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Yanilda María González
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Authoritarian Police in Democracy

In countries around the world, from the United States to the Philippines to Chile, police forces are at the center of social unrest and debates about democracy and rule of law. This book examines the persistence of authoritarian policing in Latin America to explain why police violence and malfeasance remain pervasive decades after democratization. It also examines the conditions under which reform can occur. Drawing on rich comparative analysis and evidence from Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia, the book opens up the “black box” of police bureaucracies to show how police forces exert power and cultivate relationships with politicians, as well as how social inequality impedes change. González shows that authoritarian policing persists not in spite of democracy but in part because of democratic processes and public demand. When societal preferences over the distribution of security and coercion are fragmented along existing social cleavages, politicians possess few incentives to enact reform.

Yanilda María González is Assistant Professor of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School. She holds a PhD in Politics and Social Policy from Princeton University and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School.

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Authoritarian Police in Democracy

Contested Security in Latin America

YANILDA MARÍA GONZÁLEZ

Harvard Kennedy School



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Acknowledgments

Many of us who study the police have likely come across a phrase written by veteran police scholar David Bayley: “A scholar who studies the police must be willing to do extensive fieldwork in unprepossessing surroundings, to brave bureaucratic intransigence, and to become politically suspect and socially *déclassé*.” Over the course of two-and-a-half years of field research for this project, I can attest to the particular challenges of studying the police, from the discomfort of officers candidly recounting their own abuses and of ordinary citizens gleefully celebrating torture and police killings to concerns for one’s own safety. But this work has also shed light on the urgency of studying the police in order to understand how police constitute the palpable gap between formal democratic rights and lived experience.

The tensions between policing and democracy have long been evident to me. As an immigrant child growing up in New York City during the 1990s, my sisters and I watched the local news religiously (we didn’t have cable), which seemed to be equally inundated with, on the one hand, a racialized discourse of panic over out-of-control crime and, on the other, stories of similarly racialized police violence, from the Central Park Five to Abner Louima, Nicholas Heyward Jr, and Amadou Diallo. The 9/11 attacks and their aftermath were similarly instructive. At the age of nineteen I began working at the New York Civil Liberties Union on a grassroots campaign focused on public education and mobilization around the threat of post-9/11 anti-terrorism policies to civil rights and civil liberties. Through this work I encountered many New Yorkers who defended racial and religious profiling, surveillance, and detentions without due process, insisting that the threat of terrorism necessitated

that we restrict some rights in the name of security. A few years later, I encountered similar contradictions upon arriving in Argentina as a Fulbright fellow in 2006 – the thirty-year anniversary of the military coup that gave rise to Argentina’s infamously repressive dictatorship. In my interviews and everyday contexts I spoke with many Argentines who reminisced fondly about the dictatorship period, reasoning that at least back then crime wasn’t a problem and they felt safe. Others commemorated the victims of state violence under the dictatorship and celebrated hard-won gains in human rights under democracy, while saying little about rampant police violence and its many victims under democracy.

These early experiences taught me invaluable lessons about the interdependence of and tensions between security and democracy that I sought to explore in this book. Security is a basic human right, without which the enjoyment of other rights and democratic citizenship become impossible. But security is not merely a public good: it is a site of contestation about the distribution of protection and repression, and the nature of that distribution can pose fundamental challenges for democracy. This book is an effort to grapple with this tension and elucidate some of its causes – and will hopefully contribute to debates about its solutions.

I am deeply indebted to Deborah Yashar, who provided much meaningful support and guidance throughout my academic career and the development of this project and who had an immeasurable impact on my identity as a scholar and educator. I’m also thankful for the support and guidance of Mark Beissinger and Evan Lieberman, whose early encouragement to focus on the politics of policing was essential for this project and for developing my own approach to political science.

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