

## Ecuador, Caught between extortionists and Terrorism

Nelson Pérez Villarroel

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5343-0192>

Cesar Vallejo University Lima-Perú

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**ABSTRACT:** Ecuador finds itself at a dangerous crossroads, caught between the growing threat of extortionists and terrorism, creating an environment of fear and uncertainty for its citizens. Extortion, perpetrated mainly by criminal gangs and gangs, has escalated to alarming levels, affecting small and medium-sized businesses who are forced to pay to protect their lives and property. This phenomenon not only hits the economy, but also undermines confidence in public security institutions.

This article provides a vision of the critical situation in Ecuador, where aspects are addressed from a multidimensional perspective and allowing a deep understanding of the dynamics between extortion and terrorism, the objective is to offer a comprehensive way about the related events, under a methodology of literary review, analysis of recent data, comparison of academic and government sources as a beginning of the first findings to establish public policies that help mitigate an escalation that can lead to disastrous consequences in the social, political and economic sphere.

The government response has included legislative reforms and greater international cooperation, demanding an integrated approach that not only combats the symptoms, but also the roots of these problems. Engaging the community and strengthening institutions are crucial steps to breaking this cycle of violence and fear.

The situation in Ecuador is a forceful reminder of the need for robust and coordinated policies to confront threats that go beyond national borders (Ponce & Carrera, 2022).

**KEYWORDS:** extortion, security, terrorism

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### INTRODUCTION

Ecuador, a country known for its cultural diversity and natural wealth, today faces challenges that threaten its stability and security. Two of the most critical problems afflicting the nation are extortion and terrorism, phenomena that are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, creating an environment of fear and uncertainty for citizens.

Extortion, an illicit practice that consists of obtaining money through threats and coercion, has proliferated in recent decades, affecting both small businessmen and large entrepreneurs. Criminal gangs and gangs have found extortion to be a lucrative source of income, which has led to an increase in the incidence of this crime. According to data from the National Police, extortion cases have increased significantly, generating a climate of insecurity and distrust (Ministerio del Interior, 2022).

On the other hand, terrorism, often linked to drug trafficking and insurgent groups, has added to the complexity of security in Ecuador. Terrorist groups not only use violence to sow chaos and fear, but also finance themselves through illicit activities such as extortion. This creates a symbiotic relationship between the two problems, where extortion feeds terrorism and vice versa. The presence of armed groups in border regions, especially those bordering Colombia, has exacerbated this situation, complicating government efforts to maintain order and security (Ponce & Carrera, 2022).

The Ecuadorian government's response has included various measures, such as the implementation of legislative reforms, the strengthening of security forces, and international cooperation to combat these threats. However, the effectiveness of these actions is still under evaluation, as the complexity of the problem requires comprehensive and coordinated solutions. In addition, it is crucial to involve the community in these efforts, promoting a culture of denunciation and collaboration with the authorities.

In this context, it is fundamental to understand the intersection between extortion and terrorism in Ecuador in order to develop effective public policies that address these threats in a forceful manner. Only in this way can the security and well-being of all Ecuadorians be guaranteed, breaking the cycle of violence and fear that currently affects the country.

### CURRENT STATE OF THE ART

Research on this topic has grown significantly in recent years, given the increase in the incidence of these crimes and their impact on the stability and security of the country. Extortion has become a growing phenomenon in Ecuador, particularly in urban areas

## **Ecuador, Caught between extortionists and Terrorism**

and border zones. This crime, which involves obtaining money through threats and coercion, has been driven by the presence of criminal gangs and gangs seeking to finance their illicit activities.

According to the Ministry of Interior report (2022), extortion cases have increased significantly, affecting a wide range of sectors, from small merchants to large businessmen. This increase is attributed in part to the weak presence of the state in certain areas, as well as a lack of confidence in public security institutions.

Terrorism in Ecuador, often linked to the drug trade, adds another edge to the country's security situation. Proximity to Colombia, a country that has dealt with insurgent and drug trafficking groups for decades, has exacerbated Ecuador's vulnerability. Groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) and dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have crossed the border, carrying out terrorist and drug trafficking activities in Ecuadorian territory (Ponce & Carrera, 2022).

There is a symbiotic relationship between extortion and terrorism in Ecuador. Terrorist groups use extortion as a source of financing, while criminal gangs employ terrorist tactics to intimidate their victims and consolidate their territorial control. This interconnection aggravates the situation, creating a vicious cycle that makes it difficult to implement effective strategies to combat these problems (Carvajal, 2021).

The Ecuadorian government has implemented various measures to confront extortion and terrorism. These include legislative reforms, strengthening of security forces, and international cooperation. For example, agreements have been established with Colombia to improve border surveillance and coordinate operations against armed groups (Ministerio del Interior, 2022). However, the effectiveness of these actions has been questioned due to the persistence and adaptation of criminal groups.

The impact of extortion and terrorism in Ecuador is significant, affecting both the economy and the social fabric of the country. Entrepreneurs face additional costs to protect their businesses, which decreases investment and economic growth. In addition, the climate of insecurity generates an environment of fear and distrust among citizens, weakening social cohesion and trust in institutions (Martinez, 2020).

Recent research has highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach to address these problems. It has been suggested that security policies should be accompanied by social and economic development programs that address the underlying causes of crime. In addition, the importance of community participation and international collaboration to achieve sustainable results has been emphasized (Ortega & Ramirez, 2023).

## **METHODOLOGY**

A comprehensive and multidisciplinary research methodology is developed through a literature review, qualitative analysis, descriptive research, case studies and policy evaluation that provides a holistic perspective on the problem of extortion and terrorism in Ecuador. This approach allows not only to understand the magnitude and mechanisms of these threats, but also to develop informed strategies to mitigate them.

The literature review is the crucial first step in establishing a solid theoretical basis. This involves the collection and analysis of previous studies on extortion and terrorism in Ecuador and similar contexts. Sources such as academic articles, government reports, non-governmental organization (NGO) documents and international studies will be used.

The objective is to identify patterns, causes and effects of extortion and terrorism in Ecuador. The sources, academic databases such as JSTOR, Scielo, reports from the Ministry of the Interior of Ecuador, and publications from international organizations such as the UN and the OAS. Among others.

Data analysis makes it possible to measure the magnitude of the problem and detect specific trends. The collection of statistical data on incidents of extortion and terrorism from official sources such as the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC) and the National Police of Ecuador.

Qualitative research provides a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of those affected by these problems. Versions with extortion victims, government officials, security experts and NGO representatives.

Documents and media will be examined to identify predominant narratives and discourses on the issue. The case studies allow for a detailed analysis of specific situations and local contexts with the objective of identifying specific regions in Ecuador where the incidence of extortion and terrorism is high, such as border areas with Colombia.

Analyzing current policies and their effectiveness is crucial to develop informed recommendations. In this regard, analyze the security policies implemented by the Ecuadorian government, including legislative reforms and international cooperation strategies.

## **DEVELOPMENT AND/OR DISCUSSION**

Extortion in Ecuador is not a recent phenomenon; its beginnings can be traced back to the last decades of the 20th century, mainly associated with the activities of local and transnational criminal groups. These groups began to use extortion as a means to finance their illicit activities, especially in urban areas where commerce and small businesses were quickly affected.

During the first decade of the 21st century, extortion in Ecuador experienced a notable increase. This increase was linked to several factors, including the expansion of drug trafficking in the Andean region and the proliferation of gangs and organized criminal

## **Ecuador, Caught between extortionists and Terrorism**

groups. The lack of resources and training in the police forces, along with corruption in some areas of the judicial system, contributed to the impunity of these crimes, facilitating their growth.

The strengthening of criminal groups in urban areas such as Guayaquil and Quito led to an increase in reported cases of extortion. The methods used ranged from telephone threats to direct violence, with local merchants and businessmen as the main targets.

### **Current Situation**

Currently, extortion in Ecuador has reached alarming levels, consolidating itself as one of the main public security concerns. According to a recent report by Ecuador's Ministry of the Interior, extortion cases have increased significantly in recent years, with a 30% increase in the last five years (Ministry of the Interior, 2023).

The modernization of extortion techniques, driven by the use of advanced communication technologies, has made the fight against this crime even more difficult. Social networks and instant messaging applications have become common tools for extortionists, facilitating anonymity and the rapid dissemination of threats.

Ecuadorian authorities have intensified their efforts to combat extortion, implementing measures such as strengthening specialized units in the National Police and public awareness campaigns. However, the perception of insecurity among the population remains high, and many citizens distrust the ability of the judicial system to provide effective protection (El Comercio, 2024).

### **TYPES OF EXTORTION IN ECUADOR**

Extortionists use telephone calls to threaten victims, demanding money in exchange for not harming them or their family members. This modality is common due to the ease and anonymity it offers (Pérez, M. (2021).

Criminals threaten business owners with physical violence or damage to their property if they do not pay a regular "fee". This modality seriously affects small and medium-sized businesses, especially in urban areas (Ministerio del Interior de Ecuador. (2023). With the increased use of communication technologies, extortionists use social networks and messaging applications to send threats.

In some cases, personal accounts are hacked or private information is collected to pressure victims (El Comercio. 2024).

Also known as "pago de piso", this modality involves charging money in exchange for "protection" against other potential criminals. This method is frequent in markets and areas of high commerce (Pérez, M. (2021).

Express kidnapping, in this type of extortion, victims are temporarily kidnapped and released once the ransom is paid. Although it does not always involve a prolonged kidnapping, the threat and fear are used to obtain the money quickly (Ministry of the Interior of Ecuador (2023).

Stores and businesses, especially small and medium-sized ones, are frequently targets for extortion. Criminals know that these businesses often prefer to pay rather than risk violence or damage to their property.

Transporters, especially those operating on urban and suburban routes, are common victims of extortion by gangs who demand regular payments to allow them to operate without incident.

Private and public educational institutions have also been targets of extortion, where threats are directed at directors and parents to obtain payments in exchange for not harming students (Pérez, M. (2021).

Farmers and ranchers, especially in rural areas, face extortion in the form of "quotas" to protect their crops and livestock. This modality seriously affects food production and security (Ministry of the Interior of Ecuador (2023).

### **OVERVIEW OF CRIMINAL GANGS IN ECUADOR**

Criminal gangs in Ecuador represent a significant threat to security and public order. Their involvement in a variety of criminal activities, from drug trafficking to extortion, and their ability to operate with relative impunity, underscore the need for comprehensive security strategies and international cooperation to combat this scourge.

Recent years have seen a significant increase in the activity of criminal gangs, both local and transnational. These organizations are involved in a variety of criminal activities ranging from drug trafficking to extortion and robbery. A review of some of the main criminal gangs operating in Ecuador.

Los Choneros; are one of the best known and most feared gangs in Ecuador. They originated in the province of Manabí and have expanded their influence nationwide. They are involved in a wide range of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping and murder. This gang has strong links to drug cartels in Colombia and Mexico, facilitating the transit of cocaine through Ecuador to international markets.

Los Lagartos; emerged as a split from Los Choneros, with whom they have maintained a violent rivalry. This gang operates mainly in the coastal provinces and engages in similar activities, such as drug trafficking, extortion and contract killings. The struggle for control of strategic territories has led to numerous armed confrontations between gangs, contributing to high levels of violence in these areas.

The Chone Killers; also have their roots in Manabí province and have emerged as a significant force in Ecuador's criminal landscape. This gang specializes in extortion and sicariato (contract killing), and is also involved in drug trafficking. Their notoriety has grown due to their brutality and ability to instill fear in the communities where they operate.

## **Ecuador, Caught between extortionists and Terrorism**

Los Tiguerones; a relatively new gang that has quickly gained notoriety, operating mainly in the Esmeraldas region. This gang is dedicated to drug trafficking, taking advantage of the proximity of the border with Colombia to facilitate cocaine trafficking. They are also involved in arms trafficking and extortion, and are known for their violent tactics and confrontations with other gangs.

Los Lobos; operate mainly in the province of Guayas and have expanded their influence into other regions of the country. Their main activities include drug trafficking and extortion, although they are also involved in large-scale robberies and kidnappings. Rivalry with other gangs such as Los Choneros has contributed to an increase in violence and crime rates in the areas where they operate.

### **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRIMINAL GANGS AND TERRORISM IN ECUADOR**

The relationship between criminal gangs and terrorism in Ecuador is a complex and multifaceted reality that presents a significant national security challenge. The convergence of these criminal and terrorist activities requires a comprehensive response that combines security measures, international cooperation, and social development programs to address the underlying causes of violence and radicalization.

Convergence of Criminal Gangs and Terrorism, Drug Trafficking and Terrorist Financing. Criminal gangs in Ecuador, especially those linked to drug trafficking, have established connections with transnational terrorist groups. These criminal organizations use drug trafficking not only as a source of income, but also as a means to finance terrorist activities. According to a report by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Interior, some local gangs have been identified as collaborating with Colombian and Mexican cartels, which in turn have links to terrorist groups seeking to finance their operations through drug trafficking (Ecuadorian Ministry of Interior, 2023).

Use of Terrorism as a Tactic of Intimidation. Criminal gangs have adopted terrorist tactics, such as the use of explosives and armed attacks, to intimidate their rivals and the population. This phenomenon has been particularly evident in cities such as Guayaquil and Esmeraldas, where gang confrontations and acts of extreme violence have spread terror among citizens. An article in *El Comercio* (2024) highlights several incidents in which gangs such as Los Choneros and Los Lagartos have carried out attacks involving the use of bombs and kidnappings, strategies typically associated with terrorism.

Extortion and Terrorist Financing. Extortion, a common practice among criminal gangs in Ecuador, has also been used to finance terrorist activities. Criminal groups have extorted money from businessmen, merchants, and citizens, diverting part of these funds to support terrorist organizations. This link has been documented in research showing how profits from extortion and other illicit activities are transferred through complex financial networks to finance terrorism (Pérez, 2021).

The presence of criminal gangs and the lack of economic opportunities have contributed to the radicalization of young people in Ecuador, who are recruited by both criminal gangs and terrorist groups. Poverty and lack of alternatives have created a breeding ground for radicalization, where gangs offer not only a source of income, but also a sense of belonging and purpose, albeit through criminal and terrorist activities.

In San Lorenzo: In January 2018, a car bomb attack in the town of San Lorenzo, Esmeraldas province, was attributed to gangs linked to drug trafficking with terrorist connections. This attack, which left several injured and material damage, is a clear example of how gangs use terrorist tactics to maintain territorial control and sow fear (*El Comercio*, 2018).

National Police Operations: Operations by the National Police and the armed forces have dismantled several networks that combine criminal and terrorist activities. In 2022, the capture of members of a gang in possession of war weapons and explosives, destined for terrorist acts against government facilities and criminal competitors, was reported (Ecuador Ministry of Interior, 2023).

### **ECUADOR GOVERNMENT ACTIONS AGAINST EXTORTION AND TERRORISM**

In response to the growing problem of extortion and terrorism, the government of Ecuador has implemented several strategies to mitigate these crimes and protect the citizenry. One of the most significant measures has been the strengthening of the National Police and the creation of specialized units to combat organized crime and terrorism. These units, equipped with advanced technology and better training, have carried out numerous operations to dismantle criminal and terrorist networks. According to the Ministry of the Interior, more than 200 successful operations were carried out in 2023 resulting in the capture of criminal gang leaders and the seizure of weapons and drugs.

In addition, the government has promoted international cooperation as a crucial strategy to address these transnational problems. Ecuador has signed agreements with neighboring countries and international organizations to exchange information and coordinate efforts in the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism. An outstanding example is the collaboration with Colombia and the United States to combat the flows of drugs and weapons that fuel violence in the region. This cooperation has allowed for joint operations and the strengthening of borders, hindering the operations of cartels and criminal gangs operating on both sides of the border.

The government has also implemented legal reforms to combat extortion and terrorism. These reforms include the modification of the penal code to increase penalties for extortion and terrorism offenses, and the introduction of new laws that facilitate the prosecution of these crimes. In addition, witness and victim protection programs have been established to encourage reporting and protect those who collaborate with the justice system. The State Attorney General's Office has played a crucial role in the

## Ecuador, Caught between extortionists and Terrorism

implementation of these reforms, working hand in hand with the security forces to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice.

Finally, the Ecuadorian government has invested in prevention and social development programs to address the root causes of violence and crime. These programs focus on providing educational and employment opportunities to young people in vulnerable communities, with the aim of reducing recruitment by criminal gangs. Initiatives such as “Mi Futuro, Mi Barrio” seek to create safe environments and offer viable alternatives to crime. This preventive approach reflects an understanding that the fight against extortion and terrorism cannot only be repressive, but must also address the social conditions that allow these activities to flourish.

### CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

The fight against extortion and terrorism in Ecuador has required a multifaceted approach that includes police operations, international cooperation, legal reforms and social development programs. Despite the progress made, challenges remain due to the complex and transnational nature of these crimes. The strengthening of the National Police and specialized units has shown positive results, but the need for a continuous and adaptable strategy is evident. Legal reforms have improved the legal framework to combat these crimes, and witness and victim protection has been crucial to encourage reporting. However, the sustainability of these initiatives depends on long-term commitment and the ability to adapt to new tactics employed by criminal and terrorist gangs.

When considering successful actions in other countries, we can find valuable lessons for Ecuador. Colombia, for example, has implemented comprehensive strategies that combine military action with reintegration and community development programs, which has helped to significantly reduce rates of violence and terrorism. Cooperation with international agencies and the adoption of advanced technologies for monitoring and interdiction have also been crucial. Similarly, Mexico has made progress in the fight against organized crime through the creation of specialized task forces and the strengthening of its judicial system to ensure that criminals are efficiently prosecuted (Garzón, 2020). These experiences highlight the importance of a holistic and coordinated approach.

For Ecuador, it is critical to continue to strengthen its institutions and expand social development programs that offer alternatives to crime. International collaboration must be intensified, not only in terms of security, but also in the exchange of best practices and technical support. In addition, education and employment are essential pillars for dismantling criminal gang recruitment networks. As Ecuador makes progress in these areas, it can look to successful models in other countries and adapt those strategies to its specific context to reduce extortion and terrorism rates in a sustainable manner.

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## **Ecuador, Caught between extortionists and Terrorism**

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