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The Transformation of El Salvador's Gangs into Political Actors

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Over the past three months, the administration of President Mauricio Funes in El Salvador has undertaken a high-stakes policy gamble in negotiating with some of the largest and most violent gangs in the hemisphere in the hopes of reducing his country's chilling homicide rate and lessening violence in the country.

The pact—improved prison conditions for jailed gang leaders in exchange for a truce between the two leading gangs—is already being viewed as a possible solution for other Central American nations with similar problems. But the result is likely to be a short-term drop in activity as gangs morph into political actors. While it may seem like there are fewer bodies in the street now, the overall level of criminality has not abated. What's more, gang structures have grown more sophisticated.

Gang members I interviewed last month indicated they are interested in political power. Surprised and pleased with the results of the negotiations, their leaders are beginning to understand that territorial control and cohesion make it possible for them to wring concessions from the state while preserving their essence of their criminal character. They are already discussing backing certain candidates for local and national office in exchange for protection and the ability to dictate parts of the candidate's agenda.

They also believe the balance of power is now in their favor because the government, unwilling to risk a return to high levels of violence, has only to be threatened with more violence in order to grant more concessions to groups that have terrorized the country for more than a decade. This has already led to more concessions than were made known in the earlier talks.

Past efforts to bring down gang violence, primarily through *mano dura* or the iron-fist policies, have proven a failure for many years. Police and army efforts have been unable to stem the violence that rose to some 71 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2010, making El Salvador one of the most violent countries in the world, along with Honduras and Guatemala, where the gangs are also deeply entrenched. In El Salvador, a country the size of Massachusetts, there are

some 9,000 members of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 gangs in prison and 27,000 more on the streets, according to the most recent law enforcement survey.

Against that backdrop, the desire to do something new and radically different is understandable and positive. But the process got off to a troubling start, as it was negotiated in secret and initially denied by the government. *El Faro*, the online newspaper that broke the story, was verbally attacked for publishing "false" and "slanderous" information by the government. Meanwhile, *El Faro's* editor and reporters received death threats, allegedly from gang members. However, the paper's reporting was vindicated.

Although the government denied any quid pro quo, the contours of a deal soon became evident. Talks began in late 2011. A Catholic prelate reportedly served as a mediator. The core agreement consisted of improving prison conditions for several dozen gang leaders and recognizing their political legitimacy—in exchange for a truce among warring gang factions as well as a halt in executions, extortions, and recruitment of school-age children.

The gang leaders, once kept in isolation and unable to communicate with each other, are now together again, moved by helicopter from the maximum-security prison in Zacatecoluca to less secure facilities in Ciudad Barrios and Izalco on March 9. In addition to conjugal visits and other privileges, the groups reportedly have access to cellular telephones and messengers, able to exercise command and control of their organizations.

Initial results seemed to bear out the government's best hopes. Officially reported homicides plunged almost immediately by 60 percent (from 14 a day to 6 a day). Shortly thereafter, El Salvador had its first reported homicide-free day in more than three years.

As the process advanced and the deal began to look like a success, its chief architect, retired army [General David Munguía Payés](#), who moved from minister of defense to minister of public security, stopped denying official involvement in and knowledge of the negotiations. That was

after having criticized *El Faro* and other media for suggesting he had a role.

Subsequently, the minister told the press that the entire process was part of a strategy to bring peace to the nation. While denying direct negotiations between the government and the gangs, he said that his former senior adviser Raul Mijango and the military bishop of the Catholic Church, Fabio Colindres, had been given “necessary space” to carry out the conversations with the jailed gang leaders.

The government, in an unusual move, allowed Colindres to hold a Mass, broadcast on national TV, in the new prison home of the gang leaders. In late June, the gangs announced their willingness to open broader negotiations with the government in order to reach a permanent truce that would include jobs programs and other benefits for gang members. There was no immediate response from the government.

Pretty good, except on close inspection, accomplishments to date seem less than hoped for. While homicide rates are down, human rights monitors, including the Catholic Church, have reported a significant uptick in persons disappeared. The Supreme Court’s Office of Legal Medicine reports that were 876 people disappeared in the first quarter of the year, with more than 600 of those taking place since the truce went into effect. This is double the amount reported in the same period the year before.

Munguía Payés disputed the numbers and said the office—which had always functioned as a reliable source of statistics—was not qualified to give out information. However, a former urban commando who has relatives in the MS-13, was asked to help locate a young man kidnapped by the gang. He tracked the boy’s disappearance to a particular group or *clica* and met with the leaders to determine what had happened, who told him the boy was already dead. When he asked for the body to return the family, something the gang usually respects, the leaders said no, because he was buried in one of numerous clandestine cemeteries the gangs had created so that authorities would not discover their deaths.

Likewise, some gangs agreed to stop extorting or “taxing” the small businesses that operate in their communities. To make

up for lost revenue, they have reportedly begun to extort larger businesses and prey increasingly on bus drivers and other public transportation employees—hardly a reduction in criminal activity.

In addition, serious splits in gangs surfaced almost immediately. Sources within the MS-13 reported anger with gang leaders, in part because they conducted negotiations without street member input. The same operatives are said to resent seeing the family members of leaders now going on shopping sprees, buying televisions, refrigerators, even houses—indications, they say, that the leadership received cash to agree to the truce, payments that were not shared at lower levels.

Munguía Payés denies any money changed hands, but gang sources say that sudden signs of wealth among some have set off a possible revolt by gang members not in prison, including possible assassination attempts of those behind bars.

Given the temporary gains by the government in and the long-term advantages gained by the gangs, the negotiations could have the opposite effect of what the government wanted. If the gangs break the truce and kill at previous rates, the government will have no choice but to begin a significant crackdown for which there is no stomach. If the truce holds, the gangs could develop into political actors whose influence in more sophisticated criminal activities could increase dramatically. Either way, there is a risk the situation could get worse over the long term.

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