POLITICAL CORRUPTION AND ORGANIZED CRIME: DRIVERS, EFFECTS AND RESPONSES

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OVERVIEW

In recent decades, greater attention has been paid to the capacity of organized crime to corrupt political systems, chiefly by pouring illicit money into political campaigns and institutions. Conflict and weak governance enable such networks to engage in political corruption. If not properly addressed, the increasing number and intensity of global conflicts and the democratic backsliding seen in recent years are likely to negatively affect efforts to tackle political corruption linked to organized crime. In this session, participants considered two pre-developed scenarios to explore how these trends might affect the drivers and effects of political corruption and organized crime, in an attempt to determine how current policy responses might be adapted to meet future challenges.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Democracy is never perfect but exists on a spectrum and in a variety of forms. While each context is specific, there are some commonalities between states that share similar socio-economic conditions, conflict dynamics or historical experiences. For example, in post-colonial states, democratic systems are often inherited and reflect the administrative structures of colonialism, which used politics to maintain power. In situations where there is little expectation of accountability among citizens, the mechanisms to support it are often lacking even where the political will exists.

Democratic backsliding can also be the result of a lack of trust in political institutions. The latter is frequently linked to changes in the state-society relationship, which may weaken over time as a result of corruption, weak governance, limited access to justice, low levels of social cohesion or poor service delivery. While good governance does not ensure an absence of organized crime, poor governance creates opportunities for it to flourish. Ungoverned spaces, corruption and weak rule of law enable organized crime to finance and develop its operations. The informal and illicit markets that emerge in the absence of a strong formal sector can provide livelihoods in the short term, but empower criminal networks and undermine state authority in the medium to long term.

Increasing conflict and conflict recurrence can exacerbate the above-mentioned challenges and create new ones. For example, when the proportion of public resources directed towards military operations increases, other sectors such as health care, education, security and justice may suffer cutbacks resulting in a reduction in the quality or quantity of services provided. In such instances the void created can be filled by non-state actors such as community- and faith-based organizations, humanitarian or development actors, insurgent groups or local militias. While the delivery of services by non-state actors can have positive impacts on the local population, it can also undermine state legitimacy and contribute to greater instability, particularly if the non-state actors delivering services have political objectives or are otherwise profiting from the conflict. Moreover, during times of conflict involving high levels of displacement, organized crime networks may benefit from human trafficking or profit from selling arms to and financing the parties to the conflict—whether state and non-state actors—using money earned through drug smuggling.

SESSION REPORT

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants agreed that there is no single solution that can address all the above-mentioned challenges associated with democratic backsliding or increased conflict, or the opportunities that these create for organized crime networks to engage in political corruption. However, a number of partial solutions were suggested to strengthen existing policy frameworks and address their deficiencies. The recommendations identified below and others suggested during the forum session and pre-forum workshop will be further developed by International IDEA in a forthcoming policy paper.

First, civil society plays an important role as both a watchdog and an advocate of democratic principles. Building the capacity of civil society organizations and increasing finance to those that monitor corruption and human rights in particular could help hold public officials to account and bring about a cultural shift that stigmatizes corruption. Participants also discussed how greater support for programmes that promote media independence and freedom of speech, and those that educate journalists on how to responsibly monitor and report on corruption might be effective in certain contexts.

The group discussions revealed that one of the greatest obstacles to addressing both organized crime and corruption is the lack of incentives to refrain from such practices. Positive incentives, or 'carrots', were proposed, such as educating political leaderships in the principles of good governance, implementing tax amnesties and rewarding governments that implement transparency measures with larger aid packages. Various disincentives, or 'sticks', were also suggested. For instance, by investing in justice sector reform and pairing it with anti-corruption measures, development actors would enable greater judicial independence and facilitate better enforcement of laws already on the books. At the international level, discussants considered the possibility of expanding the mandate of international judicial organizations to prosecute corruption cases linked to organized crime, learning from the experiences of such bodies as the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala.

Participants agreed that corruption should be at the forefront of the international development agenda, rather than an issue to be addressed after economic recovery and institutional capacity have passed a certain threshold. Participants noted that by treating corruption as a secondary priority, the current approach ignores its systemic relationship with governance, security and justice, reducing the sustainability of the immediate development and statebuilding gains of the post-conflict period.

Finally, the discussion highlighted the need for better analysis and greater context specificity in the design and implementation of programmes that seek to address political corruption and organized crime. In fragile and conflict-affected states, resources and capacity are limited. The needs associated with addressing political corruption and organized crime should be prioritized to ensure citizen security and restore state legitimacy. Government initiatives must complement and be sequenced with civil society and private sector interventions, and each other. Regional and international actors must develop a deeper understanding of the political actors, criminal networks and institutional vulnerabilities in a given country, as well as the relationships between them.