

III. Armed conflict in Central America

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This section briefly reviews the low-intensity (less than 1000 conflict-related fatalities) subnational armed conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in 2021, all of which are related to gang violence (see section I). Two of the most infamous street gangs in the Americas—rivals Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the 18th Street Gang (Barrio 18)—have an especially strong influence in all three countries.

There were also political tensions in several other states in the region. Since the 2018 unrest in Nicaragua over changes to the state social security system, for example, at least 355 individuals have died and more than 108 000 have fled the country.¹ In 2021 the government of President Daniel Ortega cracked down on political dissent, creating an extremely polarized environment in the run-up to November's presidential and legislative elections.² The Sandinista Liberation Front formally won 75 per cent of the vote, returning Daniel Ortega to a fourth consecutive term in office.³ On 13 November the Organization of American States issued a statement claiming the elections were 'not free, fair or transparent and lack democratic legitimacy', prompting Nicaragua's decision to begin the process of withdrawing from the regional bloc.⁴

El Salvador

In El Salvador gangs are increasingly pitted against state forces and each other in a political struggle to gain control over territory and populations. The two rival gangs behind much of the violence are MS13 and Barrio 18, with the latter split into two factions (Revolucionarios and Sureños).⁵ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded 363 conflict-related deaths in El Salvador in 2021 (up from 297 in 2020 but

¹ Organization of American States (OAS), 'IACHR updates death toll records of human rights crisis', 15 Nov. 2021; and United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 'UNHCR calls for more support for Nicaraguans forced to flee', 16 Apr. 2021.

² AP News, 'Nicaragua arrests 7th presidential contender ahead of November vote', VOA, 24 July 2021; CIVICUS, 'Nicaragua added to human rights watchlist as government clamps down on civil society ahead of presidential election', Press release, 23 Sep. 2021; and Miller, L., 'The secret-poll watchers of Nicaragua: How they monitored a questionable presidential election', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 Nov. 2021.

³ Murray, C. and Stott, M., 'Ortega crushes opponents to win "pantomime" Nicaragua election', *Financial Times*, 7 Nov. 2021.

⁴ Feyche, M., 'OAS assembly condemns Nicaragua's election', *Jurist*, 14 Nov. 2021; and 'Under fire for "sham" vote, Nicaragua begins withdrawal from OAS', *Al Jazeera*, 19 Nov. 2021.

⁵ Farber, J., 'War in peace: Exploring the roots of El Salvador's gang violence', Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 18 July 2016; and Wheeler, W., *State of War: MS-13 and El Salvador's World of Violence* (Columbia Global Reports: New York, Jan. 2020).

a third lower compared to 2018), of which 151 were battle-related deaths commonly involving armed gangs.⁶ President Nayib Bukele came to power in 2019 on a wave of populism, having promised to confront the gangs. This has involved sending soldiers and police to gang strongholds as part of his so-called ‘territorial control plan’. While murder rates have dropped significantly in recent years, political repression has increased.⁷ Nonetheless, President Bukele remained one of the most popular leaders in the region, with an approval rating of 85.1 per cent according to a December 2021 poll.⁸ In particular, despite having implemented stringent lockdown measures in 2020, his response to the Covid-19 pandemic enjoyed high support from the public.⁹ Bukele’s New Ideas party won a landslide victory in the legislative and municipal elections of 28 February 2021, giving it a two-thirds supermajority in the legislative assembly. Nonetheless, disregard for institutional checks and balances continued through 2021, with parliament endorsing the sacking of the attorney-general and five judges.¹⁰

Guatemala

ACLED recorded 653 conflict-related deaths in Guatemala in 2021 (a slight increase from 558 in 2020), of which 378 were attributed to ‘battles’ involving armed gangs.¹¹ The homicide rate for 2021 was 16.6 per 100 000, with 2843 registered for the year—266 more than in 2020.¹² Gang violence has in recent years been estimated to account for around 40 per cent of homicides in urban areas where gangs are prevalent.¹³ These killings overlap with other causes of homicide, including those related to drug trafficking and organized crime, and social and economic conflict.¹⁴ Guatemala has many criminal groups, ranging from the sizeable and influential (MS13 and Barrio 18) to smaller local gangs. They include former and active members of the security forces and police, as well as long-time criminals and some Mexican and Colombian drug trafficking organizations.¹⁵

⁶ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘Dashboard’, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

⁷ Robbins, S., ‘El Salvador’s gangs send message in blood’, *InSight Crime*, 16 Dec. 2021.

⁸ Renteria, N., ‘Majority of Salvadorans approve of Bukele’s leadership, poll shows’, *Reuters*, 15. Dec. 2021.

⁹ ‘Why Salvadoreans love their populist president, Nayib Bukele’, *The Economist*, 2 Mar. 2021; and World Health Organization, ‘COVID-19 country case studies: El Salvador’, Mar. 2021, p. 4.

¹⁰ ‘El Salvador’s parliament sacks the country’s top judges’, *The Economist*, 8 May 2021; and Avelar, B. and Lopez, O., ‘Raids on independent groups in El Salvador raise fears of repression’, *New York Times*, 23 Nov. 2021.

¹¹ ACLED (note 6), accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

¹² InSight Crime, ‘InSight Crime’s 2021 homicide round-up’, 1 Feb. 2022.

¹³ Dudley, S., ‘Homicides in Guatemala: Conclusions and recommendations’, *InSight Crime*, 20 Apr. 2017.

¹⁴ Dudley (note 13).

¹⁵ InSight Crime, ‘Guatemala profile’, 28 Feb. 2021.

Guatemala experienced months of public unrest after Congress passed an emergency budget in November 2020 that terminated pandemic assistance programmes, reduced hunger relief, and cut education and health budgets. In the face of sustained public protests, which included setting fire to the Congress building, the government retracted the budget. Public protests also focused on the failure of the government to address Guatemala's endemic problem of corruption and impunity.¹⁶

Honduras

ACLED recorded 594 conflict-related deaths in Honduras in 2021 (a slight decrease from 656 in 2020), of which 521 were attributed to 'violence against civilians' and 60 to 'battles' involving armed gangs.¹⁷ According to InSight Crime's rankings for 2021, Honduras remained Central America's most—and Latin America's third most—deadly country. The number of homicides rose to 3651 in 2021, up from 3599 in 2020, equating to a homicide rate of 38.6 per 100 000.¹⁸ 'Massacres'—defined as the killing of three or more people, often gang-related—occurred on a weekly basis throughout the year.¹⁹ The primary gangs present in Honduras are MS13 and Barrio 18, which operate mainly in urban areas such as Tegucigalpa or San Pedro Sula or in rural areas close to the border with El Salvador. Their main operations are extortion and drug trafficking.²⁰

The country also experienced pronounced political violence, with the UN Human Rights Office in Honduras recording 63 cases of political violence, including 29 killings, between the September 2020 announcement of upcoming primary elections and the local, general and presidential elections on 28 November 2021.²¹ The election saw leftist opposition candidate Xiomara Castro win the presidency with 53 per cent of the vote, ousting the scandal-ridden and highly unpopular National Party that had held power for the previous 12 years.²² Castro was voted in after a campaign dominated by debates about state corruption, drug money and increasing authoritarianism

¹⁶ 'Guatemala's top tribunal comes under pressure', *The Economist*, 22 Apr. 2021; and Reuters, 'Thousands protest in Guatemala demanding president's resignation', *US News and World Report*, 29 July 2021.

¹⁷ ACLED (note 6), accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

¹⁸ InSight Crime (note 12).

¹⁹ Ordóñez, E., 'Unas 168 personas murieron en 53 masacres que se registraron en Honduras en 2021' [Some 168 people died in 53 massacres in Honduras in 2021], *El Heraldito*, 13 Dec. 2021.

²⁰ InSight Crime, 'Honduras profile', 15 Feb. 2021.

²¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 'Honduras: Ensure people can vote without fear or coercion—Bachelet', Press release, 23 Nov. 2021

²² AP News, 'Honduras to get first female president after ruling party concedes defeat', *The Guardian*, 1 Dec. 2021.

under President Hernández.²³ In March 2021 Hernández's brother had been convicted in a US court for 'state-sponsored drug trafficking', indicating the degree of complicity some Honduran elites—including the president himself—have in the gang-related violence.²⁴ Despite fears of a repeat of the violently contested 2017 presidential election, which saw 23 people die in protests opposing the election results declaring Hernández the winner despite findings of serious irregularities, the strengthening of electoral safeguards appeared to prevent similar irregularities in the November elections.²⁵

Castro—the wife of Manuel Zelaya, who was deposed as president in a 2009 coup—became Honduras' first woman president and Latin America's only female leader. Heading a coalition of opposition parties, Castro faces significant challenges. Honduras has the second highest poverty rate in Latin America (after Haiti), with nearly two-thirds—5.5 million people—of its population living in poverty.²⁶ Migration from Honduras towards the USA surged due to the aftermath of the 2020 hurricanes, poverty and pervasive street gang violence.²⁷

²³ 'A court case rocks the president of Honduras', *The Economist*, 18 Mar. 2021; and Palmer, E. and Semple, K., 'A damning portrait of presidential corruption, but Hondurans sound resigned', *New York Times*, 23 Mar. 2021.

²⁴ 'US court sentences Honduran president's brother to life imprisonment', *The Guardian*, 30 Mar. 2021.

²⁵ Moncada, M. A., 'Elections in Honduras: The end of a 12-year regime', Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, blog, 1 Feb. 2022; and AP News (note 22).

²⁶ Contreras, F., 'Extreme poverty in Honduras forces many to migrate', CGTN, 19 May 2021.

²⁷ Kitroeff, N., "'We are doomed': Devastation from storms fuels migration in Honduras', *New York Times*, 6 Apr. 2021 (updated 28 Nov. 2021).