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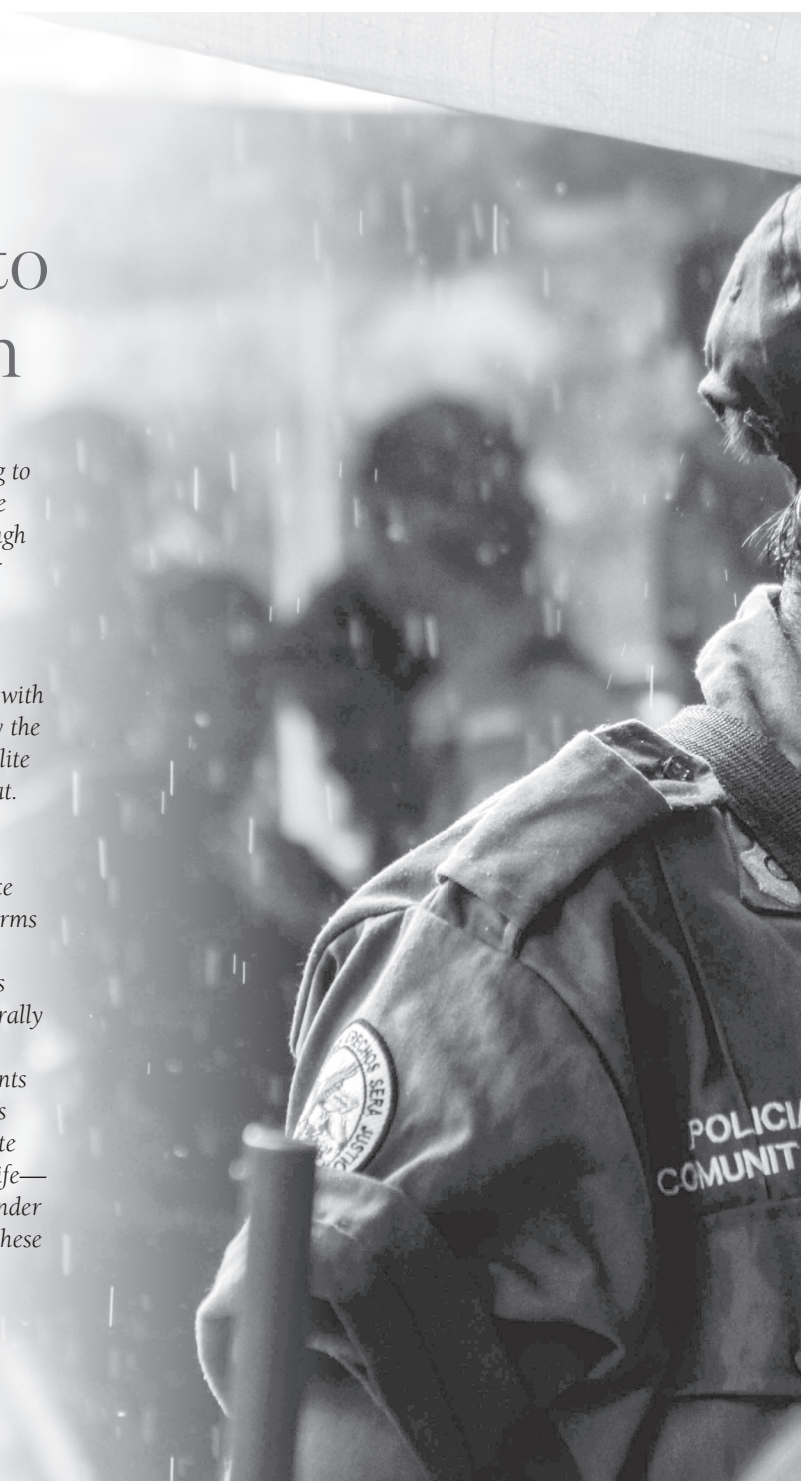
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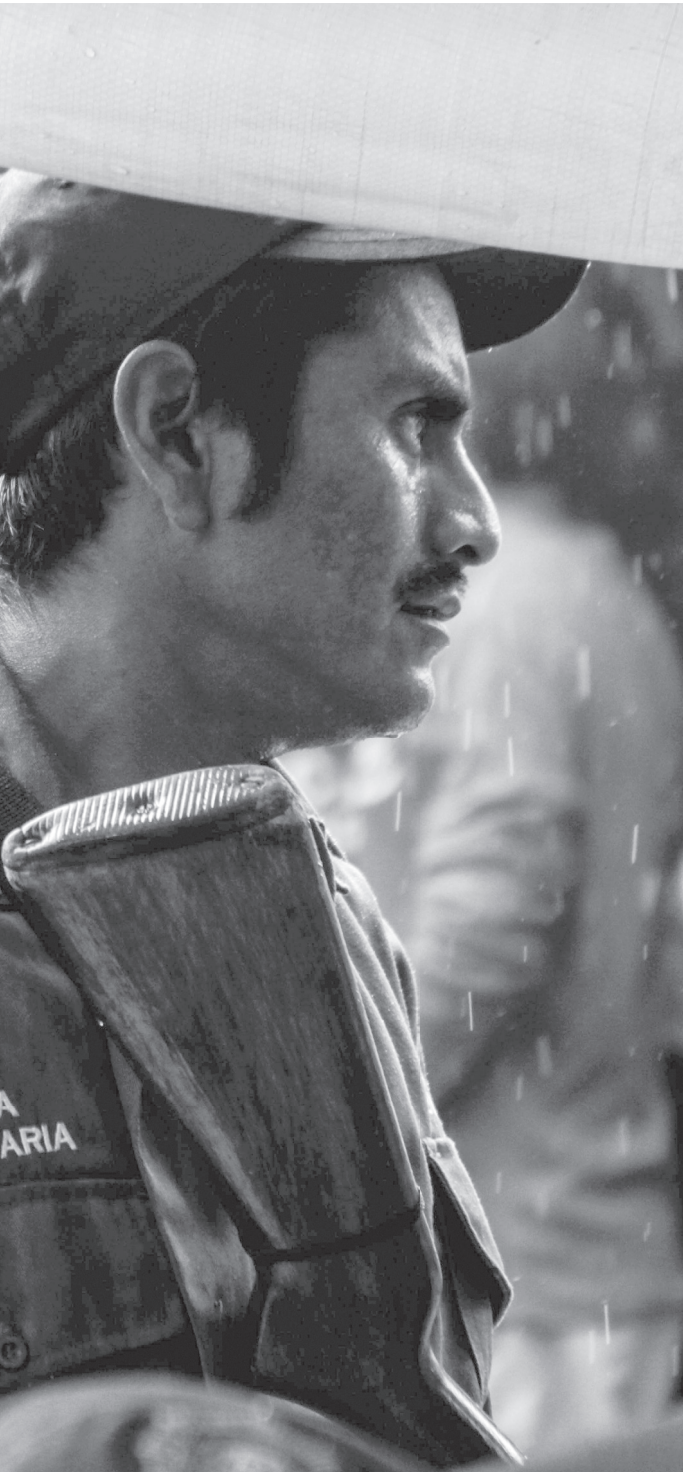
# Community Policing: An Alternative to State Repression

*Facing state governments that are unable or unwilling to protect them, a growing number of communities in the Americas have sought their own forms of justice through building autonomous, community-led mechanisms for justice and public safety. This section introduces two different forms of community policing as practiced at local and state levels in Guatemala and Mexico. The communities reported on here are largely indigenous, with long histories of criminalization and extermination by the state. In both examples, the incursion of foreign and elite interests onto their territories remains an urgent threat.*

*There are important differences, of course, in the ways that alternative justice is carried out in these case examples: In Guerrero, Mexico, community police confront organized crime and the state, as multiple forms of violence are exacerbated by drug war conflicts. In Guatemala, Maya groups fight for legal recognition as they resist the incursion of environmentally and culturally destructive transnational megaprojects.*

*It is important to recognize both the accomplishments and shortcomings of these community-based groups as they face the largely repressive and heavy-handed state answer to the injustices and insecurities of everyday life—criminal justice systems that, instead of protecting, render most citizens increasingly vulnerable. NACLA offers these stories as examples of what may lie ahead.*





MARÍA TERESA SIERRA

## Guerrero, Mexico: Community Police Confront Macro-Violences

For the past two decades, Mexico's southwestern state of Guerrero has suffered from some of the highest levels of impunity and violence in Mexico. This situation has led indigenous communities, particularly members of the Me'phaa and Na Savi ethnic groups, together with mestizo communities of the Mountain region and Pacific coast, to organize and take on the tasks of law enforcement and public safety themselves.

These communities have come to see autonomous community policing as the most effective way to confront organized crime and insecurity. The community police force of Guerrero, known formally as the Regional Coordinating Committee of Community Authorities—Communitarian Police, (CRAC-PC), has assumed responsibility for security and justice—which official public authorities have been incapable of providing—over an extended territory. They have consolidated and expanded to various regions, confronting challenges and threats, becoming an institution that communities see as their own and are prepared to defend.

Beyond the incursions of drug traffickers and other criminals, in several indigenous territories, state authorities have long implemented neo-extractivist mining policies in support of transnational capital while indigenous communities and the CRAC-PC have organized to prevent large-scale displacement and plunder. As such, the CRAC-PC represents a challenge to legal as well as illegal businesses. This has placed community policing under the surveillance of the state government, which in the name of the “rule of law” intends to regulate it. Disputes over economic interests—legal and illegal—reveal a central dimension of a state of macro-violence, where structural, political, and institutional forces converge and intersect in contexts of impunity and lack of social guaranties to prevent it.

But how strong and effective are the community

A member of the community police force of Guerrero.  
IMPAR AV/FLICKR



police of Guerrero? In the current context of the crisis of security and violence in Mexico, what alternative to state-led security policies do they represent?

The principal strength of the CRAC-PC is rooted in the collective network of communities that sustains it. This system involves a regional and communal structure of indigenous authorities charged with two fundamental responsibilities—justice and security—whose regulation creates normative rules that converge to establish community laws. The system is connected through a structure of nodes and networks across a wide territory from the coast to the mountains of Guerrero. The nodes refer to the communities, assemblies, authorities, and police forces that are linked within networks to a regional coordinator of authorities and a unified command of community police forces situated in regional centers called Houses of Justice.

The community and regional assemblies, principal spaces and nodes of decision-making that cover a broad autonomous jurisdiction, are the driving forces of the system. The communities have placed a strong emphasis on building a justice system that is even-handed, without economic distinction, not corrupt, and administered in people's own languages based on their own uses and customs. The system intends to recover a deep sense of justice, under popular control, that responds to complaints, helps resolve grievances, and determines appropriate sanctions based on the seriousness of damages resulting from any crimes or infractions.

The central element of community justice is the quest for agreement and reconciliation. As such, the CRAC-PC uses an agreed-upon oral justice procedure whose ultimate step is “re-education” for individuals found guilty of serious crimes. Re-education means that those found guilty of a crime accept their responsibility and repair the damage caused, often through community service. It requires that communities within the system commit to receiving detainees for a 15-day period and determine the kind of social work they will do during the day, while holding them in captivity at night. This system facilitates the participation of almost all communities in the re-education process. The length of re-education varies according to the judicial resolution of the CRAC-PC depending on the gravity of the crime committed: from a few months to several years. In this process of re-education, the advice and viewpoint of the “principals,” recognized authorities from the communities, is fundamental. They speak with the guilty individuals to

make them understand the harm their behavior caused. Effectively, the system tries to promote a restorative community justice that challenges the inquisitorial patterns of the state justice system. Finally, due to the success of the community police—guaranteeing justice and peace in a huge jurisdiction—the State Congress of Guerrero passed a legislation that recognized the right to autonomy to the CRAC-PC as an institution of the indigenous peoples of Guerrero.

Today, Guerrero's community justice and security system confronts formidable challenges and harassment from the violent neoliberal reconfiguration of governance where organized crime and neo-extractivist state policies converge, affecting indigenous territories. In the conflict between transnational mining interests and traditional communities, federal political and economic powers from above have pressed Guerrero's state government to harden disciplinary practices against the CRAC-PC. Lawmakers increased the number of federal and state forces in the region, including the army, with the stated goal of fighting organized crime and social conflict that press on indigenous communities. All of this has had important consequences for the community policing system. On several fronts, these new tensions have obligated community police to generate new responses to defend its autonomy and guarantee its survival.

In this context of macro-violence, two processes stand out. On the one hand, community policing has expanded—at the request of the communities themselves—to regions with more conflict, military presence, and to “hot” drug war zones. On the other hand, the central role of the community police has become increasingly focused on the defense of land and natural resources, especially against mining companies, the most public face of transnational capital.

In 2013, the federal government ceded a wide swath of community territory in the mountains of Guerrero to foreign companies with a 50-year lease. This occurred without any prior consultation with the indigenous communities that lived there, activating a broad-based movement in defense of indigenous territory and in opposition to mining companies. The CRAC-PC accompanied its self-defense movement with an educational campaign on the harmful effects of open-face mining on public health. In both situations, we see the active role that the institution of the community police has played in confronting new challenges that put their security



Members of Guerrero's community police line up for a meal. IMPAR AV/Flickr

and justice system to the test.

Nevertheless, state authorities have viewed community police efforts to confront organized crime with suspicion, as it reveals their own incapacity to provide public security. These groups also expose the existence of gray areas where impunity is the rule and upsets the civic order; this happens, for example, when community police prosecute and intervene in crimes that reveal collusion between local authorities and drug trafficking.

In response, the government has criminalized community justice. In fact, a number of CRAC-PC leaders have been arrested under frequently nebulous charges of "violating human rights." Such is the case of commander Nestora Salgado, from Olinalá, who was released in March 2016 after almost three years in prison; meanwhile, other indigenous leaders remain prisoners.

The autonomous mobilization of community police can be credited with a number of achievements: first, the creation of the Council of Agrarian Authorities of the Mountain and Costa Chica in 2012, which convenes 16 agrarian communities in defense of their territory and natural resources. All have voted against mining projects that menace their land. Second, the me'phaa community of San Miguel del Progreso, active participants in the Council, won a lawsuit against two mining concessions in 2014. Although the case reached the Mexican Supreme Court, the mining companies ultimately renounced its concession because the Mexican government wanted to avoid a Supreme Court ruling

against the existing mining law.

In sum, the community police have challenged the state, uncovering networks of macro-violence and underlining its role as an obstacle for profiteers of local and global capital. For these reasons, the state government has sought to regulate and splinter them, but have confronted an institution whose principal support base comes from the local indigenous communities, who are difficult to subordinate. In a state like Guerrero, where structural violence and impunity prevail, the community police have become an important reference for building social order and horizons of peace.

The CRAC-PCs success in challenging the mafia-like power of the state, confronting insecurity and generating viable alternatives for the population is based in its organizational strength and deep communal roots. To understand indigenous people's efforts to maintain their own institutions of security and justice and their right to exercise self-determination, we must analyze the new constellations of power in which they operate. **■**

*Translated by Fred Rosen.*

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