

Ecuador's Noboa declared war on 22 gangs. In his new term, he faces many more.

Ecuador struggles with gang violence and political challenges amid efforts to control and combat illicit activities.





How unrelenting gang violence has tested the president's militarized approach

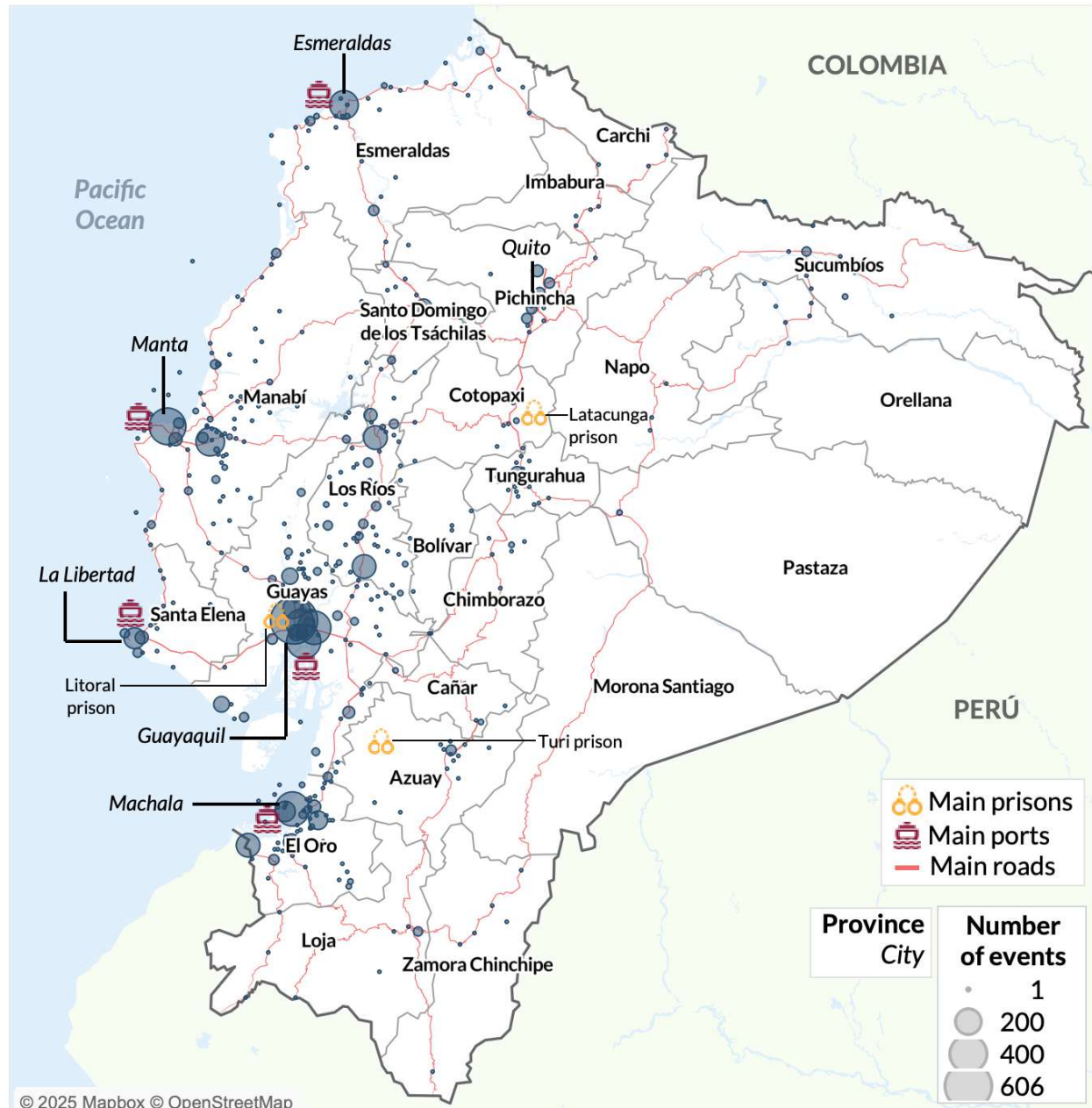
On 24 May, the incumbent right-wing President Daniel Noboa was sworn in in Ecuador, after winning the runoff of the presidential election against leftist Luisa González. Elections were held amid an unprecedented wave of violence linked to organized crime in a country that was once one of the least violent places in Latin America but quickly turned into the region's murder capital, an infamous title it has held since 2023.

Changes over the past decade in the drug trade and a progressive debilitation of Ecuador's institutions have created a fertile ground for several local criminal groups to breed. This, in turn, triggered violent competition for control of illicit economies such as drug trafficking, illegal mining, and extortion, first in prisons — which became gangs' headquarters in recent years — and then in the streets. Although almost 80% of violence is concentrated in coastal provinces, crucial transit points for drug shipments (*see map below*), gangs have been expanding their presence to over 150 of the country's 222 municipalities and are extending their reach to Peru, Chile, and Colombia.¹ Their ranks are believed to be composed of no less than 15,000 members, but according to some security experts and unofficial military estimates, up to 60,000 people — not only Ecuadorians, but

also Colombian, Venezuelan, and Peruvian nationals — may be linked to gang activity in the country².

Gang violence in Ecuador

1 January 2023 - 23 May 2025



Armed violence has become intertwined with politics. On one hand, security measures and proposals sway public preferences, including in electoral times. On the other hand, criminal and political networks have increasingly resorted to violence to get rid of politicians hindering their interests. The escalation of criminal-political violence reached its apex with the [killing of a presidential candidate in 2023](#). Since then, however, violence targeting political figures seems to have become chronic, owing less to political competition and more to the heightened fights for the control of illicit economies between ever more fragmented criminal groups.

Security policies have also influenced the evolution of violence in the country. Noboa's declaration of an internal armed conflict in January 2024 and the subsequent militarization of public security initially curbed violence, especially in prisons. However, gangs soon revived their violent competition, and higher government pressure on their leaders helped fuel intra-gang disputes. As a result, the initial lull was reversed, and violence reached unprecedented levels in early 2025. Against this backdrop, the incoming administration faces significant challenges, including gang fragmentation, expanding drug and illegal mining economies, cross-border arms trafficking, and entrenched corruption. How Noboa addresses these challenges will determine Ecuador's security trajectory in the coming years.

Ecuador's descent into gang violence

The existence of criminal gangs is not a novelty in Ecuador, but a combination of institutional weakening, economic stagnation, and shifts in international drug trafficking dynamics has profoundly transformed the country's organized crime landscape.

Soon after he was first elected in 2006, President Rafael Correa negotiated with street gangs originating in the United States and Puerto Rico, such as the Latin Kings and Los Ñetas, essentially recognizing them as civil society organizations in exchange for lower levels of violence. The process contributed to reducing violence to historical lows in the years that followed: In 2017, when Correa left power, Ecuador had a murder rate of six homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, one of the lowest in Latin America.³ But many analysts consulted for this report argue that gangs took advantage of the process to infiltrate state institutions. For example, Leandro Norero, a Ñetas member who participated in the process, became one of the key players in the country's criminal world, exploiting political connections to expand his illicit activities, as unveiled by recent corruption cases.⁴

Another controversial decision Correa made was to shut down the US military base in charge of monitoring drug trafficking activities in Manta in 2008, claiming it violated the country's sovereignty.⁵ His successor, Lenín Moreno (2017-2021), withdrew government support from the pacification process, disbanded the Justice Ministry and the Anti-Corruption Secretariat, and slashed funding for prisons by 30%, as part of a package of austerity measures.⁶ In parallel, the prison population more than tripled between 2010 and 2020, breeding powerful criminal networks within prisons.⁷

As Ecuador's institutions were weakening because of these steps, the country became an increasingly appealing destination for drug trafficking and money laundering activities, considering its geographic location between the largest cocaine producers, Colombia and Peru; its export-oriented ports; and its dollarized economy.⁸ International criminal organizations from Mexico, Albania, and Italy stepped up their presence.⁹ At the same time, the peace agreement signed in 2016 between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) created a void in the regulation of the southbound flow of drugs, primarily cocaine, creating a sort of liberalization of the trade and fostering competition among local groups with volatile alliances with international buyers.¹⁰

This combination of domestic and international factors prompted local gangs — headquartered in the country's prisons and mostly dedicated to murder for hire, car thefts,

and security for drug shipments — to strengthen and absorb or replace pre-existing street gangs. As they grew stronger, these criminal groups diversified their economic portfolio into extortion, kidnapping, illegal mining, human smuggling, medication contraband, fuel theft, and wildlife trafficking.¹¹

Initially, outfits such as Los Águilas, Los Lobos, Los Tiguerones, and Chone Killers cooperated under the Los Choneros gang umbrella, led by Jorge Luis Zambrano, known as “Rasquiña.” But tensions over leadership arose, also fueled by the growing competition between Mexico’s [Sinaloa Cartel](#) and the [Jalisco New Generation Cartel \(CJNG\)](#), which was projected into Ecuador.¹² According to a former prison official consulted by ACLED, Rasquiña established relations with the Sinaloa Cartel and envisioned local gangs to remain its logistical arms.¹³ Around 2020, however, the CJNG made inroads in the country and sought to ally with some gangs, namely Los Lobos.¹⁴ This fueled tensions among gangs over the management of illicit economies, leading to Rasquiña’s killing in December 2020, which was a turning point that triggered a violent competition for leadership.¹⁵ Internecine violence first broke out in prisons, epitomized by the multiple massacres of 2021.¹⁶ It then spread on the streets, triggering multiple conflicts, from which Los Lobos have emerged as the main perpetrator of violence in their quest to become a hegemonic power in the country’s criminal world (*see graph below*).

The growth of criminal groups and the intensification of their turf wars turned Ecuador into the most violent country in Latin America in 2023, with a murder rate of 44.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, a record it has maintained ever since.¹⁷ In 2024, ACLED records more violent events in Ecuador than in neighboring Colombia, a country roughly four times bigger with nearly triple the population (*see table below*). Gang-related violence has predominantly affected the coastal provinces, key off-ramps for drug shipments bound to North America and Europe. Almost 80% of recorded gang violence has taken place in five of the country’s 24 provinces: Guayas, Manabí, El Oro, Santa Elena, and Esmeraldas. The city of Guayaquil, which hosts the country’s biggest port and is crucial for drug shipments, is the hotbed of violence, accounting for around one-fourth of gang violence events recorded so far in Ecuador and ranking just behind Rio de Janeiro and Salvador in Brazil for total number of gang-related events in both 2023 and 2024 across Latin America (*see table below*).

Non-state armed groups’ violence in Latin America in 2024

By country		By city	
Country	Number of events	City	Number of events
1. Brazil	8,945	1. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	1,243
2. Mexico	7,191	2. Salvador, Brazil	915
3. Ecuador	2,389	3. Guayaquil, Ecuador	570
4. Colombia	2,157	4. Culiacán, Mexico	489
5. Venezuela	465	5. León, Mexico	420

Yet, the diversification of gangs' economic portfolio has driven their expansion inland, particularly around mining sites and along the country's major highways, which gangs use to extort export-oriented businesses in the agriculture, textile, and industrial sectors.¹⁸ In fact, ACLED records gang presence in around two-thirds of the country's 222 municipalities since 2023. Los Ríos, which connects coastal provinces with the center of the country, is the fourth most violent province. Los Ríos is also among the provinces where gang violence increased the most in 2024, together with provinces in the Andes and Amazon such as Azuay, Tungurahua, and Sucumbíos.

The intersection of gangs, politics, and elections

Organized crime violence has become intrinsically intertwined with politics and elections in Ecuador. Security is a central theme in political processes, since results in that realm heavily affect governments' public approval, and security plans are key pillars of electoral campaigns. Violence has also increasingly become a feature of political competition, as organized crime groups take on political figures who hinder their interests, following similar trends in other Latin American countries such as [Mexico](#), [Brazil](#), and [Colombia](#).

The deterioration of Ecuador's security situation since 2020 has tainted the image of former President Guillermo Lasso, a conservative who, by the end of 2022, had only a 13% public approval rating.¹⁹ As a result, opposition forces defeated conservative parties in the February 2023 local elections, and some government-proposed security reforms were rejected in a referendum.²⁰ A journalistic investigation also found evidence of Lasso's involvement in embezzlement schemes, as well as links between his brother-in-law and the Albanian mafia. The investigation prompted the National Assembly to start impeachment proceedings against Lasso.²¹ To avoid impeachment, Lasso dissolved the National Assembly in May 2023 and called for early elections.²² Noboa, a young entrepreneur who promised a tough-on-crime approach, won the runoff election against left-wing candidate Luisa González in October 2023 and was appointed to serve until the end of Lasso's term in May 2025.²³

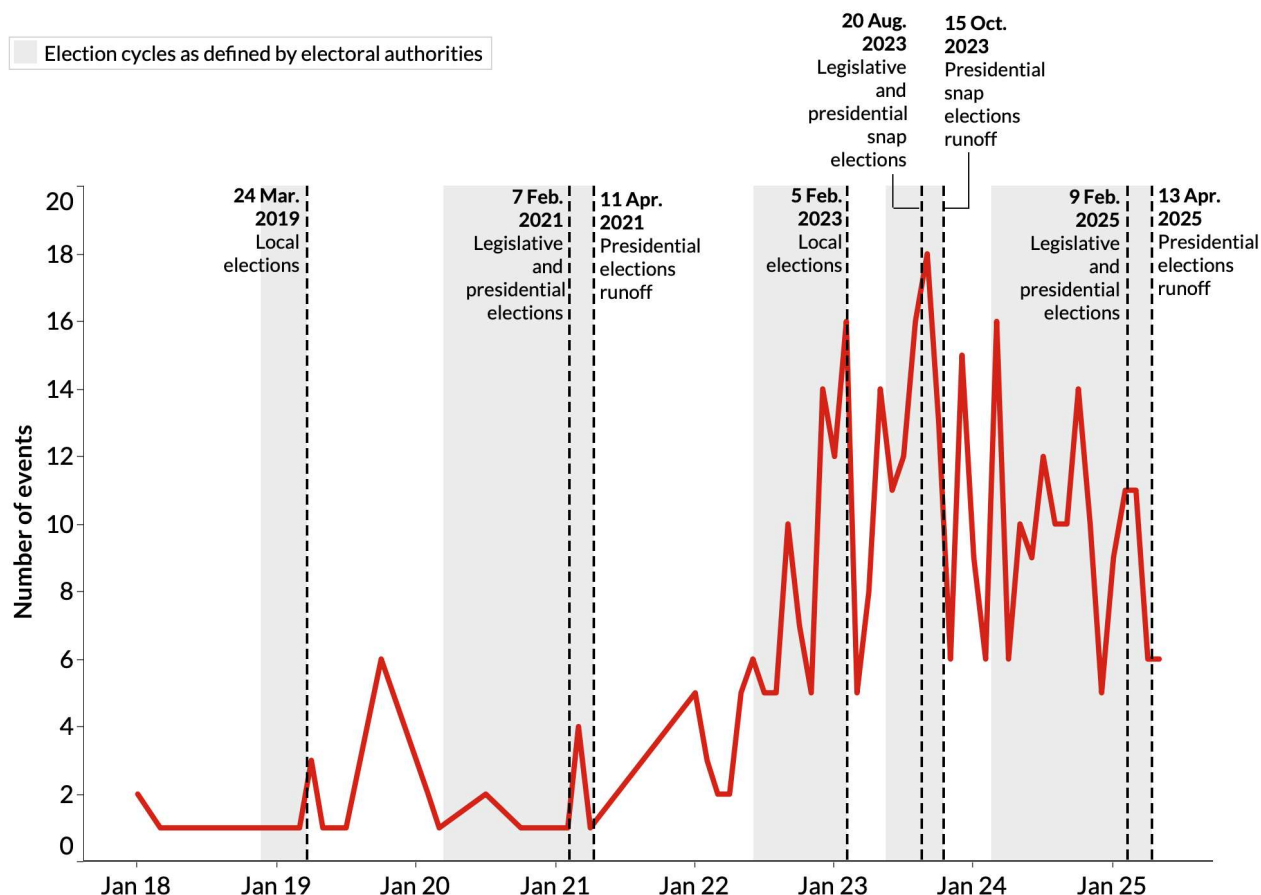
Insecurity remained at the center of the public debate in the run-up to the 2025 elections: Some 60% of interviewees in a late 2024 poll identified violent crime as the country's main problem,²⁴ and most presidential candidates proposed military interventions and tougher policies to combat criminal organizations.²⁵ Noboa, running for re-election, even proposed bringing in foreign forces, including mercenaries, for that purpose.²⁶

Since the 2023 electoral cycle, violence has not only swayed political developments but has also penetrated political competition. Between when ACLED began covering Ecuador in 2018 and 2021, there were 30 events of violence against elected officials, government workers, candidates, and their relatives, which led to the death of five people. Things changed in 2022: In the year leading up to the local elections on 5 February 2023, the number of events went up to 89 (*see graph below*). This violence further accelerated during the August snap elections: ACLED records similar levels of violence in the five months between Lasso's call for early elections and the presidential runoff. During the two electoral processes, 99 people were killed in incidents of violence against political figures, including presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio. Prosecutors believe that Los Lobos

gang members carried out his murder, but the plotters of the attack have yet to be identified.²⁷

Violence targeting political figures in Ecuador

1 January 2018 - 23 May 2025



While much of the violence targeting political figures had a clear link with the electoral process in 2022 and 2023, it has since become endemic. In fact, monthly violence against political figures remained high during the 2025 electoral process (*see graph above*), which can be said to be [the most violent](#) since ACLED began covering the country in 2018, with over 140 events. However, there were fewer events targeting candidates than in the 2023 electoral processes. This can be partly explained by the fact that the government stepped up protection measures of candidates, particularly presidential hopefuls,²⁸ and reduced campaign activities.²⁹ But another factor may have been the level of the elections: Candidates tend to be particularly targeted in local elections, as gangs more actively seek to impede the election of officials who hinder their territorial control.³⁰ Yet, other political figures continued to face high levels of violence: Transit agents, prison directors, and judicial officials were the targets in nearly one-third of events, and organized crime groups typically attacked them to ensure impunity for their illicit activities and hinder their adversaries.³¹ This suggests that violence against political figures has come to mirror the country's security deterioration and is being driven more by gang expansion, territorial competition, and fragmentation rather than political competition.

The impact of the internal armed conflict on gangs' adaptation and fragmentation

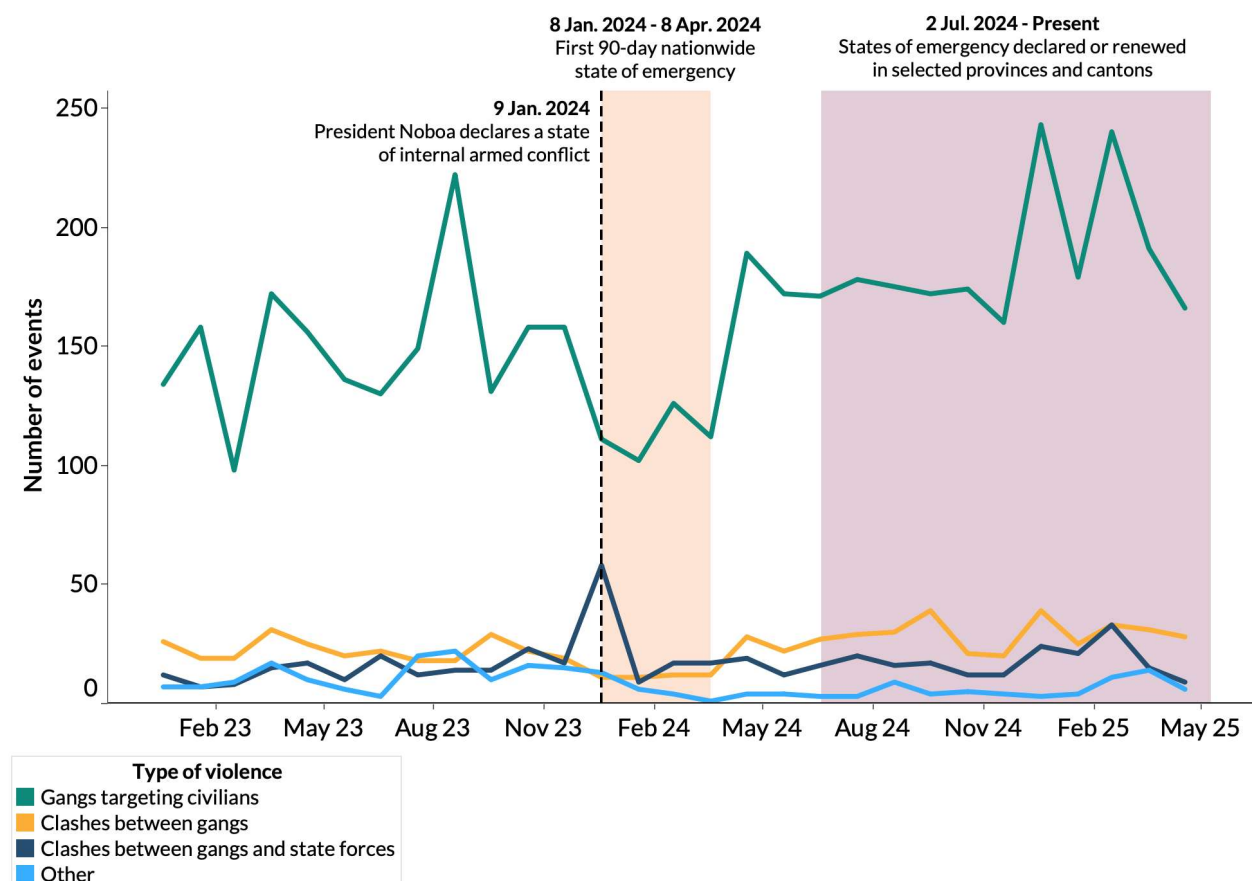
Noboa's re-election is a testament to the majority of Ecuadorians' approval of his security policy, whose most prominent measures have been the declaration of an internal armed conflict, the repeated imposition of states of emergency, and the military's expanded role in public security. In 2024, the country's homicide rate slightly decreased for the first time since 2019, even though it remained the highest in Latin America.³² However, the same measures that contributed to reining in violence in the first months of 2024 — increased military pressure in prisons and on the streets — had the unintended consequence of further fostering intra-gang power struggles and fragmentation. This ultimately led to a resurgence of violence at the end of the year and the most violent four months the country has ever recorded at the beginning of 2025.³³

In January 2024, Noboa's security policy took a militarized turn. After the Los Choneros leader escaped from prison, Noboa announced a nationwide state of emergency, to which gangs responded with a series of coordinated attacks. Los Tiguerones gang members even stormed a TV studio in Guayaquil.³⁴ In response, Noboa declared a state of internal armed conflict on 9 January, designating 22 violent criminal gangs as "terrorist organizations" and tasking the armed forces with participating in security operations in gang-controlled neighborhoods and illegal mining hotspots and taking over control in prisons.³⁵ Even though the Constitutional Court later ruled that the situation in the country did not meet the criteria to be considered an internal armed conflict, the government has continued to use the term to justify imposing a series of nationwide or province-specific states of emergency.³⁶ This move increased government pressure and was met with harsh resistance by gangs, which, in the words of a security expert consulted for this report, "took the concept of internal armed conflict more seriously than the government itself, increasing their attacks."³⁷ As a result, ACLED records 58 events of violence between gangs and security forces in January 2024, with 9 January being the day with the most violence since 2023.

Despite the immediate backlash, the massive deployment of military forces in both prisons and on the streets had a temporary impact on gang activities, particularly on clashes between gangs and the targeting of civilians amid gang wars (*see graph below*). ACLED records 128 events of gang violence in February, 34% fewer than in January and the lowest since January 2023. These remained at relatively low levels for the rest of the first three-month state of emergency. Violence dropped inside prisons, home to several bouts of deadly violence in previous years. In the first year since military forces took control of the prison system on 14 January, clashes between gangs and targeted attacks on prisoners by gang members decreased by 64% compared to the year prior. Moreover, reported fatalities resulting from gang violence went down by two-thirds, particularly in the Guayaquil Penitentiary.

Gang violence in Ecuador

1 January 2023 - 23 May 2025



Security forces' scaled-up operations translated into more clashes with gangs, many times rescuing people from kidnapping attempts. But these operations were not exempt from criticism as the military has also been accused of gross human rights violations, including excessive use of force, forced disappearances, sexual violence, and torture.³⁸ In 2024, authorities claimed to have detained over 73,000 people, but the vast majority were released, mostly due to a lack of evidence.³⁹ Meanwhile, the Guayaquil-based Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights records at least 33 victims of forced disappearance at the hands of state forces between 2024 and 2025.⁴⁰ In perhaps the most disturbing case, four teenagers were abducted and tortured by the military in Guayaquil on 8 December 2024. The remains of their bodies were found incinerated a couple of weeks later.⁴¹ A human rights defender consulted for this report expressed concern that these events occurred amid Noboa's repeated offers to pardon those who commit abuses.⁴²

But the short-term reduction in violence was soon reversed as gangs adapted to the new reality and grew increasingly fragmented. Unlike Haiti, where gangs overcame longstanding rivalries and formed a relatively stable alliance to fight against state forces in September 2023, Ecuador's wave of coordinated gang attacks against security forces was short-lived and did not morph into greater cooperation. On the contrary, interventions in prisons and gang-controlled communities hindered communications between imprisoned and free gang leaders and prompted some leaders to go into hiding or even leave the country, sparking internal power struggles and leading to the creation of further offshoot gangs.⁴³ ACLED records activity of at least 37 gangs in 2024, 54% more than in 2023, as part of what a security expert calls a "second wave of fragmentation," after the one that led to the disintegration of the Choneros-led confederation.⁴⁴ For example, Chone Killers

leaders known as Trompudo and Ben 10 were killed in Cali, Colombia, in December 2024, and violent competition between local leaders running neighborhoods in Durán, Guayas, ensued.⁴⁵

In parallel, competition also resumed in prisons, as the military control of prisons started to crack in the second half of the year and gangs tried to regain control of the prison economies.⁴⁶ On 12 November, a dispute between Los Duendes and Los Freddy Kruegers gangs over the control of food distribution led to the killing of at least 17 prisoners in the Litoral Penitentiary.⁴⁷

Above all, civilians have paid a high toll for the resurgence of gang activities and disputes (*see graph above*). In many cases, gangs target civilians who refuse to pay extortion fees. In other cases, these events are related to territorial disputes. According to a security expert consulted by ACLED, one group often attacks civilians “to show that the opposing group does not have the capacity to protect its people, in order to replace it and start asking for higher extortion payments.”⁴⁸ Taxi drivers and other labor groups, such as merchants, mechanics, and fishermen, are some of the most targeted for extortion. But civilians more directly associated with gangs, such as collaborators or members’ relatives, can also be direct victims of gang disputes. For example, on 7 March 2025, 22 people were massacred and at least 120 families were forcibly displaced in the Socio Vivienda neighborhood in Guayaquil, as part of the war between Los Fénix and Los Igualitos factions of Los Tiguerones gang, which was triggered by the capture of its leaders in Spain in October 2024.⁴⁹ Successive states of emergency imposed on the most violent provinces and cantons have failed to curb violence. On the contrary, violence picked up steam, both in and outside prisons, reaching record-high levels in early 2025.⁵⁰ Between 1 January and 23 May 2025, ACLED records over 1,300 events of gang violence, over 60% more than in the same period in 2024.

What comes next will depend on Noboa’s plans, but only in part

Noboa starts his new term amid an escalation of gang violence. Despite his victory, doubts abound over whether he will be able to drag Ecuador out of this crisis. Part of this titanic task will depend on his policy and political decisions; the other part will depend on factors outside his control.

Internally, Noboa’s militarization since early 2024 has resulted in the fragmentation of criminal gangs and rapid turnover in their leadership. To avoid a Mexico-like scenario, where organized crime groups’ splintering and shifting alliances have fueled a constant escalation of violence over the last few decades, he will need a comprehensive plan that goes beyond ad-hoc and temporary deployment of armed forces in both prisons and on the streets.⁵¹ At the same time, Noboa faces a deeply polarized landscape with a tenuous majority in the National Assembly, which complicates governance and the passing of critical reforms,⁵² as well as a stagnating economy, which will limit his wiggle room to offer alternatives to the country’s disenfranchised youth.⁵³ Meanwhile, criminal interests remain deeply embedded in the political, judicial, and security sectors, despite some efforts to expose and combat them. Further progress to root them out will depend on the

commitment of the upcoming attorney general, due to be appointed, and the government's willingness to collaborate with them.⁵⁴

But the government will also have to face the fact that some of the main drivers of the country's illicit economies that gangs fiercely fight to control, such as cocaine and illegal gold mining, are booming. Cocaine production reached record levels in 2023,⁵⁵ and Colombian rebel groups' disputes for the control of the southern coca-producing departments of Nariño and Putumayo, bordering Ecuador, [are far from over](#). Shifting alliances and territorial control between Colombian and Ecuadorian armed groups raise the risk of increasing violence on both sides of the border. At the same time, the global surge in gold prices has triggered a boom in illegal mining, drawing Ecuadorian but also Colombian criminal organizations deeper into the country's Amazonian and Andean regions, further contributing to increasing violence against security forces⁵⁶ and political figures.⁵⁷ Finally, Ecuador's porous 1,500-kilometer border with Peru has facilitated arms trafficking from the neighboring country, which is also experiencing a [deteriorating security situation](#).⁵⁸

Addressing this convergence of security, economic, and political challenges will require not only a coherent national strategy but also strong cooperation with neighboring countries and international allies. His proposals — which rely on perpetual states of emergency, building new maximum security prisons, and increasing sanctions for gang-related crimes — seem to draw much on El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele's playbook. But even if these measures dealt a huge blow to gangs in El Salvador, the suspension of due process and thousands of arbitrary arrests came at a huge cost to the country's democratic standards.⁵⁹ Unlike his first time in office, Noboa now has a full term to craft a security approach that can certainly draw on successful examples from the region but needs to adapt to the country's criminal and institutional specificities. The four-year time frame gives him the chance to achieve more substantial results, but it will also make failure more visible.

Correction: On 8 October 2024, Ecuador created a new municipality. This report has been updated to reflect that the total municipalities in the country is 222, instead of 221.

***Visuals in this report were produced by* [Ciro Murillo](#)**

Contribution of The University of Texas at Austin (UT)

The data used for this report was enriched by the work of students at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). These include Ty Burroughs, Geraldyn Campos, Tamon Hamlett, Zee Khan, and Noemi Mora, under the direction of Dr. Ashley Moran in the UT Government Department. UT identified and tagged events of election-related disorder and violent events targeting national administrators in Ecuador between January 2018 and August 2024. The project contributes to the tracking of violence targeting administrators and understanding their manifestations in national and subnational political settings. The election-related disorder tags allow the tracking of unrest that arises during electoral processes, such as violence targeting electoral infrastructure and officials, demonstrations linked to elections (e.g., electoral reforms, contestation of results, etc.), and violence against relatives of politicians, which is a tool frequently used by power brokers to put pressure on political figures.

