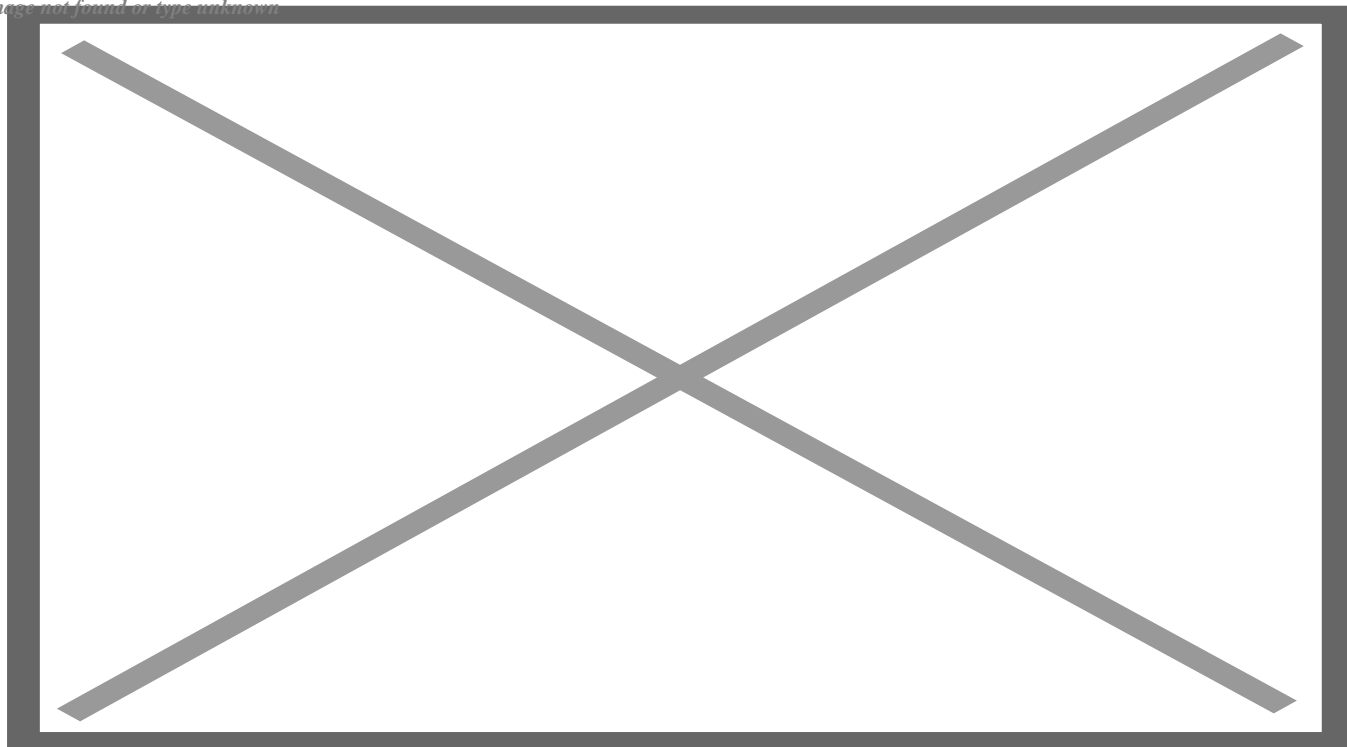


# *Criminals versus institutionalism*

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**Group of terrorists in Ecuador. Photo: AS newspaper**

By Roberto Morejón

Eight years after Ecuador was classified as one of the safest countries in Latin America, the situation has taken a dramatic turn, to be placed today at the end of that list, and this is confirmed by recent facts.

More than 20 criminal groups made up of 20,000 people operate in Ecuador, with prisons as the main command posts and regular connections with foreign drug cartels.

Political scientists and analysts agree that drug money has bought silence and cooperation.

In the last three years, the crisis has reached unprecedented levels, as a culmination of the ineffectiveness of the governments of Lenín Moreno and Guillermo Lasso, who, with the argument of reducing expenses, disregarded controls and security.

In 2023, Ecuador broke its historical homicide record with almost 7,900 murders, of which only a little less than 600 were solved, while it became an important regional center for the storage, processing and distribution of narcotics.

Criminal groups even targeted politicians, as happened when hired killers assassinated candidate Fernando Villavicencio.

With the coming to power of Daniel Noboa, who promised to manage the economy and security as pillars, the outlaws wanted to test their strength.

With explosions, looting, shootings, vehicle fires and six prison riots, the criminals responded to the government's plan, which contemplated profound reforms in prisons and even the possible calling of a referendum to legitimize harsher actions.

More explosive for the criminals was the recent state of emergency for 60 days after the escape of a dangerous convict, a decision that was followed by the bursting of a television channel by armed men.

The assault, which stunned Ecuadorians and observers alike, and the violence of the gangs, now branded as terrorists, has captured worldwide attention.

Numerous messages of support for the Ecuadorian government have arrived from various countries in response to what has been described as days of criminal violence and aggression against institutions.

In this context, the proposal of the Bolivian president, Luis Arce, to work on the regionalization of the fight against drug trafficking and other illicit activities is part of this context.

This is an idea to be considered while public opinion waits for Ecuador to recover normality after declaring an internal armed conflict.

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