

The Killers' Kindness: Gang Humanitarianism in Latin America

Written by Amalendu Misra

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AMALENDU MISRA, MAR 14 2023

One of the endearing features of contemporary Latin America society is the prevalence of violent gangs. They have an obliquitous presence across Brazil, in many Caribbean islands such as Haiti and Trinidad and Tobago, throughout Central America and much of narco-infested Mexico. The gangs' archetypal tattooed young men stand out among the region's greatest sources of public anxiety. The society and citizenry in many of these places remain perpetually hostage to their violence and everyday mayhem. They go about their business of terrorising neighbourhoods with absolute impunity. In places like El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras their indiscriminate violence against the civilian population has forced hundreds of thousands to flee these countries. These gangs, "have left near-broken societies in their wake", across much of Latin America. As violent non-state actors perpetuating insecurity they engage in kidnapping, extortion, forced recruitment of individuals to their ranks, undertake horrific sexual violence against women, peddle narcotics and murder their rivals and bystanders with impunity.

The regional criminal landscape displays certain common features. According to a 2021 study all the top ten most violent cities in the world happened to be in Latin America. According to the humanitarian organisation *Médecins Sans Frontier* (MSF), although not in a state of war, many of these gang-infested societies are experiencing conditions similar to the ones felt by people living in a war zone. With 60 murders per 100,000 people in 2017, El Salvador was the deadliest place in the world that was not at war. The severity of their violence has earned some countries like Honduras as murder capital of the world, leading to the regime engaging in a country-wide purge to rid the gangs once and for all.

However, during times of extreme societal crises, some gangs in Latin America are found to have engaged in humanitarian activism. Add to this are the occasions when some notoriously violent drugs cartels have begged forgiveness for acts of public violence while handing over to police members of their fraternity responsible for questionable undertakings. This begs the question what lies at the heart of the enterprise of "criminal humanitarianism"? Is there something called "criminal integrity"? Does the idea of "honour among thieves" have some practical manifestation? Are these acts of pure altruism? Or, are these attempts at "whitewashing" their conventional images in order to gain some sort of legitimacy from the wider public?

While they paint an overwhelmingly negative picture, there are shades of grey when it comes to depicting some gangs in the continent's violent landscape. Some gang members belonging to violent grassroots criminal organisations as well as those in the narco-fraternity from time-to-time have engaged in acts that defy their conventional stereotypical image. As one recent observer put it,

despite the widespread fear they sow through extortion, murder and kidnapping, groups like the Gulf Cartel and their rivals, the Sinaloa Cartel, profess a twisted code of ethics under which they believe they are looking out for the most vulnerable in Mexican society.

The unreality of these contrarian stories makes for like as if, one is living in an upside-down world. It is, as if, the confessional politics of criminals is aimed at easing the pain of the sufferer and those around him.

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Gangsters to the rescue

In August 2021, a powerful earthquake killed at least 2,189 people in Haiti. The poorest country in the Americas, Haiti is a dysfunctional polity. It only has what may be called a semblance of authority. Much of the country is dominated by marauding gangs. They are so insensitive to human suffering that they kidnap doctors and demand ransom from aid convoys trying to reach to the earthquake survivors. In this ongoing chaos and anarchy, however, some gangs have decided to change their ways – albeit temporarily. As desperate people waited for international aid that was held up by various gangs, one of Port-au-Prince's most notorious gangsters announced in a social media video message that he and his allied gangs had reached a truce and would assist in relief effort in the hardest-hit parts of Haiti's southwestern region – the Tiburon peninsula.

Jimmy Cherizier, alias "Barbecue", a former cop and leader of G9 Revolutionary Forces, a federation of nine dreaded gangs, was explicit in his Facebook post: "We want to tell them [the victims of the earthquake] that the G9 Revolutionary Forces and allies, all for one and one for all, sympathise with their pain and sorrows," Cherizier added further:

The Revolutionary Forces G9 and allies ... will participate in the relief by bringing them help. We invite all compatriots to show solidarity with the victims by trying to share what little there is with them.

Gangs turning humanitarian is not a one-off event. In Brazil, while the country's sceptical president Jair Bolsonaro dismissed the threat posed by Covid 19 pandemic and refused to order a national lockdown, calling those who demanded it as "quitters", many of the country's gangs had an exact opposite policy undertaking. At the height of the pandemic, in one of Brazil's biggest favela or shantytown in Rio de Janeiro's underbelly, the gangs enforced their criminal discipline to make people behave responsibly. While imposing its nonlegal private lockdown, it warned the residents living in the area under its control: "Whoever is caught on the street will learn how to respect the measure. We want the best for the population. If the government is unable to manage, organised crime resolves," [to take charge of things].

This framework of governance was embraced by other criminal gangs in several of Rio's favelas as well. Another notice on the same subject put out by a different gang announced: "We are on the streets taking risks so that you can sleep in peace, we leave our families to protect yours, so, then respect the order we have given." To hammer home the message, it warned that for anyone caught on the street after 10pm, "it will be bad!"

Stories of similar gang-imposed lockdowns to combat the pandemic in Colombia's shanty towns and barrios abound. While they have not given up their primary vocation of kidnapping and murder, during the current pandemic raging all over Mexico, various cartels have stepped up their efforts to confront what many regard as a national health emergency. The dreaded *Gulf Cartel*, with its penchant for chopping off its victims, is continually providing food parcels (*despensas*), medicine, face masks, and limited financial assistance to the needy in various areas under its control. Taking a leaf from the power of social media – the group has successfully transmitted dissemination messages where several of their middle ranking members are shown visiting nursing homes, hospitals, impoverished colonias or neighbourhoods and schools distributing essentials, toys and money (depending on the status and condition of the receiver). Similarly, when natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes rocked the western Mexican province of Guerrero, many cartel members were seen on the front line of the disaster distributing emergency medical supplies, food and water and other essentials – albeit embossed with the groups distinctive initials for good measures.

Such initiatives are replicated by other cartels across the country. In its act of inventiveness, the infamous Sinaloa Cartel, operating in the country's north-west, not only distributed *despensas* with the photo of its incarcerated founder Joachim "Chapo" Guzman, but has also courted international media to publicise its "humanitarian" work. And, there were some cartels during the height of Covid 19 pandemic, who became extra zealous and unilaterally imposed curfews in territories they dominated – for the sake of combatting the spread of the pandemic, of course.

Sinner's penance?

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In my earlier study on gangland and cartel violence in Central America and Mexico, I found that while innately wicked, even the hardest of the gangster always retained a sliver of sympathy deep down. This was often a product of their Catholic upbringing. A criminal after committing his crime always sought forgiveness from his own private Saint. Curiously a criminal in the Latin American context often tries to redeem his "sins" in one form or another in whatever manner possible.

Gangsters and murderers displaying Robin Hood-like virtue is not entirely uncommon in Latin America's religio-cultural setting. Several of Mexico's drug's cartels are known to provide economic sustenance to the poor and impoverished as part of their Christian "good deeds" on a regular basis. While they would not call themselves philanthropist, they nonetheless fund construction and repair of churches in areas of their influence.

For last several years, gangs in various parts of Mexico, have made it a habit of leaving toys and sweets on the occasion of Epiphany (known locally as *Los Reyes Magos*) for children in churches and shrines dotting many impoverished communities. The RSVP that comes with the gifts comes with specific messages extolling the virtues of the gang or cartel sponsoring these "acts of kindness". Ironic, as it may seem, on one occasion, in Tamaulipas province bordering the United States, the dreaded *Cártel del Golfo* known for its frequent bloodletting left toys for children on the occasion with a homily for the children to "persevere, be disciplined and maintain sincerity" as the three cardinal principles that will serve them well in achieving future success.

If anything, an examination of the test case of Brazil, Haiti and Mexico indicate that gangs and criminal elements while primarily a negative force, they can also prove themselves to be a force for good when the occasion arises. While rare, their good Samaritan attitude, is also a reflection of their supplemental role as provider of public good when the institutions of the state fail to deliver. The success of criminal gangs providing effective health security and economic sustenance in times of crises, is also a product of the decline of the state in various parts of its underbelly. As one of the residents of Rio's best known Rocinha favela pointed out: "The [drug] traffickers are doing this [undertaking health security initiatives] because the government is absent. The authorities are blind to us." In Mexico, several of the country's cartels are relentlessly engaged in spectacular acts of philanthropy. As one study puts it, "narco-charity supports a humanising propaganda among those [living with the orbit of their area of operation and influence] who are generally ignored by the government."

Gangs actively partaking in the decision making process to deliver public good is also demonstration of "criminal governance" where the state loses control over a part of its territory as non-state armed groups, such as drug gangs and guerrilla forces, take over and effectively govern small areas. It is now variously suggested that Brazil's criminal gangs operating in the country's urban periphery provide governance functions in communities that are poorly served by the state – if served at all.

Criminal Morality

As a 2018 comparative study of criminal gangs in Italy and in Latin America put it, everyday common visual representations of organized crime syndicates or gangs are images of killings, violence, and fear, acts of extreme 'inhumanity'. Consequently, no matter what their location and area of operation is, 'the first ideological hurdle for criminal gangs before their constituency is to challenge the existing cultural paradigms that portray them in a specific light. Gang humanitarianism, if there is such a thing, seeks to present a different kind of humanity, a criminal humanity made legitimate.

The gangs' craving for public legitimacy is couched as much in a moral setting as it is within a clearly defined pragmatic worldview. Forsaking your habitual barbarism, albeit in the short term, generates some degree of public support for the gangs. Constantly on the run from the law, many of these gang members require a civilian support base in the reference society that offers them protection in extreme situations. Reaching out and helping that specific civilian base during crisis situations, when no one other agency comes to their rescue, not only airbrushes the stereotypical image of the gangs but earns them good karma that can be encashed during lean times.

There is also the issue of expediency and long-term critical thinking on part of criminal gangs that often times

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motivates them to do unexpected and the unusual. Take, for instance, the rare move by Scorpions Group, a splinter faction of the notorious Gulf Cartel operating in the eastern seaboard of Mexico. In early March 2023, it was found responsible for kidnapping four American medical tourists and killing two others, in the north-eastern city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas bordering Texas. A week later, the same group, brought out a full public confession on for this act. In its declaration, it stated: "We have decided to turn over those who were directly involved [to the state law enforcement authorities] and responsible for the events". The letter admitted to the fact, the five members of the cartel responsible for this mayhem had "acted under their own decision-making and lack of discipline". The declaration also accused the men of breaking the cartel's rules over "protecting the lives of the innocent". While letting loose some of its members to the authorities, who could then extract vital information from them about the gangs they belonged, the said cartel was lowering its guards. But this cartel did not seem bothered about that possible outcome.

How does then one read into this cartel apology? Although a highly unusual event cartels' community relations efforts are well-known within Mexico. Can one really take the apology of criminal organizations for their misdeeds on their face value? In parts of narco-infested Mexico, they are considered much more sincere and accountable than the government for their actions. While committing gross violence, they can also be found engaged in fire-fighting activities at the same time. Handing over alleged cartel suspects to police by its own leadership is also not without precedent. On this particular occasion, it is not clear what motivated the said cartel to become emissaries of justice. Criminal groups in Mexico do not usually target U.S citizens, a move they see as extremely risky given the outsize media and law enforcement attention it elicits.

Those sceptical of criminal humanitarianism could state, there was heat all around on that cartel – the U.S. was breathing down on Mexican authorities to do something about the alleged killers and kidnappers. Also, there was a substantial monetary reward on information leading to the arrest of the cartel kingpins. And, finally, it may have been a case of the cartel leader authorising the attack and then regretting the decision. Thus, the resolve to offer five of its members as "sacrificial lambs to police."

No matter whichever side of the argument one has his sympathies, there is no denying the fact these are indeed deep and honourable deeds. The takeaway from this unexpected act are two specific declarations from the cartel. They are: (a) admission that some of its members had "lacked discipline"; and (b) that it regretted taking innocent lives. Similarly, contrary to popular belief, the cartel in question, respects value of innocent lives and committed to amend mistakes. In its admission of the guilt, the Gulf Cartel further asked, "the community to be calm, as we're committed to ensuring that these types of mistakes are not made ever again and plan to make those who are guilty pay. "This gives us the impression that some cartels run as a business model: where specific rules need to be adhered to and strictly followed.

Here to stay...

Across much of the region, humanitarian crises situations, have offered opportunities to violent criminal gangs to prove their standing in the society as "good characters" with noble intentions. These actions, at the end of the day, characterises the gangs in possession of strange, misplaced sense of civic duty. In some parts of Latin America, they have made themselves indispensable to the community by providing them with basic security cover where there is none. Such initiatives have also allowed them to spin a narrative which suggests they are the "last line of defence from chaos and "true" providers of law and order." In the process, the gang involvement in providing services and public good where the traditional institutions of the state have withered away or non-existent allows them a greater grip over the communities under their control. It is a soft power strategy that enables the gangs extract long-term loyalty of local communities.

The good Samaritan actions reflected in solidarity and care rather than their use of traditional violence, however, has a caveat. In more ways than one, having accepted a gang's favour, communities become prisoners to the former's authority and demands in perpetuity.

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About the author:

Amalendu Misra is Professor of International Politics at Lancaster University, and the author of *Towards a Philosophy of Narco-Violence in Mexico* (2018 Palgrave).