**Introduction**

Organized crime, drug trafficking, and gang violence are serious concerns throughout the region. While the population’s demand for urgent responses is understandable, such a demand can open the door to authoritarian leaders from across the ideological spectrum to justify populist and authoritarian policies that weaken democratic guarantees. A prime example in Central America is the mano dura policies implemented by the Salvadoran government. While these policies have reduced homicide and extortion rates, they have resulted in serious human rights violations and have significantly undermined the rule of law. Moreover, they have not seriously addressed the structural causes of violence. In this context, risks for the rule of law and democracy are extremely high.

In Guatemala, President Bernardo Arévalo successfully took office on January 14, 2024, following an electoral process that challenged Guatemala’s democracy yet was nevertheless staunchly defended by Guatemalans. Arévalo’s electoral platform and government agenda aim to move away from the corruption of previous governments and respect basic rules of democracy. His experience and expertise in security issues are reflected in his appointment of officials with similar backgrounds to key cabinet positions. In the Central American context, this presents both opportunities and enormous challenges.

This report presents an analysis of security policies, opportunities, and challenges for their implementation, and recommendations on how the Guatemalan government could advance a democratic security agenda. It is the result of a closed consultation meeting with national actors including governmental officials, civil society members, the private sector, and representatives of international cooperation agencies. It also builds on previous in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.

The first part of the report provides a brief overview of Guatemala’s political context considering both the 2024 change of government and the governance challenges Guatemala faces to implement a security policy. This includes a complicated and critical relationship with the Attorney General’s Office, a majority opposition Congress, and the opaque integration and resolutions of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court of Justice. The report then analyzes the current citizen security situation, highlighting both the challenges and priorities to be addressed. It also presents lessons learned from security and related policies implemented in recent years, showing that Guatemala has effectively implemented a combination of security, criminal justice, and social policies that adopt a different approach from the mano dura policies of neighboring countries.

Based on these lessons, the report presents key elements for an effective security policy within the boundaries of the rule of law in Guatemala, as well as recommendations for implementing a useful communications strategy to advance this agenda.
Methodology

To prepare this report, we conducted several interviews with experts on the political and security context in Guatemala, which were complemented by a review of relevant literature and documents. In April 2024, we organized two closed door meetings with public officials, representatives of civil society and think tanks, human rights defenders, journalists, political analysts, academics, private sector, and local leaders.

Based on a candid assessment, these meetings allowed us to collectively diagnose the security policy situation, review past public policies and lessons learned, identify problems, risks, challenges, and opportunities in the current context, as well as develop proposals for a democratic security policy and its strategic communication.

Following the Chatham House rule, we will not identify who expressed each opinion during our closed-door workshop in this publication. The central ideas discussed have been synthesized in this document, reflecting points of consensus and starting points for further discussion on this topic.

Political and Security Context

Guatemala covers 108,889 km² and has a population of 18 million. The country is notably ethnically and culturally diverse, with more than 42% of the population comprising diverse indigenous peoples. In 2022, 53% of the population resided in urban areas, while 47% lived in rural areas, although with a marked downward trend in rural areas.①

Classified as a “medium human development” country by the United Nations, Guatemala ranked 127 out of 189 countries in the 2024 Human Development Report. Despite being the leading economy in Central America, Guatemala faces significant challenges regarding inequality, with 55.1% of the population living below the poverty line in 2023 and 71.1% employed in the informal sector.②

Following the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords, Guatemala has faced the challenge of consolidating its democracy and the rule of law. The country has also grappled with increased criminal violence following the internal armed conflict, placing it among the most violent countries in the world.③

Political corruption, the influence of organized crime, and impunity of crimes committed during the conflict have been significant issues in Guatemala’s political history, issues which have been enabled by a lax justice system. Lack of an independent justice system has enabled the rise of a type of politically influential and institutionally-embedded organized crime that often originated as an instrument of political violence, such as illegal clandestine security bodies (Cuerpos Ilegales y Aparatos Clandestinos de Seguridad, CIACS).

A turning point was the February 2007 assassination of three Salvadoran members of the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN) and their driver, who were tortured and then executed by Guatemalan police under the false allegation that they were transporting drugs or drug money. The implicated policemen were arrested and executed in less than 72 hours by a squad in the prison where they were held,④ confirming the suspected participation of police groups in high-impact criminal activities, as well as involvement of high-level authorities. This event ultimately led to the 2007 creation of the internationally-supported International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) which began operating during the administration of President Álvaro Colom (2008-2012).

In 2010, President Colom appointed Claudia Paz y Paz as head of the Attorney General’s Office (or MP, the Spanish acronym for Ministerio Publico), who brought to her office innovative models of prosecutorial management and strategic criminal prosecution policy. She also bolstered her staff’s ability to investigate criminal structures within Guatemala. This work was continued by her successor, Thelma Aldana (2014-2018). These efforts impacted various political elites involved in economic crime and corruption investigations, who subsequently took actions to reverse progress of the CICIG and the MP and increase their interference in the justice system.⑤ They managed to maintain control over the executive and the majority of Congress by co-opting strategic actors in the nomination...
and appointment process of key positions in the MP and the judiciary, including the Constitutional Court.

During the administration of President Jimmy Morales (2016-2020), the agreement enabling CICIG operations was terminated after it conducted investigations implicating the president’s family members. Morales also replaced the head of the MP, appointing Consuelo Porras as attorney general. Since then, the MP began a systematic persecution against judicial officials and prosecutors who had investigated emblematic cases of corruption, leading to several of them into exile or jail under spurious accusations. These actions worsened during the administration of President Alejandro Giammattei (2020-2024), culminating in the imposition of international sanctions against those who promoted and implemented such persecutions.

Current Context

On January 14, 2024, Bernardo Arévalo, a social democrat, took office as president after months of multiple legal and political actions aimed at discrediting electoral results and preventing the inauguration of the elected officials. These actions, promoted by a coalition of political parties, the MP headed by Attorney General Porras, and Arévalo opponents, were supported by Supreme Court and Constitutional Court judges.

The Arévalo government maintains a tense relationship with the MP due to Attorney General Porras’s role trying to block the change of government and the threat of unfounded criminal actions against the government and its officials. In addition, the MP has closed major corruption cases, leaving many in impunity. President Arévalo has unsuccessfully called for Porras’s resignation. Her term ends in 2026, thanks to legal tenure safeguards established in 2016 to protect the Attorney General’s Office’s independence. At that time, Attorney General Thelma Aldana faced imminent risk of dismissal for investigating the president.

At the end of February 2024, the Arévalo government filed a criminal complaint against Attorney General Porras for breaching her duties due to her resistance to join inter-institutional coordination spaces. A preliminary impeachment proceeding by Congress is required to enable the criminal process. President Arévalo sent a proposal to Congress to reform article 14 of the Organic Law of the Public Prosecutor’s Office, which is rooted in article 251 of the Constitution and establishes the attorney general’s tenure safeguards. However, in May, the Constitutional Court granted an injunction to the attorney general, ratifying these safeguards.

President Arévalo does not have strong representation in Congress. His party, Movimiento Semilla, has 23 out of 160 seats in Congress, but the party was suspended at the MP’s request, leaving its members without participation in leadership positions and in legislative commissions. Although they have managed to form some majorities, these are circumstantial. In 2024, Congress will elect new members for the Supreme Court of Justice and Court of Appeals chambers, but the legislative composition makes it difficult for the government and Semilla’s representation to have significant influence.

The appointment procedure includes a Nominating Commission, convened and installed by Congress, composed of university chancellors, law school deans, representatives of the lawyers’ guild, and members of the judiciary. This mechanism has not been free of controversy given that it has been allegedly co-opted by groups linked to the “pact of the corrupt”, as the network of officials and supporters with links to the previous government is called in Guatemala. The political correlation in Congress makes it difficult to select a fully independent and impartial judiciary.

In addition, three months after Arévalo took office, the MP requested information from electoral authorities on the results of the second electoral round, alleging that they could be invalid, thereby contributing to political instability in the country.

President Giammattei’s administration lacked an explicit security policy. It primarily reacted to events and increased military involvement as a security response. This was evident in the appointment of military personnel to the Ministry of the Interior, responsible for implementing security policies.

Security interventions focused on social protests, especially on land conflicts in rural areas. They were addressed through a “National Agenda of Risks and Threats” with a security approach that often criminalized protests.

The decline of the security sector has impacted its effectiveness. The “pact of the corrupt” contributed to institutional reforms in 2018-2019 that removed experienced police officers, which weakened the institution, fostered corruption, and devalued police work.14

The effectiveness of the MP was also affected, with a decrease in case resolution rates from 9.92% in 2018 to 7.26% in 2020, despite a lower number of cases assigned that year.15 In 2022, 77% of cases received by the MP were dismissed, apparently to convey an image of efficiency by reducing the backlog of pending cases.16

Arévalo’s administration also faces pressure from political actors who seek to limit security policy decisions through legislative reforms, such as proposals for harsher penalties targeting gang members under the guise of “anti-terrorism” measures, which could potentially criminalize peaceful protests.18 Additionally, constant Congressional hearings summoning officials from the Ministry of the Interior and the police reflect a strategy aimed at gradually weakening their position.

Citizen Security Context

Guatemala was once considered one of the most violent countries in the region, particularly during the late 1990s and early 2000s when it experienced high homicide rates. However, its rates of violence have generally been lower compared to El Salvador and Honduras.

The country saw its highest homicide rates in the early 2010s, but since then, there has been a progressive reduction in lethal violence. In 2022 and 2023, homicide rates reached historic lows of 17.30 and 16.70 per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively. Nonetheless, violence against women remains a significant concern, with Guatemala having one of the highest rates of gender-related violent deaths in Central America, second only to Honduras.19

While there have been improvements in reducing lethal violence, the issue of disappearances remains a significant problem.20 In 2023, there was a 13% decrease in disappearances compared to 2022. However, disappearances remained concentrated in Alta Verapaz department, as well as the border departments of San Marcos (west) and Jutiapa (east).21

Extortion remains a significant problem, with a 22.9% increase in reported cases in 2023.22 According to a victimization survey, only 5 out of 10 cases of business extortion and 6 out of 10 cases of home extortion are reported.23

Issues beyond violent crime inform the designing of security policy. In Guatemala, crucial considerations include drug trafficking in cross-border areas and territories with weak state control as well as the infiltration of organized crime into state agencies. Another relevant issue is the conflict arising by land disputes and violent evictions, often backed by judicial orders, in indigenous territories. This situation has garnered the attention from national and international human rights organizations.24

In terms of crime victimization—defined as personal and direct experiences of criminal events—the 2023

The case resolution rate for the Attorney General’s Office fell from 9.92% in 2018 to 7.26% in 2020, despite fewer cases being filed.

Security is a priority for Arévalo’s government.37 He is expected to apply principles of the Framework Treaty for Democratic Security in Central America, which he actively promoted when he belonged to civil society. The treaty emphasizes human rights, separating public security tasks from national defense, and their subordination to civilian power. Despite high expectations from the electorate, Arévalo’s administration faces limited political leeway due to the influence of adversarial political sectors and powerful criminal groups, including drug traffickers, over justice and security institutions.
AmericasBarometer recorded that 18% of the population was affected, the highest among Northern Triangle countries (Honduras had 15% and El Salvador 10%), but below the Latin American average (23%). The AmericasBarometer data also indicated a slight reduction in the perception of insecurity in 2023, with 41.3% of people feeling “not very safe” or “not at all safe”, compared to 44% in 2021.

Evaluation of Previous Security Policies and their Results

The evolution of security policy in Guatemala shows that, despite being a significant government priority concern amongst the public, security has not received the same level of attention as in neighboring countries. This has provided greater flexibility and reduced pressure to adopt punitive populist policies beyond rhetoric. This section outlines the most relevant aspects of security policies implemented over the last two decades and their main results.

Incorporation of Armed Forces in Public Security Tasks

At the turn of the 21st century, former President Alfonso Portillo intensified his security policy, adopting strategies inspired by the mano dura approach that prevailed in El Salvador and Honduras in the early 2000s. This trend continued his predecessor’s remilitarization of public security. Subsequent governments have consistently prioritized security as a central issue in the development of formal policies.

Military participation has primarily focused on public security tasks such as patrols, territorial coverage support, prison perimeter security and the combating of drug trafficking. When military forces intervene in controlling domestic protests, incidents like the Alaska Summit Massacre in October 2012 occur, where their involvement led to the deaths of 7 people.

Military participation has increased with the use of measures such as states of emergency or states of siege, issued by governments to control crime in certain areas of the country. These measures have also been used with the purpose of disarticulating or limiting protests and...
mobilizations, as seen in the protests in El Estor, Izabal in 2019 and 2021, where indigenous communities mobilized against actions of mining companies that affected their territories and ancestral rights.

In various administrations, military participation has extended into the area of security policy management with the appointment of retired military personnel as heads of public security. This could be seen during the administrations of Otto Pérez Molina and Alejandro Giammattei. In addition, military officers have held advisory roles across multiple sectors.

States of Exception

Since the 1996 Peace Agreement, different administrations have periodically declared states of exception—such as preventive states or states of siege—with congressional support. These have been used to address situations of insecurity, particularly in areas affected by drug trafficking. However, they have also been used to intervene in social protests.

Between 2000 and 2020, a state of emergency was declared approximately once a year. During President Giammattei’s administration, 24 state of emergency decrees were issued, including ten during the COVID-19 pandemic and others aimed at controlling social protests and the migrant caravans entering the country, among other reasons. While these measures tend to have a temporary effect on criminality, they have also resulted in abuses of power and human rights violations.

Open Schools Program

Established during the government of Álvaro Colom (2008-2012), the “Open Schools” program aimed to provide a safe and positive space for the holistic development of children, youth and adults from at-risk communities on weekends. It extended school facility hours for free extracurricular activities such as art, sports, and personal development, thereby increasing student engagement in the education system.

Implemented in 220 schools, the program benefited approximately 100,000 people. Evaluations and expert consultation for this document recognize it as an effective violence prevention measure, particularly in diverting at-risk youth from gang involvement.

Strategic Criminal Prosecution

Since the 1996 justice system reform, Guatemala’s judicial system has advanced significantly with the adoption of an accusatory criminal procedure system granting the Public Ministry control over investigations and prosecutions.

Under the leadership of Claudia Paz y Paz as head of the MP from 2010, two major initiatives significantly enhanced institutional performance:

- First, a fiscal management model optimized case handling. This follow-up and monitoring system for managing the incoming caseload efficiently led to an internal reform of the Public Prosecutor’s Office. As a result, the MP achieved a substantial and sustained increase in the prosecution, indictment, and conviction of serious crimes such as homicide and a reduction in the backlog of incoming cases.

- Second, a strategic criminal prosecution policy based on the analysis of criminal phenomena and relationships of criminal actors, was implemented beyond individual cases. This policy also consisted of evaluating the possible social impacts of criminal interventions, focusing on the reduction of the phenomenon over the resolution of a specific case, including community participation for local phenomena.

These efforts had a significant impact on the reduction of homicides for two reasons:

- It contributed to the dismantling and prosecution of police groups involved in extrajudicial executions. This neutralized their actions and sent a message within the security forces about the consequences of abusing power in the name of fighting crime. The policy coincided with a decline in Guatemala’s homicide rate since 2011 (see Graphic 1).

- It underscored the identification of key groups or nodes of violence, especially in gangs operating in different areas of the country, whose arrest and prosecution led to a significant reduction in their criminal activities.
The MP’s institutional autonomy enabled it to sustain these interventions despite changes in government and political challenges.

Police Reform

In response to widespread scandals revealing police involvement in high-impact illegal activities, the National Police Reform Commission was established in 2010.39 The commission conducted a diagnosis of the National Civil Police (PNC) and undertook several improvements, including the educational reforms in the Officers’ Training School, the Promotions School, and the entire police education system, as well as drafting of a new National Civil Police Law.

During this period, the institution’s budget increased significantly, police personnel grew from 24,000 to 37,000, internal controls were strengthened, a Prevention Sub-Directorate was established, and criminal investigation capabilities were enhanced. Despite these strides, the reform process faced important limitations.40 The commission continued its work under President Pérez Molina’s administration but encountered setbacks during President Jimmy Morales’s tenure (2016-2020), amidst tensions with the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the departure of the first appointed Interior Minister, Francisco Rivas. Ultimately, the commission dissolved during President Giammattei’s administration.

Lessons Learned

Examining the evolution of criminal violence in Guatemala and its stabilization over the last decade and the main policies implemented reveals that the country did not adopt such prolonged and intense mano dura policies as seen in El Salvador and Honduras. In contrast, Guatemala managed to reduce levels of violence and criminality through institutional measures framed within the rule of law, despite political and governmental changes.

There is consensus on the key factors that enabled this progress. The improvement of justice and security institutions (through training, equipment, and the use of technology) and policies such as strategic criminal prosecution since 2010, as accompanied by social initiatives like the “Open Schools” program, have had positive and lasting impact.

The following are some of the lessons learned from the initiatives implemented over the last 15 years:

- **Strategic Criminal Prosecution:** The most significant and impactful policy was the MP’s substitution of the traditional case-by-case approach to investigate and prosecute strategically criminal activity (between 2009 and 2018). Investment towards activity in priority areas and the necessary resources improved the institution’s performance, particularly in reducing homicidal violence.

  Key to this was transferring some of the CICIG’s capacities to the MP and strengthening the criminal investigation police’s human and technological capacities. In areas such as homicides, both the MP and the PNC have maintained strategic investigative practices, relatively unaffected by other issues that are part of the political discussion. Despite setbacks such as the dismantling of the Special Prosecutor’s Office Against Impunity (FECI) and the persecution of justice operators who investigated power-sensitive crimes and who are now criminally prosecuted or forced into exile, the focus on strategic investigation remained strong. It is essential to strengthen the education related to the creation and transfer of capacities to national authorities in international cooperation and technical assistance processes, and to consider applying this experience to the investigation of other socially concerning violent crimes.

- **Police Reform:** The National Commission for Police Reform (2009-2011), along with improvements in police training, budget increase, and the purging of "social cleansing" squads, was instrumental in restoring confidence and improving the performance of the National Civil Police.

- **National Security System Management Scheme:** The implementation of an organized management...
scheme provided for in the National Security System Framework Law, led by the Ministry of the Interior and with the participation of civil society, was a good practice. This structure facilitated effective coordination among all security institutions and improved their capacity for strategic analysis of the security situation.

‣ **Social Policy and Prevention:** The “Open Schools” program demonstrated that social policy is capable of breaking cycles of violence through preventive measures. This program had a positive impact on the child and youth population and limited the recruitment of young people into gangs and other illegal activities.

Through free educational and recreational activities on weekends, the “Open Schools” program helped prevent the risk of youth involvement in gangs.
KEY ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE SECURITY POLICY IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE RULE OF LAW

The Guatemalan government faces multiple challenges to implement its security policy. At the institutional level, the following are required:

- Ensure effectiveness of the national security system with efficient analysis and implementation capabilities.
- Increase state control of territory.
- Promote transparency and accountability of security institutions.
- Modernize the penitentiary system and regain control of prisons infiltrated by organized crime.
- Address specific issues such as extortion, armed violence, sexual violence, violence against women and children, as well as land conflicts.

Despite these challenges, the government also has opportunities to advance its security policy. The existence of best practices that have proven effective in the past can be replicated, expanded, and improved. The executive branch can implement measures to improve security independently of other agencies and fight internal corruption. The design of the National Security System with civil society participation offers an opportunity to create a broad and comprehensive security policy. Additionally, the rural population's support for the government and their long tradition of organizing for action provides a foundation to develop local security and community policing policies.

The key elements for a democratic security policy in Guatemala are highlighted below, drawing from insights gathered during the closed meetings and consultations with specialists.

1 Resuming the Police Reform Initiative

Reactivating the police reform process is essential to strengthening the institution and ensuring its operational effectiveness. This requires several key steps:

- Resume proposals of the Commission for Police Reform and continue updating the legal framework to institutionalize police reform. A proposal already exists in Congress, but approval has stalled since 2011. Simultaneously, advance reforms to enhance the legal framework of the police, dignify
its personnel, and improve working conditions.41

- Increase the number of National Civil Police personnel to achieve effective territorial control. According to Guatemala’s National Development Priorities of the Planning and Programming Secretariat of the Presidency, the goal is to reach a ratio of 300 police officers per 100,000 inhabitants by 2032,42 necessitating a force of 59,000 officers.43

- Ensure the police force reflects territorial and cultural diversity, with increased participation of women and a rigorous selection process to prevent the reintegration of former officers involved in corruption or human rights violations.

- Strengthen the community police model with international cooperation and foster collaboration between the government and the private sector to enhance living conditions for police personnel.

2 Strengthening Intelligence and Analysis Capabilities

Strengthening intelligence and analysis capabilities is crucial to confronting internal and external threats effectively. The Intelligence Secretariat of the Presidency must prioritize analyzing threats and conflicts, given the influence of drug trafficking and other illicit actors posing both criminal and political risks, aiming to destabilize and undermine authorities.

3 Local Security Strategies and Community Policing

Progressive decentralization of security governance will enhance adaptation to the unique needs of each territory. This approach involves:

- Decentralizing security governance through territorial development, fostering coordination among institutions and citizens via departmental, municipal, and community development councils.

- Developing violence and crime prevention policies tailored to the specific realities and risk factors of each territory.
Violence against women remains alarmingly high, yet the consulted specialists highlighted that the justice system response remains inadequate to dismissive policies. To address this issue effectively, it is necessary to:

- Establish effective mechanisms for preventing and swiftly responding to cases of violence against women.
- Develop protocols for documenting and gathering evidence in cases of sexual violence, particularly involving children and adolescents, to strengthen evidentiary support and ensure effective access to justice.
- Implement specialized capacities for victim care and protection, alongside support mechanisms to empower victims to report and engage in the legal process.
- Ensure adherence to protection orders and the availability of shelters, while training security forces and justice operators in a gender-sensitive, non-revictimizing approaches.

Implementing and improving security policy relies not only on law enforcement, but also on fostering reliable and transparent institutions. Key steps include:

- Reviewing and enhancing administrative processes for procurement, contracting, and ethical and disciplinary standards to prevent and eliminate corrupt practices.
- Strengthening the National Anti-Corruption Commission as a cornerstone of good governance.

Indigenous communities often exhibit lower levels of violence compared to areas with a higher mestizo or “ladino” population. Their community justice systems, rooted in indigenous law, emphasize restoration over punishment. This approach offers valuable lessons for integrating intercultural perspectives into the state’s security and justice policies. Respecting customary laws and community-based justice modalities can enhance effectiveness and inclusivity in governance and law enforcement practices.
7 Improving the Prison System

The penitentiary system requires a modernized management model to reestablish state control over prisons, uphold the rights of persons deprived of liberty considering the state's role as a special guarantor of their rights, and reduce crimes originating within prisons, such as extortion. To achieve this, it is necessary to:

- Implement a specific policy that addresses infrastructure, security, information management, classification of the prison population and control of the execution of sentences.
- Digitalize information and procedures to enhance control and efficiency of the prison system.

8 Renewing the Institutional Framework for Land Disputes

Addressing land conflicts institutionally is essential to prevent criminal consequences and ensure human rights. To this end, it is necessary to:

- Strengthen the specialized institutions established by the Peace Accords to intervene impartially in land disputes, to prioritize peaceful resolution over criminalization or police interventions, and to guarantee respect for human rights.
- Reinforce protocols and actions aimed at resolving conflicts through dialogue, with the exceptional and gradual use of force only in extreme cases.
- Continuously monitor conflicts to anticipate and adapt government responses. The Strategic Intelligence Secretariat of the Presidency should play a key role in this monitoring and development effort.

9 Gun Control

Given the serious impact of firearm-related violence, a security policy must include legal reforms and action plans to combat the illegal circulation and trade of firearms, especially in cross-border areas. To achieve this, it is necessary to:

- Improve control over ammunition production processes, the importation of arms and their components, and their commercialization in the legal market.
- Implement gun violence prevention plans, including restrictions on firearm use in critical areas and on critical dates, as well as restrictions on possession or access to firearms for perpetrators of domestic violence or violence against women.

### 10 Regulation of Private Security Services

Companies and individuals involved in private security must operate under strict state scrutiny to prevent abuses against citizens and avoid becoming hubs for criminal activities, such as arms trafficking to the illegal market. To achieve this, it is necessary to review and update the legal regulatory framework for private security and align it with international standards. This will ensure proper selection, education, and training of personnel, as well as rigorous control of firearms in their possession.

In addition, there must be frequent audits to ensure compliance with legal requirements and thorough investigations conducted with due process in cases of non-compliance. This requires an independent judiciary and a specialized, permanent institutional framework to oversee adherence to the legal obligations of private security companies, beyond addressing criminal liability.

### 11 Continuity of Policies Across Political Transitions

An effective security policy should not be vulnerable to political fluctuations or changes in government. It is essential to maintain effective security policies in the medium term through independent institutions and trained, specialized personnel.
Strategic Communication Proposals

In a context of constant electoral cycles, public discussion often centers on results. The narrative of mano dura security policies has gained significant popular recognition, largely due to the enormous investment in strategic communication by the government of El Salvador, which promotes its security model as effective and exportable. It is challenging to find a democratic security narrative with similar public acceptance.

It is essential that any security policy, in addition to being well-designed and implemented, includes an effective communication strategy to influence public debate and generate social recognition and support. While Guatemala has successfully reduced violence without resorting to mano dura policies, a rhetoric advocating for tougher penalties or even drastic measures such as the death penalty persists. To prevent this narrative from prevailing and undermining confidence in effective and democratic security policies, the following measures are essential:

- **Implement a Strategic Communication Policy**: With adequate funding, this policy should include tracking and monitoring polls, media and social networks to understand and address the population’s main concerns promptly. Changing the public discussion is urgent, as the narrative is often dominated by those who act first (in this case, advocates of mano dura policies).

- **Innovate the Transmission of Information**: Utilize new technologies and social networks to disseminate information more broadly and reach diverse audiences, especially young people. This requires employing new formats, content, platforms, and a different language from traditional ones.

- **Show the Effectiveness of Security Policies**: The narrative must demonstrate the effectiveness of security policies beyond mere rhetoric. Effective communication should showcase the results of specific policies, providing evidence that healthier and more effective models are viable alternatives.

- **Tell Stories of Individual Impact**: Beyond presenting data, it is essential to share stories of individuals who have benefited from a democratic alternative that successfully combats insecurity.

- **Raise Awareness of the Harm caused by Mano Dura Policies and Corruption**: Highlight the risks everyone faces from abuses within a corrupt system, including those who believe they benefited from mano dura policies. This can generate incentives for active participation in preventing and denouncing abuses and corruption.

The communication strategy should demonstrate the effectiveness and tangible impacts of democratic security policies, countering the predominant narrative of mano dura policies.
Guatemala: Violence and Insecurity

ENDNOTES

4. The person in charge of the prison system at the time was Alejandro Giammattei, who would become President of Guatemala between 2020-2024.
5. One of the first actions taken was the impunity pact by reforming the criminal code to protect politicians and officials from accusations of illegal electoral financing and minimize possible penalties for related crimes. The reform, carried out by Congress in September 2017, became popularly known as the “Pacto de corruptos”.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
29. Although this did not prevent the adoption of drastic measures, such as the application of the death penalty at the end of the 20th century, it remained a legal penalty until its abolition for ordinary crimes in 2017.


32. Ibid., p. 27.

33. López, Julie, loc. cit.


35. FLACSO/INCIDE, loc. cit.


37. Ibid., pp. 111-128.

38. Ibid., p. 193.


40. FLACSO/INCIDE, op. cit., p. 32.


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