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Kurtenbach, Sabine

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The limits of peace in Latin America

Sabine Kurtenbach^{a,b}

^aGIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Latin American Studies, Hamburg, Germany; ^bPhilipps-Universität Marburg, Marburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

Latin American governments frequently emphasise the democratic and peaceful order in the region. These claims are based on two developments: First, except for Cuba, the region has experienced processes of democratisation since the early 1980s. Second, since the 1990s, a series of long-lasting civil wars have ended with negotiated settlements and without a relapse into war. Based on such a superficial analysis, Latin America can be perceived as a successful example of the liberal peacebuilding model. However, although Latin America has democratised and ended wars, it is still the most violent region in the world. This article argues that democratisation and peacebuilding focussed rather on formal changes than on dealing with the structural problems reproducing different manifestations of violence. A focus on the interaction between both processes provides evidence for the possibilities as well as the limitations of change.

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The paradox of peace in Latin America

Latin American governments frequently make proud claims regarding the region's peacefulness. The 33 governments of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), focusing on interstate relations, declared the region a 'zone of peace' in 2014 (CELAC 2014). The termination of the civil wars in Central America (Nicaragua 1990, El Salvador 1992, Guatemala 1996) and Peru (1998) and the 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the region's oldest guerrilla group, FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo), raised expectations that the cycle of political violence and civil wars underway since the late 1940s could come to an end. During a United Nations Security Council meeting in Bogotá in early May 2017, the Uruguayan ambassador presiding over the meeting even claimed that the American continent is the only one in the world which was 'free of active conflicts' (El Tiempo, 4 May 2017). In a similar tone, the Organization of American States (OAS) asserts on its homepage: 'The nations of the Americas have overcome their civil wars and bloody conflicts which unfortunately characterized the region for many years'.¹

CONTACT Sabine Kurtenbach  sabine.kurtenbach@giga-hamburg.de

¹See <http://www.oas.org/en/topics/peace.asp>.

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However, the empirical evidence on Latin America's peacefulness is mixed at best. The region shows low levels of interstate war, but militarised interstate disputes are common.² Examples abound: In 1978, the military regimes in Argentina and Chile were on the edge of war over the control of the Beagle channel; in the 1980s, Central American internal conflicts came close to escalating into a regional war; and currently, the border between Venezuela and Colombia is the site of a significant amount of sabre-rattling.

A focus on intrastate or civil war provides an even darker picture as the twentieth century was characterised by a large number of very violent conflicts in most Latin American countries.³ The Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) and the Colombian 'Violencia' (1948–1957) are just the most deadly examples.⁴ While most civil wars and armed conflicts have ended, 26 of the 54 countries classified as 'dangerous places' by SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) are in Latin America and the Caribbean due to the high number of violent deaths there (including homicides and battle-related deaths).⁵

In the twenty-first century, three forms of violence have so far been dominant in Latin America: First, there has been an upsurge of violence mostly classified as 'criminal'.⁶ Second, repressive state policies and the militarisation of public security have emerged in countries with and without a prior history of civil war.⁷ Last but not least, Latin America has stood out as a region with high levels of selective political violence against human rights defenders, representatives of social movements and independent journalists, among others.⁸ The murders of city councillor, Marielle Franco, in Rio de Janeiro (2018) and human rights and environmental activist, Berta Cáceres, in Honduras (2016) are just the most prominent cases. While 'criminal' violence dominates the public discourse, repression by the state and selective political violence are mostly neglected or justified.⁹

A similar contradiction between official claims and empirical reality can be observed regarding democracy. Latin American experiences shaped the debate on the third wave of

²Miguel Angel Centeno, 'Limited War and Limited States', in *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation*, ed. Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 82–95; Kalevi J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and David R. Mares, *Violent Peace. Militarized Interstate Bargaining in Latin America* (New York, 2001).

³Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas & Revolution in Latin America. A Comparative Study of Insurgency and Regimes since 1956* (Princeton, NJ, 1992).

⁴Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Fernán E. González González, *Poder y Violencia En Colombia*, Colección Territorio, Poder y Conflicto (Bogotá, Colombia: CINEP, 2014).

⁵Author's own calculation based on the definition by Mariana Caparini and Gary Militante, 'Sustaining Peace and Sustainable Development in Dangerous Places', *SIPRI Yearbook 2017*, (2016) and data from the Global Burden of Armed Violence http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/M-files/Armed_violence/Small-Arms-Survey-DB-violent-deaths.xlsx.

⁶Hugo Frühling, Joseph S. Tulchin, and Heather A. Golding, *Crime and Violence in Latin America: Citizen Security, Democracy, and the State* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003); and UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean. A Threat Assessment*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Wien, 2012), http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf.

⁷PNUD, *Seguridad Ciudadana Con Rostro Humano. Informe Regional de Desarrollo Humano 2013–2014* (Nueva York: Naciones Unidas, 2013).

⁸Amnesty International, 'We Are Defending the Land with Our Blood'. Defenders of the Land, Territory and Environment in Honduras and Guatemala. 1 September 2016, https://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/honduras_guate_mala_hrd_-_report_eng.compressed.pdf; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2016* (New York, NY, 2016).

⁹According to Human Rights Watch Rio de Janeiro's police killed 1444 persons between January and November of 2018 (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/19/brazil-police-killings-record-high-rio>).

democratisation.¹⁰ Starting with Ecuador in 1978, Latin American countries (except Cuba) have introduced competitive elections, increasing the possibilities of political participation for formally excluded groups from the left. In 2001, the OAS adopted the American Democracy Charter, the 28 articles of which oblige the member states to respect democracy and human rights and strengthen existing OAS instruments for actively defending democracy.¹¹ While a series of democracy's deficits such as weak institutions¹² and high levels of corruption¹³ have been highlighted, the relationship between democracy and peace has not been debated much.¹⁴

This article argues that the minimalist concepts of peace and democracy in Latin America are caused by and contribute to the neglect of the structural drivers of violence and authoritarianism. Framing the present as peaceful and democratic allows states to criminalise actors advocating fundamental change. However, neither the termination nor the absence of organised political violence in the form of war leads to violence reduction but to shifting patterns of violence which ultimately reproduce the status quo.

All social orders need to develop formal and informal institutions to control and limit violence.¹⁵ The possibilities for the prevention and containment of violence vary according to the context and may include the rule of law, control or repression. At least theoretically, the process of democratisation should mean that the rule of law and its application to all actors become more important. But the related reforms, such as the creation of an independent judiciary or a democratically accountable police force, do not happen from scratch; they interact with existing structures and behaviours shaped by history, culture and the experience of war and widespread violence.¹⁶ A focus on the link between the processes of democratisation and peacebuilding in Latin America shows that reforms of the institutions crucial for democratic violence control have been limited and mostly path dependent. As a consequence, security policies have been repressive, undermining civil and political rights and thus democratisation. The article proceeds as follows: The next section identifies the relevant factors linking democratisation and peacebuilding. The subsequent section assesses Latin American experiences, as well as how they have varied. Across the region, we can observe a mix of liberal, hybrid and authoritarian policies of violence control. The final section inserts Latin American experiences into the more general debate on peacebuilding, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the problems and challenges international peacebuilding strategies face.

¹⁰Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave of Democratization* (Oklahoma University Press, 1993); Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (JHU Press, 1996); Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule, Vol. 4: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Guillermo O'Donnell, 'On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems (A Latin American View with Glances at Some Post-Communist Countries)', Working Paper (Notre Dame, Ind.: Kellogg Institute, 1993), <https://www3.nd.edu/~kellogg/publications/workingpapers/WPS/192.pdf>.

¹¹See OAS (http://www.oas.org/charter/docs/resolution1_en_p4.htm).

¹²Steven Levitsky and María Victoria Murillo, 'Building Institutions on Weak Foundations', *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013): 93–107, doi:10.1353/jod.2013.0031.

¹³Kurt Gerhard Weyland, 'The Politics of Corruption in Latin America', *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 2 (1998): 108–121.

¹⁴Notable exceptions are Enrique D. Arias and Daniel M. Goldstein, *Violent Democracies in Latin America* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); and Jenny Pearce, 'Perverse State Formation and Securitized Democracy in Latin America', *Democratization* 17 (April 2010): 286–306, doi:10.1080/13510341003588716.

¹⁵Douglass C. North, John J. Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁶Nadine Ansong and Sabine Kurtenbach, *Institutional Reforms and Peacebuilding Change, Path-Dependency and Societal Divisions in Post-War Communities, Studies in Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding* (London: Routledge, 2017).

The links between peacebuilding and democratisation

The debates on democratisation and peacebuilding have obvious overlaps.¹⁷ Theoretically, democracy can be seen as a method of civil and constructive conflict transformation.¹⁸ The use of violence should be limited to specific exceptions, such as the cases of self-defence or where democratic institutions are allowed to exercise it.¹⁹ The democratic peace debate echoes these claims, arguing that consolidated democracies do not go to war with each other and are able to prevent and control violence inside their borders by democratic means.²⁰ The idea of a liberal peace draws on the experiences in Western Europe and the establishment of a central state with a legitimate monopoly on violence.²¹ The state is responsible for controlling violence via institutions such as the military (external security) and the police (public security), and for the sanctioning of the illegal use of violence through the judicial system. In these countries, this process of state formation historically decreased war and armed conflict²² as well as other forms of violence such as homicide.²³

Since the United Nations adopted the Agenda for Peace²⁴ in 1992, the main focus of the international peacebuilding debate has been the so-called liberal paradigm.²⁵ The main elements of liberal peace are negotiated forms of war termination,²⁶ post-war democratisation²⁷ and state-building.²⁸ Pointing to a lack of empirical evidence, the critique of the liberal peacebuilding strategy has focused on the (im)possibility of reproducing this model in non-Western historical and cultural contexts and under

¹⁷In the following, I use the terms 'democratisation' and 'peacebuilding' for the processes towards democracy and peace. Obviously, the scope and ambition of these processes depends on the underlying concepts and definitions.

¹⁸Adam Przeworski, 'Divided We Stand? Democracy as a Method of Processing Conflicts 1: The 2010 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 34, no. 2 (June 2011): 168–82, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9477.2011.00265.x.

¹⁹John Keane, *Violence and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁰Seung-Wan Choi, 'The Democratic Peace through an Interaction of Domestic Institutions and Norms: Executive Constraints and Rule of Law', *Armed Forces & Society* 39, no. 2 (24 August 2011): 255–83, doi:10.1177/0095327X11418323; and Harvard Hegre et al., 'Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816–992', *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 1 (2001): 33–48.

²¹Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* (Frankfurt am Main, 1976); Charles Tilly, *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge University Press, 1985), http://static.ow.ly/docs/0%20Tilly%2085_5Xr.pdf.

²²H. Hegre et al., 'Toward a Democratic Civil Peace?'; Håvard Hegre, 'Democracy and Armed Conflict', *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (March 2014): 159–72, doi:10.1177/0022343313512852.

²³Susanne Karstedt, 'Democracy, Crime, and Justice', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 605, no. 1 (1 May 2006): 6–23, doi:10.1177/0002716206288230; 'Does Democracy Matter? Comparative Perspectives on Violence and Democratic Institutions', *European Journal of Criminology* 12, no. 4 (2015): 457–81; Gary LaFree and Andromachi Tseloni, 'Democracy and Crime: A Multilevel Analysis of Homicide Trends in Forty-Four Countries, 1950–2000', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 2006, no. 605 (2006): 26–49, doi:10.1177/0002716206287169; and Amy E. Nivette and Manuel Eisner, 'Do Legitimate Politics Have Fewer Homicides? A Cross-National Analysis', *Homicide Studies* 17, no. 1 (2013): 3–26, doi:10.1177/1088767912452131.

²⁴Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 'An Agenda for Peace. Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-Keeping. A/47/277', <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20693723> (accessed June 17, 1992).

²⁵Roland Paris, *At War's End; 'Saving Liberal Peacebuilding'*, *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 02 (April 2010): 337, doi:10.1017/S0260210510000057.

²⁶Joakim Kreutz, 'How and When Armed Conflicts End: Introducing the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset', *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (16 February 2010): 243–50, doi:10.1177/0022343309353108.

²⁷Anna K. Jarstad and Timothy D. Sisk, eds., *From War to Democracy. Dilemmas of Peacebuilding*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); .

²⁸Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, eds., *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, 1st ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); and Timothy D. Sisk, *Statebuilding* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

the current globalised conditions.²⁹ The debate on the lack of ‘local ownership’ has provided interesting insights into the problems of external intervention, such as a lack of recognition of local orders, of the role of local authorities and traditions and of their relevance for peacebuilding.³⁰ Due to limited empirical evidence of a successful shortcut to the Western liberal peace in current post-war societies, many authors highlight the hybrid character of post-war orders³¹ or the need for ‘adaptive’ or ‘pragmatic’ approaches.³² Others emphasise the contradictions and challenges of democratisation in the aftermath of war.³³ With a focus on ‘illiberal’ and ‘authoritarian’ post-war contexts, some authors claim that liberal peacebuilding came to an end in the twenty-first century.³⁴ In these cases, Sri Lanka and Central Asia among others, wars were ended via military victory and war recurrence has been prevented by authoritarian politics of control. Here the main mechanisms of violence control are related to discursive practices, practices of spatial control and a political economy of corruption and clientelism. In the short term, this approach might prevent war recurrence but it is rather unstable in the mid-to-long term as it produces new conflicts. Despite these variations, international actors such as the United Nations continue to promote inclusive, just and peaceful societies as one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (no. 16).³⁵

These debates have introduced new perspectives on peacebuilding dynamics. First, they highlight that peace means many different things to different people.³⁶ Second, peacebuilding is a complex process and external interventions might be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Last not least, there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ strategy and the outcome of peacebuilding is shaped by the interaction between local conditions and global contexts as well as the agency of a variety of actors. While this is important, the focus on peacebuilding classified by adjectives (liberal, authoritarian,

²⁹Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P Richmond, ‘The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace’, *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (June 2013): 763–83, doi:10.1080/01436597.2013.800750; Roger Mac Ginty, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013); and Louise Wluff Moe and Finn Stepputat, ‘Introduction: Peacebuilding in an Era of Pragmatism’, *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (1 March 2018): 293–99, doi:10.1093/ia/iix035.

³⁰Vivienne Jabri, ‘Peacebuilding, the Local and the International: A Colonial or a Postcolonial Rationality?’, *Peacebuilding* 1, no. 1 (March 2013): 3–16, doi:10.1080/21647259.2013.756253; and R. Mac Ginty and O. Richmond, ‘The Local Turn in Peace Building’.

³¹Anna K. Jarstad and Roberto Belloni, ‘Introducing Hybrid Peace Governance: Impact and Prospects of Liberal Peacebuilding’, *Global Governance* 18, no. 1 (2012): 1–6; Roger Mac Ginty, ‘Hybrid Peace: The Interaction Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Peace’, *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 4 (23 August 2010): 391–412, doi:10.1177/0967010610374312; and Oliver P. Richmond and Audra Mitchell, eds., *Hybrid Forms of Peace: From Everyday Agency to Post-Liberalism* (Houndsmill, Basinkstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

³²Cedric de Coning, ‘Adaptive Peacebuilding’, *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (1 March 2018): 301–17, doi:10.1093/ia/iix251; and Moe and Stepputat, ‘Introduction’; Finn Stepputat, ‘Pragmatic Peace in Emerging Governscapes’, *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (1 March 2018): 399–416, doi:10.1093/ia/iix233.

³³A.K. Jarstad and T.D. Sisk, *From War to Democracy. Dilemmas of Peacebuilding*; R. Paris, *At War’s End*; Christoph Zürcher, ‘Building Democracy While Building Peace’, *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 1 (2011): 81–95; and Christoph Zürcher et al., *Costly Democracy: Peacebuilding and Democratization After War* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

³⁴David Lewis, John Heathershaw, and Nick Megoran, ‘Illiberal Peace? Authoritarian Modes of Conflict Management’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2018, 0010836718765902; Giulia Piccolino, ‘Winning Wars, Building (Illiberal) Peace? The Rise (and Possible Fall) of a Victor’s Peace in Rwanda and Sri Lanka’, *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 9 (2 September 2015): 1770–85, doi:10.1080/01436597.2015.1058150; and Monica Duffy Toft, ‘Ending Civil Wars. A Case for Rebel Victory?’, *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 7–36.

³⁵United Nations, ‘Agenda for Sustainable Development’, 21 October 2015.

³⁶This is highlighted among others in the ‘everyday peace indicator project’, see Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, ‘Measuring Peace: Comparability, Commensurability, and Complementarity Using Bottom-Up Indicators’, *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2017): 6–27.

hybrid and local) runs the risk of creating new silos and complicates comparisons across these contexts.

Processes of peacebuilding and democratisation are historically open – that is, they are neither linear nor is their outcome necessarily the same as that in Western Europe. Based on this assumption, the analysis of peacebuilding in specific contexts needs to take into account the whole range of possibilities from liberal to authoritarian and hybrid strategies. Analysing peacebuilding and its outcomes along a spectrum has several advantages:

First, this approach is not normative and does not predict a specific outcome. This is important as we can observe a mix of various elements in specific contexts. At the same time, the spectrum is a useful tool for comparative assessment and the explanation of variations in outcomes.

Second, the idea of a spectrum also broadens our concept of peace beyond the absence of war, putting the reduction of different forms of direct physical violence (e.g. state repression and homicide) at the core of peacebuilding. While this adheres to Galtung's 'negative peace' concept,³⁷ it makes the comparison between post-war societies and other societies with different levels of violence possible.³⁸ We can thus include a peace perspective on transformation processes beyond transformations out of war.

Third, the idea of a spectrum acknowledges the fact that a clear-cut distinction between 'liberal' and 'illiberal' or 'war' and 'peace' is often not possible.³⁹ Without assuming a temporal sequence, it is quite obvious that the factors important for war onset or termination can differ from those important for non-war-recurrence and 'quality peace'.⁴⁰

Fourth, as an analytical tool, the spectrum enables us to assess the dynamics and the direction of peacebuilding processes over time and beyond transitions from war and armed conflict.

Starting from these assumptions, Latin American countries are very interesting cases for studying the interaction of democratisation and peacebuilding. With the exception of Cuba, Latin American political systems are (or were until recently) rated as democratic. They hold regular free and fair elections to select government; provide a minimum of checks and balances between the executive, the legislative and the judiciary and guarantee – at least on paper – fundamental civil and political rights.⁴¹ Although there is growing debate on possible reversals regarding democracy,⁴² compared to other regions of the Global South, Latin America is still perceived as rather

³⁷Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91, doi:10.1177/002234336900600301.

³⁸There is broad evidence on the link between various forms of violence. Christian Davenport, *State Repression and the Domestic Democratic Peace (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics)* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³⁹David Rampton and Suthaharan Nadarajah, 'A Long View of Liberal Peace and Its Crisis', *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 2 (June 2017): 441–65, doi:10.1177/1354066116649029; and David Keen, 'War and Peace: What's the Difference?', *International Peacekeeping* 7, no. 4 (December 2000): 1–22, doi:10.1080/13533310008413860.

⁴⁰Peter Wallensteen, 'Quality Peace. Peacebuilding, Victory, & World Order', (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); A similar argument is made regarding democratisation: Sebastián L. Mazzuca, 'Access to Power Versus Exercise of Power Reconceptualizing the Quality of Democracy in Latin America', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 45 (2010): 334–57, doi:10.1007/s12116-010-9069-5.

⁴¹See the main international indices such as Polity IV (<http://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html>), Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>) and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (<https://www.bti-project.org/en/home/>).

⁴²Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, 'The Myth of Democratic Recession', *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 45–58, doi:10.1353/jod.2015.0007.

successful. With the end of the region's longest internal war in Colombia in 2016,⁴³ the cycle of internal wars might have ended. Latin America shows not only high levels of variation but also some commonalities between those countries that have experienced war and those that have not: on the surface, Latin American experiences seem to mirror a liberal peace, as most countries have remained inside the electoral democracy frame and wars have ended. At the same time, there is evidence across the region of a mix of liberal, hybrid and illiberal policies to control violence. The following section analyses this variation.

Varieties of peacebuilding in Latin America

Peacebuilding and democratisation are complex and non-linear processes. The debates on liberal, hybrid and illiberal peace outlined above identify changes in the political system, the economy and societal relations that are relevant for the prevention and control of violence. What are the core elements discussed in these approaches?

The liberal peacebuilding approaches emphasise the importance of competitive elections⁴⁴ as a major element to increase political participation, while executive restraints⁴⁵ are important between elections. The rule of law and accountability for all actors, including elites,⁴⁶ should also contribute to liberal peace. In the economy, at least some intention to work towards the reduction of existing inequalities must exist as democratic regimes are based on the promise of equality.⁴⁷

Authoritarian conflict management⁴⁸ is not just based on the absence of these 'liberal' conditions or the dominance of 'illiberal' elements but also relies on a set of specific control strategies including state propaganda and the control of information, military and civilian modes of controlling space, and the hierarchical distribution of economic resources for specific constituencies.

The following [Table 1](#) illustrates the variations in some of these conditions for peacebuilding across Latin America with a snapshot for the year 2018 based on comparative quantitative data.⁴⁹ A more in-depth study would need to look at time series and changes in time, but this goes beyond the scope of this article. As I do not discuss causality but want to illustrate the variation, the following [Table 1](#) includes data on elections, the rule of law, welfare regimes, corruption and inequality, as well as on the perception of security and the levels of lethal violence. The colours do not indicate

⁴³The armed conflict with another guerrilla group, the Ejército Nacional de Liberación (ELN), is still ongoing but not at the national level. See Andrés Aponte, 'En El Laberinto Eleno: Perspectivas de Guerra y Paz', *Cien Días Vistos Por CINEP/PPP* no. 92 (2018): 32–6.

⁴⁴Przeworski, 'Divided We Stand?'

⁴⁵T. Clark Durant and Michael Weintraub, 'How to Make Democracy Self-Enforcing after Civil War: Enabling Credible yet Adaptable Elite Pacts', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 31, no. 5 (November 2014): 521–40, doi:10.1177/0738894213520372.

⁴⁶D. North et al. see this as a 'doorstep condition' on the way from limited to open access orders; see *Violence and Social Orders*, 154–8.

⁴⁷Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, 'Inequality and Regime Change: Democratic Transitions and the Stability of Democratic Rule', *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 03 (August 2012): 495–516, doi:10.1017/S0003055412000287.

⁴⁸Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran, 'Illiberal Peace?' 0010836718765902.

⁴⁹These data come from mainstream liberal organizations and institutions as we lack alternative data at the regional level. The analysis of authoritarian mechanisms is usually based on case studies with qualitative data.

Table 1. Peacebuilding conditions in Latin America.

	Free and Fair Elections	Rule of Law	Welfare Regime	Corruption Score	Inequality GINI	Violence Perception	Violent Deaths 2018
Argentina	9	7	6,5	40	40,6	52,1	5,2
Brazil	9	7,8	7	35	53,3	62,7	25
Chile	9	9,5	8	67	46,6	33	2,7
Uruguay	10	10	9	70	39,7	37,7	11,2
Paraguay	8	5,5	5	29	48,8	37	5,2
Bolivia	9	5,8	5	29	44,6	39,5	6,3
Peru	7	6,5	5,5	35	43,3	38,7	7,8
Ecuador	6,5	4,8	5,5	34	44,7	45,4	5,7
Colombia	7	6,5	6,0	36	49,7	34,7	25
Venezuela	4	2,8	5,5	18	46,9	58	81,4
Panama	8	6	6	37	49,9	37,5	9,7
Costa Rica	10	9,5	8	56	48,3	46,4	11,7
Nicaragua	5	3,8	5	25	46,2	24,5	
Honduras	6	4,8	4	29	50,5	35,8	40
El Salvador	9	6	5,5	35	38	48,5	51
Guatemala	6	4,8	4	27	48,3	37,1	22,4
Mexico	7	5	5,5	28	43,4	49,5	25,8
	BTI Transformation Index 2018 (a)			CPI 2018 (b)	Worldbank (c)	Latinobarometro 2017 (d)	Insight Crime (e)

(a) <https://atlas.bti-project.org>.

(b) https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2018#table.

(c) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI> Data 2017 or closest year, Venezuela 2006.

(d) How frequently are you preoccupied that you will be a victim of violence – percentage responding always or nearly always? <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp>.

(e) <https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/analisis/balance-de-insight-crime-sobre-los-homicidios-en-2018/>.

objective levels but illustrate the comparison of higher or lower scores within this sample.

An interesting picture emerges illustrating the variations of peace and democracy:

- The most peaceful and democratic countries, Chile, Uruguay and Costa Rica, seemed to be able to change their development path despite dictatorship (Chile 1973–1990 and Uruguay 1973–1985) and civil war (Costa Rica 1948). Today, they not only conduct free and fair elections but also receive high ratings for the rule of law and have the most progressive welfare regimes. Levels of corruption and violence are low. Uruguay, moreover, is a country with low inequality in the Latin American context. These three countries seem to resemble patterns highlighted currently in the liberal peacebuilding approach. What is astonishing is that despite comparatively low levels of violence in all three countries, perceptions of danger regarding personal safety are highly prevalent.
- Nicaragua exhibits some patterns of successful authoritarian conflict management as there are high levels of corruption and the democratic governance scores are low, but until 2017, violence has not been a major issue. In 2018, however, at least 300 persons were killed and 2000 injured when government forces repressed anti-government demonstrations.⁵⁰
- Another more or less consistent hybrid pattern is related to the most violent societies, Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Here, we can find elements of both the liberal as well as the authoritarian

⁵⁰United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Human Rights Abuses and Violence in the Context of Protests in Nicaragua 18 of April – 18 of August 2018*, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/NL/HumanRightsViolationsNicaraguaApr_Aug2018_EN.pdf.

approaches. Elections are more or less fair and free, but they coexist alongside high levels of impunity and clientele politics, corruption and discourses of fear. An interesting outlier is the comparatively low level of inequality in El Salvador showing that there is no direct causal relation between inequality and violence.

- The other Latin American countries carry out relatively fair and free elections but don't have equivalent levels of rule of law and welfare regimes. They also have high scores for corruption, inequality, insecurity and violence.
- In relation to the historical experience of authoritarianism versus civil war or armed conflict, no clear pattern exists.

How can we explain this variation? At the crossroads between peacebuilding and democratisation, there are two commonalities across the region: negotiated transitions and the neoliberal development model.

Theoretically, negotiated transitions out of war and authoritarianism can be seen as a step towards the development of a consensus on the future. The debate on the influence of the mode of transition on peace and democracy is inconclusive.⁵¹ A recent DfID (Department for International Development) study⁵² on elite bargains emphasises the importance of the underlying power relations for different outcomes. Studies based on historical institutionalism show that reforms do not emerge from scratch but are shaped by prior experiences and societal contexts.⁵³ Latin America's transitions from authoritarian to democratic systems, as well as its out-of-war transitions (except for Peru's), were based on elite pacts. While the ambitions outlined in the peace agreements in El Salvador and Guatemala were high, the reforms were layered and gradual rather than profound.

Impunity is a good example of the effect of elite pacts on the rule of law in both transitions. Many Latin American societies made huge efforts to document the gross human rights violations that took place during the wars or the authoritarian regimes, through the establishment of truth commissions. But holding the perpetrators accountable was a difficult process as many countries passed amnesties.⁵⁴ As a consequence, high levels of personnel continuity persist within the state's security institutions (military, police and judiciary). Even where peace agreements included provisions on the vetting of military officers, as in Guatemala or El Salvador, change was slow and came only after significant external pressure.⁵⁵ Across the region, judicial institutions are weak and subject to political influence and corruption; problems of access to justice persist.⁵⁶

⁵¹Toft, 'Ending Civil Wars', 7–36; L. Nathan and M. D. Toft, 'Civil War Settlements and the Prospects for Peace', *International Security* 36, no. 1 (2011): 202–10; and Peter Grahl Johnstad, 'Nonviolent Democratization: A Sensitivity Analysis of How Transition Mode and Violence Impact the Durability of Democracy', *Peace & Change* 35, no. 3 (2010): 464–82.

⁵²Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand, and Patrick Meehan, 'Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project', n.d., 87.

⁵³Ansorg and Kurtenbach, *Institutional Reforms*. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, 'A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change', in *Explaining Institutional Change. Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, ed. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–37.

⁵⁴Nevertheless, there were significant efforts to hold the perpetrators accountable and some success, e.g. in Argentina and, at least symbolically, in Guatemala.

⁵⁵William D. Stanley, 'Building New Police Forces in El Salvador and Guatemala: Learning and Counter learning', *International Peacekeeping* 6, no. 4 (1999): 113–34, doi:10.1080/13533319908413801; and Charles T. Call, 'The Mugging of a Success Story: Justice and Security Sector Reform in El Salvador', in *Constructing Justice and Security after War* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 29–67.

⁵⁶William Ratliff and Edgardo Buscaglia, 'Judicial Reform: The Neglected Priority in Latin America', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 550, no. 1 (1 March 1997): 59–71, doi:10.1177/0002716297550001005; and Juan E Méndez, Guillermo O'Donnell, and Paulo S Pinheiro, 'The (Un) Rule Of Law and the Underprivileged in Latin America' (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

A second important condition across the region was the dominance of the neoliberal development model during the transition to democracy. Across the region, this reduced the already meagre capacities of Latin American states for social redistribution and the reduction of inequality, although specific results in relation to welfare systems vary according to historic trajectories. In 1994, the United Nations' mediator in El Salvador, Alvaro de Soto, and economist, Graciana del Castillo, warned against the negative consequences of neoliberal policies for peace.⁵⁷ Despite advances in poverty reduction and the resource boom of this century's first decade, Latin America still is the most unequal region of the Global South.⁵⁸ Seen from the perspective of both developments, path dependency prevailed over the impetus for change and traditional elites were able to maintain or modernise their power.⁵⁹

Both developments directly affected peacebuilding: Inequality is a major driver of criminal and social violence⁶⁰; elite pacts supported impunity and contributed to the militarisation of public security across the region.⁶¹ Sending the military to the streets not only to combat crime but also to crush social protest violates fundamental political and civil rights. In mid-2018, this was even true for countries that seemed to have reformed their security institutions successfully – for example, Nicaragua, where the police squashed student protests, or Argentina, where the government planned to send the military to the street against G20 protesters.⁶² Violence on the part of state security institutions is highly consequential for the democratisation process as it produces cycles of violence and repression that undermine democracy.⁶³ Selective political violence targeting representatives of social movements, human rights defenders, independent judges, attorneys and journalists is a consequence. **Figure 1** illustrates the increase in murdered human rights activists documented in the annual reports of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch between 2007 and 2017.

Although there are significant differences in these developments across the region, they are mostly in degree rather than substance. Some problems are more profound in countries with a history of civil war and armed conflict, where the promises of war termination rarely translated into a peace beyond the absence of war. The peace agreements in El Salvador and Guatemala, for example, did help to open up participation in the political system. In El Salvador, candidates from the former guerrilla FMLN

⁵⁷Alvaro de Soto and Graciana del Castillo, 'Obstacles to Peacebuilding', *Foreign Policy*, no. 94 (1994): 69, doi:10.2307/1149132. See also James K. Boyce, 'Adjustment toward Peace: Economic Policy and Post-War Reconstruction in El Salvador' (San Salvador: UNDP, 1995).

⁵⁸Maxine Molyneux, 'The "Neoliberal Turn" and the New Social Policy in Latin America: How Neoliberal, How New?: The Neoliberal Turn and the New Social Policy in Latin America', *Development and Change* 39, no. 5 (28 October 2008): 775–97, doi:10.1111/j.1467-7660.2008.00505.x; and Evelyne Huber et al., 'Politics and Inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean', *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 6 (December 2006): 943–63, doi:10.1177/000312240607100604.

⁵⁹Benedicte Bull, 'Governance in the Aftermath of NeoLiberalism: Aid, Elites and State Capacity in Central America', *Forum for Development Studies* 43, no. 1 (2 January 2016): 89–111, doi:10.1080/08039410.2015.1134647.

⁶⁰Sean Fox and Kristian Hoelscher, 'Political Order, Development and Social Violence', *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 3 (1 May 2012): 431–44, doi:10.1177/0022343311434327.

⁶¹Jenny Pearce, 'Elites and Violence in Latin America. The Logic of a Fragmented State', *Violence, Security, and Peace Working Papers*, no. 1 (2018).

⁶²On Nicaragua see United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2018) FN 50, on Argentina <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-44931542>.

⁶³Sabine C. Carey, 'The Use of Repression as a Response to Domestic Dissent', *Political Studies* 58, no. 1 (February 2010): 167–86, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2008.00771.x; José Miguel Cruz, 'Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America: The Survival of the Violent State', *Latin American Politics and Society* 53, no. 4 (2011): 1–33; and Sabine Kurtenbach, 'Tendencias de Las Políticas de Seguridad En América Latina Al Principio Del Siglo XXI', *Revista Fuerzas Armadas y Sociedad* 16, no. 2 (2001): 3–14.

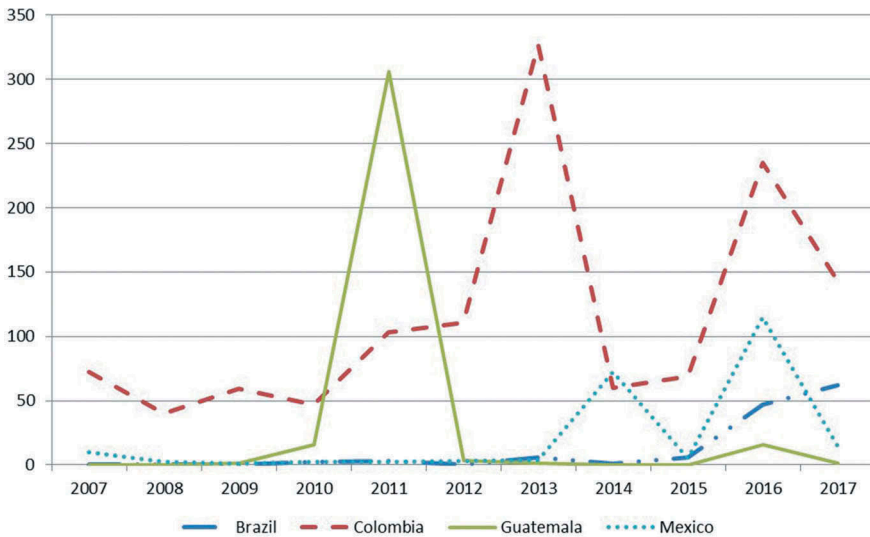


Figure 1. Number of human rights activists murdered in Latin America, 2007–2017.⁶⁴

(Frente Martí para la Liberación Nacional) were even elected to the office of president in 2009 and 2014. However, the peace processes and democratisation were unable to change the patterns of social marginalisation, especially regarding poor people, youth and indigenous groups.⁶⁵

As part of Latin America’s minimalist understanding of peace, governments highlight the peacefulness and democratic character of politics in the region. CELAC, the OAS and Uruguay’s ambassador to the United Nations are just a few examples. Seen from a government perspective, hijacking the discourse of peace and democracy serves a double purpose:

First, it helps criminalise social and political opponents (and their actions) who are not limited to formal institutions such as elections or who contest the social status quo. At the same time, political elites tend to downplay the political influence of criminal organisations despite calling for “tough on crime” or “law and order” policies.⁶⁶ Latin America provides extensive evidence of the related processes of escalation of repression and violence by state and non-state actors.

Second, the discourses are an instrument to keep external intervention regarding democracy and peacebuilding to a minimum. Current examples abound: Venezuela and its allies have rejected a debate within the OAS on the increasing authoritarianism in the country. On 31 August 2018, Nicaragua withdrew its invitation to the Office of the United Nations High Representative for Human Rights to investigate the violence between the police and protesters. And last not least, Guatemala’s president has tried to get rid of the United Nations mission to combat impunity and corruption (Comisión Internacional

⁶⁴I thank Antonia Jordan for research assistance and the compilation of data based on the annual reports of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

⁶⁵Christine J. Wade, *Captured Peace: Elites and Peacebuilding in El Salvador*, *Ohio RIS Latin America Series* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2016); and Sabine Kurtenbach, ‘Judicial Reform – A Neglected Dimension of SSR in El Salvador’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, online first (2018) doi:10.1080/17502977.2018.1517112.

⁶⁶Nicholas Barnes, ‘Criminal Politics: An Integrated Approach to the Study of Organized Crime, Politics, and Violence’, *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 04 (December 2017): 979, doi:10.1017/S1537592717002110.

Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala, CICIG). In all three cases, the presidents and their governments are themselves the subject of investigations related to the violation of national as well as international democratic norms through violence and corruption.

In a nutshell, Latin American experiences appear to provide evidence of the limits of gradual change and the persistence or reproduction of historically engrained authoritarian conflict management practices. Using the spectrum of peacebuilding strategies as an analytical tool helps to identify the underlying contradictions and dynamics. Elites exploit international discourses on democracy and peace to further their economic, political and social interest. They criminalise the political opposition against the status quo as well as marginalised groups such as youths or indigenous communities. The final section summarises what we can learn from Latin American experiences for global approaches to peacebuilding.

Latin American contributions to the global debate

Latin American experiences show how specific peacebuilding approaches are not only shaped by local contexts but also by the patterns of macro-regional development and path dependence regarding institutional change. Democratisation as progress towards conflict-processing institutions is limited to contexts or windows of opportunity where local actors support or promote an agenda of change. In Guatemala, for example, advances in the rule of law were possible as long as external support for such measures had allies inside local institutions (the Attorney Generals Claudia Paz y Paz and Thelma Aldana). When this changed in 2018, the President moved to dismantle the CICIG and has not really encountered international resistance. Most countries formally comply with minimum international standards (elections) but sideline or undermine those institutions or processes that could change the existing power relations. The corruption charges against the Guatemalan president and the withdrawal of the CICIG head's visa are an interesting illustration of this. Path dependence prevails most of all in relation to social and political conflicts framed as 'criminal'.

Accordingly, two interrelated arguments can be made: First, neither democratisation nor the termination of the civil wars has changed the deeply ingrained social inequality in many parts of the region.⁶⁷ Participation in violence was a means of political change during the twentieth century but petty crime or drug trafficking is today a means of survival or even upward social mobility. Despite many differences between these periods – such as the lack of ideology and differences in the global environment – young, marginalised youth have provided the bulk of the rank and file in organised violence. Second, state repression, selective political violence and corruption have allowed traditional elites to maintain and reproduce their unequal economic and social status quo despite democratisation. The violence against human rights defenders and social activists (see Figure 1) is just the tip of the iceberg. The result of these developments has been framed as 'perverse state formation'⁶⁸; as 'criminal governance',⁶⁹ from a more anthropological and local perspective, or as 'violent

⁶⁷UNDP, 'Acting on the Future: Breaking the Intergenerational Transmission of Inequality'.

⁶⁸J. Pearce, 'Perverse State Formation and Securitized Democracy in Latin America'.

⁶⁹Enrique D. Arias, 'The Dynamics of Criminal Governance: Networks and Social Order in Rio de Janeiro', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 38 (27 April 2006): 293, doi:10.1017/S0022216X06000721; and *Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean*. (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

democracies'.⁷⁰ In the context of minimalist concepts of peace, formally democratic regimes and high levels of violence not only coexist but are also intertwined shaping the limits of peace in Latin America.

The comparative analysis of Latin American experiences shows that a broader conceptualisation of peace as violence reduction is fruitful as it allows for the identification of continuity and change. A crucial element of enhancing the scope of peace in Latin America (and probably elsewhere) is the recognition of full citizenship.⁷¹ The current patterns of selective political violence in Latin America are obviously linked to the process of change. The problem with liberal peace is not its emphasis on universal human rights but the lack of protection for those who claim and advocate for these rights. The gap between the formal guarantees of civil and political rights and their acknowledgement and protection must be closed. This would provide a basis for inclusive policies able to reduce the high levels of political and social inequality. The current backlash against formerly marginalised groups (women, youth, indigenous and LGTBI) in Brazil and elsewhere shows how contentious these changes are. Independent judicial institutions are key to subordinating elites from all political backgrounds to the rule of law. Given the legacies of war and violence, even selective political violence endangers non-violent actions for change.

Politically this means that despite their limited influence, international actors need to insist on the implementation of peace accords and the guaranteeing of civil and political rights to prevent these being circumvented or undermined. While this challenges the sovereignty and the state-centric approach, non-enforcement may lead to renewed escalation of violence along political lines. The high levels of selective political violence in Central America and Colombia (see [Figure 1](#)) show how dangerous this might be.

Across academic and policy debates, Latin American experiences connect with those from other world regions and the recent innovations in the peacebuilding debate.⁷² But Latin American experiences highlight that internal and external actors need a broader perspective of peace beyond the absence of war as a compass for the future. Otherwise, local power relations may instead support a relapse into the authoritarian and violent practices of the past or the countries may remain stuck in transition. Peacebuilding choices are not necessarily dichotomous and limited to liberal or illiberal choices. Latin American experiences show that there is an important grey zone and high levels of variation. But the end of war or of an authoritarian regime is not necessarily a tipping point towards change. Theory and policy approaches need to systematically take into account the fact that neither peacebuilding nor democratisation proceed as linear processes but are rather highly contested. Outcomes are shaped by the context-specific interaction between global norms, local contexts and the diverging goals and interests of a multitude of actors.

Peace and democracy need broad coalitions based on the acknowledgement of human rights for all. The right to physical integrity stands at the core and policies of comprehensive violence reduction are a necessary basis for inclusive, just and peaceful

⁷⁰E.D. Arias and D. Goldstein, '*Violent Democracies in Latin America*'.

⁷¹For a similar argument on the relation between violence, peace and hierarchies of citizenship see Robin Luckham, 'Whose violence, whose security? Can violence reduction and security work for poor, excluded and vulnerable people?' *Peacebuilding* 5, no.2, (2017): 99–117, doi:10.1080/21647259.2016.1277009.

⁷²L. Moe and F. Stepputat, 'Introduction'; C. de Coning, 'Adaptive Peacebuilding'.

societies as envisioned in Sustainable Development Goal no. 16⁷³ and the United Nations agenda of sustaining peace.⁷⁴ These documents have developed from and transcended the liberal tradition and as such are an important reference to facilitate change towards a peace beyond the absence of war. While change in this direction is a long-term endeavour, violence is a powerful instrument for reproducing the status quo.

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Notes on contributor

Sabine Kurtenbach is a political scientist, acting director at the GIGA Institute of Latin American and honorary professor at Philipps-Universität Marburg. Her research interests include post-war societies, peace processes, security sector reform and youth in Latin America and beyond.

⁷³United Nations, ‘Agenda for Sustainable Development’, 21 October 2015.

⁷⁴United Nations, ‘The Challenge of Sustaining Peace’, 2015.