

Venezuela: A Mafia State?

*Venezuela has become a hub of organized crime
in the region*



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7 Reasons for Describing Venezuela as a “Mafia State”

Picture by Seth Wenig /AP Images

There is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes a “mafia state”¹. Here are seven arguments as to why we think Venezuela qualifies and what the implications are of this troubled Andean nation as a regional crime hub.

1. Top level criminal penetration into state institutions

For the last three years InSight Crime has been tracking individuals we believe have links to organized crime and have held, or currently hold, senior positions in Venezuelan state institutions. We have found 123 officials that we confidently believe are involved in criminal activity. For legal reasons we will not publish the entire list, but some of the clearest cases are named in this investigation, “Drug Trafficking within the Venezuelan Regime: The Cartel of the Suns.”

What is clear from our investigations is that the following institutions are staffed at the higher echelons by individuals we believe are, or have been, engaged in criminal activity:

The Vice Presidency, the Ministries of Interior (Ministerio del Poder Popular del Despacho de la Presidencia y Seguimiento de la Gestión de Gobierno), Defense (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Defensa), Agriculture (Ministerio del Poder Popular de Agricultura Urbana), Education (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación), Prison Service (Ministerio del Poder Popular para el Servicio Penitenciario), Foreign Trade and Investment (Ministerio de Estado para el Comercio Exterior e Inversión Internacional), Electricity (Ministerio del Poder Popular para

¹ A great start point into thinking about the issue is Moises Naím's article “Mafia States” published April 25, 2012, in Foreign Affairs. You can read it here: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/25/mafia-states-pub-47954>

la Energía Eléctrica), the National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana), the Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Bolivarianas), the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional - SEBIN) and PdVSA.

The penetration of so many key institutions, and the fact that they constitute the state's main organs in the fight against organized crime, means that Venezuela cannot even contain organized crime, let alone effectively fight it. With so many state actors with interests in criminal activity, be it fuel smuggling, the black market sale of food and medicines or the trafficking of cocaine, this factor alone suggests that Venezuela qualifies as a mafia state.

2. Evidence of kleptocracy

How does a nation sat astride the greatest oil reserves outside of the Middle East go bust? Staggering incompetence, corruption and kleptocracy.

The state coffers have been pillaged on an industrial scale by the Bolivarian elite. With no transparency or public accounting of state budgets or expenditure, it is hard to calculate how much has been looted from the country. An investigation by a congressional committee put the number at \$70 billion.² A former minister has stated that the number is closer to \$300 billion.³

Without hard data, all we can do is recognize the scale of the corruption and look at some of its principal motors. The lack of transparency is one. Venezuela ranks 166 out of 176 countries rated by Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.⁴ If nobody knows how much the state is earning and how it is spending it, then there is no accountability and therefore officials who control budgets can easily divert funds into their own pockets or those of their friends. This kleptocracy has certainly been one of the main factors that has brought Venezuela to the edge of economic collapse and bankruptcy.

Currency and price controls introduced by the Venezuelan government in February 2003 were one of the principle enablers of corruption and kleptocracy during the government of Hugo Chávez. And this continues today, although on a much smaller scale.

"The system was created to be abused," said Alejandro Rebolledo, a Venezuelan lawyer specializing in organized crime, during an interview with InSight Crime in Caracas.

2 Venezuela Investigative Unit, "Widespread Corruption in Venezuela Backfires on President Maduro." InSight Crime, October 16, 2016. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/widespread-corruption-backfires-on-maduro-administration-in-venezuela>

3 Héctor Navarro, the former minister of Electrical Energy and Higher Education stated this before a National Assembly Commission in 2016. For details see: <http://www.elimpulso.com/noticias/nacionales/hector-navarro-ratifico-que-chavismo-desvio-300-mil-millones-de-dolares>

4 See: https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016?gclid=Cj0KCQ-jw5-TXBRCHARIsANLixNxWU2yFibFD-Kt3Vu1grPeKJExK-CyAfapSchSzhmxbFcJ8DmQv0B4aApp3EALw_wcB

The differential exchange rates were created under the premise of avoiding capital flight in the aftermath of widespread strikes that had led to the 2002 coup. They immediately gave rise to “perverse incentives,” according to Carlos Miguel Alvarez, an analyst at the Venezuelan think tank Ecoanalitica. Unscrupulous businesses and corrupt officials could buy dollars “cheap” at the official rate and sell them for much more bolivars on the black market.

Armed Groups Operating in Venezuela

Targeted by the government
 Financed by the government
 Transnational organized crime
 Common crime
 Homicide
 Extortion
 Drug trafficking
 Contraband
 Kidnapping
 Illegal mining

“Colectivos”

Armed civilian groups similar to paramilitaries. Alleged ideological ties to the government. Perform public safety, intelligence and repression functions in conjunction with government security forces. Control food sales in some areas.

“Pranes”

A “pran” is an incarcerated gang leader who directs criminal organizations on the outside called “trenes” from inside prison. The term has recently expanded to include people in control of criminal activity in the neighborhoods and gold mines in certain regions of the country.

Paramilitares o “paracos”

Paramilitary groups such as the Urabeños and Rastrojos that emerged along the border with Colombia from the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC). Involved in contraband, drug trafficking, extortion and other crimes. This is also how the government defines criminal groups in general, distinguishing them from the colectivos.

ELN and FARC Dissidents

Colombian guerrilla groups operating in Venezuelan territory, primarily in border states. Involved in drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping and contraband.

“Megabandas”

Criminal groups involved in kidnapping, extortion, drug dealing, car theft and other crimes. They possess high-caliber weapons and operate throughout the country.

Armed Forces

The Venezuelan Armed Forces consist of the army, National Guard, navy, air force and National Militia. While they are not criminal groups, many members are involved in criminal activity.

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Importers “wildly inflate the value of goods brought into the country to grab American dollars at rock-bottom exchange rates. Sometimes, they fake the shipments altogether and import nothing at all,” according to an investigation by the New York Times.⁵

⁵ William Neuman and Patricia Torres, “Venezuela’s Economy Suffers as Import Schemes Siphon Billions,” the New York Times, May 5, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/06/world/americas/venezuelas-economy-suffers-as-import-schemes-siphon-billions.html>

Now, the exchange system is used to keep key sectors loyal. The privileged get access to US dollars, allowing them to make huge profits. The principal beneficiary today is the military, which controls the importation and distribution of food and medicine, and profits in criminal terms from this monopoly.

3. The devolution of state powers to irregular and illegal actors

Following the 2002 military coup that ousted Hugo Chávez from power for 48 hours, the president made key changes to the levers of power to ensure he could not be toppled in the same way again. One of the measures he adopted was to devolve state functions to irregular and even criminal elements. The security forces also lost the monopoly on carrying arms. Instead there has been a proliferation of weapons and munitions into criminal hands, either by design or through corruption. We have two articles in this investigative series dedicated to two examples of this: “The Devolution of State Power: The Colectivos,” and “The Devolution of State Power: The Pranes.”

The colectivos are irregular, usually armed groups that have control over many neighborhoods, principally in Caracas. They have historically enjoyed government blessing and therefore a degree of legitimacy, but are ultimately accountable to no one. They “police” their areas of influence and some even offer a parallel justice system. While they were initially funded by the Venezuela government, they have increasingly turned to criminal activities to finance themselves, principally the microtrafficking of drugs, as well as extortion. The government of President Nicolás Maduro has used the colectivos to exert social control in their areas of influence and to break up opposition protests.



The Colectivos also perform police surveillance

The pranes are the criminal bosses within Venezuela’s prison system. Under Prison Minister Iris Varela, the government has largely delivered control of the prison system to the pranes, with the understanding that they keep violence to a minimum and prevent disorder within the penitentiary system. The system of

pranes has become so powerful and successful, that their criminal structures now operate beyond the prison gates, often in tandem with the so called “megabandas,” criminal structures than now exert control over much of the Venezuelan underworld.

4. Exponential growth of Venezuelan organized crime

Venezuela does not have a long tradition of organized crime. Indeed, until very recently it was the Colombian mafias who controlled much of the drug trafficking, extortion and kidnapping, and these were largely confined to the border states.

Today crime is rampant, and Venezuela is likely the kidnap capital of Latin America, although there is no hard data to support this claim.

Right from the outset, the Bolivarian regime adopted a strange attitude to crime. In a now infamous speech Chávez made shortly after becoming president, he condoned those who stole to feed their families, in comments widely interpreted as encouraging crime.

“The truth is that yes, if I were that young man ... and I saw my daughter at the point of dying of hunger I think I would go out at midnight to do something to stop her from going to her grave -- don’t you think?” he said in a public address.⁶

“The rich are bad and the poor are exploited, the poor are delinquents or violent because they’re poor and exploited,” is how Roberto Briceño-Leon, who heads the Venezuelan Violence Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia – OVV), described the regime’s ideological justification for tolerating criminality.



Photo given to the press by José Vicente Rangel Avalos in January 2014

There have been a series of government policies that have directly benefited organized crime. One began in 2013, when the government began implementing what became known as its “peace zone” policy. Run by José Vicente Rangel Avalos, now the mayor of Sucre municipality in Caracas, the policy was to engage in social investment in areas of high criminality and negotiate with local communities to reduce crime.

⁶ Charlie Charleston, “chavez manda a robar,” Published August 2 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYyyMtArMUM>

What really ended up happening was Rangel Avalos sitting down with the leaders of megabandas.

Part of the negotiations between the megabandas and the government was a verbal agreement not to allow state security forces into the designated zones without prior agreement, according to reports.⁷ Rangel Avalos denied this was the case, but observers and the media reported that the government effectively handed the areas over to the control of the gangs. They became the de facto law, and thus expanded in confidence, strength and territorial control.⁸ The absence of the security forces was the most fundamental factor in the growth of the gangs. Much like their colleagues in the prisons, the megabandas were able to create a state within a state.

“They abandoned people when they said to the municipal police, the state police, the city police that they couldn’t patrol these [peace zones] to avoid misunderstandings ... and so the criminals said, ‘Hey brother, this is my opportunity to convert this area into our territory, to bring kidnapping victims, to charge ransoms, to batter the people who live here,’” Fermín Mármol, a lawyer and former police chief, told InSight Crime.

The peace zone policy, never officially recognized by the government, has been abandoned, but the zones in which it was practiced remain some of the areas with the highest rates of criminality.

Investigations by InSight Crime point to between 12 and 16 megabandas, some with over 300 members, currently operating in Venezuela, mainly in the states of Miranda, Guárico, Carabobo, Aragua, Zulia, Bolívar, Táchira and in the capital Caracas.

Linked to growth of criminal gangs has been the increase in illegal economies. The biggest has long been the smuggling of subsidized fuel, the cheapest in the world to buy, into Brazil and Colombia. This is now largely in the hands of the National Guard, working with Colombian groups. But a far more widespread series of black markets was created via the system of government subsidies on foodstuffs and medicines. This black market has fed the growth of criminal actors, who profit from their trading or smuggling. Nowadays, almost every Venezuelan does business with black markets, and many state actors, as well as criminal actors, profit from it, once again blurring the lines between the state and criminals, undermining the legitimacy of the government.⁹

7 Ronna Risquez, “10 claves para entender las Zonas de Paz,” RunRun.Es, July 15, 2015. <http://runrun.es/nacional/venezuela-2/212961/10-claves-para-entender-las-zonas-de-paz.html>

8 El Nacional, Delincuentes controlan “zonas de paz” en Barlovento,” January 19, 2014. http://www.el-nacional.com/noticias/sucesos/delincuentes-controlan-zonas-paz-barlovento_91388 and Gustavo Rodriguez, “Bandas delictivas se robustecieron en los territorios de paz,” Efecto Cocuyo, May 16, 2015. <http://efecto-cocuyo.com/efecto-cocuyo/bandas-delictivas-se-robustecieron-en-los-territorios-de-paz>

9 Tristan Clavel, “In Food-Starved Venezuela, Cartel of the Flour?” InSight Crime, September 1, 2016, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/venezuela-s-cartel-of-the-flour>

Peace Zones in Venezuela



5. High levels of violence by state and non-state actors

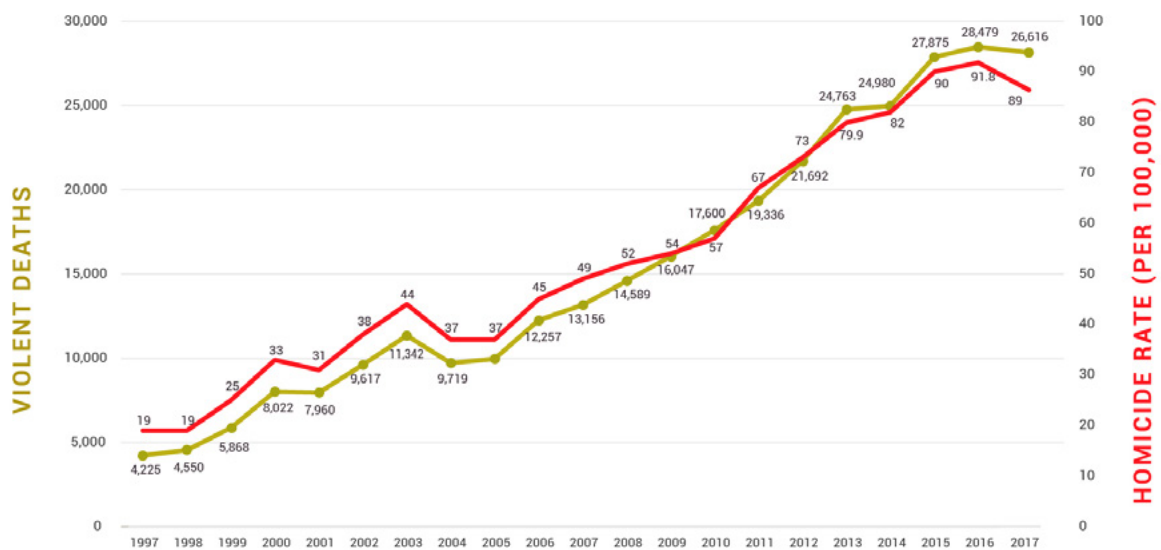
While there are no official homicide statistics, the most realistic data on murders is provided by Venezuela's Violence Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia – OVV). It placed Venezuela at 89 homicides per 100,000 of population during 2017, making the nation the most dangerous in Latin America, in a region with the highest homicides rates in the world. Caracas ranks as one of the deadliest cities on the planet, with a murder rate of 130 per 100,000.

Of the 26,616 homicides registered by the OVV in 2017, 5,535 occurred at the hands of the security forces, a very high proportion, amid widespread accusations of extrajudicial killings, often in the context of the Operations to Liberate the People (Operativos de Liberación del Pueblo – OLPs). These are anti-crime offensives, launched by President Nicolás Maduro, aimed at bringing down rampant crime rates. They have been marked by high numbers of killings and accusations that there is a “shoot first, ask questions later” mentality. Another factor in the high level of state killings has been the heavy handed response to opposition protests. The United Nations has already questioned the high level of security force killings.¹⁰

¹⁰ Reuters, “U.N. seeks inquiry into killings in Venezuela, says poll not credible,” March 7, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-election-rights/u-n-seeks-inquiry-into-killings-in-venezuela-says-poll-not-credible-idUSKCN1GJ17C>

These levels of homicides can be laid firmly at the door of the government. When Chávez took power in 1999, homicide rates were at around 25 per 100,000, with just under 6,000 violent deaths at the end of 1999, according to the OVV. From 1999, homicides began to go up and have risen steadily year on year.

Homicides in Venezuela



Method: The figures are derived by combining official homicide figures (mainly from the investigative police, CICPC) as well as information gathered by six regional observatories. They include official homicide figures, violent deaths under investigation, and those victims classified as "resisting authority." The OVV believes that a death that is the result of the state's use of force should be included as it reflects the level of violence that exists in Venezuela. The government of Venezuela does not publish regular homicide statistics and the figures above are an approximation.

Source: The Venezuelan Observatory of Violence (OVV)

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6. The Exportation of Criminality

For decades Colombia exported conflict and criminality to Venezuela, as that country's civil conflict spilled over the frontier. Colombian drug trafficking organizations and warring factions set up shop, turning Venezuela into a logistics base, safe haven and one of the principal transit nations for Colombian cocaine. However, with the rising levels of criminality and the large-scale contraband to neighboring countries, including many small and vulnerable Caribbean islands, Venezuela is becoming a net exporter of criminality.

Much of this can be laid at the door of sheer desperation. Hungry and penniless Venezuelans, many with little education or marketable skills, have been forced out of the country in their search for survival. They are easy prey for organized crime, as victims and recruits.

The Red Cross estimated that at least one million Venezuelans fled their nation into Colombia over the last 12 months, and that an estimated 37,000 people were crossing the border every day.¹¹

Many of these dispossessed are being recruited by organized crime. The biggest recruiters have been the Colombian mafia and rebel groups, but InSight Crime doing field research in Colombia has found Venezuelan women working in the sex trade across Colombia, including as far away as Nariño on the border with Ecuador. The chapter “Colombia and Venezuela: Criminal Siamese Twins” provides further information on the presence of these rebel groups on the border between the two countries.

In the article on the cocaine pipeline from Venezuela through the Caribbean, “Dominican Republic and Venezuela: Cocaine Across the Caribbean,” we track the growing involvement of Venezuelans in a wide variety of criminal activities.

7. Widespread international accusations of criminal behavior

Another indicator of a mafia state is when enough international actors question a state’s legitimacy, not just on its democratic credentials, but for criminal activity.

Not surprisingly, the United States has taken the lead in condemning the Venezuelan government. In one of the most recent declarations, Nikki Haley, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, said that ordinary Venezuelans were “the unwilling victims of a criminal narco-state.”¹²

Colombia’s president, Juan Manuel Santos has accused the Maduro administration of “using criminal gangs to be able to exercise better control over society, over the people, a macabre association of criminal gangs with security forces to control the population.”¹³

The United Nations has received reports of “hundreds of extrajudicial killings in recent years, both during protests and security operations,” the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein stated.¹⁴

11 AFP, “One million fled economic crisis-hit Venezuela for Colombia in past year,” The Guardian, May 9, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/09/one-million-refugees-entered-colombia-after-economic-crisis-hit-venezuela>

12 AP, “EEUU pide renuncia del presidente venezolano Nicolás Maduro,” May 9, 2018. Available at: <https://apnews.com/ff8bac3a4fc14f9abee58baf1c5b202a>

13 El Nuevo Herald, “Santos acusa a Gobierno venezolano de usar criminales para controlar sociedad,” April 16, 2018. Available at: <http://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/mundo/america-latina/colombia-es/article208982469.html>

14 Reuters, “U.N. seeks inquiry into killings in Venezuela, says poll not credible,” March 7, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-election-rights/u-n-seeks-inquiry-into-killings-in-venezuela-says-poll-not-credible-idUSKCN1GJ17C>

Panama placed 54 Venezuelan government figures, including President Maduro, on a list of persons at “high risk” of engaging in money laundering or financing terrorism.¹⁵

The European Union placed sanctions on seven senior government officials, including Interior Minister Nestor Reverol, Supreme Court president Maikel Moreno, intelligence chief Gustavo Gonzalez Lopez and the number two of the ruling socialist party, Diosdado Cabello. They are now subject to asset freeze and travel bans.¹⁶

Even Switzerland, not known for its aggressive foreign policy, announced sanctions against Venezuela, stating it was “seriously concerned by the repeated violations of individual freedoms in Venezuela, where the principle of separation of powers is severely undermined and the process in view of the forthcoming elections suffers from a serious lack of legitimacy.”¹⁷

Venezuelans go the polls this weekend, to choose their next president. Nobody is expecting free and fair elections, and the favorite to win is the sitting president, Nicolás Maduro. If he wins, the mafia tendencies of the Venezuelan state are likely to further solidify, and this Andean nation will become one of Latin America’s regional crime hubs, with grave consequences for her neighbors and the region as a whole.

15 EFE, “Panamá incluye a Maduro en lista de ‘alto riesgo’ por lavado de dinero,” El Tiempo, March 18, 2018. <http://www.eltiempo.com/mundo/latinoamerica/panama-incluye-al-presidente-nicolas-maduro-en-una-lista-de-alto-riesgo-por-lavado-de-dinero-199472>

16 AFP, “EU agrees to blacklist seven top Venezuelan officials,” January 18, 2018. <http://www.newindian-express.com/world/2018/jan/18/eu-agrees-to-blacklist-seven-top-venezuelan-officials-1757624.html>

17 Reuters, “Swiss impose sanctions on seven senior Venezuelan officials,” March 28, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-swiss-venezuela/swiss-impose-sanctions-on-seven-senior-venezuelan-officials-idUSKBN1H42KP>



Drug Trafficking Within the Venezuelan Regime: The Cartel of the Suns

Picture by Fernando Llano/AP Images

In Latin America, criminal entrepreneurs in the form of cartels, have traditionally run drug trafficking. In Venezuela, it is managed from within government, and if Nicolás Maduro wins another term in office, Venezuela's position in the global cocaine business will solidify.

Drug traffickers have long sought to penetrate the state, to facilitate business and if possible, put resources of the state at their disposal. But sometimes, corrupt state actors decide that turning a blind eye to drug trafficking in return for payoffs is not enough, and that direct participation is warranted. This is what has happened in Venezuela and we call the drug trafficking elements within the Venezuelan regime the “Cartel of the Suns.”

The term “Cartel of the Suns” (Cartel de los Soles) came from the golden stars that generals in the Venezuelan National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB) wear on their epaulettes. The term was first used in 1993 when two National Guard generals, anti-drugs chief Ramón Guillén Dávila and his successor Orlando Hernández Villegas, were investigated for drug trafficking. Today the name is used to describe all government officials involved in the drug trade. And there are many, stretching across all the organs of the state.

For the last three years, InSight Crime has been building files on senior officials, current or past, that have been involved in the trafficking of cocaine. We have 123 files. However, for legal reasons we will not publish our entire list. Instead here are some details of those we feel there is very strong evidence against.

Cartel of the Suns, Drug Trafficking Inside the Regime

High-ranking members of the army and government have been accused or sanctioned for crimes related to drug trafficking since 2002.



 <p>Frank Morgado</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Ex-Head of the Anti-Narcotics Command 2002-2005 	 <p>Pedro Luis Martin Olivares</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Head of Financial Intelligence of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) 2007-2013 	 <p>Jesus Itriago</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Head of investigative police (CICPC) 2010-2013
 <p>Jose David Cabello</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Superintendent of the National Integrated Service for the Administration of Customs Duties and Taxes (SENIAT) 2008 - present day ◆ Trade Minister 2015-2016 ◆ Industry Minister 2014-2016 	 <p>Rafael Ramirez</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Permanent UN Representative for Venezuela 2015-2017 ◆ PDVSA President 2004-2014 ◆ Petrol and Mining Minister 2002-2014 	 <p>Bladimir Flores</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Inspector General of the investigative police (CICPC) since 2016 ◆ Head of the Technical Police Division of old PTJ 2002
 <p>Efraín Antonio Campo Flores</p> <p>Arrested and charged by a Federal Court in Manhattan in 2017</p> <p>Nephew of Venezuela's First Lady</p>	 <p>Francisco Flores de Freitas</p> <p>Arrested and charged by a Federal Court in Manhattan in 2017</p> <p>Nephew of Venezuela's First Lady</p>	 <p>Walter Jacob Gavidia Flores</p> <p>President of the Pro-Patria Foundation 2000 2014-2015</p>
 <p>Cilia Flores</p> <p>First Lady of Venezuela</p>	 <p>Carlos Erick Malpica Flores</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ National Treasurer 2013-2016 ◆ Vice president and Internal Finance Director of PDVSA 2014-2016 ◆ Acting Director of Vice presidency 2012 	 <p>Vassily Kotosky Villaroel Ramírez</p> <p>Captured in Venezuela in 2015</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Captain of the National Bolivarian Guard (GNB) 2007-2013
 <p>Yazenky Antonio Lamas Rondón</p> <p>Captured in Bogotá (Colombia) in June 2016 and extradited to the United States in 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Ex-army official and pilot 	 <p>Rafael Antonio Villasana F.</p> <p>Captured in Venezuela in 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Captain of the National Bolivarian Guard (GNB) 2007 - 2013 	 <p>Carlos Luis Justiniano Nuñez</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Captured in the Dominican Republic and released in 2016, location unknown since then ◆ Commercial Pilot 2007-2016
 <p>Darry Francisco Fortoul Ochoa</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Lieutenant Colonel of the National Bolivarian Guard (GNB) ◆ Member of Top Management of the Venezuelan Foundation for the Prevention and Treatment of Drug Consumption 2008-2009 	 <p>Eliécer García Torrealba</p> <p>Detained in Venezuela in 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Head of Interpol in Lara State 2016 	 <p>Benny Palmeri-Bacchi</p> <p>Detained in 2014 and sentenced in 2015</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Judge and State Attorney

Instead of sidelining those accused of drug trafficking, Maduro has promoted them to the highest offices, perhaps calculating that they have the most to lose if his regime falls and will therefore fight the hardest to preserve it.

The most powerful figures in the Bolivarian regime now have the taint of drug trafficking to differing degrees.

Diosdado Cabello is touted as either the second-most powerful figure in the Venezuela regime, or the puppet master -- the power behind Maduro. Either way, with his influence over the appointment of officials to key posts, especially within the military, there is no way that he is not aware of the drug trafficking dynamics in the country.¹⁸ Sources in the US Justice Department spoke to InSight Crime about Cabello on condition of anonymity.

“Look, this guy is up to his neck in all sorts of illegal activity in Venezuela and we are building a case against him. But he knows how to protect himself and keep a distance from the dirty work,” said the source.

In May 2015, the Wall Street Journal revealed that Cabello was being investigated for drug trafficking and being a leader of the Cartel of the Suns.¹⁹ Evidence has been provided by, among others, Leasmy Salazar, who used to work as Cabello’s chief of security. He has testified that Cabello plays a leading role in drugs passing through Venezuela.²⁰



Salazar with Cabello and former President Chávez

Cabello immediately sued the Wall Street Journal for defamation, but a US court in April this year rejected the case. Also named in the article was his brother David Cabello.

On paper, the second-most important man in government is Vice President Tareck El Aissami. He has also been accused of illegal activity, including drug trafficking.²¹ Before

becoming vice president, he was governor of the state of Aragua, and InSight Crime

18 InSight Crime, “Top Venezuela Govt Official Accused of Drug Trafficking,” January 27, 2015. <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/top-venezuela-govt-official-accused-of-drug-trafficking/>

19 José de Córdoba and Juan Forero, “Venezuelan Officials Suspected of Turning Country into Global Cocaine Hub,” Wall Street Journal, May 18, 2015. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuelan-officials-suspected-of-turning-country-into-global-cocaine-hub-1431977784>

20 Emili J. Blasco, “El jefe de seguridad del número dos chavista deserta a EE.UU. y le acusa de narcotráfico,” ABC, August 18, 2015. <http://www.abc.es/internacional/20150127/abci-venezuela-cabello-eeuu-201501262129.html>

21 InSight Crime, “New Venezuela VP Is Latest Top Official Linked to Drug Trade,” January 10, 2017. <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/new-venezuela-vp-latest-top-official-linked-drug-trade/>

was collecting testimony on his links to organized crime in this strategic province on the Caribbean coast.

Once of the most important positions in terms of internal security is the head of the National Guard. That position was held by Major General Néstor Reverol -- now Interior Minister -- who has been indicted in the United States for drug trafficking. His indictment states that Reverol warned drug traffickers of operations against them, blocked investigations, released arrested narcos and ensured that seized drugs were returned to traffickers.²²

Cilia Flores, the wife of President Maduro and therefore first lady, has also been implicated in drug trafficking by association. Not only have her nephews been convicted in the United States of cocaine trafficking,²³ but her son, Walter Jacobo Gavidia, a Caracas Metropolitan Area judge, is also under investigation.²⁴ She has also been linked to the case of Captain Yazenky Antonio Lamas Rondón, a Venezuelan pilot extradited from Colombia to the United States to face drug charges.²⁵ He has been accused of more than a hundred narco flights in the past decade from the Venezuelan state of Apure to the Caribbean.²⁶

The Development of the Cartel of the Suns

The drug trafficking structures in the Venezuelan state are not a cartel, they are a series of often competing networks buried deep within the Chavista regime, with ties going back almost two decades.

Venezuela was always going to play a role in the drug trade, positioned as it is alongside the world's principal producer of cocaine, Colombia. However initially it was Colombian narcos who ran the business within Venezuela, paying off military officials along the border to look the other way as cocaine flowed across the frontier. Then inevitably, the corruption ran deeper. Instead of just looking the other way, Colombian drug traffickers asked elements of the GNB to protect and even move shipments. Their role protecting the frontiers, airports and ports made them the perfect partners for the traffickers.

22 InSight Crime, "US Charges Fmr Venezuela Anti-Drug Officials with Cocaine Trafficking," August 2, 2016. <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/us-charges-fmr-venezuela-anti-drugs-officials-with-cocaine-trafficking/>

23 InSight Crime, "Venezuela's 'Narco Nephews' Case Hints at Govt Complicity in Drug Trade," November 21, 2016. <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/venezuela-narco-nephews-conviction-suggests-govt-complicity-in-drug-trade/>

24 Antonio Maria Delgado, "Hijo de primera dama de Venezuela también es investigado por narcotráfico," El Nuevo Herald, November 18, 2015. <https://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/mundo/america-latina/venezuela-es/article45402777.html>

25 Semana, "Yazenky Antonio Lamas: una extradición clave," July 1, 2017. <https://www.semana.com/confidenciales/articulo/extraditan-a-yazenky-antonio-lamas/530838>

26 El Tiempo, "Piloto del 'cartel de los Soles' habría buscado negocio con bacrim," June 13, 2016. <http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/justicia/cargos-a-los-que-se-enfrenta-piloto-del-cartel-de-los-soles/16619650>

But Colombia was not content with simply exporting cocaine to Venezuela. By the 1990s, it was also exporting its civil conflict, with the rebel armies of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN) taking up residence in Venezuela's border states. Both groups have long been involved in the drug trade and developed close links with Venezuelan officials, often with the blessing of President Hugo Chávez. Files seized from the camp of FARC commander Luis Edgar Devia Silva, alias "Raul Reyes," killed in an aerial bombardment in Ecuador in March 2008, revealed the names of several senior Venezuelan officials. Some of these have been linked to drug trafficking activity, including:

- Ramón Rodríguez Chacín, who was Minister of Justice and the Interior in 2008, met with FARC members many times and was known by them by the alias "El Cojo."

- Hugo Armando Carvajal Barrios, director of military intelligence, and Henry Rangel Silva²⁷, director of the intelligence police (DISIP), liaised with the rebel army. Both were later sanctioned for "for materially assisting the narcotics trafficking activities of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a narco-terrorist organization." ²⁸

- Freddy Bernal, a former mayor; Cliver Acalá Cordones, an Army General; and Ramon Madriz Moreno, a key intelligence officer, all met with FARC leaders and helped coordinate their security when on Venezuelan soil.²⁹ Bernal and his right-hand man Amílcar de Jesús Figueroa allegedly helped arrange urban warfare and explosives training for the Bolivarian Circles/Colectivos with the FARC.

The links between the Cartel of the Suns and the FARC were instrumental in the development of drug trafficking in Venezuela. While the FARC demobilized in 2017 after signing a peace agreement with the Colombian government, there are growing dissident elements still in Venezuela, deeply involved in the drug trade. (For more information on this read "Colombia and Venezuela: Criminal Siamese Twins.") It is believed that these elements are still working with members of the Cartel of the Suns.

A key moment in the strengthening of drug trafficking in Venezuela came with 2005 expulsion of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), after Chávez declared that it was "using the fight against drug trafficking as a mask to support drug trafficking, and to spy in Venezuela against the government." This, combined

²⁷ Farc Files. Email I.1653. March 13, 2006.

²⁸ US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Venezuelan Government Officials Supporting the FARC," September 12, 2008 <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1132.aspx>

²⁹ US State Department, "Treasury Designates Four Venezuelan Officials for Providing Arms and Security to the FARC," August 9, 2011. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1295.aspx>

with the suspension of the flyover agreement for drug flight monitoring,³⁰ meant that Venezuela suddenly became a black hole for US intelligence gathering in the counternarcotics fight. Organized crime was quick to take advantage of this, with drug trafficking organizations increasing their use of Venezuelan territory.

Also in 2005, the passing of a new drug law (Ley Orgánica Contra el Tráfico Ilícito y el Consumo de Sustancias) decreed that counternarcotics investigations and operations would no longer been the exclusive remit of the National Guard but would include all other branches of the armed forces -- the army, navy and air force. The Cartel of the Suns suddenly expanded from the National Guard to all arms of the military. Mildred Camero, Chávez's drug czar at the time, told InSight Crime that this was the moment that the military shifted from a facilitator in the drug trade to an active participant. Before the passing of the law, drug trafficking was largely limited to the National Guard, but once all branches of the military were given jurisdiction "a war broke loose," according to Camero. The army and the National Guard started to compete with each other for routes, and began dealing directly with the FARC rather than with Colombian civilian drug traffickers.

This, along with international pressure, led to the capture of several top-level Colombian drug traffickers in Venezuela during 2011 and 2012. These arrested marked yet deeper participation in the drug trade by the Cartel of the Suns. Among those arrested were Maximiliano Bonilla Orozco, alias "Valenciano," a leader in the criminal organization the "Oficina de Envigado," captured in November 2011; Héctor Germán Buitrago, alias "Martín Llanos," a paramilitary warlord who had long run drugs across Colombian's eastern plains into Venezuela, arrested in February 2012; Diego Pérez Henao, alias "Diego Rastrojo," military head of the Rastrojos crime group, captured in June 2012; and then Daniel Barrera Barrera, alias "El Loco," one of the most prolific Colombian cocaine smugglers, arrested in September 2012. These traffickers had been protected by high-level Venezuelan officials. After their captures, the Cartel of the Suns took over many of the routes the Colombians had been running, thus moving from protecting shipments, to buy and selling them, dealing directly with international buyers, foremost among them the Mexican cartels.³¹

Emblematic Cases of the Cartel

The first person to speak with inside knowledge of the penetration of drug trafficking into the Venezuela state was Walid Makled.

Makled was, in the late 1990s, one of Venezuela's most powerful drug traffickers. His power was based upon his strong links to senior members of the Venezuelan military,

30 See: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305747257_Revolution_and_Counter-Reform_The_Paradoxes_of_Drug_Policy_in_Bolivarian_Venezuela, <http://www.hri.org/news/usa/std/1999/99-05-28.std.html> and <http://archives.forusa.org/programs/panama/archives/38.htm>

31 This conclusion was reached after a series of interviews during 2012 and 2013 with national and international law enforcement officials in both Colombia and Venezuela.

and his criminal empire grew exponentially during the early years of the Chávez's government.³² He controlled the drug trafficking business in the state of Carabobo, which is home to Venezuela's main port, Puerto Cabello. According to the DEA, over 70 percent of the narcotics then sent from Colombia through Venezuela were shipped from Puerto Cabello.³³ Makled was connected to the former National Guard general and then governor of Carabobo, Luis Felipe Acosta Carles. General Alexis Maniero was head of the 7th Army Regional Command in the state of Sucre, expedited official credentials for Makled, who considered him a valuable ally, according former drug czar Mildred Camero.³⁴

In 2004, Makled momentarily lost four tons of cocaine at the hands of the local Valencia police. The drugs were returned to him by Jesus Itriago, the then chief of the anti-drug unit within the judicial police (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas – CICPC), after Makled paid him a million dollars, according to DEA documents seen by El Nuevo Herald.³⁵ An official investigation was later aborted in the Carabobo state legislature, when key politicians were also reportedly paid off by Makled to drop the probe. Itriago was later promoted to head of the CICPC's drug division.³⁶

In April 2006, Makled was linked to 5.5 tons of cocaine found in 128 suitcases on a plane that landed in southern Mexico, having departed from Maiquetía airport (now Simón Bolívar International Airport) outside Caracas. The captured pilot of the flight spoke of the National Guard supervising the loading and departure of the plane.³⁷

The links between Makled, the FARC and the Chávez government became clearer after Makled was captured in the Colombian border city of Cúcuta in August 2010. Makled was by this point probably the most powerful native drug trafficker in Venezuela -- he was added to the US "Kingpin List" in 2009.³⁸ His position as a broker between the FARC and corrupt elements of the Venezuelan armed forces, among others, meant that he probably knew more about the mechanics of corruption and drug trafficking in Venezuela than anyone else. In interviews with the media³⁹

32 InSight Crime, "Walid Makled Profile," Last updated October 17, 2016. <http://www.insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/walid-makled>

33 US State Department, "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report," March 2007. <https://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2007/vol1/html/80855.htm>

34 Mildred Camero, "Chavismo, Narcotráfico y militares," Editorial Libros Marcados 2014. p.32

35 Gerardo Reyes, "La DEA descubre nexos entre Venezuela y las FARC," El Nuevo Herald, December 11, 2009. <http://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/article2001432.html>

36 Mildred Camero, "Chavismo, Narcotráfico y militares," Editorial Libros Marcados 2014. p.32

37 Jeremy McDermott, "Makled's Window into Trafficking in Venezuela Closing," InSight Crime, April 19, 2011. <http://www.insightcrime.org/component/content/article?id=793:insight-walid-makled-a-look-in-to-drug-trafficking-in-venezuela>

38 US Treasury department, "Recent OFAC Actions," May 29, 2009, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/pages/20090529.aspx>

39 Aquí y Ahora, "Exclusiva con Walid Makled, el narcotraficante que quieren extraditar EU y Venezuela," March 31, 2011. <http://www.univision.com/shows/aqui-y-ahora/exclusiva-con-walid-makled-el-narcotraficante-que-quieren-extraditar-eu-y-venezuela>

after his arrest, Makled claimed “all my business associates are generals,” and that he had paid off as many as 40 Venezuelan generals as part of his drug trafficking activities.

Serving or former members of the military named by Makled included military general Henry Rangel Silva (who was subsequently made Defense Minister), former Military Intelligence Director Hugo Carvajal, National Guard General Dalal Burgos, and former captain Ramon Rodríguez Chacin, who at the time was the Minister of Interior and Justice. Makled stated that he used to pay Carvajal \$50,000 a week for his help and cooperation.⁴⁰ Silva, Carvajal and Rodríguez had already been sanctioned by the US Treasury Department for their involvement with the FARC and drug trafficking.

Makled said that up to six drug flights a day left the border state of Apure, taking cocaine to Honduras, from where it was shipped to Mexico and into the United States. He insisted there were drug laboratories in Apure and Maracaibo, and that they were “guarded by the government.” While Makled admitted he had not directly dealt with Chávez, he said he had spoken to “very close relatives of his” (believed to be his brother Adan), and also claimed to have financed one of Chávez’s presidential campaigns in exchange for concessions at Puerto Cabello.⁴¹

Today, Makled sits in a Venezuelan military jail, as do many of the regime’s dirty secrets.

In September 2013, France made one of its biggest cocaine busts ever, finding 1.3 tons of cocaine on board an Air France plane that landed in Paris, packed into 31 suitcases. The flight had left Caracas airport, which is closely controlled by the National Guard. The international scandal forced the Venezuelan government to act. Twenty-eight arrests were made, among them a lieutenant colonel and other National Guard members.⁴² With these arrests the investigations by the Venezuelan government halted and no attempts were made to follow lines of enquiry that led to more senior figures.

In November 2016, Efraín Antonio Campo Flores and Francisco Flores de Freitas -- the nephews of Maduro’s wife and First Lady, Cilia Flores -- were convicted by a court in New York for conspiring to traffic 800 kilograms of cocaine into the country.⁴³

40 Jeremy McDermott, “Makled’s Window into Trafficking in Venezuela Closing,” InSight Crime. April 19, 2011. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/insight-walid-makled-a-look-into-drug-trafficking-in-venezuela>

41 AFP, “Condenan a 14 años de cárcel a Walid Makled,” October 2 2015. <http://www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/condenan-14-anos-de-carcel-walid-makled/417516-3>

42 Miriam Wells, “How Venezuela’s Military Tried to Fly A Ton of Cocaine to France,” InSight Crime, October 21, 2013. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/details-revealed-about-venezuela-militarys-massive-drug-smuggle>

43 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “Venezuela’s ‘Narco Nephews’ Case Hints at Govt Complicity in Drug Trade,” InSight Crime, November 21 2016. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/venezuela-narco-nephews-conviction-suggests-govt-complicity-in-drug-trade>

The cousins planned to move the cocaine, provided by the FARC, out of the international airport in Caracas using their privileges as members of the Venezuelan elite, and their relationship with the military. They flew to Haiti in November 2015, where they planned to seal the drug deal, but were arrested by the DEA. The plane was piloted by Pablo Urbano Pérez, a military official, and Pedro Miguel Rodríguez, a lieutenant colonel in the Venezuelan Air Force.⁴⁴

Evidence that one of the nephews, Efrain Antonio Campo Flores, was planning to put some of the proceeds from the drug deal into his aunt's political campaign as head of the National Assembly, suggests that the first lady was not ignorant of her nephews' activities and where they were getting their money.⁴⁵

The Cartel Today


The Cartel of the Suns today is a disparate network of traffickers, including both state and non-state actors, but all operating with the blessing and protection of senior figures in the Venezuelan government. Without such political top cover, and paying off the correct people, drug smuggling operations are shut down.

As the country teeters on the brink of bankruptcy, kleptocracy and the systematic sacking of state coffers has diminished. There is simply no more money to steal from the government budget. However, the wheels of corruption need to be greased, especially within the military, which is the key strut propping up the government of Maduro and which will be the kingmaker during any regime change.

InSight Crime believes that drug trafficking is one of the main lubricants for corruption in Venezuela today, and that this troubled Andean nation is becoming one of the world's major cocaine trafficking hubs.

44 Venezuela Investigative Unit, "Venezuela Military Officials Piloted Drug Plane," InSight Crime, InSight Crime, November 20 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/venezuela-military-officials-pilot-ed-drug-plane>

45 US Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, Case 1:15-cr-00765-PAC Document 54-6. Post-Arrest Interview of Efrain Antonio CAMPO-Flores on 11-10-2015.



The Devolution of State Power: The 'Colectivos'

Picture by Carlos Ramírez

They are known by supporters as “knights of steel” on their motorcycles, and as the most ardent defenders of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution. Yet now they look more like criminal gangs with immense social control. Welcome to the world of the “colectivos.”

In 2002, President Hugo Chávez faced two attempts to unseat him from power: a military coup and a strike in the crucial oil sector. In the aftermath of these threats, he decided he needed parallel security structures that could act as a counterweight to the military and the ability to rapidly concentrate political shock troop against opposition demonstrators. His solution was the colectivos (collectives).

The term “colectivos” has its roots in the Venezuelan guerrilla groups of the 1960s. But it was appropriated by Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution. In 2001, Chávez set up a new generation of political groups, the “Bolivarian Circles,” to build up grass-roots political support.

These Bolivarian Circles proved their loyalty and willingness to use violence during the April 2002 coup attempt. Video footage of April 11 shows anti-government protestors being engaged by armed men, later identified as members of Bolivarian Circles, who opened fire from the Llaguno Bridge in central Caracas.⁴⁶ By the end of that day, 20 people lay dead and dozens more, both Chavistas and demonstrators, were wounded.⁴⁷

46 Venezuela Today, “Sucesos 11 Abril 2002: Asesinos de Puente Llaguno,” YouTube. Uploaded June 16 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFHt4N2Ychg&t=72s>

47 Nelson, Brian A. *The silence and the scorpion: the coup against Chávez and the making of modern Venezuela.* 2009, Nation Books.

The military generals refused orders from Chavez to mobilize against the anti-government protests. Chávez eventually agreed to resign on condition that he and his family would be exiled in Cuba.⁴⁸ Yet within 48 hours, Chávez was back in power, mostly thanks to General Raúl Baduel, then the Commander of the 42nd Paratrooper Infantry Brigade, who rallied key sectors of the military. This was the moment that Chávez radicalized his revolution and determined to hang onto power at all costs.

Only three people were jailed after the violent events of April 11. One was Iván Simonovis, then head of the Metropolitan Police in Caracas. He was sentenced to 30 years in jail.⁴⁹

InSight Crime interviewed him in his house, where he has been under house arrest since 2014. For him, the violence of the Bolivarian Circles and the impunity surrounding the killings they committed that day are the precedent for the power and violence of the colectivos now.

“They said that the people shooting from the bridge were using force in self-defense against the police. How can you justify saying that a person firing on police is engaged in the legitimate use of force?” said Simonovis.



Civilians armed under the Colectivo group

48 Rory Carroll, “Comandante – Inside Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela,” Canongate 2013, Pg 70-72

49 Daniel Pardo, “Qué significa la liberación de Iván Simonovis, el “preso político” más simbólico de Venezuela,” BBC Mundo, September 20 2014. http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2014/09/140920_ultnot_venezuela_simonovis_significado_liberacion_lav

The term *colectivo* began to replace that of the Bolivarian Circles in the government's public language after the coup. These pro-government enforcement groups in 2006 came under the umbrella of the government's "communal councils," through which they received state funding and resources, including weapons. They were granted legitimacy and real power in their areas of influence.

"The day jobs that many of these people [in the *colectivos*] have are actually as security for government officials. So that gives them direct access to government resources, but also to government weapons and the rest of it," said Alejandro Velasco, an associate professor at New York University and author of "Barrio Rising," a book on urban politics in Venezuela.⁵⁰

Inside the 23 de Enero Neighborhood

There is no place in Venezuela more emblematic of the Bolivarian Revolution and the *colectivos* than the 23 de Enero neighborhood of Caracas. Here is where many of the most infamous and powerful *colectivos* are based.



The Cuartel de La Montaña, in the 23 de Enero neighborhood, Caracas.

The Cuartel de La Montaña, Hugo Chávez's final resting place, a fort oddly reminiscent of a European castle, looks down on the sprawling 23 de Enero neighborhood -- a combination of improvised housing and shacks clustered around tall apartment blocks. The presidential palace, the Casa de Miraflores, is visible below.

Chavez's image, those of the *colectivos* and the Bolivarian Revolution adorn the walls of the neighborhood.

Yet in recent years, its residents have begun to question not just the Chavista regime,⁵¹ but its local face, the *colectivos*. While a handful are still unarmed and focused on their original cultural and community roots, most have become armed enforcers who pledge allegiance to the revolution, funded in part through criminal activity.

InSight Crime entered the area with a respected community leader, our ticket to a neighborhood suspicious of outsiders. Many of the young men we passed had small

⁵⁰ Interview with InSight Crime, Alejandro Velasco, January 25, 2017.

⁵¹ Hannah Drier, "Venezuela's poor rejected socialists, now fear economic pain," Associated Press, December 8, 2015, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-venezuelas-poor-rejected-socialists-now-fear-2015dec08-story.html> and CNN en Español, "Una visita al 23 de Enero, uno de los bastiones chavistas en los que ganó la oposición," December 8, 2015, <http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2015/12/08/una-visita-al-23-de-enero-uno-de-los-bastiones-chavistas-en-los-que-gano-la-oposicion/>

leather bags strapped across their chests. Our guide told us many colectivo members carry their pistols that way -- out of sight but easily accessible.

Every inch of the 23 de Enero is now controlled and monitored by the colectivos, residents told us. Colectivo roadblocks control and often tax the circulation of vehicles.

The colectivos have several streams of income, some legal, others definitely illegal. Of the legal streams, most come from the government, although some of colectivos have established businesses that turn a legal profit. The government income comes less and less via cash payments, but rather through concessions, like the distribution of food, which is now a very lucrative business.

“They [the colectivos] control the food [distribution] and have the whole neighborhood terrified. That’s the word: terrified,” said Claudia, a local resident, keeping her voice low.⁵²

Another resident, Rosa, was equally condemnatory.

“I don’t know where they get the food from, if they buy it, but then they sell it on the black market,” she said. “They talk about equality and the revolution and I don’t know what else, but then they sell food parcels at inflated prices.”



Lisandro Pérez, alias “Mao,” of the Tupamaros

One of the leaders of the historic Tupamaros colectivo, Lisandro Pérez, better known by his alias “Mao,” compared food trafficking to drug trafficking in terms of earnings.

“A lot of those who sold drugs are now trafficking food. It’s less risky and more profitable,” he told InSight Crime.

The same goes for sales of medicine, which is now always in short supply and can command extortionate prices from the desperate.

As far as illegal earnings are concerned, InSight Crime found evidence of involvement in the sale and distribution of drugs, extortion and illegal gambling.

“More [common] than anything here is the sale of drugs and they go around with weapons at whatever time they like,” said Rosa, serving a coffee inside her house.

⁵² Names of interviewees have been changed to protect them from repercussions.

“The sale of drugs here is as common as the sale of Coca-Cola. The colectivos control the drug distribution -- those that have the power to do so,” admitted a colectivo leader in 23 de Enero who wanted himself identified only as “Galeano Marcos.”

Interviews with residents and colectivo leaders also revealed that the colectivos are running clandestine casinos in the 23 de Enero.

“The colectivos manage [the casinos]. And they escort the people who come to bet, and afterwards they escort them out,” said local resident Claudia.

Mao confirmed the existence of the casinos as the latest criminal enterprise to emerge in the 23 de Enero. He also admitted they were managed by the colectivos, although he insisted he is against them on an ethical level.

“I can’t deny people the right to enjoy themselves, but I can’t say I approve of the casinos because they generate a commercial culture, the idea that being a man is about having more to assert dominance,” he said.

Mao is scornful of some of the newer colectivos. His Tupamaros predate Chávez, as they were formed in 1979. However, their power grew exponentially under Chávez.

“The term colectivo is being used all over the place ... but I think that there are colectivos that unfortunately have to disappear,” Mao stated.

Marcos Galeano went even further.

“Each colectivo has a boss and commander, and they all want to be colectivos because they want weapons. Everyone here wants to have more weapons than the others. Each leader is in charge of his territory and does whatever he likes there. Here they say they’re democrats, but you do what the boss tells you,” he said.

La Piedrita

The messianic mythology of one of the most notorious colectivos of the 23 de Enero is perfectly illustrated in this picture. Jesus, wearing his crown of thorns wielding a Kalashnikov, alongside the Virgin, cradling the baby Jesus and another AK-47.

The colectivo La Piedrita was born before Chavismo. Its founders Valentín Santana and Carlos Ramírez created the group in September 1985 in an effort to reverse the violence dominating parts of the 23 de Enero neighborhood. A number of Santana’s siblings and extended family members belong to the colectivo, which is defined by strong Marxist-Leninist principles.⁵³

⁵³ InSight Crime Interview, January 25 2017, with Prof. Alejandro Velasco. Op. cit.



This is the public face of La Piedrita (Little Stone).

La Piedrita runs a local radio station, and provided facilities for the Cuban doctors, now long gone, who once came to serve the community. The colectivo also owns a small urban farm that breeds chickens and grows vegetables, which are sold locally prices. Plans for a bakery are in the works.

But the colectivo is better known for its violent acts and reputation, and has come to represent the aggression associated with pro-government groups.



Valentín Santana, suspected murderer and leader of the La Piedrita colectivo

Members of La Piedrita have attacked opposition protestors and media with tear gas, accusing them of blocking the revolutionary process.⁵⁴ Santana, who has military experience that he has used to instill a sense of discipline and a strong vertical structure within the group, has stated that La Piedrita is willing to defend the Bolivarian Revolution “at all costs.”⁵⁵

54 Reporters Without Borders, “New Year’s Day attack on TV station by radical pro-Chávez group,” January 2, 2009. <https://rsf.org/en/news/new-years-day-attack-tv-station-radical-pro-chavez-group>

55 Noticias24, “La Piedrita: dispuestos a morir por Chávez y la revolución bolivariana,” November 22, 2008. <http://www.noticias24.com/actualidad/noticia/20386/la-piedrita-dispuestos-a-morir-por-chavez-y-la-revolucion-bolivariana/>

To date, Santana has three arrest warrants in his name, two of them for homicide. Despite this, he frequently appears in public and has been interviewed by the international media. In February this year, Santana posted a video on his Twitter feed, showing himself embracing top government officials, including General Fabio Zavarse Pabón, the commander of all Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana - GNB) and army troops in the Capital District who was recently sanctioned by the United States⁵⁶ for the repression of demonstrations.⁵⁷

Assumption of State Powers

The power of the colectivos is not restricted to running rackets in their areas of influence. Since the Metropolitan Police was dismantled by Chávez in 2011, the regime abdicated security in the 23 de Enero, as well as some other parts of the capital, to the colectivos. State security forces are obliged to coordinate with them to enter these areas. Manuel Mir, a community leader in the 23 de Enero, told InSight Crime that the colectivos have turned the neighborhood into a “state within a state.”

Some of the colectivos work alongside the security forces, often doing their dirty work for them.



Members of Colectivo Alexis Vive

⁵⁶ El Espectador, “EE.UU. Sanciona a cuatro funcionarios venezolanos”, January 5, 2018. <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/el-mundo/eeuu-sanciona-cuatro-funcionarios-venezolanos-articulo-731861>

⁵⁷ InSight Crime, “Video Shows Notorious ‘Colectivo’ Leader Greeted by Venezuela Officials,” February 28, 2018. <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/suspected-murderer-colectivo-leader-greeted-venezuela-officials/>

Colectivos like “Tres Raíces” and “Frente 5 de Marzo” are well known for their close links to elements of the security forces.

Tres Raíces is one of the better armed colectivos, and several of its members are serving in either the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional - Sebin), Libertador’s Municipal Police Force (Policía del Municipio Libertador - PoliCaracas), the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar - DGCIM) or the Special Action Force of the Bolivarian National Police (Fuerza de Acciones Especiales - FAES).⁵⁸

Even though members of Tres Raíces have been linked to kidnappings and murders, high-level contacts in the security forces have meant they have not been prosecuted for these crimes.⁵⁹

The Frente 5 de Marzo colectivo was founded by a former policeman, José Miguel Odremán, who was killed in a 2014 security force operation. His colectivo was under investigation for seven murders, as well as robbery and extortion.⁶⁰ It also set up a bodyguard service, the Venezuelan Bolivarian Association of Bodyguards (Asociación Bolivariana de Escoltas de Venezuela), essentially acting as hired guns.

There have also been accusations that colectivos have been involved in the controversial Operations to Liberate the People (Operativo de Liberación del Pueblo – OLP). These are anti-crime offensives launched by President Nicolás Maduro to try to bring down rampant crime rates. They have been marked by high numbers of killings and accusations that there is a “shoot first, ask questions later” mentality.

The OLPs have failed in their primary objective of reducing crime, but have fed record murder rates, amid accusations that government forces have engaged in extrajudicial executions. Survivors and families of their victims say that participants in the OLPs shoot to kill.⁶¹

“The OLPs have killed innocent people, because they break into houses and kill people without asking who they are,” said local resident Claudia.

Witnesses say the involvement of colectivos in the OLPs vary. Often they work with the state security forces in 23 de Enero, where they have much more local knowledge.

58 Lorena Meléndez, “Colectivo Tres Raíces: “Ha muerto el león más feroz del 23 de Enero,” Runrunes, January 18, 2018. <http://runrun.es/rr-es-plus/336870/colectivo-tres-raices-ha-muerto-el-leon-mas-feroz-del-23-de-enero.html>

59 Vanessa Moreno Losada, “Colectivo Tres Raíces cierra acceso al 23 de Enero y pide destitución de jefe policial,” Efecto Cocuyo, June 6, 2016. <http://efectococuyo.com/principales/colectivo-tres-raices-cierra-acceso-al-23-de-enero-y-pide-destitucion-de-jefe-policial/>

60 Vanessa Moreno, “Según el Cicpc, este es el prontuario de José Odreman y el Frente 5 de Marzo,” Contrapunto, October 12, 2014. <http://contrapunto.com/noticia/segun-el-cicpc-este-es-el-prontuario-de-jose-odreman-y-el-frente-5-de-marzo/>

61 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “Informe desenmascara el “terror de Estado” de las fuerzas de seguridad de Venezuela,” InSight Crime, October 10, 2017. <https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/noticias-del-dia/informe-desenmascara-terror-estado-fuerzas-seguridad-venezuela/>

“The OLPs come with all the different security bodies and the colectivos always hood themselves and mix in with them,” said Claudia.

Another 23 de Enero resident told InSight Crime that the involvement of the pro-government groups is even more sinister.

“It’s the colectivos that do the executions,” she said.

The colectivos still perform their traditional role as political shock troops and were deployed against the wave of protests that took place in 2017, using tear gas canisters and even firing pistols to break up opposition protests.⁶²

Luis Cedeño, who runs the non-governmental organization Paz Activa, which studies criminality in Venezuela, now sees the colectivos as a pool of mercenary labor for the government, and increasingly for organized crime.

“They are paid to generate violence ... paid by specific interests that seek to create chaos,” he said in a video produced by his organization.⁶³

Research by InSight Crime points to the presence of 46 colectivos in the 23 de Enero neighborhood, ranging from “traditional” to “emerging” models, which we have referred to in our map as “hybrids.” Some of these groups are small with no known identity, but we have mapped the ones we think are the most significant.

Many of the colectivos members we spoke to still refer to Chávez with reverence. For the most part, they only have scorn for Maduro.

“The death of Comandante Chávez brought us to a crossroads. It’s not the same, the leadership of Chávez compared to those who have taken over,” said colectivo leader Marcos.

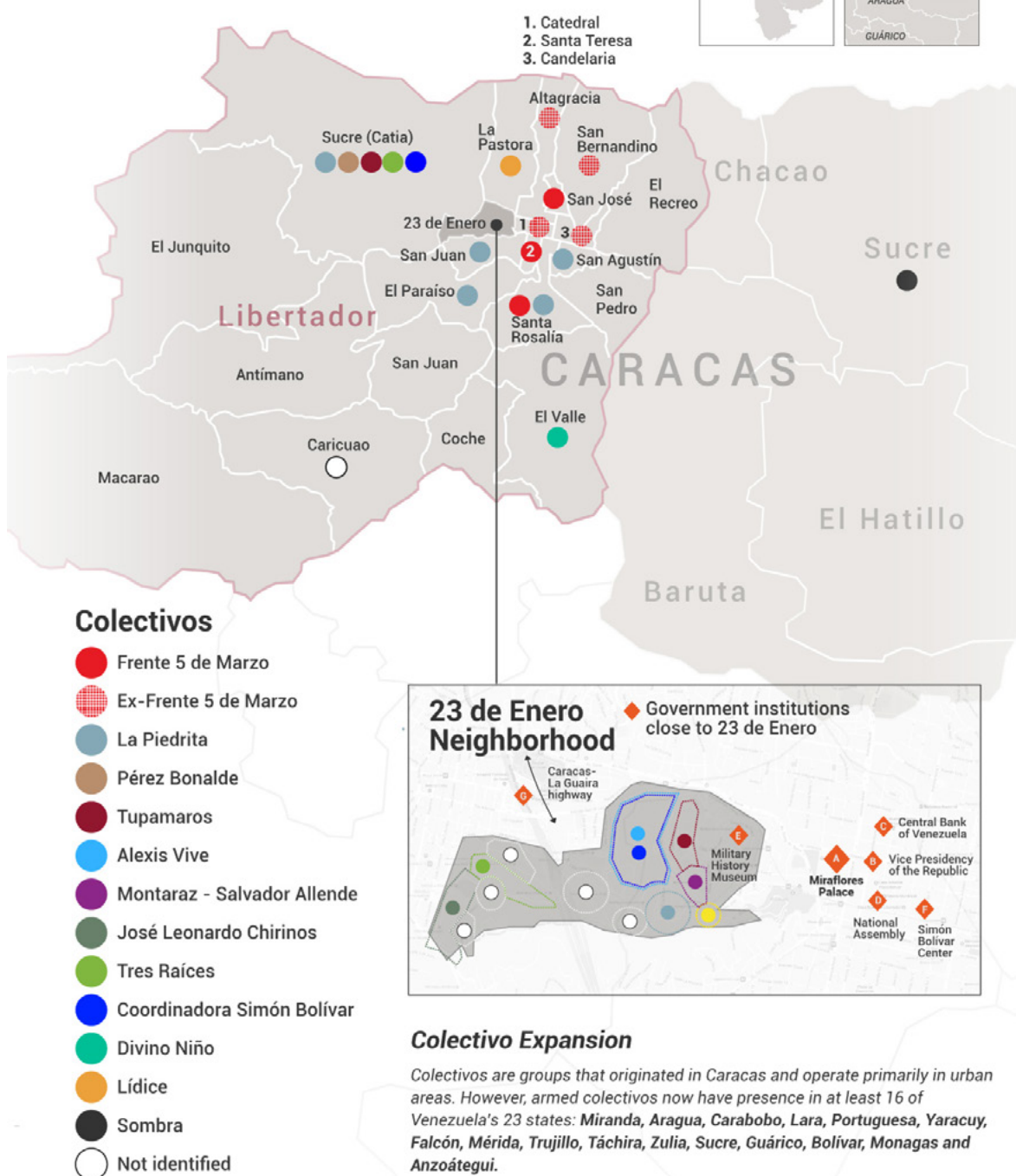
It is clear that government control of the colectivos has weakened, if not evaporated in many cases. This is in part due to the current political chaos and economic meltdown, which the colectivos do not see as a weakness of the Bolivarian Revolution. Rather, they attribute the situation to Maduro’s betrayal of revolutionary principles. The other reason is that the government is broke and has cut back funding on all fronts, including funding destined for the colectivos. This has forced the colectivos to become more financially self-sufficient, which in many cases has meant engaging in criminal activity.

There is also a connection between some of the colectivos and Colombian rebel groups, a relationship initially fostered by Chávez but now out of Maduro’s hands.

62 Patricia Torres and Nicholas Casey, “Armed Civilian Bands in Venezuela Prop Up Unpopular President,” New York Times, April 22, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/22/world/americas/armed-civilian-bands-in-venezuela-prop-up-unpopular-president.html>

63 Paz Activa, “Colectivos... Los mercenarios de la Revolución Bolivariana,” May 26, 2017. <http://observatoriodot.org.ve/cms/index.php/home/sala-de-prensa/notas-de-prensa/item/217-colectivos-los-mercenarios-de-la-revolucion-bolivariana>

Colectivos in Caracas



Source: *InSight Crime* - May 2018

insightcrime.org

Some colectivos have received training at the hands of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC).⁶⁴ On a visit to 23 de Enero we found a bust of the legendary FARC founder and leader, Pedro Antonio Marín, alias “Manuel Marulanda”.

⁶⁴ Infobae, “Los 5 colectivos chavistas más temidos por la población civil de Venezuela,” April 29, 2017. <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2017/04/29/los-5-colectivos-chavistas-mas-temidos-por-la-poblacion-civil-de-venezuela/>


Evidence from FARC dissident and security force sources in Colombia suggests that relationships are being developed with Venezuelan groups like the colectivos, more in the interests of illegal business than ideological affinity.



Statue of "Tirofijo" in 23 de Enero

If the opposition wins the upcoming presidential election and the National Assembly is reinstated as Venezuela's primary legislative body, it is likely that the colectivos will find themselves under enormous pressure to disarm and disband.

Therefore, the survival of the colectivos depends on the survival of the regime. Should the ruling party fall, what is left of the support and tolerance of the colectivos will also crumble, giving them one of two choices: disband, or transform into purely criminal entities.



The Devolution of State Power: The 'Pranes'

Picture by Carlos Ramírez

** This report was initially published in September 2017, as part of a prison investigation by InSight Crime*

In May 2011, a 26-year-old prison gang leader held 4,000 members of the Venezuelan security forces, backed by tanks and helicopters, at bay for weeks. Humiliated nationally and internationally, it pushed President Hugo Chávez into a different and disastrous approach to the prison system.

Home to more than 4,700 prisoners in 2011, Rodeo was one of Venezuela's biggest jails. The disturbances in May that year began as a fight between rival gangs in the jail. There was a coup executed by the gang leaders or "pranes" of Rodeo II against a pran in the neighboring building of Rodeo I. A change of "carro," or "car," as the criminal governance structure in the prisons is called. But this was not some punch up with prison shanks and clubs. This was a battle with fully and semiautomatic weapons.

The prison authorities called for backup. Three thousand members of the Bolivarian National Guard, 400 paratroopers and a contingent of military police were deployed to the baking heat of Miranda state, just 40 kilometers east of Caracas. On June 17, the soldiers attacked. A battle ensued. Four prisoners were killed and several soldiers were wounded. The military managed to take control of Rodeo I, the installation closest to the main road. The prison building by this stage had come to resemble something out of downtown Aleppo.



A television image of Rodeo prison during the 2011 riots

more than 1,200 prisoners, proved a far tougher target. Here the inmates were better organized under their pran, a man named Yorvis Valentín López Cortez, alias “Oriente,” aged just 26. The authorities were wary of an all-out assault. By then the media had descended and cameras covered far too many angles of the battleground.

Yorvis Valentín López Corte, alias “Oriente”

On June 21, negotiations began with the prisoners in Rodeo II. Oriente spoke for the prisoners, while the government sent an evangelical pastor and former second hand car salesman, José Argenis Sánchez, accompanied by Ronald Gregorio García Tesara, alias “Satan,” a member of “La Piedrita,” one the state-sponsored gangs that acted as political shock troops for the Chavista regime. It was assumed that this “good cop, bad cop” combo would bring the prisoners to their senses. Electricity and water had been cut off to the prison. The heat was unbearable. After two days of talks, all the authorities managed to extract from the prisoners were four swollen and rotting corpses. It was not clear exactly what the prisoners wanted, but there was no mistaking their tone.

Inside Rodeo I, authorities found 20 semiautomatic pistols, seven assault rifles, five shotguns, eight grenades, 5,000 rounds, 45 kilograms of cocaine and 12 kilograms of marijuana.

Venezuela’s authorities display weapons confiscated after Rodeo prison riot in 2011

Rodeo II, the block behind Rodeo I that was home to



Venezuela's authorities display weapons confiscated after Rodeo prison riot in 2011



Yorvis Valentín López Cortez
alias "Oriente"

"They are tricking us with evangelical leaders we do not know. We are not going to speak to people who do not inspire trust. This is a war and we are going to fight," Oriente shouted.⁶⁵

It took the government 27 days to re-establish control of Rodeo. Official figures put the death toll at 23, with 70 wounded. The reality was likely far higher. The prison was only taken after Oriente escaped, somehow managing to slip through the ring of steel around the prison. The rumors were that the then

interior and justice minister and now Vice President Tareck El Aissami, made a deal to let Oriente leave in exchange for an end to the standoff. There were allegations that the National Guard pulled backed on orders from on high.⁶⁶ Oriente was later recaptured, only to escape from another prison in December 2016.⁶⁷

Power to the Prisoners

Embarrassed by the chaos and media frenzy, Chávez announced a full investigation and overhaul of the prison system. Two prison officials, among them the governor of Rodeo II, were arrested, along with a National Guard captain responsible for prison security. It was discovered that the arsenal of weapons in the hands of inmates were smuggled through after paying "tolls" to officials. As with everything that entered the prison, a system of taxes had been levied: \$2,300 for an assault rifle, \$70 for a pistol and \$45 for a grenade.⁶⁸

Vice President Elías Jaua pledged to take action against the pran system.

"We are going to get to the bottom of this. The revolution will not be blackmailed by these mafias. We are going to recover the full presence of the government in the prisons of the country," he insisted.⁶⁹

Except the government actually did the complete opposite.

65 Informe 21, "El pran "Oriente" dijo que las autoridades amenazan a su familia y ministro Reverol lo desmiente," 30 June, 2011. <https://informe21.com/actualidad/pran-oriente-dijo-las-autoridades-amenazan-su-familia-ministro-reverol-desmiente>

66 Ultimas Noticias, "Manu Pelua Ordeno Retirar la GN del Rodeo II," 15 July, 2011, <https://www.ultimas-noticias.com.ve/noticias/actualidad/sucesos/mano-pelua-ordeno-retirar-a-la-gn-del-rodeo-ii.aspx>

67 Jose Rafael Ramirez, "Yorvis Valentín López Cortez, alias pran "oriente", se volvió a fugar de un penal," Noticias JR, 15 December, 2016. <https://noticiasjr.com/yorvis-valentin-lopez-cortez-alias-pran-oriente-se-volvio-a-fugar-de-un-penal/>

68 Infobae, "Descontrol y muerte en las prisiones de Venezuela," 21 June, 2011. <https://www.infobae.com/2011/06/21/1027571-descontrol-y-muerte-las-prisiones-venezuela/>

69 EFE, "Chávez ordena desmantelar mafias que administran cárceles," El Espectador, 11 June, 2011. <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/elmundo/chavez-ordena-desmantelar-mafias-administran-carceles-articulo-279264>

On July 26, 2011, the Ministry of Popular Power for the Penitentiary Service (Ministerio del Poder Popular para el Servicio Penitenciario) was established. The first minister was a politician, a sitting representative of the National Assembly. Iris Varela had little experience with prisons, but she had the key credential that the president demanded. She was a Chavista loyalist and firebrand grass roots politician known as “Comandante Fosforito,” or “Commander Phosphorous.”

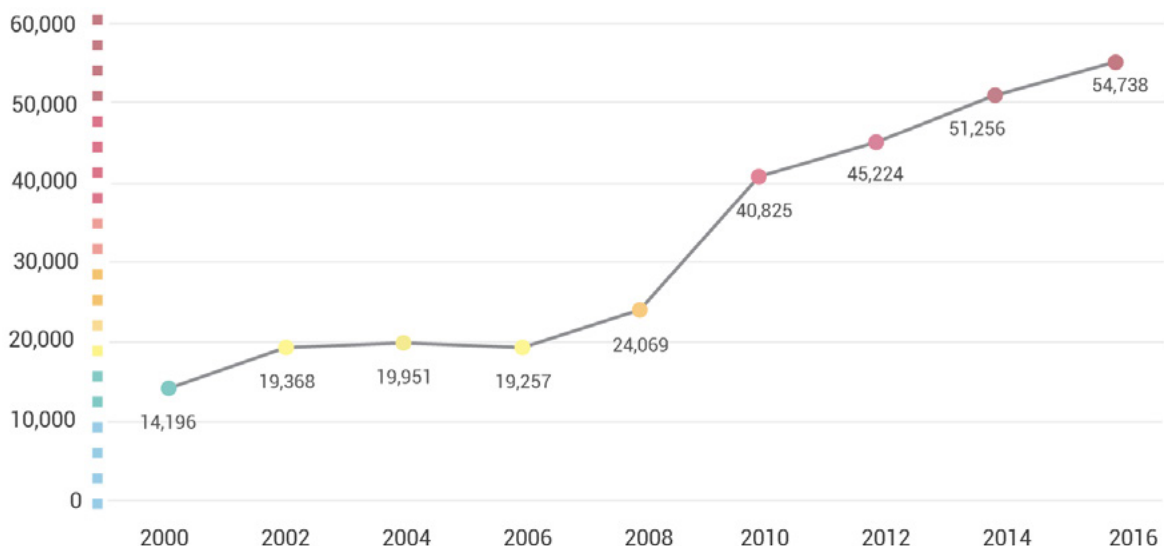
The new ministry was billed as a continuation of the policy laid out in Chávez’s 1999 Constitution. Article 272 of the Constitution dealt specifically with prisons. It opens: “The state will guarantee a prison system that assures the rehabilitation of the inmates and respect for their human rights.”

Carlos Nieto, a lawyer who heads the NGO Prison Observatory “A Window to Liberty” (Una Ventana a la Libertad),⁷⁰ had helped draw up the relevant section of the Constitution.

“We could not believe it when we laid out what we wanted to put in the Constitution,” Nieto told InSight Crime over a coffee in Caracas. “The government just kept saying yes, include it. Of course, we had no idea then that none of it would ever be implemented.”

President Chávez reiterated this vision of prisons as rehabilitation centers when the new ministry was announced, saying, “Prisons must become a center for the formation of the new man, who leaves transformed, trained for life and for love.”⁷¹

The Growing Prison Population in Venezuela



Source: Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR)

insightcrime.org

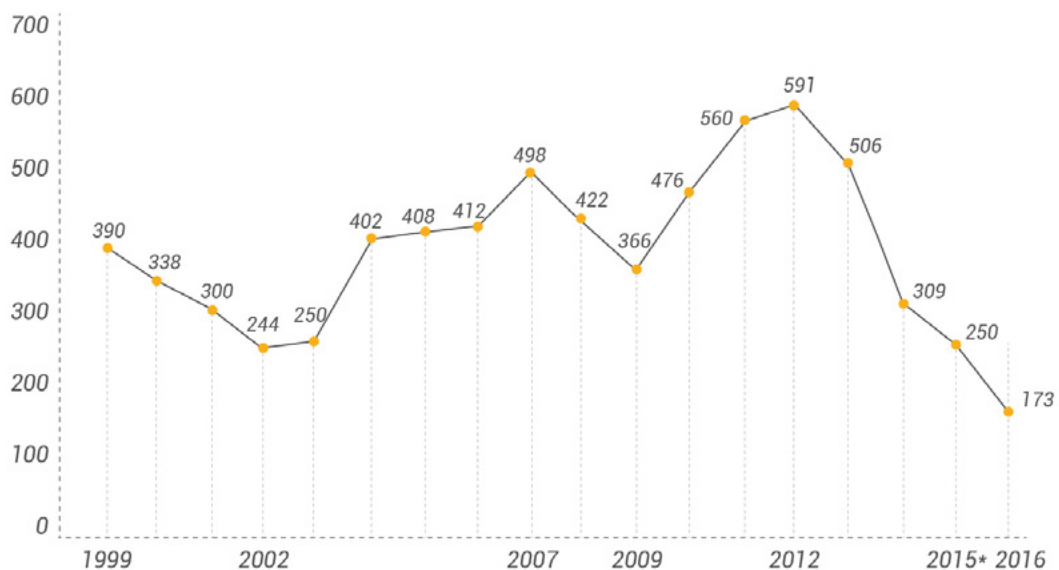
⁷⁰ <https://unaventanaalalibertad.org/>

⁷¹ Semana, “Chavez Crea Ministerio de Carceles en Venezuela,” 26 July, 2011, <https://www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/chavez-crea-ministerio-carceles-venezuela/243733-3>

However, Varela faced a Herculean task. Prison infrastructure was crumbling. Overcrowding was at epidemic levels. Guards and administrators were poorly paid and vulnerable to criminal interests and intimidation. And criminality and corruption, as was illustrated in the Rodeo riot, were rampant.

Added to these numbers, there are estimated to be another 33,000 people being held in police cells built to hold 5,000. The conditions in the police cells are even worse than the prisons. The facilities were designed to be temporary holding cells, to keep prisoners overnight until they could appear before a judge. But they are so crowded that prisoners have to take turns to sleep on the floor. The police have no resources to feed them. Even worse, the guards charge the relatives of prisoners a fee to let food in.⁷² Hundreds more prisoners, especially those detained in political protests, are held in the emblematic building of the Helicoide, the headquarters of the feared secret police, the Bolivarian Service of National Intelligence (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional – SEBIN). Many wait, in prison or a police cell, for over two years until they are sentenced.⁷³ Or found not guilty.

Homicides in Venezuela's Prisons



*Projection based on statistics from the first semester

Source: Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones

insightcrime.org

The Venezuela prison system is also one of the most violent in the world, with 6,472 murders registered between 1999 when Chávez took office and 2014.⁷⁴ In the

⁷² Angélica Lupo, Runrun.es, 13 January, 2017. <https://runrun.es/uncategorized/293037/calabozos-politiciales-en-gran-caracas-son-carceles-paralelas-con-sotanos-de-presos-y-reclusas-embarazadas.html>

⁷³ Prison Insider, Venezuela Country Profile, accessed 6 September, 2017. <https://www.prison-insider.com/countryprofile/prisonsinvzla?s=la-population-carcerale#la-population-carcerale>

⁷⁴ Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones, "Situación Carcelaria en Venezuela, 2014," <https://www.oveprisiones.org/assets/informe-2014-pdf.pdf>

first half of 2015 the Venezuelan Prison Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones – OVP) counted 109 dead and 16,417 injured.⁷⁵

Varela was faced with an almost impossible task. She was instructed that there were to be no more prison riots, that homicides within the prison system needed to come down, and that no more bad news should be generated in the media. Faced with this multitude of challenges and limited resources, Varela adopted a new policy to fulfill her mission. She simply befriended the most important pranes and started making deals with them. What they wanted, and got, was power within prison walls. They achieved control of everything that happened inside. In return, nothing was to spill over the walls and into the media. It was a Pax Mafiosa that would have profound consequences.

Venezuela's Prison System		
PRISON POPULATION TOTAL <i>Including pre-trial detainees / remand prisoners</i>		49,664
PRISON POPULATION RATE <i>Per 100,000 of national population</i>		159
PRE-TRIAL DETAINEES / REMAND PRISONERS <i>Percentage of prison population</i>		63.4%
FEMALE PRISONERS <i>Percentage of prison population</i>		5.6%
JUVENILES / MINORS / YOUNG PRISONERS INCL. DEFINITION <i>Percentage of prison population</i>	0% - Responsibility of Instituto Nacional del Menor (INAM)	
FOREIGN PRISONERS <i>Percentage of prison population</i>		3.7%
NUMBER OF ESTABLISHMENTS / INSTITUTIONS		32
OFFICIAL CAPACITY OF PRISON SYSTEM		19,000
OCCUPANCY LEVEL <i>Based on official capacity</i>		269.8%
Source: Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR)		insightcrime.org

Venezuela's prison system breakdown

⁷⁵ Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones, "Situación Carcelaria en Venezuela, 2014," <https://www.oveprisiones.org/assets/informe-2014-pdf.pdf>

Wilmito and the Rise of the Pranes



*Prisons Minister Iris Varela
with Wilmer José Brizuela, alias
"Wilmito"*

The word pran is believed to come from a Spanish acronym drawn from the words, “Preso Rematado Asesino Nato.” The literal translation would be something like “natural-born double killer prisoner.”⁷⁶

One of the pioneering pranes, who helped establish the criminal structures in the prisons was Wilmer José Brizuela, alias “Wilmito.” A local boxing champion with nine children from six different women, Wilmito was a habitual criminal who was first convicted of kidnapping. He was, in many ways, more at home behind bars than on the outside. When

Alfredo Meza, a journalist who best chronicled Wilmito’s life, visited him in the Vista Hermosa prison in Ciudad Bolívar in December 2013, Wilmito had an AR-15 assault rifle propped against the wall in his cell, alongside a 9 mm pistol.⁷⁷

It was in Vista Hermosa that Wilmito had started his life as a pran, running a section of the prison before deciding to systematically eliminate his rivals. Between 2005 and 2006, he took over one section at a time, eventually becoming the master of the jail. Over time, more structure formed. The lieutenants became known as “luceros.” If strong enough, a lucero could inherit the throne when the head pran left or was killed. The pranes also set up collection services, social committees, and security wings. Wilmito, for example, never moved through the prison without bodyguards, each of whom carried an assault rifle.

There was an attempt to dethrone Wilmito in Vista Hermosa in 2009. He was shot in the shoulder, but was able to collect his assault rifle from his room and kill four of the seven mutineers. By then his Vista Hermosa “carro,” or informal governing structure, was generating more than \$3 million in annual profits.⁷⁸

Wilmito’s rise in jail earned him national fame and popularized the notion of a pran. Even President Chávez mentioned him once in his weekly program “Aló Presidente,” poking fun at the then-governor of the state of Bolívar, Francisco Rangel Gómez: “This Wilmito has more authority than you.”

The power of the pranes was growing.

For Humberto Prado, the director of the Venezuelan Prisons Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones – OVP), a turning point came in 2008, when

⁷⁶ InSight Crime interview with Humberto Prado, Caracas 7 July, 2016.

⁷⁷ Alfredo Meza, “El gobierno de Wilmito,” Armando Info, 19 March, 2017. <https://www.armando.info/historias/7431=el-gobierno-de-wilmito>

⁷⁸ Jorge Benezra, “On the Inside: Venezuela’s Most Dangerous Prison,” Time, 6 June, 2013. <https://time.com/3800088/on-the-inside-venezuelas-most-dangerous-prison/>

Tareck El Aissami became minister of interior and justice. El Aissami made changes to the visiting hours for the penitentiary system, which opened the prisons to more goods and services and created a thriving economy behind bars.

“Tareck El Aissami was the one who recognized the figure of the *pran*. He gave the authorization for families to spend nights in the prisons,” Prado explained to InSight Crime. “Visiting days used to be just twice a week — Wednesday for conjugal visits, Sunday for families. That changed. Before there was a visit with a bag of food and some clean clothes for the inmate. That changed to full suitcases, lines of visitors, women coming to stay with the family”.

For Carlos Nieto of the Window of Liberty NGO, the arrival of the families was just part of the problem. It was not just wives and children. Prostitutes and partygoers, along with drugs and alcohol, began to flow more freely.

“And so they began to put together parties that started on Fridays and finished Monday,” he said. “Parties where there was alcohol, drugs, music, where all that was done was sex, partying, alcohol and drugs. So it’s a Molotov cocktail, from which nothing good could come.”

Visits were the key to the *pranes* power. They were the means by which *pranes* could exert their will and expand their criminal economy. At the root of the *pran* system was the extortion charged within the prison, much of it related to the visits. Every prisoner had to pay a fee called “*la causa*,” or “the cause,” to the *pran* every week. Failure to pay led to punishment beatings and even death. If a prisoner wanted a nice cell, he paid more *causa*; if he wanted a nice flat-screen TV, he had to pay even more.

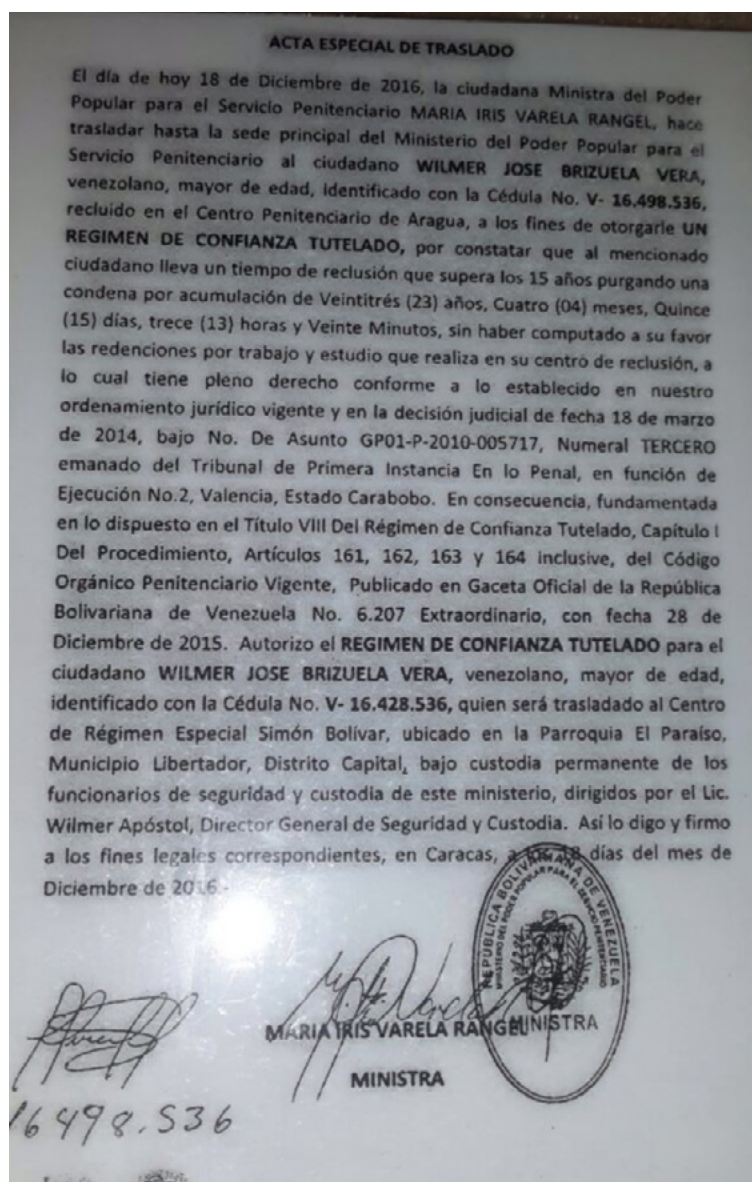
To this day, everything that goes into the prison has a tax and can cost up to 10 times its value on the outside. Therefore the more inmates a prison has, the more visitors, the richer and more powerful the *pranes*. All businesses in the prison, the restaurants, shops, barbers, also pay the *pran*. In the most populous prison of Tocarón in Aragua, with some 7,000 inmates, the *causa* is estimated to be worth more than \$2 million a month.⁷⁹ With millions of dollars the criminal structures grew in size, power and sophistication.

So Varela’s decision to hand the jails to the prisoners was just another strengthening of the criminal system. The *pranes* became political actors, an extension of the Chávez revolution. It was not unlike the bargain the Chavistas had struck with pro-government *colectivos* and criminal groups inside poor neighborhoods. Only in the case of the *pranes*, the government had no jurisdiction.

“The government decided to essentially do nothing, and deliver the jails to the prisoners.” Roberto Briceño León, the director of the OVV, told InSight Crime. “The police and the National Guard now have to ask permission to enter.”

⁷⁹ Runrunes, “En Tocarón, el riesgo es que te quieras quedar,” 7 August, 2015. <https://runrun.es/nacional/venezuela-2/217111/en-tocoron-el-riesgo-es-que-te-quieras-quedar.html>

Wilmito appeared again in the news on February 17, 2017 when he suffered another assassination attempt, not in prison where he was supposed to be serving a 14-year sentence for murder, but on a beach on the island of Margarita. He was there vacationing with his family, carrying a “get out of jail free card” signed by Varela herself.⁸⁰



A letter from Venezuela prison director Iris Varela authorizing the temporary release of the pran “Wilmito”

Boasting four swimming pools, a disco and even a cockfighting ring, this penitentiary was run by another of Varela’s favorite pranes, Teófilo Rodríguez, alias “El Conejo” (The Rabbit).

He had been wandering free since December 2016. Such was the scandal generated by the incident that he was not sent back to his “home” prison of Vista Hermosa, but rather to another infamous prison, that of Tocarón, in the state of Aragua. There he did not enjoy the same status or protection afforded him in Vista Hermosa. In the early hours of April 1, Wilmito was shot dead in his cell. He had just celebrated his 35th birthday.

Conejo and the Exportation of the Pran System

If visits were the key to a pran’s power, then holding a huge party was the ultimate manifestation of that power. In that regard, no one could compete with San Antonio, a prison on Margarita Island. Boasting four swimming

80 Runrunes, “Jueza Casado: “Quiero que la ministra Varela me explique por qué mi hermana está muerta y Wilmito en la playa,” 1 March, 2017. <https://runrun.es/nacional/actualidad/299100/jueza-casado-quiero-que-la-ministra-varela-me-explique-por-que-mi-hermana-esta-muerta-y-wilmito-en-la-playa.html>



A mural of pran leader "Conejo" next to Hugo Chávez

Conejo was so named for his buck teeth and passion for Playboy pornography. He adopted the Playboy bunny image as his own and the walls in the common areas of the prison had it painted everywhere. The one exception was the wall where a mural of Conejo and Chávez took pride of place.

Margarita Island, part of the archipelago of Nueva Sparta has long been a favorite holiday spot for Venezuelans. Blazing sunshine and perfect Caribbean beaches, it also became the best prison in which to have to do time. Conejo knew how to throw a party, but his bonhomie camouflaged a keen mind that built a criminal structure inside that prison that projected itself across the island.

The hedonism of the San Antonio prison was publicized across the world when the New York Times visited Conejo and was given the grand tour of the prison.⁸¹ But what was not covered was Conejo's criminal activities outside the prison, which included drug trafficking on the island, a crucial stepping stone for cocaine making its way across the Caribbean.

While the criminal structures within the prison were called "carros," or cars, the criminal structures linked to the pran system that operated outside of the prison walls became known as "trenes," or trains. Conejo ran his own train, called "Tren del Pacífico."⁸²



A photo taken inside San Antonio prison

Conejo was not the only pran working outside of prisons. Numerous other pran ran criminal operations from their jail cells. Nieto, of Window to Liberty, said one of the most notable examples of the criminal structures inside and outside prisons is the "Tren de Aragua." It is allegedly run from Tocarón prison in Aragua state. "Not only from there do they plan crimes, kidnappings, extortions, robberies, but also drugs are

distributed and from there operate the megabandas," Nieto said.⁸³

81 Simon Romero, "Where Prisoners Can Do Anything Except Leave," 3 June, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/04/world/americas/04venez.html?mcubz=3>

82 For more information on "Trenes" see InSight Crime's profile on the "Tren de Llanos" (Train of the Plain) at: venezuela-organized-crime-news/train-of-the-plain

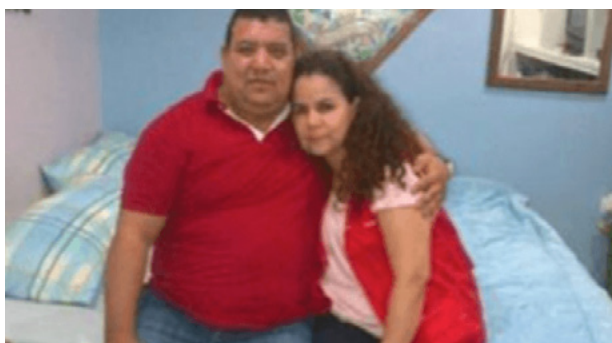
83 InSight Crime interview with Carlos Nieto, Caracas 6 July, 2016.

This criminal structure became one the most powerful in Venezuela while Tareck El Aissami was governor of Aragua, a post he held from 2012 until he took over the vice presidency this year. For Nieto, this is no coincidence. International law enforcement agents feel the same: El Aissami has fostered organized crime structures in every official post he has held.⁸⁴

Other pranes and luceros, who had served their time were leaving and replicating the prison structures outside jail walls. For Luis Cedeño, director of the NGO Paz Activa that studies organized crime in Venezuela, the pran system was instrumental in the establishment of what are known as the “megabandas.” These are criminal syndicates, sometimes hundreds strong, that control the local distribution of drugs, extortion and kidnapping in many parts of the country.

“Many prisoners who had been ‘pranes’ or ‘luceros’ took the criminal knowhow from the prisons and reproduced them outside, creating the megabandas,” said Cedeño in Caracas, clutching a copy of his report on the evolution of the megabandas phenomena.⁸⁵

In both cases, the relationship these criminals forged and maintained with officials of the government was critical to their success, despite government assertions to the contrary. Questioned about a 2011 photo showing her embracing Conejo, Varela scoffed at the implication and threatened the questioner.



Iris Varela pictured in 2011 with Conejo

“Please, why would you ask that? I am going to sue anyone who defames me in that manner,” she said. “I am a mother, I am the minister of prisons, I have been photographed with 100,000 prisoners in this country.”⁸⁶

Still, as it was with Wilmito, Conejo’s connections to the government could not protect him from every enemy. On

January 24, 2016, while on parole, he was murdered outside a nightclub on Margarita Island, cut down in a hail of bullets along with several of his bodyguards. The murder remains unsolved, but talk of a debt owed to drug traffickers seems to be the favorite theory. His funeral was a lavish affair, inside and outside the prison of San Antonio. Inmates gathered on the roof, firing an impressive assortment of firearms to mourn the loss of their leader. Such was the scandal created that Varela closed down the prison soon after.

84 In February 2017, the US Treasury placed El Aissami on it's “kingpin” list of suspected drug traffickers because he has “facilitated shipments of narcotics from Venezuela.” See: Venezuela Investigative Unit, “US Sanctions Against Venezuela VP Hit Highest Government Rank Yet,” InSight Crime, 14 February 2017. Available at: [/news-analysis/us-sanctions-venezuela-vp-hit-highest-government-rank-yet](#)

85 The 2016 report can be downloaded here: [file:///C:/Users/Intel/Downloads/DOTPA-Reporte_TeYcni-co-4_-_Las_Megabandas-Actual_13.10.2016.pdf](#)

86 Lorena Meléndez, “Lo que dice Iris Varela cuando le preguntan sobre “El Conejo,” Runrunes, 1 January, 2016. <https://runrun.es/nacional/246190/lo-que-dice-iris-varela-cuando-le-preguntan-sobre-el-conejo.html>

The Situation Today

High levels of violence. Rampant criminality. Corruption. Venezuela today looks much the same inside and outside of the prisons. The situation has gotten worse after the death of Chávez in 2013. Since Chávez's handpicked successor President Nicolás Maduro has taken power, inflation is out of control, food has become scarce on supermarket shelves, and the government has established an even harder line on political dissidents.

Yet ironically it seems the pranes run a more efficient government than Maduro. Justice is swift, and while food is scarce on supermarket shelves, the pranes seem able to get all the food they need. Indeed, residents of Aragua state have been known to go the Tocarón prison when they cannot buy food anywhere else. The prison's passageways look like Aladdin's cave, with goods piled up against walls, vendors doing a brisk business with inmates and the general public alike.⁸⁷

The Pax Mafiosa that Varela established did manage to bring down homicides in the prisons. While there were incidents of prison riots, scandals and violence, she did manage to keep a lid on things in the jails. However, this system gave birth to a new generation of organized crime structures, and the pranes, the trains and megabandas now have reach across the country pushing up criminality and murder. All of this has helped turn Venezuela into one of the most dangerous nations on earth.

In June, the government's longest serving minister, Iris Varela, resigned to run for a post in the National Constituent Assembly, Maduro's latest, and to date, successful vehicle to sideline any opposition to his rule. Comandante Fosforito, to no one's surprise, won a seat. Before she left she had a final word to say about pranes.

"I deny the existence of pranes," she said. "I do not recognize the existence of such a figure."⁸⁸

Just says before the elections in July she was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) for "undermining democracy."⁸⁹ She joined numerous other members of the Bolivarian Republic on the OFAC list, including Vice President El Aissami. This was her response, the same she gave to the rule of law, to respect for human rights and to the prisoners placed under her care:

87 InSight Crime, "Venezuela Overcomes Shortages by Shopping in Prison," 23 August, 2016. [/news-briefs/venezuela-overcome-shortages-by-shopping-in-prison](#)

88 José Silva, "Iris Varela niega que haya pranes en las cárceles del país," El Universal, 29 March, 2017. https://www.eluniversal.com/noticias/sucesos/iris-varela-niega-que-haya-pranes-las-carceles-del-pais_645866

89 US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions 13 Current and Former Senior Officials of the Government of Venezuela," 26 July, 2017. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0132.aspx>

Prison Structures and Slang*

Achicharrao

A prisoner who receives no visits, who matters to no one.

Alta

The highest body in a prison, made up of “luceros” and the “pranes” of different parts of the jail.

Batanero

Someone who steals within the prison. The punishment is to be stabbed in the hand various times. These scars brand the prisoner as a thief wherever he goes.

Boca cosida (sewn-up mouth)

When a prisoner is about to be transferred or wants to protest against anything, he sews up his mouth, declares a hunger strike and refuses to cooperate. This person cannot be attacked by any other prisoner.

Caleta (hide)

A hiding place for weapons or money

Carro

The government inside the prison, separate from the guards or director. Changes to the “carro” are seen as a coup and result in deaths or injuries. A pran can only be removed when he is killed by another.

Castigos (punishments)

The idea is to produce suffering. Includes opening old wounds to promote scarring; shooting people in their feet and legs; hanging people until they almost pass out.

Causa (cause)

The “causa” is what a prisoner pays to the “pran” and his “carro” to live in certain parts of the prison and enjoy certain privileges.

Cincuenta cincuenta (50-50)

A shot to the stomach, which you have a 50-50 chance of surviving. Employed as a punishment.

Cochinos (pigs)

Some prisons have pens with huge pigs. These are used to dispose of human remains.

Garita

Sentry posts where armed inmates patrol. Anyone who falls asleep on such duty is usually killed.

Gandules	Inmates who are drug addicts and do not respect the rules.
Luceros	The lieutenants of the pran who make up a “carro.”
Luz	A prison rule. To violate a “luz” results in immediate punishment.
Mancha	An infraction of a “luz” or rule within the prison. “Mancharla” is to disobey the rules.
Número	The daily roll-call.
Pacificación	The negotiation between the authorities and a pran to ascertain what he wants in exchange for keeping the peace.
Paria (pariah)	An inmate who has no weapons and does not fight, that causes no problems. Once so designated by a pran, he cannot be messed with by other prisoners.
Pran	The leader of a prison. In some of the bigger jails there is a principal pran and secondary pranes who answer to the first.
Tela de juicio	A prison trial, carried out in a circle, in front of the “carro” where sentence is passed for any infractions of prison law.
Varones	Evangelical preachers who have special status and can move with relative freedom throughout the prison helping out inmates.
Visita (The Visit)	This is the most sacred part of prison life. No one can interfere with the Visit, harass the females or disrespect the visitors in any way.

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Colombia and Venezuela: Criminal Siamese Twins

Picture by Howard Yanes/AP Images

Colombia and Venezuela have shared criminal dynamics for decades. Colombia has pushed cocaine through Venezuela on its journey to US and European markets, while Venezuela's contraband fuel has gushed in the other direction. But today the criminal links are far more complex and increasingly symbiotic.

For decades, Colombia's civil conflict spilled across into Venezuela, in the form of the desperate displaced fleeing violence, and Colombia's warring factions seeking sanctuary. The human wave now flows in the other direction, mainly the economically displaced, hungry and sick Venezuelans looking for a better life, and prepared to work for a hot meal. Colombia's civil conflict is winding down, with just one remaining warring faction still in the field, the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN). Venezuela provides the ultimate sanctuary for the ELN, and is the key base from which this rebel army plots its expansion. Sanctuary in Venezuela in no small part explains the ELN's unwillingness to compromise at the peace table.

The Colombia-Venezuela border is now one of the principal regions of criminality in Latin America, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in illicit revenues. It is home to a plethora of criminal economies, and feeds dozens of criminal groups.

Criminal Economies on the Border

The Colombian border region of Catatumbo, in the department of Norte de Santander, is the cheapest place in the world to produce cocaine. It is also now one of Colombia's

most prolific drug production and cultivation areas.⁹⁰ The Andean mountain slopes here have some of the highest yields of cocaine per hectare, over seven kilograms per year, according to sources in Colombia's anti-narcotic police. The main precursor chemical in the processing of cocaine is gasoline, and thanks to Venezuela's fuel subsidies, this is dirt-cheap. The other two definitive factors in the cocaine trade are proximity to a departure point -- in this case Venezuela itself -- and a cheap labor force to harvest, process and move cocaine shipments. Venezuelans increasingly provide that labor force, and are now prepared to assume far greater risks, for far less money, than their Colombian counterparts. There is now a wide and deep pool of criminal labor made up of desperate Venezuelans all along the frontier.

Colombian cocaine is pouring across the border into Venezuela, along three main axes: straight across from the production center in Catatumbo, into the Venezuelan states of Táchira and Zulia; across Colombia's eastern plains into the state of Apure; and along the rivers that are the superhighways of the southern jungles into the state of Amazonas.

There are no clear numbers on the amount of cocaine transiting Venezuela, but two international intelligence sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they would not be surprised if it were in excess of 400 metric tons a year. At current prices of \$4,000 a kilogram in Venezuela, that amount of drugs is worth \$1.6 billion. The costs of transiting Venezuela are estimated at around \$1,000, meaning that organized crime in this troubled Andean nation could be earning up to \$400 million a year, just from the cocaine trade.

But cocaine is not the only illegal economy along the border.

Contraband gasoline, in large part controlled by the ELN, is another key illicit activity in the region. A liter of 95 octane fuel costs 6 bolivares (approximately 1/100th of a US cent) in Venezuela. However, on the border, that amount sells for 170,000 bolivares (between \$2 and \$2.50).⁹¹

Through photographic evidence, InSight Crime was able to confirm that hundreds of barrels are transported from the Venezuelan state of Apure to the neighboring Colombian state of Arauca with the complicity of members of Venezuela's National Guard, whose silence is purchased with hush money.⁹²

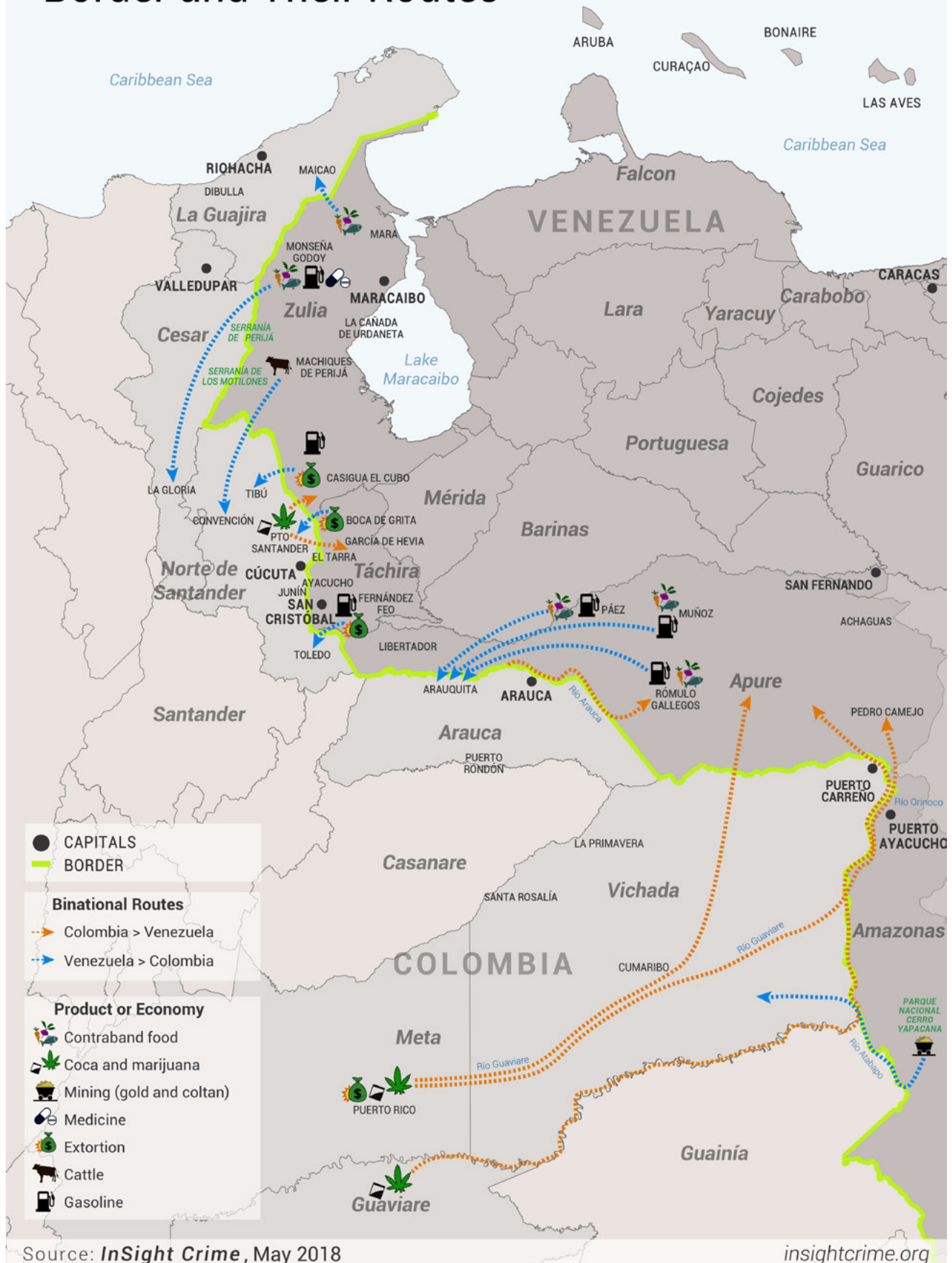
On the other hand, in the states of Amazonas and Bolívar in southern Venezuela, the ELN and dissidents of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas

90 Mimi Yagoub, "Which Regions of Colombia Are Playing the Biggest Role in the Coca Boom?," InSight Crime, March 23, 2017. <http://www.insightcrime.org/component/content/article?id=8666:which-regions-colombia-biggest-role-coca-boom>

91 Miguel Barrios, "Así se mueve el contrabando de ganado y combustible al Cesar", El Heraldo, August 7, 2017. <https://www.elheraldo.co/cesar/asi-se-mueve-el-contrabando-de-ganado-y-combustible-de-venezuela-al-cesar-390205>

92 The footage was shown to InSight Crime by a source in Saravena, Arauca in April 2016, and revealed uniformed members of the National Guard receiving payoffs from smugglers as boats were being loaded up in Apure with barrels of contraband fuel.

Illegal Economies on the Colombia-Venezuela Border and Their Routes



Source: *InSight Crime*, May 2018

insightcrime.org

Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) are engaged in mining gold and coltan, exporting it across the border into the Colombian states of Guainía and Vichada. This illicit enterprise also operates with the complicity of the Venezuelan military and involves the exploitation of local indigenous communities.⁹³

Subsidized food rations provided by the Venezuelan government have also become a form of subsistence utilized not only by crime groups, but also by average citizens. From Apure to Arauca, and from the Venezuelan state of Zulia to the Colombian states of La Guajira and Cesar, food is transported by clandestine routes. Beef is a common contraband item. Even though it is traded for a lower price than the official one in Colombia, it still generates significant profits because the cost in Venezuela is very low due to the large difference in the exchange rate and the lack of liquidity.

However, severe food shortages in Venezuela have reduced the contraband trade, and have even generated a reverse phenomenon; smugglers now traffic food into Venezuela due to the lack of items there.⁹⁴

The 2015 closure of the border by President Nicolás Maduro further strengthened the hold that the National Guard had on smuggling of all kinds. Stricter border controls cut out many of the small-scale smugglers, and passed the criminal monopoly to the Venezuelan military. The smaller, independent smuggling operations found their room for maneuver severely limited, while the larger-scale mafias with close ties to the National Guard flourished.⁹⁵

Criminal Sanctuary

Political tolerance and state corruption in Venezuela, combined with the proliferation of illegal economies, have turned the Venezuelan border states into criminal sanctuaries. While Venezuelan organized crime structures, both state and non-state, are strengthening, it is Colombian groups that have traditionally exercised more influence in Venezuela's border region. With the 2017 demobilization of the FARC there has been a great deal of change in the criminal landscape along the frontier.

Tolerance towards the Colombian Marxist rebel groups began under Chávez.⁹⁶ Both the ELN and the FARC appear to have been tolerated, if not actively supported, by

93 EL Espectador, "Comunidades indígenas: víctimas de la minería en Venezuela", January 19, 2018. <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/medio-ambiente/comunidades-indigenas-victimas-de-la-mineria-en-venezuela-articulo-734123>

94 Alexandra Ulmer, Anggy Polanco, "En un giro del destino, venezolanos hacen contrabando de comida desde Colombia", Reuters, June 12, 2016. <https://es.reuters.com/article/topNews/idESKCN0YW1KE>

95 James Bargent, "Gas Smugglers Busted as Colombia-Venezuela Contraband in Flux". InSight Crime, August 15, 2016. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/gasoline-smugglers-busted-as-colombia-venezuela-contraband-dynamic-evolves>

96 María Teresa Romero, "Venezuela Hacia Colombia: Los desaciertos diplomáticos y sus consecuencias", Analítica, April 1, 1999, <http://www.analitica.com/opinion/opinion-nacional/venezuela-hacia-colombia-los-desaciertos-diplomaticos-y-sus-consecuencias/>

Venezuela under Chávez. He viewed these groups as ideological allies,⁹⁷ although his attitude towards them was complex, and he ran hot and cold according to when it suited him. Chávez let both groups use Venezuelan territory but also moved against them when it was convenient. Under Maduro, Venezuela played an important role in the peace process with the FARC, but apart from that there has been no evidence of him supporting rebel presence in Venezuela. However, Maduro's fight for political survival has taken up all his attention, meaning that the Colombian groups on Venezuelan soil have faced little government pushback and have been allowed to flourish.

The ELN

Perhaps the single biggest Colombian group operating on Venezuelan territory today is the ELN. For more than 30 years the ELN has seen much of its leadership and rear guard based in the Venezuelan states of Apure and Zulia, with more recent expansion into Táchira and Amazonas.

The ELN's most powerful fighting division, the Eastern War Front (Frente de Guerra Oriental) is based in the border state of Apure and its Colombian counterpart, Arauca. According to Colombian military sources, up to 90 percent of the Eastern War Front's fighting capacity and logistics are situated in Apure.⁹⁸ InSight Crime had other confirmed sightings of ELN in the Apure municipalities of Páez, Rómulo Gallego and Muñoz, where the rebels run smuggling operations.

Sources on the Venezuelan side of the border have also charted ELN presence in Táchira, particularly the municipality of Fernández Feo, where local inhabitants have seen rebels walking around in civilian clothing but carrying rifles and small arms. Other sources have confirmed ELN presence in the states of Amazonas and Bolívar. In Zulia, only Colombian security forces mentioned ELN presence, although local residents in the municipality of Tibú, Norte de Santander, have spoken of ELN rebels crossing the border. There have even been reports of the ELN handing out propaganda material in schools,⁹⁹ and government food parcels in Venezuela.¹⁰⁰

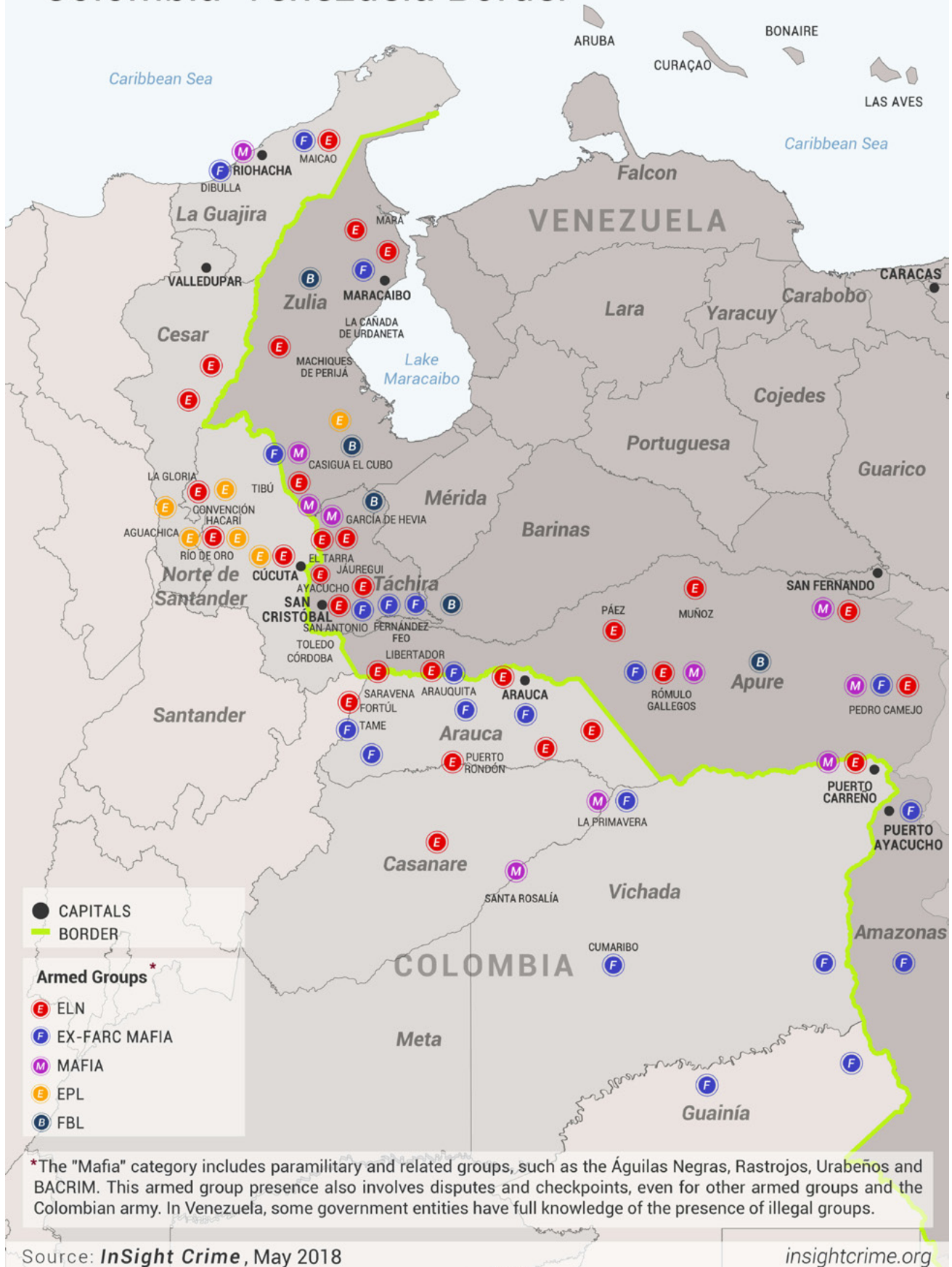
97 BBC News, "Colombian FARC rebels' link to Venezuela detailed", May 10, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-13343810>

98 Interviews with Colombian military sources in Saravena, Arauca, during April 2016.

99 Lorena Meléndez, "ONG denunció adoctrinamiento de niños en la frontera por parte del ELN," Runrunes, April 26, 2018. <http://runrun.es/nacional/346640/ong-denuncio-adoctrinamiento-de-ninos-en-la-frontera-por-parte-del-eln.html>

100 Venezuela Investigative Unit, "Colombia's ELN Reportedly Distributing Venezuela Government Food on the Border," InSight Crime, February 9, 2018. <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/colombia-eln-reportedly-distributing-venezuela-government-food-border/>

Presence of Armed Groups on the Colombia-Venezuela Border



The Eastern War Front has historically been led by Gustavo Aníbal Giraldo Quinchía, alias “Pablito,” who was admitted in 2015 to the ELN’s highest body, the Central Command (Comando Central – COCE). He is currently the group’s military chief. He has used his sanctuary in Apure to strengthen the Eastern War Front and to launch attacks into Colombia. He is believed to have for some years been based out of a farm in El Nula, expropriated by President Chávez.¹⁰¹

Pablito is opposed to peace talks with the Colombian government, believing that the “current conditions do not favor negotiations.”¹⁰² Pablito is expanding from his strongholds in Apure and Arauca into the Venezuelan states of Táchira and Amazonas, as well as into the state of Vichada on the Colombian side. He has been filling the vacuum left by the demobilized FARC rebels, seeking to not only absorb territory, but also the illegal economies that previously sustained the FARC.¹⁰³

While the group is expanding its finances and manpower, Pablito and other radical elements in the ELN see no benefit in negotiating peace with the Colombian government.¹⁰⁴ Venezuela is a key factor in this ELN thinking.

FARC Dissidents

While the FARC as a national actor with belligerent status is now gone, there are growing dissident factions spreading across the country, and Venezuela is becoming a rear-guard area and source of funding for some of these elements.

InSight Crime has information that Gener García Molina, alias “Jhon 40,” one of the FARC’s most notorious drug traffickers and a former head of the rebels’ 43rd Front in the central Colombian department of Meta, has established a base across the border in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas, with elements of the “Acacio Medina” Front.¹⁰⁵ Jhon 40 was once in charge of the finances for the FARC’s Eastern Bloc, which operated in seven Colombian departments: Arauca, Casanare, Meta, Guaviare, Vaupés, Vichada and Guainía. It also had relationships with various Brazilian and Colombian drug-traffickers including Daniel “El Loco” Barrera, arrested in Venezuela in 2012. Jhon 40 therefore has extensive knowledge of the drug trade, international contacts and perhaps runs his own cocaine routes.

By relocating to Amazonas, Jhon 40 can receive drug shipments moving across Colombia’s Eastern plains, where the dissidents of the FARC’s 1st Front have

101 This information was received in Arauca in July 2011 when the author carried out interviews, where sources spoke of delivering extortion payments to Pablito, or been summoned for meetings.

102 This quotation came from intelligence intercepts played to InSight Crime by Colombian security force sources.

103 Tristan Clavel, “Record ELN Cocaine Shipment Seized Days before Peace Talks Start,” InSight Crime, January 27, 2017. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/authorities-seize-record-eln-cocaine-shipment-days-before-peace-talks-start>

104 Jeremy McDermott, “8 Reasons Why Colombia’s Post-Conflict is Still a Ways Off,” InSight Crime, June 23, 2016. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/eight-reasons-colombia-post-conflict-is-still-a-way-off>

105 Interviews with Colombian army and police sources, combined with sources in Puerto Ayacucho in Venezuela, conducted during 2017 and 2018.

their stronghold, as well as along the rivers that spill into the tri-border jungles of Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil. Jhon 40 is also likely running, or at least “taxing,” the illegal mining operations in Amazonas, which include gold and coltan.

Former Amazonas Governor Liborio Guarulla denounced both FARC and ELN activity in the state of Amazonas, and was recently banned from politics by the Maduro government.¹⁰⁶

Jhon 40 is just one element of the growing FARC dissidents, likely headed by Miguel Botache Santanilla, alias “Gentil Duarte,” who was expelled from the FARC towards the end of last year. He is the highest profile dissident leader.¹⁰⁷ These dissidents are based in Guaviare, parts of Meta and Vichada, as well as the jungle department of Guainía. Venezuela is now an economic lifeline and sanctuary for many of the FARC dissidents. InSight Crime estimates that the total number of FARC fighters and militiamen still active could number up to 2,500, and Venezuela is an important strategic rear-guard area and finance center for them.

The EPL

Another Colombian group pushing into Venezuela is the last remnant of the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Popular – EPL), called “Los Pelusos” by the government to avoid recognizing their guerrilla roots. The EPL officially demobilized in 1991, and this last faction in Norte de Santander has become a major player in the drug trade along the Venezuelan border. In the aftermath of the FARC demobilization in 2017, the EPL has engaged in aggressive expansion, declaring war on the ELN, and expanding out of its Catatumbo stronghold.¹⁰⁸

The group was weakened by the 2015 death of former leader Victor Ramón Navarro, alias “Megateo,” and the 2016 arrest of Guillermo León Aguirre, alias “David León.”¹⁰⁹ Megateo ran drug trafficking for the ELN and FARC out of Catatumbo. But that vacuum was filled by an individual using the alias “Pácora,” whom authorities have not yet been able to identify. Pácora is leading the EPL expansion, including forays in Venezuela aimed at securing drug trafficking routes, strengthening military capabilities, recruiting ex-security force members and training snipers.¹¹⁰ There have been reports of EPL presence in the town of El Cubo, in the Venezuelan state of Zulia.¹¹¹

106 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “Venezuela Suspends Border Governor After He Speaks Out on Crime”. InSight Crime, May 9, 2017. <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/venezuela-suspends-border-governor-after-speaks-out-crime/>

107 Mimi Yagoub, “FARC Expels 5 Commanders, Revealing Extent of Rebel Fragmentation”. InSight Crime, December 16, 2016. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/farc-kicks-out-5-top-commanders-as-crime-corrodes-insurgency>

108 James Bargent, “Are EPL narco guerrillas expanding across Colombia?”. InSight Crime, October 24, 2016. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/are-the-epl-narco-guerrillas-expanding-across-colombia>

109 James Bargent, “Arrest of Top Narco-Guerrilla Could Spark Turmoil in East Colombia”. InSight Crime, September 16 2016. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/arrest-of-narco-guerrilla-leader-could-cause-turmoil-in-east-colombia>

110 Redmas “Combates entre Eln y Epl se extendieron a Venezuela,” March 20, 2018. <http://www.redmas.com.co/colombia/combates-eln-epl-catatumbo/>

111 RCN Radio, “Bloqueos y enfrentamientos en El Catatumbo se extienden a frontera con Venezuela”, April 21, 2018. <https://www.rcnradio.com/colombia/santanderes/paro-armado-del-catatumbo-se-extiende-municipios-fronterizos-de-venezuela>

Colombian Mafia

Since the 2006 demobilization of the paramilitary army of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC), a plethora of Colombian criminal groups have developed, initially called BACRIM (“bandas criminales”) by the government, but now designated as Organized Armed Groups (Grupos Armados Organizados – GAOs). Of these, two have significant presence in Venezuela: the Rastrojos and the Urabeños.¹¹²

Indeed, there has been fighting between the two groups in Venezuelan territory as they seek control of smuggling corridors.¹¹³ However, the fragmentation of these groups has meant that they are increasingly being overshadowed along the Venezuelan border by the ELN, EPL and FARC dissidents, and in many cases are now working in tandem with these rebel groups, as well as with corrupt elements of the Venezuela security forces.

The FBL

One of the principal irregular Venezuelan actors active along the frontier is the Bolivarian Forces of Liberation (Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberación - FBL), a strange phenomenon of a pro-government rebel group, modeled on the Colombian example. While initially the FBL worked closely with the ELN, the FBL now views the ELN as competition, since the ELN has such strong presence on the Venezuela side of the border. In recent years, the FBL have had much more contact with the FARC, and indeed the Citizens Ombudsman in Arauca described them as a “child of the FARC”.¹¹⁴

Numbering between 1,000 and 4,000 members, the FBL engages in extortion and is active in local politics, allegedly receiving funding via communal councils (concejos comunales), a Chávez-era invention intended to allow a greater degree of direct participation by citizens in local governance. Sources in Venezuela have asserted the FBL have links to the drug trade, but we have found no concrete evidence of this. FBL presence has been registered in the states of Apure, Táchira, Barinas, Zulia, Mérida, Portuguesa, Cojedes and Carabobo, as well as Caracas. The FBL may have received material support and training from the FARC in the past.¹¹⁵ With reports of FARC dissident presence in Venezuela, some of this may be the result of working with FBL elements.

112 Parker Asmann, “¿Caos en Venezuela contribuye a resurgimiento de Los Rastrojos de Colombia?”. InSight Crime, July 19, 2017. <https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/noticias-del-dia/caos-en-venezuela-contribuye-a-resurgimiento-de-los-rastrojos-de-colombia/>

113 W Radio, “Venezolanos denuncian la presencia del ELN y el EPL en la frontera con Colombia”, August 23, 2017. <http://www.wradio.com.co/noticias/regionales/venezolanos-denuncian-la-presencia-del-eln-y-el-epl-en-la-frontera-con-colombia/20170823/nota/3557388.aspx>

114 InSight Crime Interview with the People's Defender in Arauca Gloria Orjuela, April 28, 2016. Entrevista Defensoría del Pueblo, Arauca.

115 InSight Crime. “FBL”. Publicado en: <http://es.insightcrime.org/noticias-sobre-crimen-organizado-en-venezuela/fbl/>; para más información sobre el FBL, consultar la página web del grupo guerrillero: <http://fuerzasbolivarianasdeliberacion.blogspot.com.co/>

The Future

Colombia has been exporting organized crime to Venezuela for decades. What has changed now is that Venezuela has stepped up in criminal terms and is now an equal partner in many criminal economies.

The criminal economies along the border are by their very nature transnational. Therefore, any meaningful response to them must be transnational as well. Yet there is now very little bilateral collaboration between Venezuela and Colombia, allowing transnational organized crime free reign.

In an April 2018 interview, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos accused the Venezuelan government of using criminal gangs to “perpetuate itself in power.”¹¹⁶ President Maduro responded by describing Colombia as a “failed state.”¹¹⁷ Thus, there is little hope of cooperation against organized crime under the current administrations. Could the presidential elections in Venezuela and Colombia change this?

If the two favorites to win the upcoming elections are successful, the answer is a categorical no. Maduro is standing for re-election, and the playing field is very much tilted in his favor, even assuming he does not openly manipulate the voting. In Colombia, Iván Duque, supported by former President Álvaro Uribe, is ahead in the polls. When interviewed about the situation in Catatumbo, on the border with Venezuela, Duque clearly revealed his attitude to the neighboring nation:


“It needs security, justice and infrastructure, because there is a drug trafficking corridor, promoted by the Cartel of the Suns, which is headed by the Venezuelan government. I’m going to go to the UN Security Council to denounce what is happening on the frontier with Colombia, which is the consent of a government that has drug trafficking structures, taking advantage of a cocaine production corridor.”¹¹⁸

So what can we expect for the rest of 2018? An increase in the flow of cocaine into Venezuela, as coca cultivation in Colombia continues to grow; a strengthening of all Colombia’s illegal groups on Venezuelan soil; and desperate Venezuelans being recruited by Colombia’s illegal groups and organized crime as they fight for survival with few legal alternatives. All of this adds up to a strengthening of criminal economies along the border, with transnational organized crime establishing even deeper roots in this troubled region.

116 El Nuevo Herald, “Santos acusa a Gobierno venezolano de usar criminales para controlar sociedad,” April 16, 2018. Available at: <http://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/mundo/america-latina/colombia-es/article208982469.html>

117 RCN, Maduro aseguró que “Colombia es un Estado fallido,” April 20, 2018. <https://www.noticiasrcn.com/internacional-crisis-venezuela/maduro-aseguro-colombia-un-estado-fallido>

118 POLY MARTÍNEZ, “Iván Duque: «Denunciaré al dictador Maduro ante la Corte Penal Internacional»,” ABC, May 07, 2018. http://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-ivan-duque-denunciare-dictador-maduro-an-te-corte-penal-internacional-201805060211_noticia.html



Honduras and Venezuela: Coup and Cocaine Air Bridge

Picture by Arnulfo Franco /AP Images

On the morning of Sunday, June 28, 2009, Honduran soldiers burst into the presidential palace in the country's capital, Tegucigalpa, rustled President Manuel Zelaya from his bed, and took away his cellular phone. As the army disarmed the presidential guard, the soldiers ushered Zelaya into a van and took him to an air force base where he was escorted onto an airplane that immediately left the country. Zelaya said he did not know where he was going until he arrived in San José, Costa Rica.

"I have been kidnapped," he told a packed press conference later that day from Costa Rica. "Violently, brutally kidnapped."¹¹⁹

What an independent truth commission would later call "a coup," was the culmination of months of political turmoil in the country.¹²⁰ Zelaya claimed he was simply holding a referendum, scheduled for that very June 28, to determine if Honduras should include a so-called "fourth ballot box" in the upcoming November national elections. The fourth ballot box would give voters the opportunity to ask for a constitutional assembly. Zelaya's rivals -- which included his own party in congress as well as three of four other political parties in the legislative branch, the Supreme Court, the military, the Catholic Church and the country's top business associations -- said he had ignored court rulings that made his referendum unconstitutional and was seeking to perpetuate his presidential term like his ally, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, had already done in Venezuela on numerous occasions. US officials later

¹¹⁹ CNN, "Golpe de estado en Honduras, Manuel Zelaya dando declaraciones (CNN) 1-5," 28 June 2009. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dg2urJDXCrY>

¹²⁰ Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación, "Para que los hechos no se repitan: Informe de la Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación," July 2011. Available at: <https://www.oas.org/es/sap/docs/DSDME/2011/CVR/Honduras%20-%20Informe%20CVR%20-%20RECOMENDACIONES.pdf>

said they had tried to stave off the removal of Zelaya, but the Honduras military had broken off talks on the day of Zelaya's ousting.¹²¹

To be sure, behind "the coup" in Honduras was the specter of Venezuela. During his presidential campaign in 2005, Zelaya had run as an able businessman and moderate reformist for the center-right Liberal Party (Partido Liberal – PL). After facing opposition for many of his proposals from his Liberal Party colleagues and the rival National Party (Partido Nacional – PN), Zelaya had turned to leftist coalitions and unions for support of his agenda. To the consternation of business elites, he raised wages of public and private sector employees, including increasing the minimum wage for all workers by 60 percent. And to the horror of the political elites, he joined Petrocaribe and the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas – ALBA), Chavez's regional economic and political alliance, which acted as a counterweight to the US-led trade agreements in the region.¹²²

The irony, of course, is that ALBA would have little impact on Honduras compared to the coup that ousted its one-time executive promotor. In fact, the chaos that followed Zelaya's removal from office opened the door to a period of unprecedented criminal activity in the country, which deeply altered Honduras' political, economic and social landscape. Like ALBA, it emanated from Venezuela and included Venezuelan official participation. Unlike ALBA, it involved some of the same political interests in Honduras that had sought to undermine Zelaya.

Chaos and Criminal Opportunity

Following the coup against Zelaya, Congress installed the head of the legislative body, Roberto Micheletti of the PL, as interim president. The international community, including the US government, rejected Micheletti's claim to power. Honduras was suspended from the Organization of American States, numerous countries withdrew their ambassadors, and no country recognized Micheletti's administration.¹²³

Political isolation grew as Micheletti declared numerous curfews, shut down opposition media, and dispatched army soldiers and police to quell the protests that had erupted following Zelaya's removal. These protests only intensified in September 2009, when Zelaya snuck back into the country via a mountain pass and installed himself in the Brazilian embassy in Tegucigalpa, which tried to negotiate a deal that would allow him to retake the presidency until the end of his term.¹²⁴ Micheletti

121 Elisabeth Malkin, "Honduras President is Ousted in a Coup," The New York Times, 28 June 2009. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/world/americas/29honduras.html>

122 Peter Meyer, "Honduras Political Crisis, June 2009 – January 2010," Congressional Research Service, 1 February 2010, pp. 1 – 2. Available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41064.pdf>

123 Meyer, op cit.

124 Elisabeth Malkin, "Ousted Leader Returns to Honduras," The New York Times, 21 September 2009. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/22/world/americas/22honduras.html>

responded by declaring a 45-day state of siege, which, among other things, suspended various constitutionally guaranteed liberties.

With each side entrenched, a stalemate emerged, even as presidential campaigning for the November election had begun. National Party candidate Porfirio Lobo won the vote, which saw 50 percent abstention. For some, it was an affirmation that Hondurans rejected Zelaya's and his allies' efforts to boycott the process and have him reinstated. But for others, it was *deja vu* -- an affirmation that the country's political and economic elites had turned the clock back to the 1980s with the help of the military by deposing a left-leaning president.

The US government only reinforced this belief when it recognized the Lobo administration. But the surreal political crisis had hamstrung US cooperation with Honduras, particularly in counternarcotic matters. In the days that followed Zelaya's ousting, the US government withdrew \$33 million in economic and military aid,¹²⁵ and it stopped working with the Honduran military and counter-drug forces.¹²⁶ At the same time, the Honduran military and police concentrated their forces in Tegucigalpa to deal with the political turmoil. The result was an opening for criminal organizations.

One such organization that took advantage was a Colombian-Venezuelan network that operated along the country's shared borders. It was run by Jose Evaristo Linares Castillo, a long-time associate of Daniel "El Loco" Barrera,¹²⁷ who, along with their other associate, Pedro Oliveira Guerrero, alias "Cuchillo,"¹²⁸ used their criminal networks in Colombia to facilitate the movement of cocaine through Venezuela.¹²⁹ While Barrera and Guerrero were associated with right-wing paramilitary groups, Linares was alleged to work with the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC).¹³⁰

The Linares network included a Colombian-born middle-aged former butcher named Gersain Viafara Mina.¹³¹ Viafara Mina was originally from Cali, Colombia

125 Meyer, *op cit*

126 US State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), "2011 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report," 3 March 2011. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2011/vol1/156361.htm#honduras>

127 Barrera was captured in Venezuela in 2012, deported to Colombia and extradited to the United States where he got a 35-year jail sentence for drug trafficking. See: Sofia Liemann, "Colombia's 'El Loco' Barrera Gets 35 years in US Prison," *InSight Crime*, 26 July 2016. Available at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/colombia-el-loco-barrera-gets-35-years-in-us-prison>

128 Guerrero was killed in a security forces raid in 2010. See: *InSight Crime*, "Pedro Oliverio Guerrero, alias 'Cuchillo,'" updated on 9 March 2017. Available at: <https://www.insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/pedro-olivero-guerrero-cuchillo/>

129 US Treasury Department, "Treasury Designates Head of Aviation Drug Smuggling Operation," 20 February 2013. Available at: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1857.aspx>

130 See the US Treasury Department's organizational chart for Linares here: https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/20130220_linares.pdf

131 Joshua Goodman, "AP Exclusive: Extradition may shed light on Venezuela military's role in drug trafficking," *Associated Press*, 31 October 2015. Available at: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/10/31/ap-exclusive-drug-extradition-may-shed-light-on-venezuela>

but had resettled in the border state of Apure, Venezuela.¹³² And by the time Zelaya was removed from power, Viafara Mina was managing cocaine loads moving from Venezuela through Honduras for Linares and others. In court papers filed by the US government charging Viafara Mina with drug trafficking, an affidavit by a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent says Viafara Mina coordinated numerous flights between the two countries.¹³³



Gersain Viafara Mina

“Viafara-Mina made arrangements to ship the cocaine from Apure, Venezuela to Central America through sources that supplied cocaine, aircraft, and clandestine airstrips to facilitate the cocaine smuggling operations,” the affidavit, written by agent Kimajah Brooks, reads.¹³⁴

These flights would leave Apure, fly due north towards the Dominican Republic, then take a sharp left along the 15th parallel, which entered Central America along the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. The route allowed these single and twin-engine aircraft to avoid Colombia-based radar detection. The flights were coming in waves, according to a foreign counternarcotic official who was working in Central America at the time and who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity because some of these cases are still making their way through the US justice system.¹³⁵ Each single engine carried, on average, 500 kilograms; each twin engine would take between 800 kilograms and a ton, the counternarcotic official said.

“Air tracks continued to proliferate in 2010,” the State Department’s annual assessment of drug trafficking in the region stated in 2011. “The Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) recorded 75 suspect air flights into Honduras during the year, compared with 54 in 2009 and 31 in 2008.”¹³⁶

The report said the majority were from Venezuela.¹³⁷ The foreign counternarcotic official was more specific. “If there were 100 [air tracks],” the official said, “probably 95 were coming Venezuela.”

The departure point also permitted Viafara Mina and his team to liaison with its support network, which, according to the affidavit, included the FARC and possibly

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ DEA Special Agent Kimajah Brooks, “Affidavit in Support of Request for Extradition,” in *United States of America v. Gersain Viafara-Mina*, 27 March 2015.

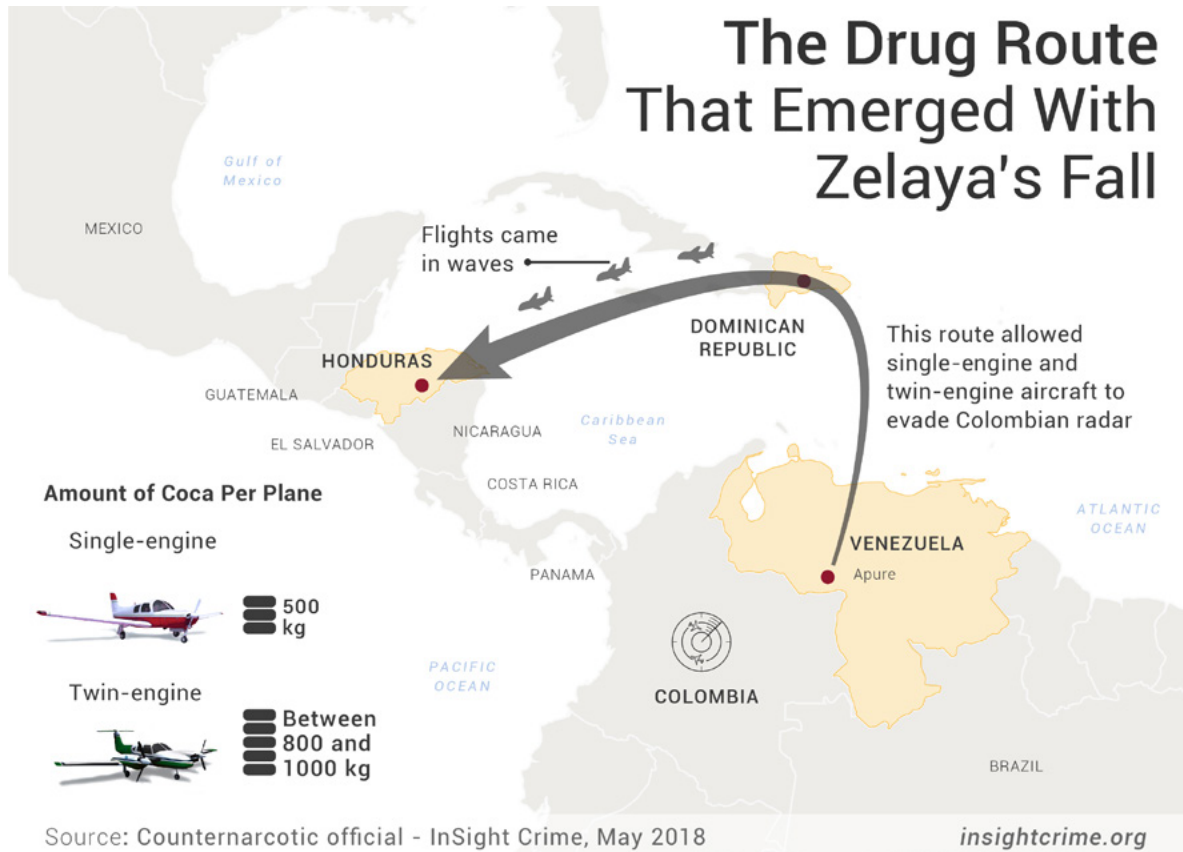
¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ InSight Crime interview with foreign counternarcotics official, 5 June 2017.

¹³⁶ INL, op. cit.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

portions of the Venezuelan military. The affidavit is specific on this first point but vague on the second. It says the FARC “provided security at the airstrip” in Apure.¹³⁸ But it only makes one specific mention of the Venezuelan authorities, citing an intercepted phone call in which Viafara Mina and a confidential informant identified only as “CC-1” discuss getting an aircraft that had crashed in Apure in May 2011, “from Venezuelan military custody.”¹³⁹

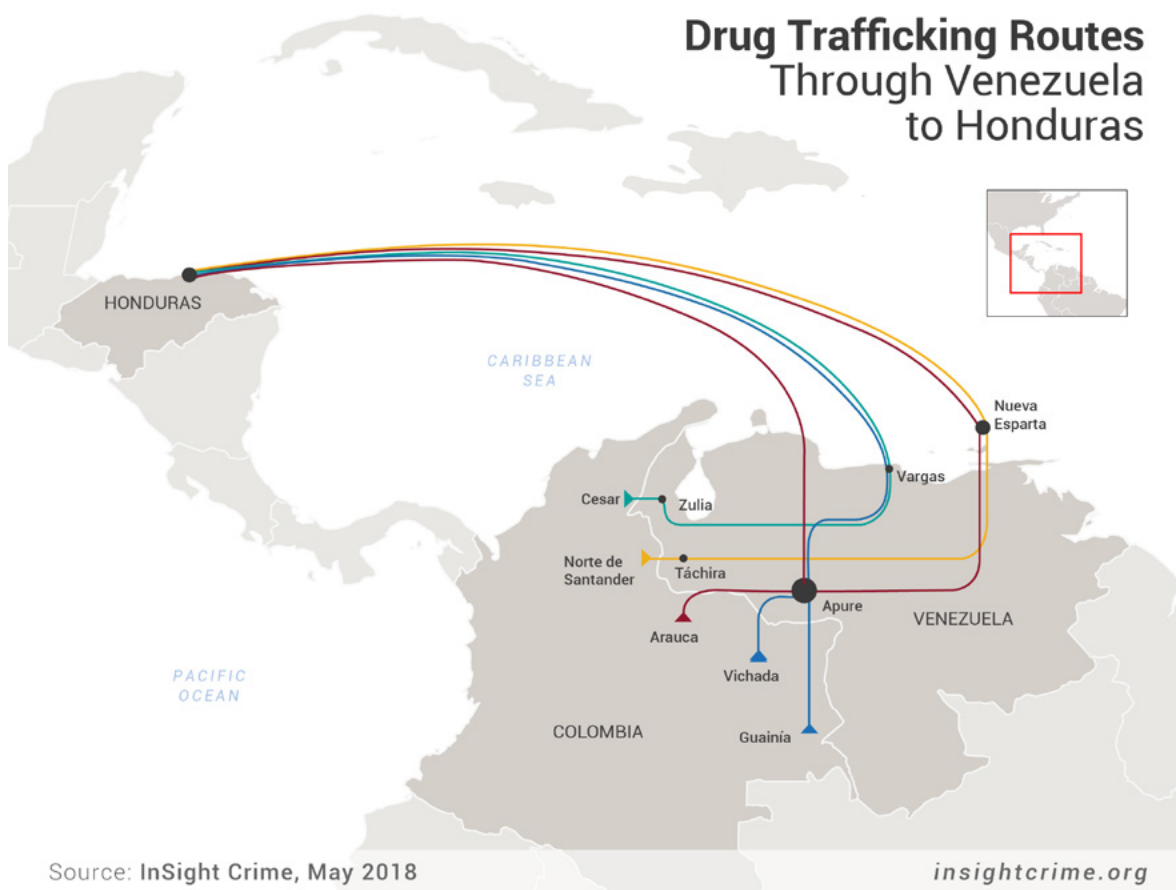


Other parts of the affidavit, however, are less specific. In one section, the DEA agent discusses meetings between Viafara Mina and “members of the military of a nearby country.” These military personnel, the affidavit says, “had access to transponder codes that could be used by pilots to fly in that country’s airspace and access clandestine airstrips there used in connection with the transportation of large quantities of cocaine.”¹⁴⁰ The limited geographic scope of Viafara Mina’s team made Venezuela the logical identity of this “nearby country,” but efforts to confirm this with the US Justice Department went unanswered.

¹³⁸ Brooks, op. cit.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.



Viafara Mina was captured in 2015, when he crossed into Colombia to purchase a light for his car.¹⁴¹ He was extradited that same year to the United States, leading to more ripple effects in relations between Venezuela and its neighbors.¹⁴² The extradition reportedly caused a commotion on the Venezuela–Colombia border, where Venezuelan authorities temporarily closed passage to Colombia in supposed retaliation for the extradition of Viafara Mina and another suspected Colombian trafficker,¹⁴³ whom *El Tiempo* identified as “a key witness against uniformed [Venezuelan] personnel connected to illegal interests.”¹⁴⁴

The Impact on Honduras

It was also 2015, the same year Viafara Mina was arrested, when one of the Honduran networks linked to the cocaine air bridge unraveled, taking with it the vast political

¹⁴¹ Goodman, op. cit.

¹⁴² *El Tiempo*, “Santos avala extraditar a ficha clave en narcotráfico desde Venezuela,” 28 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-16162641>

¹⁴³ Antonio María Delgado, “Maduro castiga a Colombia para proteger al Cartel de los Soles,” *El Nuevo Herald*, 27 August 2015. Available at: <http://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/mundo/america-latina/venezuela-es/article32595408.html>

¹⁴⁴ *El Tiempo*, “Extraditarán a empresario que destaparía narcotráfico en Venezuela,” 24 August 2015. Available at: <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-16279476>

and economic network it had created. Sometime in January 2015, Javier and Devis Rivera Maradiaga, the two brothers who had created a criminal group popularly known as the Cachiros, went to a Caribbean island and turned themselves into US authorities. They were charged with drug trafficking and quickly began cooperating with US authorities to lower their sentences and get some members of their family out of Honduras.

The Cachiros had emerged as cattle rustlers in the eastern state of Colón in 1970s. Early on, they had established ties with elite families, such as the Rosenthal clan, to whom they could sell their livestock.¹⁴⁵ The Rosenthal family had started with insurance companies in the 1930s, but later expanded into meat-packing, real estate, agriculture, cattle, dairy products, tourism, banking, television, telecommunications and other businesses.¹⁴⁶ By the 1970s, they were one of the wealthiest families in Honduras. By the late 1980s, Jaime Rosenthal Oliva, the family patriarch, was a prominent member of the Liberal Party and the country's vice president. By the 1990s, the family was one of the richest and most powerful in all of Central America.

Over that same time period, the Cachiros' criminal portfolio grew to include drug trafficking. The Cachiros were particularly adept at establishing networks that could receive and move cocaine from the coasts and clandestine airstrips of eastern Honduras to Guatemala. In 2004, following a tiff with their chief rival, the Cachiros went on a three-country search-and-destroy mission before catching up to him in a Honduras prison where they had him killed.

By 2009, the year Zelaya was unceremoniously removed from power, the Cachiros were one of the largest illicit transport groups in the country. They had teams of collaborators throughout the area that arranged for the aircraft landings, set up the lights along the clandestine airstrips, offloaded the illicit merchandise and moved it to a safe location. They also established local connections -- including with the police, local politicians and judicial authorities -- to ensure the drugs would not be confiscated, or if they were, that they could be recovered at a minimal cost.¹⁴⁷

The price the Cachiros charged for this service was roughly \$2,000 per kilogram of cocaine, the difference in cost of cocaine between Nicaragua and Guatemala. The sums of money generated by this business were immense, especially for a place like Honduras. Honduran authorities estimated that by the time they began confiscating the Cachiros' properties in 2013, the group had accumulated up to \$800 million in assets, or about half the total amount of the country's top export, coffee, during any given year.¹⁴⁸

145 Steven Dudley, "Why Elites Do Business with Criminals in Honduras," InSight Crime, 8 October 2015. Available at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/why-elites-do-business-with-criminals-in-honduras>

146 Steven Dudley, "Honduras Elites and Organized Crime: The Cachiros," InSight Crime, 9 April 2016. Available at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/honduras-elites-and-organized-crime-the-cachiros>

147 Ibid.

148 Charles Parkinson, "\$800 mn Cachiros Seizure 'End of Phase I': Honduras Police," InSight Crime, 26 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/800m-cachiros-seizure-end-of-phase-one-honduras-police>

As the Cachiros' illicit businesses grew, so did their connections and their ability to penetrate the highest levels of political life. By the early 2000s, the Cachiros had forged ties with the Rosenthals and other elites in banking, hotels, agribusiness and via a soccer team they helped finance. They used their legitimate businesses to get state contracts to build and maintain roads, as well as work on other infrastructure projects.¹⁴⁹ And they became business partners with the then-first family and possibly the future first family.

After the Rivera Maradiaga brothers handed themselves to US authorities, the consequences for these elites who had worked with the Cachiros came swiftly. In May 2015, in a sting coordinated with Haitian authorities, US authorities arrested Fabio Lobo, the son of former President Porfirio Lobo, the same man who had won the controversial November 2009 election following the ousting of Zelaya.¹⁵⁰ In October 2015, the US Justice Department indicted three members of the Rosenthal family and a lawyer for their business conglomerate on charges of money laundering related to corruption and drug trafficking networks.¹⁵¹



Fabio Lobo

Lobo's case was particularly damaging for his family. He was taken to the United States, where he pled guilty. At his sentencing hearing, Devis Rivera Maradiaga, the younger of the two Cachiros who had turned himself over to authorities in the Caribbean, testified in a New York City courtroom that Lobo's father had received bribes in the hundreds of thousands of dollars from the group in return for a promise that

the government would not extradite them to the United States, and that Fabio Lobo had worked closely with him to secure and transport at least two loads of cocaine from the Colón area to the Guatemalan border.¹⁵² In his testimony, Rivera Maradiaga also implicated the brother of current President Juan Orlando Hernández to secure money owed to one of his companies.¹⁵³

149 Dudley, "Honduras Elites and Organized Crime: The Cachiros," op. cit.

150 Loren Riesenfeld, "Son of Honduras Ex-President Arrested for Drug Trafficking," InSight Crime, 22 May 2015. Available at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/son-of-honduras-ex-president-arrested-for-drug-trafficking>

151 Steven Dudley, "US Releases Indictment Against Honduras Business Behemoth," InSight Crime, 7 October 2015. Available at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/us-releases-indictment-against-honduras-elite>

152 Steven Dudley, "Another Day, Another Damning Testimony of Elites by Honduras Trafficker," InSight Crime, 20 March 2017. Available at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/another-damning-testimony-elites-honduras-trafficker>

153 Ibid.

The Rivera Maradiga brothers were also linked to Venezuela’s “narco nephews” case. Supposedly the Cachiros were also connected to Efraín Antonio Campo Flores y Franqui Francisco Flores de Freitas, the nephews of Venezuela’s first lady, Cilia Flores.¹⁵⁴



Illustration: Elizabeth Williams

Although these links have not been proven, there was confirmation that a route via Honduras was envisaged, and that the relatives of the Venezuelan president did have links to Central American criminal groups. For more details on this case, see the chapter on the ‘Cartel of the Suns.’

What is clear is that the ouster of Zelaya led to the creation of one of the main cocaine routes from South America to the United States. This route depended on sophisticated drug trafficking structures in Venezuela, and a path of minimal resistance through Honduras.

154 El Herald, “Honduras: Los Cachiros estarían ligados a ‘Narcosobrinos’ de Nicolás Maduro”, 20 March 2017. Available at: <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/1054622-466/honduras-los-cachiros-estar%C3%ADan-ligados-a-los-narcosobrinos-de-nicol%C3%A1s-maduro>



The Dominican Republic and Venezuela: Cocaine Across the Caribbean

Picture by Ricardo Arduengo /AP Images

Drug traffickers have a problem exporting drugs from Venezuela. There are few commercial flights, little container shipping, no tourists and a collapsed fishing sector. But the Dominican Republic, 1,400 kilometers away, has it all.

As cocaine pours largely unopposed across the border from Colombia, with production in the Andean nation at a record high, so organized crime has developed one of the region's most prolific drug pipelines into the Dominican Republic. While there are some illegal flights that swing past, the lion's share of the drug streaks across the Caribbean in go-fast boats. The Dominican Republic offers the drug trade some of the Caribbean's biggest container ports, a lively tourist sector with commercial flights across the globe, and a booming property and banking sector, ready to wash narco-dollars.

The Caribbean route had rather fallen from favor since the heady days of the Medellín Cartel, when Pablo Escobar and his associates used the island of Norman's Cay in the Bahamas to refuel the planes laden with cocaine, bound for the United States. In the mid-1980s, over 75 percent of the cocaine seized on its way to the United States was taken in the Caribbean. By 2010, that number was down to 10 percent, and Central America was registering over 80 percent of seizures.¹⁵⁵

The reason for the resurgence in the Caribbean is explained by two factors: increased US investment in the drug war in Central America and Mexico, and the growing importance of Venezuela as a regional cocaine hub.

¹⁵⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Cocaine from South America to the United States," 2010. https://www.unodc.org/documents/toc/Reports/TOCTASouthAmerica/English/TOCTA_CACaribb_cocaine_SAmerica_US.pdf p. 31

The United States has dedicated resources via the Mérida Initiative in Mexico, which began in 2008, and the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), which has been pumping money principally into the Northern Triangle nations of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. This has also had an effect on the cocaine air bridge from Venezuela to Honduras, pushing more drug consignments onto the high seas of the Caribbean. (For more information on this, see our investigation “Honduras and Venezuela: Coup and Cocaine Air Bridge.”). While the United States set up the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative in 2010, this has seen far fewer resources dedicated and attention paid, failing to curb the growing cocaine trade via the Caribbean. The US State Department has identified the Dominican Republic as one of the principal transit nations for cocaine shipments headed to the United States, with maritime trafficking, involving the use of go-fast boats and commercial containers, as the primary method of smuggling drugs to and from the island.¹⁵⁶ It was also the country most frequently identified by European agencies as the transit nation for cocaine shipments destined for Europe.”¹⁵⁷

Why the Dominican Republic?

The Dominican Republic (DR) sits in the heart of the Caribbean. It is the region’s most populous nation with 10.5 million inhabitants and has its strongest economy. Up to five million tourists enter the country through the international airports and the dozens of cruise liners that pull up to its ports every year. From a trade point of view, the Dominican Republic’s six ports make it a regional hub for container shipping. Some of these ports can handle the “neo-Panamax” ships, the largest size able to negotiate the Panama Canal.

Santo Domingo is one of the oldest, as well as the largest, cities in the Caribbean, with its metropolitan area registering a population of almost three million. It boasts world-class hotels, resorts, restaurants and casinos, everything an aspiring narco needs. The Dominican Republic has far and away the biggest economy and GDP in the Caribbean, along with a booming property market, thus offering plenty of money laundering opportunities.

For departing cocaine shipments, the Dominican Republic has a plethora of different routes to offer. For the US market, there is Puerto Rico, just 381 kilometers away. As a US territory, if smugglers can get cocaine onto this island, it makes for an easier ride to the mainland, being inside the US customs barriers. Similar dynamics apply with the French territories of Martinique and Guadeloupe for shipments into

¹⁵⁶ United States Department of State, “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report,” March 2017. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268025.pdf>

¹⁵⁷ United Nations, “International Narcotics Control Board - Report 2016,” March 2, 2017. https://www.incb.org/documents/Publications/AnnualReports/AR2016/English/AR2016_E_ebook.pdf

mainland Europe.¹⁵⁸ British overseas territories like Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, as well as former colonies like Jamaica, are springboards into the United Kingdom. Yet thanks to linguistic advantages and a significant Dominican diaspora, Spain is still the principal entry point into Europe for drugs leaving the Dominican Republic.¹⁵⁹ Spain has traditionally been the European nation with the highest cocaine seizures.¹⁶⁰

Another reason the Dominican Republic is a preferred transit nation for cocaine is the increasing sophistication of the native drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). Dominican criminal structures used to act principally as transporters for Colombian and Mexican organizations. Those days are gone. Dominican DTOs have moved into the big league. Nowadays, the Dominicans are buying cocaine in Venezuela, contracting Venezuelans to make the hazardous journey across the Caribbean, then taking direct control of loads as they hit the island. Dominican reach does not stop here. Their DTOs can move drugs up to the eastern seaboard of the United States. There, a large Dominican diaspora sells the drugs, even going down to retail level. This means that the Dominicans now control a large number of links in the drug chain, and are able to maximize their profits from each kilogram of drugs. Dominicans, working with Colombian and Mexican cartels, are also acting as intermediaries for international mafias looking to secure large cocaine loads. International intelligence agencies in Santo Domingo have flagged the growing presence of Russian organized crime figures.¹⁶¹

US law enforcement sources admitted to the growing importance and reach of Dominican DTOs.

“We have at the moment four to five cases of high-level Dominican crews moving significant quantities of drugs into the mainland United States,” stated one source on condition of anonymity.

The Dominican Republic is immensely attractive to Venezuelans looking to flee their collapsing homeland, or stash their money beyond the reach of hyperinflation and government expropriation. The culture on this Caribbean island is a lot like that in Venezuela, so they feel right at home.

158 The Economist, “Full circle - An old route regains popularity with drugs gangs,” May 24, 2014. <https://www.economist.com/news/americas/21602680-old-route-regains-popularity-drugs-gangs-full-circle>

159 Ross Eventon and Dave Bewley-Taylor, “An overview of recent changes in cocaine trafficking routes into Europe,” European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2016. http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/2373/downloads/EDMR2016%20Background%20paper_Eventon%20and%20Bewley-Taylor_Cocaine%20trafficking%20to%20Europe.pdf p. 5

160 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, “European Drug Report,” 2017. <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/4541/TDAT17001ENN.pdf>

161 InSight Crime interview, April 18, 2017, Santo Domingo.



Wealthy Venezuelans have long invested in vacation homes and other properties in the Dominican Republic. As they sought to protect their assets from possible seizure back home, investment increased. Between 2010 and 2015, Venezuelan investment in the Dominican Republic totaled \$5 billion, principally in tourism resorts, residential and commercial real estate, as well as in shopping malls.¹⁶² But few Venezuelans actually took up residence on the island. A 2012 census of immigrants in the Dominican Republic found just 3,434 Venezuela-born persons living in the country, 12 years after Hugo Chávez came to power.¹⁶³

However, that dynamic changed after President Nicolás Maduro took office and the country was plunged into an economic crisis in 2013. The first to arrive in the Dominican Republic were upper- and middle-class Venezuelans fleeing the uncertainty. They generally established medium-sized service companies and got jobs as professionals. But lately, the stream has turned into a flood. Many of the later arrivals have entered the informal economy, selling Venezuelan maize cakes known as “arepas” and fast food on street corners, engage in sex work or driving taxis. The arrival of Venezuelans through Dominican airports jumped 40 percent in

¹⁶² Listin Diario, “Venezolanos invierten más de US\$5,000 millones en RD,” July 8, 2016. <http://www.listindiario.com/economia/2016/07/08/426135/venezolanos-invierten-mas-de-us-5000-mil-lones-en-rd>

¹⁶³ Oficina Nacional de Estadística, accessed February 12, 2018. [http://www.one.gob.do/Estadisticas/218/encuesta-nacional-de-inmigrantes-\(ENI\)](http://www.one.gob.do/Estadisticas/218/encuesta-nacional-de-inmigrantes-(ENI))

2016 compared to the year before, for a total of 142,540 people, although there is no clear data on how many went for tourism purposes and how many stayed.

In an attempt to stem the flow, in December 2016, the Dominican government announced new restrictions on Venezuelans arriving as tourists, such as proof of financial means or paid hotel reservations.¹⁶⁴ A foundation that helps Venezuelan immigrants in the Dominican Republic estimated that there may as many as 200,000 Venezuelans residents now.¹⁶⁵

Several Dominican sources pointed out that Venezuelans linked to the Maduro government are buying up luxury villas in top-notch resorts such as Casa de Campo in La Romana, possibly purchased with ill-gotten gains from the drug trade or the kleptocratic sacking of state coffers.¹⁶⁶

US sources stated that Venezuelan criminal structures are now present in the Dominican Republic, working with their Dominican, Mexican and Colombian counterparts.

“They are actually in control of major organizations, orchestrating the money laundering, the movement of the cocaine, transport, even down to distribution,” said a Caribbean-based US law enforcement source.

Add to this high levels of corruption among the political class and the security forces and the Dominican Republic has the potential to be a drug trafficking paradise.

Routes From Venezuela to the Dominican Republic

As the crow flies, the Dominican Republic is about 1,400 kilometers from Venezuela’s northern coast. The drug traffickers are using this direct route, sending go-fast boats laden with up to a ton of cocaine from the Guajira and Paraguaná peninsulas. The Paraguaná peninsula in particular, located just 27 kilometers from the island of Aruba, still has infrastructure capable of building and maintaining boats, used not just to ferry tourists, but to feed a booming contraband trade between Aruba and the Venezuelan mainland.

Another route taken by boats laden with drugs, is island hopping across the Caribbean archipelago. There are 834 kilometers from Venezuela to Trinidad and Tobago, and from there, islands line up all the way to Cuba, among them Grenada, Martinique

164 Al Momento, “República Dominicana endurece las condiciones de entrada a venezolanos,” December 3, 2016. <http://almomento.net/república-dominicana-endurece-las-condiciones-de-entrada-a-venezolanos/267786>

165 La Tercera, “El éxodo venezolano apunta a República Dominicana,” January 14, 2017. <http://www.latercera.com/noticia/exodo-venezolano-apunta-republica-dominicana/>

166 InSight Crime interview, Dominican politician and lawyer, Santo Domingo, April 19, 2017

and St. Kitts and Nevis. Then you hit the big islands starting with Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, which the Dominican Republic and Haiti share, and finally Jamaica, before hitting the biggest island in the Caribbean, Cuba.

The Venezuela-Dominican Republic Drug Links

Perhaps the most emblematic recent Venezuelan drug scandal is that of the “narco nephews.” Francisco Flores de Freitas and Efraín Campos were convicted in November 2016 by a court in New York for conspiring to traffic 800 kilograms of cocaine into the United States.¹⁶⁷

They are the nephews of Venezuela’s First Lady, Cilia Flores. They were originally arrested in Haiti, next door to the Dominican Republic, where they had been flown in a plane piloted by a member of the Venezuela National Guard. Once there, they intended to receive a down payment for a drug deal, which was going to involve cocaine allegedly provided by the largely demobilized Colombian rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC). The Dominican connection was proven with a raid on a mansion owned by Francisco Flores at a luxury Dominican resort property, where 127 kilograms of cocaine and 10 kilograms of heroin were pulled from a 135-foot yacht named “The Kingdom,” docked alongside.¹⁶⁸

At the end 2016, 10 drug traffickers were captured on a Lear jet arriving in the Dominican Republic carrying 450 kilograms of cocaine. The aircraft belonged to Aeroquest, a company owned by José Gregorio Vielma Mora, governor of the Venezuelan state of Táchira on the border with Colombia, and a member of the ruling United Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela).¹⁶⁹

In mid-2016, a captain in the Venezuelan military, Yazenky Antonio Lamas Rondón, also connected to First Lady Cilia Flores,¹⁷⁰ was arrested in Colombia on a US indictment, accused of having conducted more than a hundred narco flights in the past decade, many to the Dominican Republic. Airplanes were sent without cargo from Mexico to the Venezuelan state of Apure, which borders Colombia. The planes were received by Lamas, who then loaded them with cocaine and dispatched them to the Dominican Republic, Haiti and the Bahamas.¹⁷¹ Lamas was extradited to the United States in July 2017.

167 Venezuela Investigative Unit, “Venezuela’s ‘Narco Nephews’ Case Hints at Govt Complicity in Drug Trade,” InSight Crime, November 21, 2016. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/venezuela-narco-nephews-conviction-suggests-govt-complicity-in-drug-trade>

168 James Hider, “Maduro’s nephew had 300lb of drugs at home,” The Times, November 17 2015. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/maduros-nephew-had-300lb-of-drugs-at-home-tfd50g0p7k2>

169 Arianna Romero, “Avión detenido en República Dominicana con 450kg de cocaína esta vinculado con Vielma Mora,” Diario Contraste, December 12, 2016. <http://www.diariocontraste.com/2016/12/avion-detenido-en-republica-dominicana-con-450kg-de-cocaina-esta-vinculado-con-vielma-mora/#>

170 Semana, “Yazenky Antonio Lamas: una extradición clave,” July 1, 2017. <https://www.semana.com/confidenciales/articulo/extraditan-a-yazenky-antonio-lamas/530838>

171 El Tiempo. “Piloto del ‘cartel de los Soles’ habría buscado negocio con bacrim”. Junio 13 de 2016. <http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/justicia/cargos-a-los-que-se-enfrenta-piloto-del-cartel-de-los-soles/16619650>

Venezuela's director of Interpol, Eliecer García Torrealba, was arrested by Venezuelan authorities and charged, in April 2016, with organizing the transport of a shipment of cocaine to the Dominican Republic. García Torrealba allegedly used his post to coordinate the loading and takeoff of a plane from the airport in the city of Barquisimeto, the capital of the state of Lara. Five police agents and three airport security guards were also involved in prepping the Cessna to depart with cocaine aboard. Venezuelan citizens Juan Lanz Díaz and Pablo Cárdenas, were alleged to have financed the operation.¹⁷² Cárdenas was also linked to another shipment of 349 kilograms of cocaine that were seized at the airport in La Romana, in the Dominican Republic, in March 2016.

In April 2015, four members of Venezuela's National Guard and a prominent businessman were arrested in Venezuela in connection to a 450-kilogram shipment of cocaine flown in a private jet from Venezuela to the Dominican Republic. The drugs were seized by Dominican anti-drug police. The private jet's five passengers -- all Venezuelan nationals -- were taken into custody in the Dominican Republic, as were four members of the Dominican military, including a captain and a lieutenant.¹⁷³

Verny Troncoso, the lead prosecutor in charge of narcotic cases for the province of Santo Domingo, said that every week since late October 2016, officials have arrested three to four Venezuelans arriving at the country's airports with drugs either ingested or hidden in suitcases.¹⁷⁴ They all arrive on a daily *Acerca* flight direct from Caracas to Santo Domingo's Las Americas airport.

"It has broken all records," Troncoso told InSight Crime, noting that authorities had never previously detected mules from Venezuela. Venezuelans now account for 90 percent of the drug mules captured in the Dominican Republic, according to one source in the Dominican Republic's drug control agency (Dirección Nacional de Control de Drogas – DNCD).¹⁷⁵ On average, Venezuelans who have ingested drugs bring in a kilogram of cocaine, or if they are carrying it in a suitcase, an average of five kilograms, said the same source.

During questioning, several of the mules told Troncoso they were taken over the border from Venezuela to Colombia to load up with drugs (either ingested or packed in their luggage). They then flew out of the international airport in Caracas. The drive to Caracas from Catatumbo in Colombia, where coca is booming, is more than 10 hours, and it takes a similar time from the Colombian Guajira -- too long for mules to risk having the drugs in their stomachs. This could mean that they are boarding domestic flights in Venezuela's border states, undetected or unmolested, and making connections to the Dominican Republic through Caracas' international airport.

172 CNN Español, "Accusing a jefe de Interpol Venezuela por narcotráfico y asociación para delinquir," April 4 2016. <http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2016/04/04/acusan-al-jefe-de-interpol-venezuela-de-dirigir-trafico-de-droga-a-republica-dominicana/#more-274050>

173 InSight Crime. "Venezuela investigates jet plane drug bust in Dominican Republic," April 1, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/venezuela-investigates-jet-plane-drug-bust-in-dominican-republic>

174 InSight Crime interview, April 19, 2017, Santo Domingo.

175 InSight Crime interview, Capitán de Navío José Manuel Cabrera Ulloa, April 18, 2017, Santo Domingo

The mule operation is largely run by Colombians and Dominicans residing in Venezuela, according to Troncoso. Most of the mules caught at the airport in the Dominican Republic said they were obliged to carry the drugs due to the desperate economic situation at home, Troncoso said. He also said the same dynamic lay behind a spike in Venezuelans crewing go-fast drug launches. Current indications show that between three and four out of every five go-fast boats arriving near the Dominican Republic include Venezuelan crewmembers.¹⁷⁶

The scale of the maritime route between Venezuela and the Dominican Republic is hard to estimate, but speaking to law enforcement officials from the United States, the United Kingdom and the Dominican Republic, we built up a picture of around three go-fast boats coming into Dominican waters every week, carrying between 700 kilograms and a ton of cocaine. Using these figures, one could estimate that the maritime route alone from Venezuela is bringing in 9.5 tons of cocaine a month, which is 115 tons a year, to the Caribbean island. On top of this are the “contaminated” containers passing through the Dominican Republic’s ports.

Vice Admiral Félix Pimental, the head of the DNCD, told InSight Crime that at least 120 tons of cocaine were passing through the island every year, a huge percentage of which goes to Europe.¹⁷⁷ This is an extraordinary amount of drugs, equivalent to about 15 percent of annual global cocaine production.¹⁷⁸

The average amount that Dominican organized crime charged traffickers to transit the island is \$1,400 per kilogram. That would mean that Dominican organized crime is making over \$200 million a year. The real figure is sure to be much higher, as in many cases the Dominicans are owners of the cocaine shipments and are selling each kilogram for more than \$25,000 in the United States or \$35,000 in Europe. They are also handling a significant flow of heroin and fentanyl passing across the island.

The Future

Even if President Maduro is defeated in the upcoming elections, the conditions in Venezuela are unlikely to change quickly. This means that the drug pipeline to the Dominican Republic is likely to grow and strengthen, certainly in the short term. While US authorities like the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) are well aware of the flow of narcotics, there is little they can do, as they are not officially present in Venezuela and receive zero cooperation from Venezuelan authorities.

Interdiction across the Caribbean is tough. The go-fast boats usually depart at dusk, and then as the sun rises, they throw blue-green tarpaulins over the boats, making them all but invisible. When darkness falls again they continue their journey. When they get near the Dominican Republic, they are met by Dominican traffickers at sea,

176 InSight Crime interview, international law enforcement agent, Santo Domingo, April 20, 2017.

177 InSight Crime interview, Vice Admiral Félix Pimental, April 20, 2017, Santo Domingo

178 United States Department of State, “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report,” March 2017. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268025.pdf>

who transfer the loads. The mainly Venezuelan crews then return back to the South American mainland. And the process is repeated.

What is interesting is that the vast majority of cocaine seizures occur on the way into the Dominican Republic. This means that once on the island, organized crime is able to move and export drug shipments with relative ease and security. This suggests high-level corruption in local law enforcement, the national anti-drug agency and the port authorities, perhaps including political top cover. Almost all sources consulted agreed on this, but were reluctant to go on the record.

The longer this cocaine pipeline remains active, the more sophisticated and powerful Dominican and Venezuelan DTOs will become. The Dominican Republic is no longer just a transshipment point, but a venue where international mafias can purchase large drug consignments. This means the Dominican Republic will evolve as a cosmopolitan drug-trafficking hub, with growing Venezuelan criminal presence. There is already evidence that DTOs here are unrestricted by national boundaries, have partners from many different nations, and are able to change their smuggling patterns and modus operandi to avoid law enforcement detection.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ US Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, "2017 National Drug Threat Assessment," October 2017. https://www.dea.gov/docs/DIR-040-17_2017-NDTA.pdf



Venezuela and El Salvador: Exporting Aid and Corruption

Foto por Natacha Pisarenko /AP Images

José Luis Merino is one of the most powerful figures in El Salvador's governing political party and played a key role in the founding of ALBA Petróleos, a subsidiary of Venezuela's state-owned oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela S.A., whose business network has made many Salvadoran elites wealthy but also has ties to corruption and other crimes.

Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PdVSA), which reported \$2.5 billion in revenues in 2015, has supported a network that made many close to the Salvadoran regime wealthy at alarming rates and has served as the basis for expanding the Petrocaribe oil alliance model. However, it has also worked in close collaboration with firms that have been investigated for corruption and money laundering.

Petrocaribe is a geopolitical and economic initiative started by Hugo Chávez in 2005 to strengthen regional alliances through the oil trade. El Salvador's chapter in the history of the alliance illustrates how funding for PdVSA fossil fuel imports was used to expand the economic and political power of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional – FMLN), El Salvador's current ruling political party.

The relationship between ALBA Petróleos, PdVSA and the FMLN -- and its influence on El Salvador's politics -- has lasted for a decade. However, in recent months, the presence of Merino, alias "Commander Ramiro," and the importance of ALBA in the Salvadoran economy have waned due to funds from Venezuela drying up amid its economic crisis and Merino losing the power he once had in the FMLN following unfavorable local election results.

Founded in 2006 as a joint public-private venture, the public funding for ALBA came from Salvadoran mayors to whom Venezuela loaned millions of dollars between 2010 and 2015. InSight Crime has had access to ALBA's founding documents, which show

that PdVSA is the majority owner with 60 percent of the company's shares, the other 40 percent belonging to 18 mayors in the FMLN party.

The documents also address the subsidiary's business transactions with PdVSA: half of the oil shipments are paid against product delivery, and the other half are financed through 22-year loans with interest rates between one and two percent.

During the past decade, Merino -- currently a member of the FMLN's political commission and deputy foreign affairs minister in the party-run administration -- was the primary middleman between the FMLN and the Chavista regime; he was in charge of maintaining ties between PdVSA and the Salvadoran and Venezuelan governments.

When the FMLN took power in El Salvador in 2009, political relations with Venezuela had already been established through ALBA, but they go back even further. Former President Hugo Chávez often sent friendly messages to the FMLN and its leadership from Caracas.

Now, US legislators are pointing to Merino's connections with Venezuela and PdVSA as evidence of possible criminal activities.

"Multiple open sources reports indicate that financial structures controlled by Mr. Merino, currently the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, have acquired hundreds of millions of dollars in unexplained wealth while helping the FARC guerrillas in Colombia, corrupt elements of the Venezuelan government and other criminal groups move funds to safe harbor," states a letter dated June 19, 2017.¹⁸⁰ It was signed by 14 members of US Congress on both sides of the aisle and asks the Treasury Department to open an investigation into Merino under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act.

The recurring suspicion in Washington is that some of the funds mentioned in the letter have been moved using companies belonging to ALBA.

While José Luis' brother, Sigfredo Merino, is listed as ALBA's founder in company documents, Commander Ramiro has always controlled it from behind the scenes as an advisor or middleman. José Luis has also served as the public face of ALBA.

Two sources from US security forces have told InSight Crime that both the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have named José Luis Merino as a "person of interest" in investigations related to ALBA Petróleos. In conjunction with these investigations, Sigfredo Merino was temporarily detained at George Bush International Airport in Houston, Texas in February.¹⁸¹

When El Salvador's Superintendency of Competition (Superintendencia de Competencia – SC) conducted a routine investigation into ALBA in 2013 after it

180 Héctor Silva Ávalos, "US Congress Members Request Investigation of El Salvador Official Linked to Organized Crime," InSight Crime, June 23, 2017.

181 Héctor Silva Ávalos, "Closing In on El Salvador Cabinet Member, US Detains His Brother," InSight Crime, March 26, 2018.

requested permits to build eight gas stations, it was José Luis Merino who publicly spoke on behalf of the company. “We are prepared to accept the sanctions we deserve,” said the FMLN party leader.

It was also Commander Ramiro who faced the public in 2013 amid complaints from the National Private Enterprise Association (Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada – ANEP) on ALBA Petróleos’ rapid economic growth. “There is some concern because ALBA Petróleos was founded seven years ago with \$1 million, and now it has \$400 million -- let me correct myself -- \$800 million,” said Merino.

By 2015, ALBA Petróleos owned 10 companies involved in a range of industries, from aviation food sales to importing medicine, providing finance services and, of course, fossil fuel distribution. That year, the company reported \$1.1 billion in revenues.

Explaining ALBA Petróleos’ rapid earnings growth to the public, unusual in an economy as small as El Salvador’s, Merino and other representatives cited new international investments, growth in the oil industry and the diversification of its portfolio. However, the argument that an expanding oil industry fueled the company’s growth does not pass muster because the conglomerate’s most prosperous years, 2012 to 2015, coincide with decreases in oil prices, especially 2014 and 2015, when they fell by half.

Besides the 2013 investigations for alleged monopoly practices, to date, there have not been investigations in El Salvador into companies with ties to ALBA Petróleos, despite the fact that some have declared bankruptcy or fired their workers without the required transparency.

For example, Veca, an airline founded in 2014 whose fleet contains only two used planes purchased from Cyprus Airways, fired all its employees in 2017, in some cases without paying them the benefits required by law. ALBA contributed \$60 million in financing to create the airline.¹⁸²

Financial documents from ALBA Petróleos show that, altogether, the conglomerate almost always had more debt than earnings; only 2013 and 2014 showed surpluses. The debt is only one part of its liabilities and is linked to loans made to or from off-shore companies established in Panama by Sigfredo Merino, Ramiro’s brother, according to Washington, DC consulting company IBI, which conducted an analysis in 2016 for the US government. In one case, ALBA owes \$150 million to Atlantic Pacific Logistic, while ALBA Petróleos El Salvador (APES), a mirror company founded in Panama, owes ALBA \$165 million.¹⁸³

Although there are no formal inquiries against ALBA regarding its finances, the Salvadoran Attorney General’s Office is currently conducting an investigation

182 Alberto López, “Despega VECA Airlines con inyección de US\$60 millones de ALBA petróleos El Salvador,” *Estrategia y Negocios*, April 9, 2015.

183 Efren Lemus, “Alba tiene ocho offshore en Panamá y así reduce impuestos en El Salvador,” *El Faro*, April 11, 2016.

against José Luis Merino for allegations that he helped the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) to traffic weapons and drugs. The investigation started in 2008, after the Colombian Attorney General's Office gave El Salvador certified letters written by FARC leader Raúl Reyes -- killed that March -- in which he identifies "Commander Ramiro" as one of the FARC's middlemen for missiles and other weapons.

But the most compromising investigation is political in nature and is happening now in the US Congress. The House Committee on Foreign Affairs began to scrutinize the businesses of Salvadoran politicians after Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) made accusations in 2016 of links to drug trafficking and money laundering.¹⁸⁴

A House Committee attendee confirmed with InSight Crime that the legislative body planned to send a letter to the State Department suggesting that investigations into José Luis Merino and his finances be expanded to determine whether he has committed financial crimes that affect the United States. The source, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, stated that the letter will have the support of both Democratic and Republican legislators.

"The idea is for the administration to be able to track the money, that it search through Merino's finances because it is clear that there could be funds from Venezuela and the FARC," said a former Republican official in the capital who currently works as a congressional consultant on issues related to Latin America and agreed to speak to InSight Crime on the condition of anonymity.

After Rubio's remarks, Salvadoran Attorney General Douglas Meléndez announced that he had reopened the 2008 investigation into the FARC files. So far, however, no progress in the case has been made public.

Albaquetzal and Hydroil: Regional Expansion Initiatives

"We were at the heart of popular victories ... [and it] highlighted the rebelliousness of the Latin American peoples against the impositions of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and other measures the multilateral agencies had imposed using their power and the capacities of their neoliberal model," said José Luis Merino on El Salvador's TVX television channel. It was a perfect marriage of the ALBA and Chavista scripts regarding the evolution of the FMLN since it came to power in 2009.¹⁸⁵

Merino and his role in companies financed with Venezuelan money awakened a lot of suspicion in Washington towards the end of former US President Barak Obama's

184 Héctor Silva Ávalos, "El Salvador FMLN Leader Investigated for Drug Trafficking," InSight Crime, July 5, 2016.

185 Canal TVX interview, José Luis Merino, May 31, 2017, at <https://www.facebook.com/ExpresaTVX/videos/649880308541624/>

administration, not only for the similarities between Merino's rhetoric and Chavista ideology, but also for his potential links to organized crime in the region.

In addition to Merino's direct or indirect participation in ALBA Petr6leos' financing of other companies and his alleged long-term relationship with the FARC, in 2016, questions arose regarding his connections to the Salvadoran businessman Enrique Rais, whose planes were detained in the United States for alleged ties to drug trafficking. Rais is currently a fugitive from corruption charges in El Salvador that also involve former Attorney General Luis Mart6nez.¹⁸⁶

In August 2017, in cases not involving ALBA Petr6leos or Merino, El Salvador's Attorney General ordered the arrests of Rais, ex-Attorney General Mart6nez and a dozen attorneys and former public officials for crimes including corruption and alleged fabrication of evidence. The following January, after a high court denied an order for conditional release, Rais and other suspects fled the country.

The relationship between Rais and Merino is key for understanding how ALBA Petr6leos engaged with established companies and actors as well as those suspected of corruption to advance the political and commercial aims of ALBA Petr6leos, which they subsequently used to move money in El Salvador.¹⁸⁷

In a recent interview, Merino admitted he was a friend of Rais. "I know him. He's my friend. We've talked about lots of things. We are not partners in anything, absolutely anything," said the political leader.

While it is true that no legal documents exist in which the names Jos6 Luis Merino and Enrique Rais appear together, there are many establishing business deals between FMLN or ALBA Petr6leos and Rais or his relatives.

A prime example of how Merino attempted to take his business ventures to new heights through his connection with Rais is the company named Hydroil, which belongs to Rais. A deal was made in which Hydroil would supply ALBA Petr6leos with some of the Venezuelan oil it purchased.

On January 11, 2011, Hydroil agreed to supply and sell 8.4 million gallons of diesel to ALBA Petr6leos for \$2.58 per gallon on the condition that ALBA open an "irrevocable credit card ... transferable against shipping documents in favor of Hydroil S.A of C.V.," a deal totaling \$21.6 million.¹⁸⁸

Six months earlier, on July 7, 2010, Rais had written to a group of subordinates who were in Kosovo exploring the acquisition of companies to purchase "product [to sell] to ALBA Petr6leos." According to the emails between Rais and his employees, to which InSight Crime had access, communication between Merino and Rais served to secure business during the 2009 to 2014 administration of former Salvadoran

186 H6ctor Silva 6valos and C6sar Castro Fagoaga, "Prominent El Salvador Businessman Tied to Suspected Drug Planes," April 28, 2016.

187 H6ctor Silva 6valos, "El titiritero," Revista Factum, November 2015.

188 H6ctor Silva 6valos, "Courting El Salvador's Puppet Master," InSight Crime, December 29, 2015.

President Mauricio Funes, also of the FMLN party, and to attempt to expand business into Honduras and Nicaragua.

Rais' emails to his partners reveal the aim of his relationship with Merino. On February 23, 2011, Rais writes to them, "Sorry, I've been involved in political issues. Ramiro has been in Venezuela. He still hasn't given me the date. I'm leaving for Washington." And on September 1 of the same year, he sent the following message: "I'm with the president [Funes] now. And Ramiro. We're at the last stage ... I'm working on the new project for Honduras. He [Ramiro] is traveling with me."

Communication from earlier years, such as this message from February 8, 2010, reveals similar activity: "As I mentioned, we visited the woman in Managua [likely referring to first lady Rosario Murillo] with all her advisors. Yes, we've been in negotiations with them through Ramiro. We're invited to participate." And there was another on March 13, 2010: "This morning, at 10 a.m., I'm going to meet with Ramiro and the Finance Minister."

The relationship between Merino and Rais grew to encompass multiple companies with ties to both men and networks with political leaders from the FMLN or their relatives, all of it resulting in important contracts.

This is evident in a contract signed by ALBA Petróleos and Vifasa, another company owned by Rais, for the construction of an access route for oil tankers in the port of the Salvadoran city of Acajutla, a deal worth more than \$1.3 million. More important than the amount of the deal, though, are the signatures on its pages: Rais' is accompanied by those of ALBA Petróleos Vice President Luz Estrella Rodríguez and Orestes Ortiz Quinamar, the notary who legally certified the contract. These names show just how tight the relationships are between ALBA Petróleos, Merino, the FMLN, Rais' businesses and their governments. (Luz Estrella Rodríguez was mayor of Apopa, El Salvador, representing the FMLN party. Ortiz Quintanar is the son of Orestes Ortiz, who happens to be José Luis Merino's right-hand man and the current minister of agriculture under President Salvador Sánchez Cerén.)

These connections have helped Merino not only to make business advancements, but also to extend ALBA Petróleos' sphere of influence into other countries. For example, in Guatemala, he started Albaquetzal, a mirror company under ALBA Petróleos, with the help of the Rais business group.

Albaquetzal was registered on December 7, 2009, in Guatemala with company headquarters located at Calle 2, #15-18 in Zona 13 of Guatemala City. The owner of Albaquetzal is listed as Lifi Consulting Group, a company based in Panama whose legal control was given to Rais in 2013.

Albaquetzal is authorized to conduct commercial transactions and imports and exports, especially in the agricultural, fossil fuel and aviation sectors, including with ALBA Petróleos. Plus, just like ALBA Petróleos, Albaquetzal has used attorneys based in Panama who have been involved with the "Panama Papers" scandal for their role in creating off-shore companies.

When Albaquetzal was established in Guatemala, its partners were José Ismael Soto Orantes and Rony Armando Martínez Iboy, Guatemalans also mentioned in the Panama Papers, whom Rais met by way of Ramiro, according to what a Salvadoran investigator who has probed Rais' activities told InSight Crime.

In the case of ALBA Petróleos, according to an investigation published by digital media outlet El Faro, it was through law firm Infante & Pérez Almillano that the conglomerate created its various offshore companies in Panama, among them Alba Petróleos de El Salvador (APES) and Atlantic Pacific Logistic, S. A. of C.V. Merino's brother, Sigfredo, has been involved in APES.¹⁸⁹ Between the two of them and the Salvadoran conglomerate, there have been loans totaling approximately \$460 million.¹⁹⁰

Political Protection

Despite the plethora of allegations surrounding them, neither the FMLN nor the Salvadoran government have faltered in their protection of Merino and their public support for ALBA Petróleos. When, at the end of October 2016, Commander Ramiro was nearing the end of his term as a representative in the Central American Parliament, President Sánchez Cerén asked his Foreign Minister Hugo Martínez to create an ad-hoc position for Merino. Thus, the Vice Ministry of Foreign Affairs was born.¹⁹¹

It was a well calculated appointment that protected the strongman behind ALBA Petróleos against criminal prosecution. Merino took office shortly after El Salvador's Attorney General took action against Rais in response to Senator Rubio's accusations, and after Attorney General Meléndez announced that the FARC weapons investigation would be reopened.

The FMLN also supported Merino in the face of Senator Rubio's accusations. In a statement, the party expressed "its emphatic condemnation and rejection of the defamatory and baseless claims against one of our best leaders, a member of the political commission of our party recognized as a long-time fighter for our people."

Moreover, before issuing its statement, the FMLN even sent one of its most influential representatives, Roger Blanding Nerio, to Washington, DC to visit several congressional offices to drum up support for Merino and express the party's disagreement with what it called interference by US Ambassador to El Salvador Jean Manes.¹⁹²

189 Efren Lemus, op. cit.

190 Efren Lemus, op. cit.

191 Cristian Meléndez, "[Sánchez Cerén le crea un viceministerio a dirigente FMLN José Luis Merino](#)," La Prensa Gráfica, October 21, 2016.

192 Héctor Silva Ávalos and Bryan Avelar, "[La ofensiva del FMLN en Washington: defender al comandante Ramiro](#)," Revista Factum, October 8, 2016.

Publicly, Manes has not referred to Merino, but she has made it clear that she supports Attorney General Meléndez’s investigations against FMLN officials. Meanwhile, as confirmed by a diplomatic source in San Salvador and the two sources in US Congress, the ambassador privately supported the investigation against Merino.

On June 21, 2017, a bipartisan group of 14 members of the US Congress signed a letter requesting that the US Treasury Department open an investigation against Merino because his “long-standing associations with transnational organized criminal networks are the subject of US criminal investigations.”

The legislators who signed the letter believe that the criminal activities tied to Merino could pose a “significant threat” to US security.

It is very likely that the investigations against Merino will expand, and sanctions are another possibility. But while the United States promises to continue digging into his past activities in El Salvador, Ramiro remains well protected by the authority and influence he has maintained so far.

****This investigation is the product of three years of field research by InSight Crime’s Venezuela Investigative Unit and the Colombian Observatory of Organized Crime.***

The InSight Crime Foundation

InSight Crime is a foundation dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime.

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