Introduction

State-Narco Networks, Democratization, and Violence

In 1988, Bolivian coca production reached a new high. Growing global demand for cocaine had created a booming sector in Bolivia, as coca destined primarily for illicit markets developed new agricultural frontiers and sustained rural communities. According to Bolivian government estimates, total national coca production increased from 8.5 metric tons (MT) in 1970 to 144 MT by 1988 (Justiniano and Doria Medina 1991). Illicit coca represented one of the few growth industries of the crisis-plagued Bolivian economy of the 1980s. It was widely recognized that coca provided a vital source of livelihood for many within low-income sectors of Bolivian society. Rarely acknowledged, though, was the country's thriving organized crime. Bolivian trafficking organizations profited from a lucrative business, selling huge quantities of coca paste to their Colombian associates for processing into cocaine. It was estimated that the Bolivian leg of the Andean cocaine trade was worth US$674 million by 1988, equivalent to 78 percent of Bolivia's recorded total exports or 15 percent of official GDP (Franks 1991; World Bank 2025).[1] Indicative of the power and wealth of Bolivi-

an organized crime during this period, prominent drug trafficker Roberto Suárez—otherwise known as the "King of Cocaine"—reportedly offered to pay off the country's national debt in exchange for amnesty (Associated Press 2000).[2] However, contrasting sharply with mainstream narratives of drugs, violence, and disorder in Latin America, the Bolivian cocaine trade remained relatively peaceful.

The seemingly exponential growth of this illicit economy closely shadowed Bolivia's long-promised 1982 transition to democracy. This book argues that the distinct dynamics of Bolivian organized crime were intimately interwoven with the process of political transition. State-narco networks—relations of patronage between state actors and Bolivia's organized crime groups (OCGs)—suppressed violent competition in the cocaine trade. These networks were established during the country's military authoritarian period (1964–1982) and reflected the historic clientelist functions of the Bolivian state. As Bolivia democratized, state-narco networks evolved and became bound to a fragile post-transition settlement between the main political actors. The book theorizes that criminal violence is controlled when goals of maintaining political transition converge with the interests of state-narco networks. Links between OCGs and political parties, the military and the police, for example, may be incorporated into political pacts designed to protect key actors during transition. These pacts hinder the institutionalization of democratic norms while engendering political stability and mitigating criminal violence. In such contexts, the cocaine economy underpins the emergence of a hybrid political regime, where elements of authoritarianism and clientelism blend with formal democratic institutions.

This novel argument intervenes in vital contemporary debates of democracy and violence in Latin America. Confounding the expectations of democratization, widely quoted statistics show Latin America as the most violent region in the world. According to the UNODC (2022), for example, Central and South America averaged 22.1 homicides per 100,000 population between 1990 and 2018, while the corresponding global figure was 6.5. Statistics for 2012 show that Latin America accounted for 37 percent of the world's homicides, despite constituting just 8 percent of the global population (Chioda 2017, 1). The causes of this violence are multi-

faceted and vary greatly across the region. In many cases, though, this trend has been linked to drug trafficking and the proliferation of organized crime (Fajnzylber, Lederman, and Loayza 2002). Vast revenue from the global cocaine trade has spawned powerful OCGs in Latin America. Within popular and policy discourses, the trade has been synonymous with violence and disorder, as democratic governments have struggled to establish security and protect the rights of citizens. The militarized "war on drugs" has defined the policy response to these issues in Latin America, yet it has often only exacerbated violence, entrenched organized crime, and further weakened the rule of law.

To explain heightened drug-related violence in Latin America's democratic era, recent literature has advanced nuanced theorizations of illicit economies and the drivers of criminal violence, the structures and incentives of organized crime, the drug trade's relationship with the state and its intersections with politics, and the impacts of policy interventions (Albarracín and Barnes 2020). This literature has tended to focus on cases that have experienced high levels of violence, such as Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Central America. Within such analyses, the fragmentation of state power, disruption of informal governance mechanisms over organized crime, deficient democratic institutionalization, and electoral incentives for hardline policy responses are important explanatory factors for the association of criminal violence with democratization. Many of these factors were seemingly present in Bolivia in the 1980s. A concomitant rise in criminal violence, though, was absent. Despite its large cocaine economy, significant organized crime sector, and uneven democratization, Bolivia largely avoided the high levels of criminal violence witnessed elsewhere in Latin America. What, then, can the divergent Bolivian case tell us about the relationship between political transition and criminal violence? How did Bolivia avoid an outbreak of large-scale criminal violence as it democratized?

In this chapter, I introduce the broad argument of the book and its contribution to debates of violence and democracy in Latin America. The chapter maps different explanations for criminal violence in the modern era of Latin American democracy across disciplinary perspectives to contextualize the distinct experience of Bolivia. It discusses theorizations that center on failures of

democratic consolidation, for example, where violence is causally related to deficient institutionalization and "weak" state capacity. While this framework exposes fault lines of democratic government in Latin America, it undertheorizes the different forms of empirical statehood in the region that have shaped hybrid political regimes. Within these regimes, different types of relationship may form between state actors and organized crime, helping to determine levels of violence. These processes are reflective of deeply entrenched practices of state power in Latin America. I draw on the criminal governance literature to explain how the redistribution of state power entailed by political transition impacts the function of illicit economies. These insights are crucial to understanding the Bolivian case, specifically outlining the concept of state-narco networks and their role in managing criminal violence. However, the book advances the literature by highlighting the pivotal role of political pacts in managing the disruptive effects of transition on state-narco networks. This argument addresses a lacuna in the literature by examining the influence of organized crime on processes of political transition and vice versa. It shows that the fault lines of Bolivia's new democracy were crucial to avoiding large-scale criminal violence in its burgeoning cocaine economy.

Explaining Criminal Violence in Latin American Democracies

During the 1980s and 1990s, a wave of democratization swept over Latin America. Countries that had lived under authoritarian governments initiated various types of transition toward democracy (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986). Latin America of the Cold War period had been mired in violence. Authoritarian regimes turned the repressive security apparatus of the state brutally against their own people. Leftist guerrillas waged armed campaigns across the region, leading in some cases to civil war. Democratization raised hopes that such violence would be consigned to the past. State power would be constrained by democratically elected governments and meaningful civil rights, and sociopolitical conflicts resolved through elections and democratic institutions. Such hopes have been frustrated, as many areas of Latin America have instead experienced heightened levels of vio-