


The Lomas children understand politics inductively, and the MANTHOC children understand it deductively (182), but all of them are knowledgeable political subjects with much to say about the state, its reach, and its absences.

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Mary Fran T. Malone, Lucía Dammert, and Orlando J. Pérez (2023). *Making Police Reform Matter in Latin America*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers. Tables, bibliography, index, 249 pp.; hardcover US\$105.00.

This comprehensive volume provides a much-needed contemporary foundation for understanding police reform in Latin America. Grounded in a structure centered on the dual themes of reform history and public opinion, its seven country case studies together provide a full range of in-depth but clear and applicable analytical points to navigate the complex political and institutional map of Latin American police reform. The authors look at the bundle of reform as they move through time in a “modified path dependency,” showing how specific proposals are added, discarded, and modified along the way as they maneuver around constant obstruction, politization, and change.

To survive, the book shows, these reforms try to hold on to core principles and approaches. The main one is community-oriented policing (COP), which incorporates citizens directly into policing through programs such as neighborhood councils and services for vulnerable social sectors. In the case of Colombia, for example, a history of violence and high-profile scandals helped usher in innovative programs of citizen participation and quadrant-based neighborhood police units. Such citizen-centered policy, the authors correctly stress, is needed to create and maintain the public support and legitimacy on which all reform ultimately depends. “Public trust is essential,” they assert, “for if citizens view the police as corrupt, inefficient, or abusive, they will be reluctant to turn to police for

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protection or to solve problems” (page 7). And if people do not turn to the police, the police will lack the information to prevent or investigate crime, worsening their inefficiency and risking a downward spiral in citizen trust, institutional legitimacy, and public safety.

Through steeped in historical detail, this approach helps to understand and confront the region’s current and rapidly emerging challenges. The overarching one, of course, is democratic erosion. In addition to the institutional overhauls after new parties win elections are major critical junctures, nearly all of which have happened in the book’s case studies, such as invasions (Panama in 1989), internal breakdowns (Peru in 1992), peace agreements (Colombia in 2016) and ordered transitions (Chile in 1990). Through its chronology of these changes, from planned electoral shifts to more tectonic disruptions, the authors help analysts and policymakers understand how reform will withstand new waves of change currently underway. One is mass protest; the chapter on Chile shows how the poor preparation for and violent response to street protests quickly unraveled the legitimacy of one of the region’s most trusted police forces. Such clashes are likely to be more intense and common amid growing polarization and populism. Policing is also at the forefront of increasingly bold authoritarian advances, from constitutional suspension allowing mass arrests in El Salvador to a militarization of policing in Mexico to a loosening of gun restrictions in Brazil. As demand for action against insecurity increases, such policies are likely to become more common, as in the new governments of Ecuador and Argentina. Majority support for harsh police tactics—a kind of democratic assault against democratic standards—is the flip side of the popular trust and legitimacy this book outlines so well.

Another challenge is geographic administration. The book discusses decentralization in detail, outlining the challenges to police reform in federal structures in which most police are administered in whole or in part by local and regional governments that can strengthen, weaken, or redirect reform projects. Many chapters describe the success of urban models, such as in the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo and Colombia’s three main cities, with effective policies such as participatory budgeting and restrictions of alcohol sales. The book also describes the mixed outcomes that stem from such shared governance, particularly the seesaw applications of iron fist (*mano dura*) and preventative COP approaches. This geographic approach connects with the book’s stress on capacity and corruption, and can help explain why reform is dead on arrival in many of the region’s areas, such as Central American cities governed by the highly organized gangs known as *maras*, or the wide swaths of rural territory in Colombia and Peru controlled by armed criminal groups.

Such fragmented administration—not just among police units but with other armed agencies such as the military—also makes the police less able to understand or confront the greatly destabilizing power of organized criminality. Each chapter lays out the emerging threat posed by increasingly skillful and collaborative groups, from local gangs (p. 120) to transnational cartels, and the challenges for ill-equipped police to deal with their rapidly expanding activities. For example, the

case study of Panamá describes how the security system is hindered by secrecy laws and weak judicial oversight in trying to confront drug trafficking, kidnappings, extortion and money laundering (page 148). In other cases, the steady strategies followed by reformers have diverged dangerously from those of organized crime. In the case of Costa Rica, as the authors show, that difference has “raised alarms” at the capacity of the otherwise highly functional police force (page 100).

Amid these strengths, though, the wealth of details in the book’s comparative cases is often not matched with links among them.

One mismatch is between data references and provided data. For example, one case study’s conclusion of modest results despite increasing investment in technology should be followed up with an explanation of how results are measured, and what data shows these results. Because the book emphasizes citizen trust, more cross-regional analysis should be done of case-specific findings, such as why comparative institutions’ trust in the police is highest Panamá and lowest in Mexico. How much do those levels reflect distrust of other state agencies? Public trust levels should also be more connected to corruption, which is one of its primary determinants. For example, how much is Bolivia’s top score in reported rates of police bribery connected to its low rates of public trust? How do salary and personnel numbers, as reported in Table 2.1, factor into police corruption?

Another dimension needing more analytical focus is internal. Through concerted historical descriptions, each case study chronicles the police’s “chronic institutional instability,” as in Peru (page 167). But the case studies would have benefited by looking more closely under the hood: the actual practices of training, internal affairs, promotion, administration, turnover, accountability, and unit proliferation that can make the police impervious to reform. Such details could have helped explain why the police “retained much of their militarized structure and presence” (page 78) despite efforts to improve police community relations, or why “many red flags pop up” with reform at local police stations (page 169). When the authors found that police officers felt undervalued (page 171), how much did that reflect police structures and how much did it contribute to corruption? More study was also needed of the relationships between the police and prosecutors, which is critical to the trust and legitimacy of the overall security apparatus. Several case study chapters, such as on Panama, provide an in-depth look at judicial reform, but the process of criminal investigation and adjudication could have been better integrated into the analytical framework.

Similarly, the book could have applied its rich material on the limits of reform to better understand counter reform. Such backlashes may face death by a thousand cuts from officials willfully slow walking or ignoring new regulations, such as when the slow results of preventative policies prompt frustrated officers to turn to repression (page 144). But counter reform increasingly originates from the top. The book’s study of Nicaragua rightly pivots on the April 2018 uprising, asking whether the governmental crackdown was “a dramatic departure from the police’s community orientation” (page 166). It then discusses policing since the 1979 Revolution, public trust, electoral preferences, and crime rates. But the issue is not reform but

repression. This big picture is that the authoritarian Ortega-Murillo regime took control of the judiciary, suppressed public opinion and crime data, and turned the country's signature achievement in community policing against the community by politicizing the Consejos de Poder Ciudadano (CPCs); arming para-police and "voluntary" citizen patrols; recruiting young men to attack activists; and allowing stations to ally with narco-traffickers. Laws to indict citizens as "terrorists," coup-mongers, or "traitors" further weaponized the police. In the analysis of these cases, the devil does not emerge from the details.

Despite these missed opportunities and disjunctures between the book's core themes, the authors' overarching conceptual framework, extraordinary knowledge of the country case studies, and consistent policy insights together give us both a historical background of reform that will be enduringly useful to scholars as well as a roadmap that highlights roadblocks ahead under Latin America's diverse and unfailingly unpredictable political and socio-economic conditions.

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