checkpoint                   |
| 3    | Attacks on Ecuadorian patrols  | Alto Tambo y El Pan  | March 18      | Wounded military personnel                   |
| 4    | Kidnapping and murder of        | No location          | March 26      | Murder of civilians                           |
|      | journalists                     |                      |               |                                              |
| 5    | Kidnapping and murder of        | No location          | April 17      | Murder of civilians                           |
|      | civilians                      |                      |               |                                              |

destination. Based on these facts, and as López and Negrete say, direct contagion from institutions of the Ecuadorian State cannot be ruled out, as occurs in Mexico, where a group of ex-military formed the armed wing of the Gulf Cartel called Los Zetas [11]. Exist some routes of arms trafficking in Ecuador, they are in relation to the main cities and regions in this country. Mainly, there are three routes where both illegal substances and materials are trafficked. The first route goes along the coastal axis from the Tumaco (Colombia) – Emeraldas – Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas – Portoviejo - Manta – Guayaquil – Salinas – Machala - Huaquillas to Zarumilla (Perú). The second route goes through the Inter-Andina region from Machala - Cuenca – Ambato – Quito - Tulcán to Pasto (Colombia). And finally the eastern axis that goes from the cities of Ambato and Quito towards Nueva Loja - Puerto Nuevo - Puerto Maestanza - Puerto Asis (Colombia) [12].

Among the objectives of these AIG is to permeate, contaminate or recruit personnel belonging to the control and State Security Agencies, to facilitate their criminal activities through the infiltration technique, which allows members to of a subversive minority or to people who unconsciously or consciously cooperate, especially to enter public organizations. For the AIGs to obtain the collaboration of the security forces’ elements, it will depend on the means of pressure they use and the commitment of the members of these institutions with their ethical and moral responsibility in the fulfillment of their functions.

The Ecuadorian Armed Forces and National Police are diverse institutions made up of all social strata, populations, and ethnic groups that inhabit the country; in other words, the men and women who make it up come from all regions, provinces, cities, towns. As an example of the above, the percentages of admission to the training schools of the Land Force for the admission process of the year 2018 are highlighted, as shown in Table 2.

Indeed, the security forces in Ecuador and specifically the military forces are made up of inhabitants from all its regions; consequently, it is normal for this institution to coexist with the same ties, problems, social and economic needs that afflict its population in general. While the security forces strive to keep their personnel isolated from any form of
contamination to their ethics, principles, and institutional values, common or organized crime could use this relationship to promote corruption within security institutions’ ranks.

5 The Generalization “An Attack on State Security”

Recent cases related to alleged acts of corruption by personnel are analyzed to determine whether corruption has effectively managed to introduce its tentacles into the Ecuadorian security forces’ ranks. These cases are considered by their importance and impact generated in the society.

1. Crime report in Esmeraldas. On Monday, January 29, 2018, four soldiers who fled in two vehicles were arrested by members of the National Police, allegedly escaping when they were discovered while trying to attack a house in the Tachina sector, Esmeraldas province [14].

2. Detained in Arenillas. On Thursday, March 8, 2018, the National Police dismantled, in the city of Arenillas, El Oro province, an alleged criminal group made up of 10 members, two of whom were active-duty military personnel [15].

3. Detained in “La Y” Sucumbios. On Sunday, August 26, 2018, in the sector “The Y” Sucumbios, between Santa Barbara and Carmel, at a military checkpoint a van Nissan brand, which carried white goods appliances stopped, within which was found a substance, presumably a drug, leading to the arrest of two active-duty army members [16].

4. Cocaine seized at the Manta Air Base. On September 13, 2018, the National Police seized approximately one ton of cocaine at the Manta Air Base, Manabí province, because of an anti-narcotics operation. Two soldiers of the Ecuadorian Air Force on active duty were arrested and placed under the orders of the competent authorities [17].

5. Military, former police, and eight civilians arrested for illicit association. On October 11, 2018, two members of the Ecuadorian Air Force, a former police officer, and eight civilians were arrested for the alleged crime of illicit association while they were transported in four high-end cars to the north of the province of Esmeraldas, to steal money and jewelry [18].
6. **Possible crime of arms and ammunition trafficking.** On October 17, 2018, the Prosecutor’s Office, with the National Police’s support, carried out a series of proceedings in the country’s military units for investigative purposes on the possible crime of trafficking in arms and ammunition. As a result, seven active-duty military personnel were arrested, as well as one public servant [19].

Table 3 shows the data of corruption cases in 2018 in which personnel in active service have been involved. On the other hand, Table 4 has been compared with the total population of Ecuadorian society during the same period of occurrence as follows:

**Table 3. Number of military personnel arrested for alleged acts of crime and corruption**

| Cases raised in 2018                                             | Number of military personnel detained |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Military detained in Esmeraldas  | 4                                    |
| Military detained in Arenillas  | 2                                    |
| Military detained in “La Y” Sucumbios | 2                                    |
| Cocaine seized at the Manta Air Base  | 2                                    |
| Possible crime of arms and ammunition trafficking  | 7                                    |
| Military, ex-police and 8 civilians arrested for illicit association | 2                                    |
| **Total Personnel Detained**  | **19**                                |

**Table 4. Percentage comparison of detained personnel (year 2018)**

| Universe                  | Population | Detained 2018 | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------|------------|---------------|----------------|
| Ecuadorian inhabitants     | 16,620,000 | 15,566        | 0.0934         |
| Ecuadorian security forces personnel | 90,000    | 19            | 0.0211         |

As can be seen from Table 3 and Table 4 of the results obtained, the percentage of active duty military and police personnel involved in illicit activities corresponds to less than a quarter of the percentage of citizens detained for the same reasons in the same period. This information supports the claim that the security forces are far below the general population’s criminal level.

As analyzed, no one can talk of a generalization of corruption in the Ecuadorian security forces. It is true that in 2018 there were several cases of involvement of active duty personnel in illegal activities; however, it is also true that illegal activities on the part of the AIG that operate on the Ecuadorian borders increased, as one of the main causes of this. In recent years, we must also consider that corruption at all levels has increased in general, to the point of becoming a complex problem on a national and regional scale.
On the other hand, the response of the Ecuadorian security forces authorities at different levels before the public opinion has been forceful in providing all the collaboration so that the alleged crimes are investigated and, if applicable, punished with total impartiality, but at the same time with all the rigor of the law.

It is important to point out the significant effect it produces on the people’s perception, the approach with which columnists in all its forms treat these events. It will also depend on their professionalism and ethics to leave in the collective mind a perception of generalized corruption or simply isolated events. Added to this is the negative effect produced by the increasing use of social networks irresponsibly and inappropriately. Thus, in 2018, various statements were made through multiple media that generalized the concept of “corruption in the security forces”, negatively affecting the image and prestige of these institutions.

Considering the broad spectrum of participation of the Ecuadorian State’s security forces in compliance with their fundamental missions and support for development, to speak of the generalization of corruption in these institutions is an attack on their security.

Cases of participation in criminal actions by military or police personnel do not have a connection between them; in other words, the members who are being investigated for their alleged intervention do not belong to or have formed any permanent, generalized, or articulated criminal organization or group to act with the security forces. These events may have the same causes, but they would not necessarily be related to the action of a few members within the military institution is considered as worrying isolated events.

The facts must be analyzed and investigated in-depth so that the security forces implement the necessary policies that combat and prevent their personnel’s involvement in criminal acts related to AIG’s activities.

The Ecuadorian Armed Forces, above all, have taken important steps to avoid contamination of their members; proof of this is the new Law on Personnel and Discipline of the Ecuadorian Armed Forces (FF.AA) seeks to increase commitment to society and highlight the ethical and moral values of the members of the armed institution. This is also part of an institutional strategy for society to maintain its trust in military institutions’ professionalism, ethics, and integrity.

6 Conclusions

Corruption in Latin America is one of the fundamental factors that impede the development of this region of the world since it leads to the degradation of the social structure and, with it a significant loss of large amounts of public economic and financial resources, which in the end significantly reduces the levels of quality of life and human well-being.

Starting from the signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian State and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC - EP), new dissident groups of these criminal organizations have emerged. These groups have increased their actions on the northern Ecuadorian border, especially in the province of Esmeraldas, consequently forcing the Ecuadorian State to increase the military and police presence in said region.

Common and organized crime have as a strategy to include recruiting members of the security forces to carry out their illegal actions. The Ecuadorian security forces’
members run a high risk of being incited to be part of them because the geostrategic position of the country facilitates the mobility and trafficking of illicit substances and/or weapons.

In the year 2018, the number of members of the security forces who have participated in acts of corruption or common crime represents 0.02% of these institutions’ total personnel. The percentage is very low, so it is evident that they are not a generalized act of corruption but rather isolated cases.

The Ecuadorian security forces in general and the Armed Forces specifically enjoy high levels of acceptance and credibility. In the Ecuadorian case, corruption is considered a risk within the defense political agenda, for which strategies have been established and objectives defined to avoid possible contamination and involvement of uniformed personnel in illegal actions.

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