

# Rethinking Political Transitions in Today's Latin America

From Regime Change  
to Violence Reduction

Sebastián Guerra Sánchez

*January 2026*



PROGRAMA REGIONAL PARA  
AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE

## Executive Summary

The era of democratic transitions has largely come to an end in Latin America. Today, it is predominantly democratic and mostly free of national armed conflict.

Yet, many states in the region are facing two distinct but interdependent threats. First, organised criminal networks are gaining in strength, territory and governance capacities as compared to the state. Second, elected officials are increasingly eroding institutional checks and weakening the rule of law.

Combined, these threats produce a specific dilemma: namely, how to address acute public security crises without recourse to authoritarian tactics. As such, political transitions in contemporary Latin America must be reconceptualised. Rather than being understood as swings from authoritarianism to democracy or from war to peace, they must be reconceptualised as transitions from weak to strong democracies and from high to low levels of violence.

This new landscape in Latin America implies a broad agenda for discussion and action. This includes to:

- 1. Update democratic tools.** The institutions created after Latin America's third wave of democratisation still matter, but cornerstone principles like civilian control over the military need to be updated to confront today's challenges.
- 2. Acknowledge that democracy is both stagnating and collapsing.** The region shows two trends at the same time: some countries struggle to deepen democracy, while others are experiencing democratic breakdown and growing authoritarianism.
- 3. Keep open the path back to democracy where backsliding has happened.** In countries that have slid into authoritarian rule, democratic transition models still matter, but they operate against a different geopolitical backdrop: one in which democratic legitimacy is weaker and outside support more limited.
- 4. Identify today's new threats to democracy.** Unlike the late 20th century—when coups or insurgencies were the main dangers—today's biggest spoilers are organised criminal groups that act as local authorities and elected officials who undermine democratic checks.
- 5. See state-building and the rule of law as long-term political tasks.** The building of capable, impersonal state institutions and a functioning rule of law is not a technical project; it is a major political undertaking that requires long-term investment in police, prosecutors, courts and fiscal agencies.
- 6. Understand security crises as opportunities to shift from one equilibrium to another.** Severe security crises can open the door to moving from high to low levels of violence. In a democratic environment, this usually requires two phases: a short, targeted disruption to break criminal power, followed by a long phase of strengthening regular, accountable state institutions.
- 7. Look closely at local-level politics and collusion.** Many of the toughest barriers to reform lie at the municipal and subnational levels, where “grey zones” of

cooperation between local officials and criminal groups persist. Successful transitions need a mix of national and local strategies.

- 8. Treat exceptional measures as limited tools, not permanent solutions.** States of exception and special security regimes are not automatically anti-democratic; but their legitimacy depends on how they are designed. They must have clear legal limits, transparent oversight, and a plan to hand responsibilities back to ordinary institutions once the crisis passes.
- 9. Make democratic solutions politically believable.** Authoritarian shortcuts often hold appeal because they deliver quick, visible results. To avoid democratic erosion, democratic strategies must also “work” by combining short-term security gains with credible, enforceable plans for institutional reform and accountability.
- 10. Build political and social coalitions that can sustain reform.** Successful transitions in this new era require groups that can bear the political cost of change. Broad coalitions—political parties, civil society, community leaders, and the private sector—are essential for giving both security and institutional reforms legitimacy and staying power.

*This publication is an English-language executive summary of Las transiciones políticas hoy en América Latina (IFIT, January 2026).*

The [Institute for Integrated Transitions \(IFIT\)](#) is an international non-governmental organisation dedicated to innovation and dialogue as the pathway to peace and reconciliation. Often working behind the scenes, IFIT aims to bridge social and political divides in fragile and conflict-affected states and expand the spectrum of perceived solutions. IFIT's 380+ local and global experts are recognised leaders in negotiation and transition.

The [Regional Programme for Latin America and the Caribbean](#) is IFIT's first region-wide initiative. It builds on IFIT's accumulated experience in [Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela](#), and coordinates an active network of more than 100 experts and leaders.

*The research behind this document was completed in September 2025*



INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

© 2025 Institute for Integrated Transitions

[www.ifit-transitions.org](http://www.ifit-transitions.org)  
[info@ifit-transitions.org](mailto:info@ifit-transitions.org)



Scan for more information