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Rise of the Criminal Hybrid State in Venezuela

#HYBRIDSTATE

Rise of the Criminal Hybrid State in Venezuela

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Authors:

Venezuela Investigative Unit

Layout and Design:

Ana Isabel Rico, Juan José Restrepo, María Isabel Gaviria – Graphic Design

Elisa Roldán – Creative Direction

Editing:

Chris Dalby - Managing Editor

Peter Appleby, Liza Schmidt, Juan Diego Posada – Editors



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1

How Criminal Groups Helped Fill Venezuela's Post-Chávez Void



When Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez succumbed to cancer in 2013, a perfect storm of crises was already looming on the horizon for his vice president and successor, Nicolás Maduro.

The founder and leader of the Bolivarian Revolution was dead. Maduro's claim to democratic legitimacy came from a special election he won by a razor-thin margin.

What's more, Venezuela's economy was on the cusp of a tailspin that would devastate the population and leave the state near bankrupt. This would feed insecurity and criminality as well as poverty and social unrest, which, in turn, strengthened popular and international support for the political opposition.

To compound it all, Maduro had neither the popular appeal nor the support from within the Chavista political movement and the Venezuelan military that Chávez had leveraged to maintain unity and ensconce himself in power.

Maduro's response was to build on one of the murkiest legacies of the Chávez era: the converging relationship of the Venezuelan state with armed groups and organized crime. What followed set Venezuela on a unique path of criminal evolution.

Today, criminal groups and corrupt state actors together form a hybrid state that combines governance with criminality, and where illegal armed groups act at the service of the state, while criminal networks form within it.

Hybrid Armed Groups: Shoring Up the Revolution

Venezuela's first full hybrid groups formed in the early 2000s with one overriding purpose: to keep Chávez in power.

It began with the *colectivos*, a term applied to grassroots political organizations that spanned the spectrum from armed militants and subversives to social and cultural organizations serving neglected communities.

Initially, Chávez had moved to integrate these organizations into his political movement through the "Bolivarian Circles" network, which provided state funding to bring these groups together with each other and with the state. After they proved instrumental in mobilizing the popular protests that returned Chávez to power after a 48-hour military coup in 2002, the government took things much further, providing arms, training, and financing.

"These groups went from being ideological to receiving military training," said a former **army general**, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. "When you see that the internal threat to the government came from the political opposition, then you understand why they were being trained to fight the opposition."

A similar shift took place on Venezuela's border, where tensions were building with Colombia, which Chávez labeled a "pawn" of his main political enemy on the world stage -- the United States.

Even before coming to power, Chávez had cultivated political ties with Colombia's leftist insurgencies: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - **FARC**) and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - **ELN**), as well as Venezuela's homegrown guerrilla group the Bolivarian Liberation Forces (Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberación - **FBL**). But as relations with Colombia and the United States soured, he made moves to incorporate them into his geopolitical plans.

Armed Groups in Venezuela: From Adversarial to State-Embedded

InSight Crime has developed a scale to categorize armed groups and criminal networks in Venezuela, according to their relation to the Venezuelan state.

i See more information below



**Neither the state, nor the country's criminal groups, are necessarily unified nor homogenous and they are in constant flux, so many groups defy such neat definitions. As such, the definitions above are intended as a theoretical framework to understand criminal dynamics rather than a definitive categorization of specific groups. To reflect this, the scale below includes positions between the categories to illustrate how groups may primarily belong to one category but maintain characteristics of another.*

1

Adversarial Non-State Armed Groups are in direct confrontation or competition with the state because of their conflicting criminal or political aims and objectives. They may attack or clash with the state, the state may actively persecute the group, or the group may seek to avoid encounters with the state altogether.

4

Cooperative Non-State Armed Groups maintain mutually beneficial relations with elements of the state that are limited in scope, have specific objectives, and are usually transactional in nature. They make ad-hoc, quid pro quo agreements with individuals or networks within the state that are usually based on the interchange of economic resources, in the form of money or access to criminal economies; and services, such as protection and impunity, provision of goods such as arms or military equipment, access to or control of territories and contracted violence.

7

Hybrid Armed Groups are organizations whose cooperation and coordination with elements of the state has become systematic and is a core feature of their operations. Their interests and objectives, whether political, economic, or strategic have converged with one or multiple branches of the state on a local, regional, and/or national level. These groups habitually coordinate actions and strategies with their state allies, and there may be a level of integration of personnel, resources, and operations.

10

State-Embedded Groups are criminal networks whose principal leaders and core membership hold positions within the state. They may leverage this position for illicit gain, or may act illegally to further the aims and objectives of their branches of the state. In their parallel criminal roles, they organize to carry out, control, or systemically exploit illegal activities – either independently or in cooperation with non-state or hybrid actors.

What began as ideological support for their struggle **evolved into better cooperation** and exchanges of resources and services such as arms, supplies, and money laundering, all geared towards shared strategic objectives.

“It was clear the state was financing or supporting the subversive guerrilla movements so that if at any time there was an intervention, an invasion, they would have an additional armed element that could participate,” said Liborio Guarulla, who was governor of the border state of Amazonas between 2001 and 2017.

“They installed camps in the border region, and I was concerned about making an official complaint as governor because when I spoke with high-ranking government officials, they all told me the same thing: that this was the order from above,” Guarulla added.

The rise of these hybrid armed groups in Venezuela was matched by the proliferation of state-embedded criminal networks, a trend driven by the same logic: protecting Chávez’s power.

Chávez ensured the support of security forces and powerful political actors by granting positions to loyalists, which they use to construct corruption networks dedicated to embezzling state resources. At the same time, he turned a blind eye to the growing involvement of state actors in criminal economies, including the transnational drug trade.

This process led to the emergence of the most important and powerful state-embedded criminal networks of the Chávez era, the drug trafficking cells collectively referred to as the **Cartel of the Suns**, for the sun insignia on the uniforms of military generals.

Hybrid Economies and Governance: Chávez Lays the Groundwork

In 2006, Chávez won reelection in a landslide victory. He was popular with voters at home and backed by regional allies abroad as left-wing governments took power around Latin America. And he had reshaped the state in a way that rewarded loyalty and sidelined dissent.

Chávez’s enemies posed a diminishing threat to his power, but in his second term he began to face much more insidious foes -- economic decline and social breakdown.

Once again, the solutions he turned to would accelerate the development of the hybrid state, leading to the emergence of new forms of hybrid economies to capture resources, and hybrid governance to control ungovernable spaces.

After oil prices crashed following the global economic crisis of 2008, Chávez sought to exploit the mineral wealth of the state of Bolívar to make up for lost income. His efforts to nationalize the mining sector failed badly, but the informal, gang-controlled mining sector that filled the vacuum left by the collapsed industry offered new criminal opportunities.

Mining gangs formed, known as *sindicatos*, and were [allegedly patronized and protected](#) by retired General Francisco Rangel Gómez, a former army comrade of Hugo Chávez who was governor of Bolívar from 2004 to 2017.

“There is a group within the regional government that is arming criminals and assigning them responsibility for certain zones,” said former intelligence officer José Lezama Gomez in an affidavit turned over to the National Assembly in 2016.

This combination of gangs and gold turned mining into a hybrid economy – part criminal, part state-controlled.

Around the same time, murder rates and predatory crime were spiraling, and Venezuela earned the unwanted distinction of being one of the [most violent countries](#) in the world. The violence, above all, affected deprived urban areas, and, most spectacularly, prisons, where reports of prison gangs armed with semi-automatic weapons battling each other and guards shocked the world.

This time, the solution the government sought was a form of hybrid governance, using organized crime to bring order to the chaos.

It began in the prisons, where the [government ceded control](#) inside the prison walls to gang bosses known as *pranes*. In exchange for keeping the peace, selected *pranes* were not only allowed to govern prison life, but they were also granted control over – and allowed to profit from – all movements in and out of the prisons, from visitors, to basic essentials such as food, and even contraband such as drugs and alcohol.

“They recognized the *pranes*’ status by negotiating and making agreements with them – the *pran* is an authority. This offers an interesting view on policy, because with them things work properly,” Mónica Fernández, a former National Prisons Director at the Ministry of Justice, told InSight Crime.

The ceding of power to the *pranes* set a precedent: governance negotiated between armed groups and the state for the mutual benefit of both sides.

Soon, the same logic was being applied outside of prison walls with [“Peace Zone” agreements](#), which saw security forces withdraw from gang-held territories in return for pledges to reduce violence, and, eventually, to disarm.

But while the security forces withdrew, the gangs did not, and a new era of criminal governance began for many communities.

Maduro and the New Hybrid State

Under Nicolás Maduro, the role of existing hybrid armed groups began to evolve and expand, while new opportunities emerged for groups that were previously adversarial or cooperative to secure the advantages of becoming hybrids.

When opposition to the new government mounted, the *colectivos* became Chavista **shock troops** (*grupos de choque*) deployed to violently repress the mass popular protests that were sweeping the nation.

The threats to the Maduro regime also altered its relationship with guerrilla groups. Colombia's insurgents evolved into **Venezuela's pro-state paramilitary groups** and self-declared defenders of the Bolivarian revolution.

InSight Crime has collected evidence showing both the *colectivos* and the guerrillas have coordinated directly with the security forces to target common enemies and rivals, even carrying out joint operations side by side.

“[During the anti-Maduro protests] it was hard to know who was doing these things, who was killing, because the security forces and the *colectivos* worked side by side, and the *colectivos* had military uniforms,” said a municipal official in the state of Lara, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions.

Both the *colectivos* and the guerrillas were also **deployed at election times**, using a mix of sometimes violent coercion and bribery to mobilize, control, or suppress voters in areas under their control, all for the benefit of the Maduro government.

Even when international observers returned to the country for the 2021 local and regional elections, the interference of hybrids was evident, especially in far-flung corners, that few observers reached, such as the rural areas of the guerrilla-plagued state of Táchira.

“[The ELN] came to the voting centers and stationed themselves at the doors, not letting anyone pass who said that they wouldn't vote for the government candidates,” said a local official from the Táchira municipality of Seboruco. “And in the case of Los Ríos, which is their epicenter, they removed the election witnesses and shut poll workers in the centers [during voting].”

“[The colectivos] have lost the ideology they had in the beginning, and they have become clientelist in nature.”

But the functions of hybrid armed groups have not been limited to political repression. And the new generation of hybrids are not just ideological sympathizers, there are also criminal groups with little interest in politics beyond what brings personal gain.

In Maduro's new hybrid state, almost anything is possible: [Drug traffickers finance public works](#), [colectivos run public services](#), *pranes* coordinate prisoner transfers, and gangs have [set up charitable foundations](#) that receive state funding for everything from sports programs to medical clinics.

This ceding of state functions has also allowed the Maduro regime to channel resources and economic opportunities to armed groups, establishing a clientelist relationship.

This is most evident through the subsidized food program run by the Local Storage and Production Committees (Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción - CLAP), whose boxes of essential supplies are distributed, and in many cases, sold on at inflated prices by *colectivos*, guerrillas, and gangs. And it is at its most extreme with the *colectivos*, which profit not only from CLAP boxes, but also from their state-sanctioned control of subsidized gas stations, housing, public transport, cooking gas, and even the water supply.

“[The *colectivos*] have lost the ideology they had in the beginning, and they have become clientelist in nature,” said a former police chief from Lara, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

But the economic opportunities do not just flow from the state to armed groups.

Maduro's nearly bankrupt government can only pay only a poverty wage to the security forces whose loyalty are needed to keep Maduro in power. And the pickings from corruption, which was used to keep political allies and high-ranking security officials on side, has dried up.

The hybrid state offered solutions by permitting state-embedded criminal networks to work with armed groups in criminal economies, and by allowing the rise of new forms of hybrid economies, where legal goods and resources controlled by the state intersect with criminal supply chains.

Traditional criminal economies such as [drug trafficking are cooperatively controlled](#) by state-embedded criminal networks and their criminal associates, with profits divided up or state actors paid a cut to protect and facilitate operations.

Both state actors and criminal groups together profit from new hybrid economies such as [scrap metal trafficking](#), black markets, contraband, and [fuel smuggling](#).

“There are not any loyal [military] officials left because those that had a bit of dignity have left, while those that remain are just waiting for their turn to whack the piñata,” said a retired military officer, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. “All of the security forces are mercenaries now.”

The original hybrid economy -- the gold trade -- remains perhaps the most important, and the gold-rich state of Bolívar has become a [microcosm of the new hybrid dynamics](#).

Under Maduro, Bolívar is crawling with political actors and security forces officials of every rank, some local and others from outside the region, all seeking to profit from gold and aligning themselves with different armed groups involved in mining. Each is out for themselves, and while sometimes they cooperate, at other times, their interests collide. The only rule is that the central government gets its cut.

“In the mines, the *sindicatos* are in charge,” a miner in the town of Tumeremo, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, told InSight Crime. “But the *sindicato* is responsible for making monthly payments to the security forces, and there is also a big slice that is sent to the government people.”

The ever-closer ties between the state and armed groups have also led to a growing overlap of personnel and leadership as both sides began to cross over into the world of the other.

Some armed groups have moved into politics, [launching their family members](#) and associates as candidates or sponsoring their own hand-picked politicians.

“In fact, the mayor doesn’t have police bodyguards. His bodyguards are from the gang.”

Some launched their own political wings, such as the FBL guerrillas, whose Bolívar and Zamora Revolutionary Movement (Corriente Revolucionaria Bolívar y Zamora – CRBZ) won control of municipalities in the state of Apure and secured positions within the National Assembly.

The Tupamaros *colectivo* took this evolution a step further and became a fully-fledged political party – but one backed by the latent threat of armed action.

“If we are not allowed a space to express ourselves politically then [a return to arms] could be an option. It has not been ruled out,” Tupamaros leader William Benavides told InSight Crime.

State actors, meanwhile, began to take direct control of armed groups. InSight Crime has investigated cases of police chiefs and local mayors or their associates assuming direct control over gangs, or using them as a clandestine armed wing to carry out dirty work.

“[The gang’s] social control let them carry out “hidden hand” actions, and the mayor was interested in having them as an armed wing to do his dirty work,” said a former police chief in a municipality in the state of Miranda where such a deal was struck, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

“In fact, the mayor doesn’t have police bodyguards. His bodyguards are from the gang,” he added.

In the most extreme examples, the government itself has become a criminal enterprise.

This reached its peak in the administration of Zulia Governor Omar Prieto. Prieto and his cronies, in and outside of government, extorted and confiscated businesses. They muscled in on gasoline, contraband, and scrap metal smuggling, using the authority of the office to push out other actors. And they used the police to eliminate rivals.

“The political project of Omar Prieto as governor was a project of crime in political power,” said a former Chavista political leader in Zulia, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

Prieto, however, lost his bid for reelection in 2021, suggesting that even in Maduro’s hybrid state, there are limits to how far political actors can push their criminality.

Now celebrating 10 years in power, Maduro appears to have ridden out the worst of the storm. The economy, while still struggling, has at least stabilized. The political opposition is weak and divided. Maduro has stacked key national and regional government positions with allies and loyalists. And Venezuela is slowly being integrated back into the international community.

But to protect this position, Maduro needs legitimacy both at home and abroad. The out-of-control criminality that helped keep him in power represents a possible obstacle to that goal. He is faced with a new challenge: to bring order to the hybrid state he has created. And the question he now faces is whether he can put the criminal genie back into the bottle.

2

Maduro's Peace Defender Squads Are Anything But Peaceful



In March 2019, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro created a new wing of the Bolivarian Revolution political movement, the Peace Defender Squads (Cuadrillas Defensoras de la Paz). The squads, known by the acronym Cupaz, were tasked with guaranteeing peace in Venezuela. But four years later, the Cupaz have spread across Venezuela, and they are anything but peaceful.

The Cupaz network was launched in 2019 as Maduro's grip on power seemed at its most tenuous. A new wave of mass protests was sweeping the country at home, while abroad, countries were flocking to recognize opposition leader Juan Guaidó's claim to be the "interim president" of Venezuela. And from the start, the government made clear the Cupaz were intended as a response to this threat.

“The Cuadrillas Defensoras de la Paz was born as a response to the brutal, criminal, and terrorist onslaught carried out by the fascist right wing in Venezuela and supported by US imperialism to overthrow the Bolivarian Government and take control of the wealth of the homeland,” the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela – PSUV) said in a press release that accompanied the launch.

But while the PSUV touted the Cupaz as a citizen volunteer force to act as a bulwark against the “terrorist actions of the opposition,” in reality, it has acted as an armed group deployed to control the population.

The Cupaz have been used to repress protests and political opposition to the PSUV with violence and intimidation, deployed as shock troops to fight criminal gangs, and have been assigned control of criminal economies that exploit local communities. In the process, they have emerged as the latest evolution of Venezuela’s hybrids – illegal armed groups that work at the service of or in coordination with the state. And with this evolution, the gap between the state and these armed groups has narrowed more than ever before.

The Colectivos: the Cupaz Petri Dish

Although public officials have never acknowledged it, the Cupaz were clearly based on Venezuela’s original hybrid armed groups: the *colectivos*.

The *colectivos* emerged in the 2000s when a disparate network of grassroots left-wing political groups was trained, financed, and armed by the state, then given orders to defend President Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution from all and any enemies.

First, Chávez and, later, his successor Maduro, used the *colectivos* to impose social and political control over communities, and to **repress** the political opposition, often through violence.

The *colectivos* systematically coordinated their actions with the state. Members joined the ranks of state forces such as the notoriously abusive police Special Action Forces (Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales – Faes) or took up government posts, rising as high as national ministerial positions. At the same time, government and security officials joined the ranks of the *colectivos*.

But as Venezuela was rocked by a storm of political and economic crises after Maduro took power in 2013, the nature of the *colectivos* began to change.

The crisis-wracked Venezuelan state needed their help more than ever, especially to repress the mass protests that threatened to drive Maduro from power. But the economic crisis had left it near bankrupt, and it could no longer afford to keep the *colectivos* on the payroll.

The solution was to allow the *colectivos* to **criminalize**. The government offered them control of black markets for subsidized food, cooking gas, and gasoline, and it turned a blind eye as some groups set up extortion rackets, or got into crimes such as robberies, kidnapping, and microtrafficking.

While some *colectivos* held the ideological line, many others began to look and act more like criminal gangs.

“We are a mafia here,” said one *colectivo* leader in the Caracas neighborhood of 23 de Enero, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. “Being in a *colectivo* gives you more power, more money, more opportunities. Being in a political party means being part of the system, but being a *colectivo* is working on a whole other level.”

For him, this power has corrupted the new generation of leaders.

“Those in charge now are pieces of shit. They take cocaine, they are drunks, they are the scum of society, and they fuck with everyone in the name of the *colectivos*, in the name of the revolution,” he said.

The Cupaz have incorporated both the parastatal and criminal characteristics of the new generation of *colectivos*. But while the *colectivos* were becoming unruly, the Cupaz offer the state direct control.

After the 2019 launch, the ranks of the new Cupaz units were filled with existing *colectivo* members alongside local government officials, PSUV militants, and, most of all, current and former security officials. All follow a direct line of command that begins with the highest echelons of the PSUV and continues down through local governors and mayors.

“They don’t have any ideological formation, they have been created because [the state] needs a group that will follow orders,” said a former *colectivo* leader in the state of Lara, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

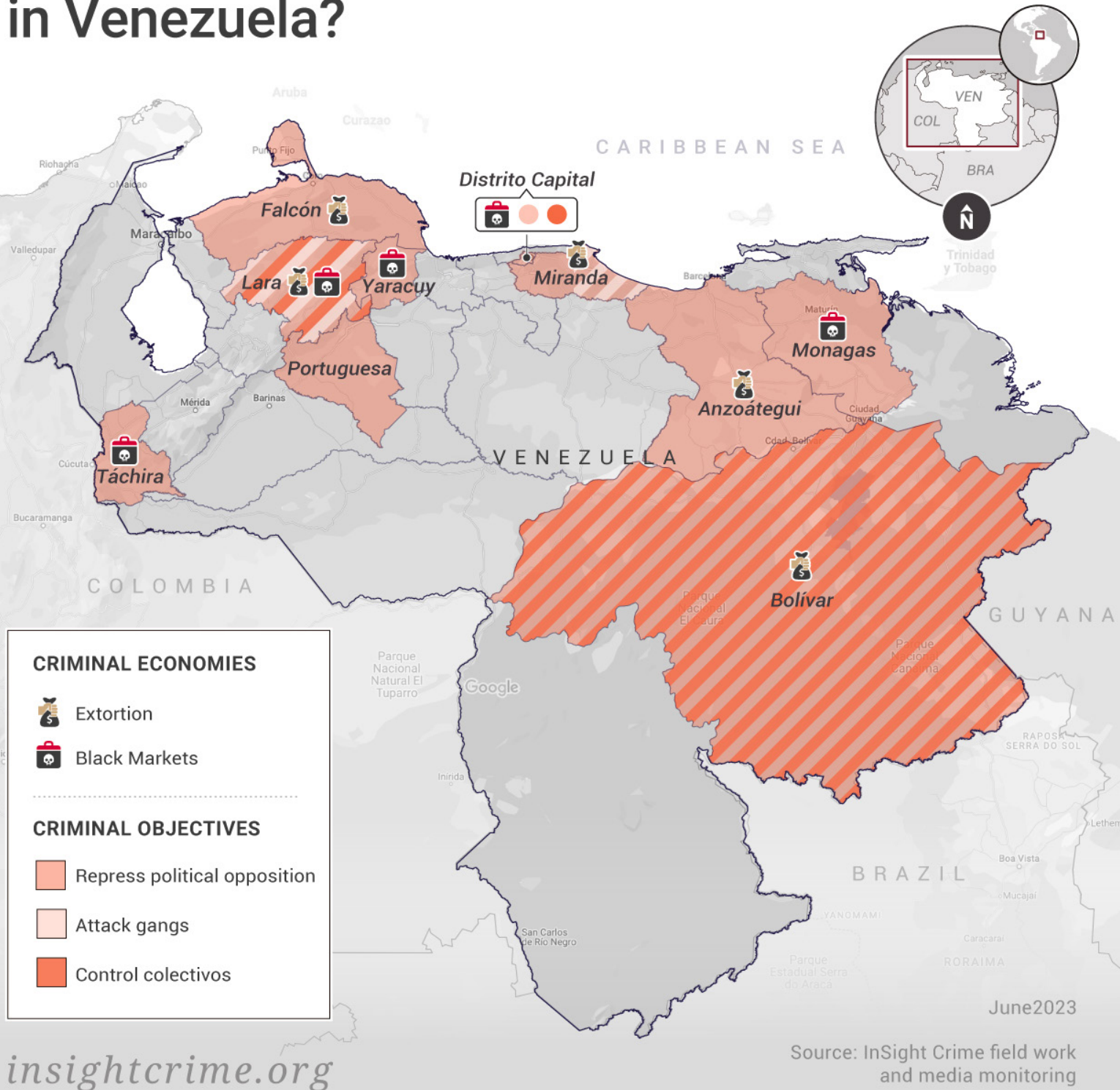
Bringing Order to the Colectivos

In the four years since the launch of the Cupaz, the network has spread to ten states in Venezuela, according to InSight Crime’s monitoring of the group.

In each of these states, the different Cupaz units share certain common characteristics. They dress in their state-issued, black Cupaz uniforms, often with government-supplied guns and even motorcycles. They control subsidized gas stations and food distribution – both lucrative black-market rackets. And they provide security to state actors and interests while repressing opposition political activity.

But exactly what the Cupaz are -- and what their objectives are -- varies from region to region.

Where and How Do the Cupaz Operate in Venezuela?



In the capital city of Caracas, *colectivo* members and residents in communities they control described to InSight Crime how the Cupaz have been used as an umbrella to group together existing groups.

“The creation of this group was the way they found to homogenize the *colectivos*,” said Carlos Julio Rojas, coordinator of Frente de Defensa de Caracas, an organization that resists *colectivo* property invasions in central Caracas.

“The Cupaz are the ones with the most power because they have taken control of public services.”

One Caracas *colectivo* member, speaking on condition of anonymity, described to InSight Crime how *colectivos* or their members have joined the Cupaz network, while still acting independently.

“The [Cupaz] is organized between all of the *colectivos*,” he said. “The line of command comes down from above, but then we decide which orders to act on and which not.”

In Venezuela’s other [major hub](#) of *colectivos*, the state of Lara, the Cupaz are not coordinating between existing *colectivos*, but are instead absorbing or even displacing them.

One resident of the Alí Primera Socialist City in Lara’s capital Barquisimeto, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, described how the Cupaz appeared to replace the fractious 4F *colectivo* that had long controlled the public housing development of 4,000 families. Today, the Cupaz are a part of daily life.

“The Cupaz are the ones with the most power because they have taken control of public services,” she said. “They walk around with handguns, they live in the urban development, and they are in charge of security. When there have been security operations in the development, they are the ones who have entered first on their motorcycles.”

As well as providing the social control offered by the traditional *colectivos*, the Cupaz in Lara also act as an information gathering network for the repressive arms of the state, according to a former police commander in Lara, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

“The function of the Cupaz is to do intelligence work and report it to the Sebin [Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional)] and the Faes,” he said.

In other parts of the country, this parapolice role has become the Cupaz's main function. And in some places, the power that grants them has seen Cupaz groups cross the line into obvious criminality.

The Cupaz and the Gangs

While Lara and Caracas are renowned for the social control of the *colectivos*, in the Valles del Tuy region of the state of Miranda, it is violent criminal gangs that have long ruled over communities. And when the Cupaz first appeared in the region in 2020, it was as a state-sanctioned alternative to this gang rule.

The police “carried out about four operations, killing the gang leader in one of them, and the famous Cupaz arrived when they had finished throwing out the gangs,” said a community leader in the city of Charallave.

“When they arrived, they took control of everything. There would be heavily armed Cupaz members stopping you to check your identification,” added the leader, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals.

The pattern was repeated across the region, with the Cupaz helping drive out gangs, then occupying the spaces the gangs left behind. While some residents describe how the Cupaz became less aggressive with the communities after the initial incursions, for many, the new reign was worse than the old one.

“The Cupaz in the Mata de Coco [neighborhood] managed to eliminate the gangs, but now they have started to charge residents for ‘security,’” a local journalist in Tomás Lander, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, told InSight Crime.

“Residents prefer the gangsters to the Cupaz because they didn’t demand money. The gangsters were in their own world. They didn’t bother the community,” she added. “What the Cupaz do is demand and demand. It is ‘take what is yours and make it mine.’”

The strategy of replacing the gangs with Cupaz has also fanned fears of violence after the region’s most notorious gangster, Deiber Johan González, alias “Carlos Capa,” fired warning shots in the Cupaz’s direction.

“If they deploy Cupaz in Colina, they are going to be attacked until we have killed all their people,” Capa said in a voice message that circulated on local WhatsApp networks in March 2023. “If the people accept the Cupaz, then they won’t be able to move around, not even the children, because there will be lead flying everywhere.”

The Criminalization of the Cupaz

For the time being, open conflict between the Cupaz and Carlos Capa's gang in Valles del Tuy has yet to break out. But in other regions, the risk the Cupaz pose to communities is not that they will be caught in the crossfire of their conflicts with gangs, but that the Cupaz are becoming a gang in their own right.

In the state of Anzoátegui, political and community leaders who spoke to InSight Crime anonymously for security reasons described how armed Cupaz members have been stalking rural areas.

"They are criminal leaders in the south of Anzoátegui," one community leader said.

At night "they set up roadblocks in farming and ranching zones, and extort and threaten people," he said. "And in the day they go to the farms to extort people. The police do nothing, and people are too scared to report it."

The sources who spoke to InSight Crime were uncertain whether the impunity enjoyed by the Cupaz was because they are working with local police, or whether the police were too intimidated by the heavily armed Cupaz squads to act.

But either way, the warning signs are clear. Like the *colectivos* before them, the Cupaz may be tempted by the path of criminalization.

Anzoátegui is not the only state where such warning signs are evident. In Lara, too, there are signs of the Cupaz slipping out of the control of their state masters.

"The Cupaz have overstepped the boundaries in security actions, and what they are doing is usurping functions. There are several who have been charged by the courts with usurpation of functions, aggravated crimes, theft," said the former police commander.

For the moment, the Cupaz remain the ideal all-purpose tool for the Maduro regime: a hybrid armed group that can be directly controlled by the state, and which can be deployed against any challenge to the state's power – whether from specific threats such as criminal gangs and the political opposition, or the amorphous risks of social and economic breakdown.

However, the warning signs from Anzoátegui, Lara, and elsewhere make the risks of this strategy clear. As with the original *colectivos*, there is a danger Maduro's Frankenstein could lose control of his new hybrid monster.

3

Hybrid Governance and the Criminal Fiefdoms of Tren de Aragua



There are specific expectations for residents of San Vicente, a neighborhood in Venezuela’s central state of Aragua. Men are not allowed outside shirtless, children are not allowed outside after 6 p.m., and schools enforce discipline comparable to military academies.

Nobody can sell drugs or cigarettes, the front of every house must be lit up at all times, and all homes must be decorated with a plant outside. There are no exceptions.

Breaking any of these rules can see someone put on “trial,” where a “jury” can mete out punishments ranging from exile from the neighborhood to being put to death.

These strict rules are not imposed by the government or by a military junta but by a foundation known as Somos El Barrio JK (We Are the Barrio JK), a pseudo-social organization that functions as a public-facing front for the most powerful gang in Venezuela: [Tren de Aragua](#).

Based in San Vicente, a large neighborhood in Aragua's state capital, Maracay, this foundation regulates virtually every aspect of daily social and economic life. Tren de Aragua's power here is no coincidence. San Vicente is near the gang's base of operations, the Aragua Penitentiary Center, better known as Tocarón, where it controls the lives of thousands of prisoners.

In San Vicente and Tocarón, [Tren de Aragua](#) has become a de facto government.

"Tocarón has become like a kingdom ... The state has turned over complete control," said Beatriz Carolina Girón, director of the Venezuelan Observatory of Prisons (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones - OVP).

But the criminal group did not establish this dominance alone. It was ably assisted by state elements who systematically worked with the gang to create this hybrid governance, where the political blends with the criminal.

Tocarón, the Fortress of Crime

Tren de Aragua's hybrid governance model was forged in Tocarón. It is there that the group's supreme leader, Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, also known as "[Niño Guerrero](#)," has ruled since the 2010s when a wave of violence in prisons across Venezuela led the government to relinquish control over many penitentiaries to prison gangs to reduce the number of deaths.

Once in control, criminals like Niño Guerrero rapidly exploited this position's logistical and economic benefits. A prime means of income comes in collecting *causas*, regular fees that all prisoners must pay to the *pranes*, a term for prison bosses. At the same time, Tren de Aragua coordinates extensive criminal economies, such as extortion, carried out outside prison by members who can come and go freely from Tocarón. Former prisoners and allied gangs in other parts of the state also contribute to the gang's coffers.

"A fee to the prison must be contributed by anything that generates money [in Aragua]," one Tren de Aragua member, who is close to the group's leadership, told InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

Like a good manager looking after his employees, Niño Guerrero has kept order among the prison population and has upgraded Tocarón. The prison has a swimming pool, a zoo, several gyms, a recently renovated baseball stadium, and a wide range of shops frequented by prisoners and their families. But reports vary, as the gang has also been accused of murdering sick inmates.

“For the authorities, it is easier to let Niño Guerrero maintain control because he knows how to keep things in order,” a former official from the Ministry of Penitentiary Services told InSight Crime anonymously.

And the gang’s control goes beyond simply maintaining order. The government has delegated so many functions of managing the prison to Tren de Aragua that it could be considered a de facto privatization, with the gang acting as a government contractor.

Tocorón’s daily logistics, from buying supplies to the movement of prisoners, happen in close coordination between the Venezuelan Ministry of Penitentiary Services, the judiciary and police, and the criminal group. The ins and outs of this system, as well as the roles played by government officials, were revealed to InSight Crime by a former prison official who worked for years in Tocorón and had direct contact with Niño Guerrero.

His revelations were backed up by researchers from non-governmental organizations studying prisons and violence in Venezuela.

The supply of food to the prison provides a strong case study. While the ministry sends food to Tocorón for the entire prison population, most resources end up in the hands of the gang, who then sell the foodstuffs inside and outside the prison.

“The gang leadership knows about everything that arrives there,” said the former official.

Prisoner transfers work differently, he explained. While the ministry can send prisoners from overcrowded police holding cells to Tocorón, most transfers occur when family members pay prison bosses to arrange for a transfer via their contacts in security institutions. And if prisoners in Tocorón want to move elsewhere, they must also pay a fee for Tren de Aragua to coordinate the move with the prison director and the ministry. Such payments must include per diems for the penitentiary and judicial personnel involved.

Some prisoners who violate the gang’s rules may also be transferred elsewhere, but at a terrible cost, the official revealed. Before they go, the Tren de Aragua takes them to the roof of a prison building, where their lips are sewn together, and they are left for days without food before being picked up by officers.

This level of collusion goes beyond the standard corruption, which is common in the country’s prisons but happens with the highest levels of government.

“Niño Guerrero rarely meets with anyone. He only meets with the director and those above the director,” the former official said.

But while Tocorón has become a reliable base of operations and stronghold for Tren de Aragua, the gang has exported this model of hybrid governance to the streets.

A Home Outside the Prison

The neighborhood of San Vicente, with its outdoor lighting and strict curfew, is home to about 25,000 inhabitants. Prior to Tren de Aragua's control, it had a long history of small gangs fighting for local drug sales, which led to a steadily rising homicide rate, according to InSight Crime interviews with local residents, police, civil society employees, and academic researchers.

In 2014, the neighborhood was included in Venezuela's [Peace Zones](#), a controversial policy that saw authorities suspend police operations in violent areas, in exchange for local groups keeping the homicide rate down. But this only helped to strengthen the gangs, as many police stations were dismantled and officers pulled out.

It is not exactly clear when Tren de Aragua moved into San Vicente, but the Peace Zone status likely gave it some cover. Since then, and although San Vicente's Peace Zone status was never removed, operations targeting criminals who take their orders from Tocarón have increased. Names such as Niño Guerrero, Johan Petrica, and Larry Changa, the group's foremost leaders, began to surface in police reports.

At the same time, the group purged any security personnel who lived in the area, driving many away and violently killing several who chose to stay. Tensions escalated in 2015 when Venezuela launched Operation Liberation of the People ([Operación de Liberación del Pueblo](#) - OLP), a plan which sought to reduce crime with extreme force. Hundreds of extrajudicial executions were reported across the country.

Regular clashes would break out in San Vicente for a year, amid plentiful accusations of abuse by security forces and protests by local residents, demanding an end to the operation. When the OLP ended in 2016, Tren de Aragua became involved in a project which helped increase its power and influence.

In April 2017, then-Minister for Prisons, Iris Varela, launched the Peaceful Homes Ecosocialist Plan (Plan Ecosocialista Hogares de Paz). In San Vicente, this program was launched in coordination with a newly created foundation, known as Somos El Barrio JK. Created by Tren de Aragua, this legal entity allowed the gang to channel more resources, formalize alliances with state institutions, and dictate more rules to the community.

The foundation is headed up by Kenferson Sevilla Arteaga, alias "El Flipper," one of Niño Guerrero's top lieutenants who survived the confrontations with the police and is now the gang boss of San Vicente.

Hybrid Governance in San Vicente, Aragua

The San Vicente neighborhood in the municipality of Girardot in Aragua state is governed by members of Tren de Aragua in cooperation with political actors.



Tren de Aragua

Controls San Vicente and issues orders from Tocarón prison



Kenferson Sevilla Arteaga, alias "El Flipper"

Member of Tren de Aragua and coordinator of the JK Foundation



JK Foundation (Fundación Somos El Barrio JK)

Social facade of Tren de Aragua. Provides assistance and services to the community, enforces social rules, and works with state actors



Criminal Actors



Local Committees for Supply and Production (Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción - CLAP)
Subsidized food distribution program used to transmit El Flipper's messages



Communal Councils
Pro-government social groups that inform the community of the rules imposed by El Flipper and promote the JK Foundation's projects



Hugo Chavez Battle Units (Unidades de Batalla Hugo Chávez - UBCH)
Groups within the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela PSUV) that support the JK Foundation in community work



Politicians
Mayors, councilors, governors, and government ministers coordinate social projects with the JK Foundation, which campaigns for the PSUV during elections



State Entities

June 2023

The origin of the foundation's name is unclear. JK is believed to either stand for *Juventud Kilométrica* (Kilometer-Running Youth), due to its young membership, or for the initials of Kenferson and his girlfriend, according to different media reports. Either way, it has become the main provider of public services such as sewage and electricity. The foundation imposes its rules on schools and takes care of the population by ensuring house-to-house medical visits, organizing sexual education workshops, and even carrying out vaccination campaigns. They also keep an updated census of the population in San Vicente, which the government has not done for years.

“It is another government ... Nothing can be done within the school that they don't find out about,” a teacher from San Vicente told InSight Crime. “People have accepted it, they have preferred to stay with this government that does provide, that helps, that keeps its word.”

This benevolent facade has won the favor of many residents who have come to rely on Somos El Barrio JK to provide services that the state has long abandoned.



The former minister for penitentiary services, Iris Varela, at an event in San Vicente, flanked by Irene Hernández, identified as the president of Foundation Somos El Barrio JK. Source: Venezuelan Ministry of Penitentiary Services)

But this hides a darker purpose in the foundation's tight grip on society.

"I don't agree with rules like no fighting or no music being played after a certain time ... They are overdoing these things," one resident of San Vicente told InSight Crime.

Tren de Aragua did not achieve this level of control unaided. It secured alliances with local institutions, including communal councils, the Local Committees of Supply and Production (CLAP) – which run a food program subsidized by the Maduro government – and the Units of Battle Hugo Chávez (Unidades de Batalla Hugo Chávez – UBCH), a political group dedicated to defending the ideology of the Bolivarian revolution.

The foundation is now so embedded in San Vicente that its members have sometimes appeared at press conferences for government events. Its representatives have appeared in photographs with Varela and other senior government figures.

A local researcher with extensive experience studying society in Aragua told InSight Crime that she has identified members of the foundation who work in the mayor's office and are dedicated to maintaining links between both sides.

But their role goes further still. Government officials will occasionally act as representatives of the foundation and communicate their plans. InSight Crime found that CLAP employees, the food subsidy program, had been transmitting directives from El Flipper. Local political figures, such as city councilors, are largely unknown in San Vicente. They don't need to be seen there. At election time, Somos El Barrio JK always publicly supports candidates from the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela – PSUV).

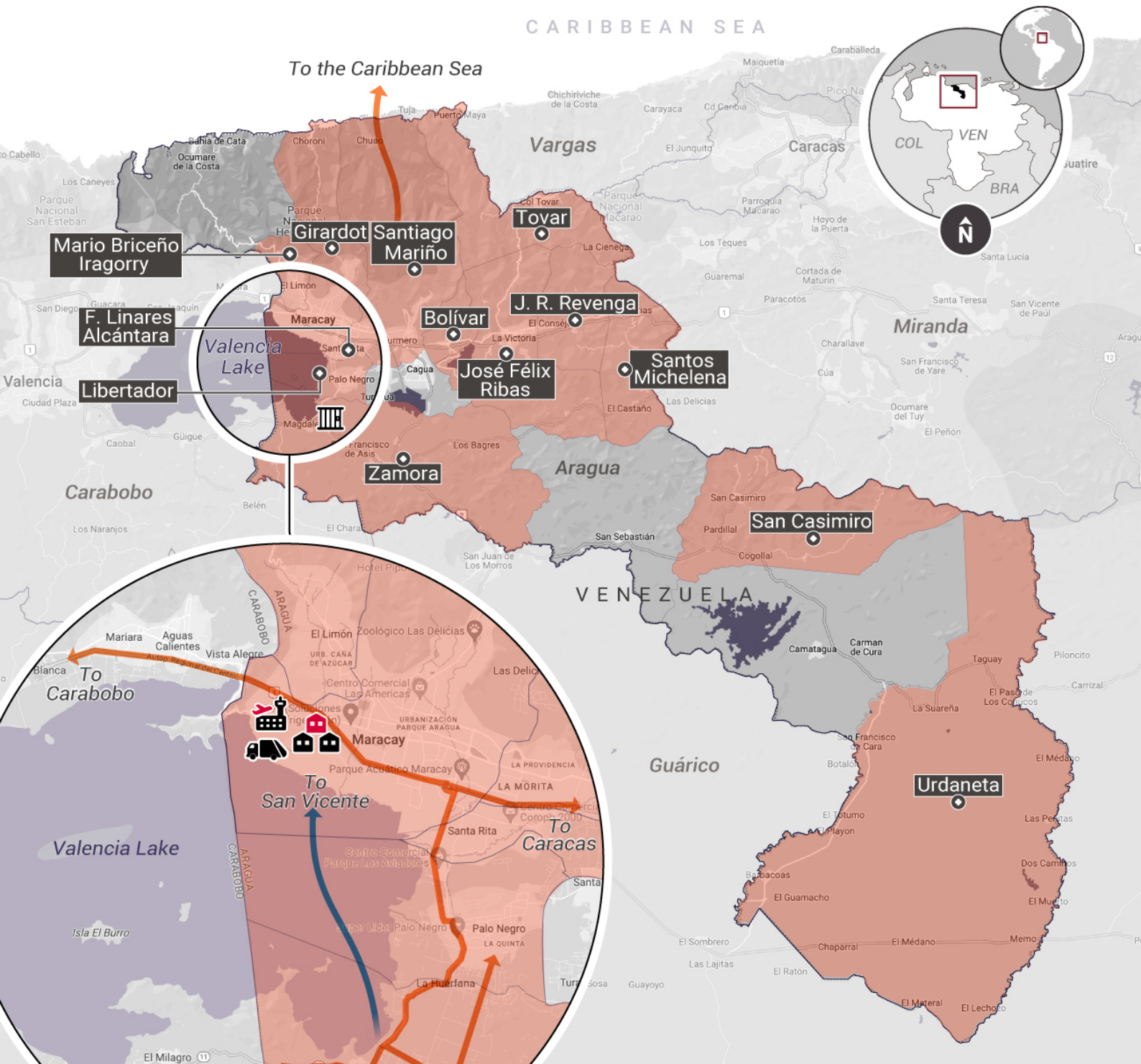
While politicians such as former Vice President Tareck El Aissami have visited San Vicente, usually bringing gifts, opposition candidates are banned from entering the neighborhood.

Replicating the San Vicente Model

Controlling San Vicente has allowed Tren de Aragua to expand its criminal activities and has provided a convenient bolthole to hide from authorities when necessary.

San Vicente's geographic location offers it particular value. It is well-connected to the rest of Aragua state and to Lake Valencia, through which goods and drugs can easily be moved by boat, including to Tocarón. Additionally, the neighborhood is close to a small regional airport, from which the gang arranges private flights. San Vicente has an industrial zone, where companies are ripe for extortion, and a landfill, where the gang can obtain scrap metal to sell on as well as using the dump as a storage area.

Tren de Aragua Presence in Aragua State, Venezuela



	State of Aragua		Tren de Aragua Presence
	San Vicente Neighborhood		Los Tacariguas National Airport
	Aragua Penitentiary Center, Tocarón		Garbage Dump
MOVEMENT CORRIDOR FOR MEMBERS AND CONTRABAND			
	Land Corridor		Lake Corridor

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Source: Venezuela Investigative Unit field work and media reports

“San Vicente was an experiment that turned out very well, but it was because of its geography ... The landfill and Lake Valencia belong to the group,” explained the Tren de Aragua member who spoke to InSight Crime.

Controlling the community provides other benefits, such as access to a young population for recruitment.

“They have a very good breeding ground in San Vicente ... People see the *pran* as a role model ... They bring things from the state, they bring entertainment, they bring gifts. [People say,] ‘I want to be like the *pran* when I grow up,’” another former criminal from Aragua told InSight Crime.

The gang’s strict rules also help with recruitment, as they help identify potential recruits who have the right level of discipline and show leadership potential, according to one researcher.

The San Vicente model has been replicated elsewhere. Tren de Aragua members and affiliated gangs control other parts of Aragua, and police officers and residents alike have confirmed similar criminal governance systems similar to San Vicente, although these are usually less strict.

The areas chosen for such hybrid governance usually offer benefits to Tren de Aragua, such as being near busy transport routes, offering plenty of extortion or kidnapping targets, or even providing space to train recruits.

For each of these expansions, the same institutional corruption is always present. Multiple sources consulted by InSight Crime have spoken of government staff and elected officials, including mayors, working for Tren de Aragua in exchange for payments and favors. Police forces have also reportedly been co-opted by the gang, with InSight Crime having learned of at least three cases where police were ordered by their superiors to release criminals linked to Tren de Aragua.

But this support is not just local. Tren de Aragua has also received favors from the government of Nicolás Maduro. One man, whose son was detained in Tocarón, told InSight Crime that the group maintains control of their communities and enforces the government’s will, much like *colectivos*, militant civilian groups that suppress political opposition.

“They were sent to keep people under control. Why? So that with this economic situation, the people, who are mostly government supporters, do not rise up but remain under control out of fear of Tren de Aragua,” a local researcher in Aragua told InSight Crime.

And besides Tren de Aragua, groups with different social and political goals, including *colectivos*, have also established similar hybrid governance systems due to collaboration with government institutions.

“No one has any idea of the full parallel world that this represents. There is a lot of government involvement,” concluded the Tren de Aragua member.

4

Rise and Fall of a Hybrid Guerrilla Group: The Bolivarian Liberation Forces



In June 2022, according to local press reports, a heavily armed unit from Venezuela’s General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence stormed several farms in the western state of Barinas.

To the neighbors’ surprise, this was not an effort to dislodge a member of the Venezuelan political opposition or an armed group, as is customary in such operations.

In this case, the military’s objective was to apprehend William Alexander Rodríguez, alias “Román Pedraza,” the commander of the [Bolivarian Liberation Forces](#) (Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberación - FBL), a Venezuelan guerrilla group whose close connections with the government make it a hybrid actor -- a combination of a criminal group and an armed force in the service of the state.

Being a hybrid entity was a significant advantage for the FBL for many years, but their high dependence on the state eventually began working against them. Once the government decided that this relationship was no longer in its interest, the FBL's governmental privileges disappeared, and its inability to survive without state patronage was exposed.

The Start of a Bolivarian Guerrilla

While many guerrilla groups in Latin America have posed security threats to governments in the region, the FBL was an atypical example.

Instead of trying to gain power by taking up arms, the guerrilla group allied with the Venezuelan state and used its government connections to propel its political-military project.

The FBL – known locally as the “Boliches” – entered the Venezuelan criminal landscape in the mid-1980s as a leftist armed group composed of intellectuals and political activists fighting against corruption in the country.

With the arrival of Hugo Chávez to power in 1998 and the subsequent rise of the Bolivarian Revolution – the name given to the Venezuelan political and ideological project better known as *chavismo* – many peasant and popular organizations became extensions of the state, serving as shields for the government's plans in different territories.

Although the direct links between Chávez and the FBL were never made public, statements released by the Venezuelan guerrilla group, along with testimonies collected by InSight Crime from agricultural producers, political leaders, religious authorities, journalists, and residents of the states of Barinas and Apure, provide evidence of a relationship that went beyond mere ideological camaraderie.

From the outset, the FBL openly **described** itself as “the first trench that the enemy will have to cross if they attempt to destroy the dreams of the majority of the people of Bolívar.”

In 2004, Chávez **invited** FBL commanders to lay down their arms and join the civilian branch of the Venezuelan army, also known as the Bolivarian militias.

However, this invitation was a front to conceal his support for an illegal armed force, according to a left-wing political activist from Apure who witnessed the territorial consolidation of the FBL and requested anonymity for his safety.

“A group of ministers determined that not everyone should surrender their weapons because someone had to keep guarding the border, namely the FBL,” he told InSight Crime.

“The FBL was trained, equipped, and government personnel even financed the FBL.”

For Chávez’s regime, collaborating with an illegal armed branch meant that the Venezuelan armed forces did not have to dirty their hands with [extrajudicial killings](#). And although the FBL’s calling card presented the group as a defender against external threats, its military capabilities were mostly [employed internally](#).

In states that were strongholds for the group, like Barinas, Táchira, and Apure, the FBL used its strength to intimidate, restrain, and displace the Venezuelan political opposition. From repressing political demonstrations to threatening electoral candidates, the hybrid organization aided the government by operating illegally in the name of the state.

In exchange for playing the hybrid role of extralegal political oppressor, social regulator, and territorial protector, the Venezuelan government gave the Boliches commanders *carte blanche*, allowing them to operate without limitations and with total impunity.

“The FBL was trained, equipped, and government personnel even financed the FBL,” said a former member of the Communist Party of Venezuela (Partido Comunista de Venezuela – PCV) who asked to withhold their name for security reasons. “That allowed them to gain strength and position pieces within various institutions to finance the project.”

This opened the door for some group members to engage in [illicit activities](#) such as kidnapping, extortion, and smuggling. Although this led to internal divisions, the organization continued to operate as the guardian of the Bolivarian Revolution’s leftwing ideals.

Thanks to the government’s tacit approval of their armed and criminal activities, the armed branch of the FBL operated without significant opposition and gradually infiltrated the Venezuelan political system.

The Art of Armed Politics: The State’s Imitation of the FBL

Over the years – and with the election of President Nicolás Maduro in 2013 – the FBL’s relationship with the state deepened. Politics, they found, was a more powerful weapon than rifles.

Through the Bolívar and Zamora Revolutionary Current (Corriente Revolucionaria Bolívar y Zamora - CRBZ), the name for the FBL’s political and civil platform, founded in 2009 – an opportunity arose for the armed organization to camouflage its actions through the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela – PSUV).

“When they approach, you don’t realize the danger because you believe they are people from your environment. You see the CRBZ initials, and you associate them with neighborhoods and not with an armed guerrilla group, only to find out that they are indeed a guerrilla cell operating under the government’s shadow,” a cattle rancher from Barinas, who was intimidated by CRBZ spokespersons, explained to InSight Crime.



The CRBZ used the PSUV platform to secure significant political positions in this context. Héctor Orlando Zambrano, alias “Lapo,” has been a national lawmaker for Apure since 2011. José María Romero, known as “Chema,” is the current mayor of the Páez municipality in the same state.

Additionally, during Ramón Carrizalez’s tenure as governor of Apure between 2011 and 2021, several CRBZ members held positions within this office. Luis Tolosa, the leader of the CRBZ, held important positions during Carrizalez’s term and is currently in charge of the tax and customs office on the Apure border with Colombia.

The same strategy of social control through force was applied in the political arena: Those who opposed the government's plans or denounced irregularities at the border faced the heavy-handedness of a hybrid armed actor that now had the state's legal power in their hands.

A resident of Santa Barbara de Barinas, who suffered threats and persecution by the CRBZ, told InSight Crime that the former mayor of the Ezequiel Zamora municipality, Maigualida Santana, used her position to advance FBL interests.

"If the mayor had a political problem with you, she would call the guerrilla, and the guerrilla would come and invade your house," said the resident, who requested anonymity for security reasons.

The Decline and Replacement of a Hybrid Armed Group

As the political power of some FBL members grew, their actions became more difficult to control, and wide cracks began to form between the guerrilla group and the government.

A resident of Barinas and two agricultural producers from the same region explained to InSight Crime that the relationship between the FBL and the government fractured after some gang members kidnapped Franyeli Guerrero in December 2021. [Guerrero](#) is the daughter of an ally of Diosdado Cabello, one of the most powerful men in Venezuela. In response to Guerrero's kidnapping, the government launched the operation against "Román" in Barinas in June 2022.

However, a guerrilla conflict in the state of Apure sparked the event that marked the point of no return.

In this border subregion, the FBL coexisted for several decades with their Colombian counterparts, the National Liberation Army ([Ejército de Liberación Nacional](#) - ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia ([Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia](#) - FARC). Although both Colombian guerrilla groups surpassed the FBL in numbers, experience, and military prowess, the Venezuelan organization's political connections made them untouchable.

However, this power balance shifted when the FARC and the Colombian government signed a peace deal in 2016. As the FARC entered the demobilization process, some members of the former [10th Front](#) in the Colombian department of Arauca, which borders the state of Apure, declared themselves dissidents and continued [secretly operating](#) on both sides of the border.

By 2021, the 10th Front had broken agreements with the Venezuelan army and its allies, leading to a joint military campaign between the Bolivarian National Armed Forces and the ELN to expel them from Venezuelan territory.

Violence intensified, and on January 14, 2022, an armed commando from the ELN forcefully entered the Simón Bolívar rural commune, a territory of nearly 100,000 hectares located in the La Gabarra sector of the Páez municipality in Apure. According to sources in the states of Apure and Barinas who spoke with InSight Crime, the ELN occupied La Gabarra in search of the 10th Front. However, invading the commune had significant symbolic weight for the FBL.

The FBL had established a “self-government” there in 2008, composed of different community councils directly financed and sponsored by the Venezuelan government.

“More than 50 armed men have taken control of the town of La Gabarra, in the purest style of a foreign occupying army, disregarding the Bolivarian State, popular power, and causing distress and terror among the population,” stated CRBZ spokespersons in a press release.

A few months later, CRBZ spokespersons published several photos showing a new invasion of the commune by around 80 men belonging to the ELN.

Unlike in the past, the government did not intervene in either case to support the FBL, indicating the state’s tacit support for the ELN’s actions.

Once the Venezuelan army and the ELN expelled the FARC dissidents from Venezuelan soil, they turned their attention to the Venezuelan guerrilla group FBL, whom they blamed for supporting the 10th Front.

“The ELN will operate differently. They won’t operate as these guys did.”

InSight Crime spoke with two residents of the Simón Bolívar commune involved in FBL’s work in the region. They detailed the support provided by the Venezuelan guerrilla group to the 10th Front during armed confrontations.

“Supposedly, [the FBL] provided support, not directly in combat, but in creating corridors ... for the FARC to exit the conflict and leave through Táchira, Barinas, or wherever they had a presence,” one of them recounted.

With state forces against them and the ELN harassing them, the FBL found themselves trapped.

The government also targeted the political arm of the organization. On June 18, 2022, a commission from the military counterintelligence agency captured eight CRBZ members while participating in a Bolivarian Militia political event in Guasualito, Apure.

As a result, the CRBZ has been adapting to this new period. The platform changed its name, with leaders like Héctor Zambrano now presenting themselves as part of the VAMOS Citizens' Movement ([Movimiento Ciudadano VAMOS](#)).

As for their armed branch, different sources on the Colombia-Venezuela border, including journalists, residents, local political leaders, and victims of the FBL, are unaware of the whereabouts of the group's main commanders, like "Román" or Jerónimo Paz, who are likely in hiding after the state's crackdown.

The whereabouts of FBL combatants on the ground are also unclear. During InSight Crime's last visit to Apure in early 2023, several residents confirmed that the only remaining illegal armed force in the territory was the ELN.

However, the Maduro regime was not going to sacrifice a useful tool like the FBL without a backup plan.

The clashes with the 10th Front in Apure solidified the ELN's position as a [pro-state paramilitary group](#) with which the government could coordinate complex military and criminal operations.

As the guerrilla group has [expanded](#) across Venezuelan soil, the ELN has demonstrated discipline and military capability, showcasing its potential as a hybrid armed actor that would guarantee governance in strategic territories, populations, and illicit economies for the state.

But the ELN is a different creature from the FBL. While the FBL represented a hybrid of a state-embedded criminal actor, the ELN is a cooperative armed group whose hybrid relationship with the government is primarily conditioned by the volume of profits it generates from various criminal economies.

"The ELN will operate differently. They won't operate as these guys did," stated a border resident who experienced violence at the hands of both armed groups.

Placing trust in a group that is militarily superior and does not depend on its relationship with the Venezuelan state to survive is a sign that the government is engaging in dangerous dealings. If the government decides that its alliance with the ELN is no longer in its interests, severing ties with the group will not be as straightforward as it was with the FBL, an organization with limited territorial reach and questionable armed power.

Antagonizing a binational guerrilla group with decades of military and criminal expertise as an insurgent group in Colombia could lead to a new armed conflict that affects the entire border region and questions the capabilities of the Venezuelan armed forces.

5

The Future of Venezuela's Hybrid State



The evolution of a hybrid state in Venezuela, combining governance with criminality, has helped President Nicolás Maduro hold on to power, even as his government has spent years battling near-constant crises. But today, that panorama is slowly beginning to change, and Maduro's hybrid state is changing with it.

The direct threats to Maduro's power – mass protest movements, the Venezuelan political opposition, and the geopolitical efforts of international opponents – have not disappeared. But they have receded, losing the momentum that at one point seemed destined to unseat him. Similarly, the main indirect threat – economic breakdown – remains. But it has lost its urgency. While the prognosis remains poor, the economy is at least stable relative to the desperation of the peak crisis years.

These changing dynamics require new strategies if Maduro and the Chavista political movement are to turn survival into consolidation; strategies to bring about the lifting of international sanctions, the reactivation of the oil industry, and to quiet questions about the legitimacy of Venezuela's elections and Maduro's government.

Such objectives will be difficult to achieve as long as the rampant corruption, criminality, and overt subversion of the democratic process that helped keep the president in power are so evident. And there are no signs that Maduro has any intention of changing the kleptocratic and authoritarian nature of his regime. Indeed, to do so could leave him even more vulnerable.

An analysis of his strategies over the last two years suggests Maduro is aware of this, and he is trying to bring about a hybrid state that is more reliable, easier to control, and more low profile -- but no less criminal.

As InSight Crime explored in the first chapter of this series, [How Criminal Groups Helped Fill Venezuela's Post-Chávez Void](#), the hybrid state in Venezuela has three main pillars: hybrid armed groups, which systemically cooperate and coordinate their activities and strategies with the state; hybrid governance, where armed groups and criminal networks work together with the state to govern spaces and impose social control; and hybrid economies that combine state and criminal control of resources and supply chains. Below, we highlight the most recent trends in each of these areas and look forward.

Hybrid Armed Groups

In February 2023, InSight Crime [published the Venezuela Organized Crime Top Ten](#), ranking the most powerful criminal organizations in Venezuela. Each of the top five could be considered either full hybrid groups or at least cooperative groups with hybrid characteristics, while the bottom five are among the main targets of current security operations. This is likely no coincidence.

An analysis of current security strategies suggests the most trusted hybrids are growing stronger, while the Maduro regime is attacking other organized crime groups with the full power of the security forces.

This has been evident in [the use of mega-operations](#): massive security deployments of hundreds and even thousands of heavily armed police and soldiers against gangs such as [Tren del Llano](#), the [Wilaxis gang](#), and the [El Koki gang](#). And it has been evident in the [military campaigns](#) targeting previously allied guerrilla groups such as the [ex-FARC mafia's 10th and 33rd Fronts](#), and, as reported in [Chapter 4 of this investigation](#), the Bolivarian Liberation Forces (Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberación – [FBL](#)).

In contrast, the groups that offer the most benefits to the regime, such as the guerrillas of the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) and [Tren de Aragua](#), have largely been left untouched, despite ranking as the country’s biggest security threats.

Meanwhile, the growing criminality of Venezuela’s original hybrids, the *colectivos*, has been met not with force, but with attempts to control and co-opt these groups, as revealed in Chapter 2 of this series, [Maduro’s Peace Defender Squads Are Anything But Peaceful](#).

This trend is likely to continue as Maduro seeks to bring more order to Venezuelan organized crime, to ensure the benefits of hybrid status are only enjoyed by the most useful and trusted partners. His biggest challenge in doing so may prove to be in areas where criminal groups that have become targets of the national government have formed hybrid relations with local state actors, setting up internal conflicts between different branches of the state.

Hybrid Governance

Recent years have seen the Maduro government steadily work to row back on many of the original forms of hybrid governance, which were based on negotiated agreements resulting from the weaknesses of the state.

Many of the “[Peace Zones](#),” where security forces withdrew in exchange for gangs reducing violence, have been reclaimed, with massive security operations breaking the stranglehold of gangs such as the [El Koki gang](#) in the Cota 905 neighborhood of Caracas, [the El Conejo gang](#) in the Aragua municipality of Tejerías, and the various gangs of the Valles del Tuy region in the state of Miranda.

In the penitentiary system too, the control of gang bosses, known as *pranes*, has been broken in multiple prisons by the implementation of the “New Prison Regimen.” The program imposes stricter controls on prison life, curbing both the power and the economic opportunities of inmate gangs. While *pranes* still control almost 60% of the prison population, according to the Venezuelan Prisons Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones – OVP), the state can keep those that remain in check by threatening to impose tougher conditions or transfer them to prisons under the new regimen.

However, where such agreements strengthen the state, they have been left in place, as in the case of [Tren de Aragua’s](#) control of the San Vicente Peace Zone and Tocarón prison, covered in Chapter 3 of this investigation. Furthermore, criminal governance in areas under the control of hybrid allies, above all [the *colectivos*](#) and [the ELN guerrillas](#), is deepening. Armed groups now play a central role in imposing social and political control, and capturing economic resources.

Hybrid Economies

Hybrid economies have proven a double-edged sword for the Maduro government. On the one hand, they have been a critical way of channeling resources to the hybrid armed groups and state-embedded criminal networks whose backing Maduro has needed to stay in power. But in doing so, they have often undermined the functioning of the state, with severe political and social repercussions.

There are signs the government is now seeking to curb the most damaging of these economies and rein in some of the state-embedded criminal networks behind them.

There has been a huge rise in operations against fuel smuggling, a trade usually controlled by corruption networks that severely impact both the functioning of the economy and the day-to-day lives of the population. In the first five months of 2023 alone, authorities reported fuel seizures that were already three times higher than in the whole of 2021, according to InSight Crime's monitoring of media reports and official sources.

There has also been a surge in arrests and operations against [scrap metal trafficking](#), which has seen state-embedded networks benefit from the looting of industrial sites, which the government needs in operation if it is to reactivate the oil industry. In the first five months of 2023, authorities have reported seizing 187.1 metric tons of scrap, compared to 59.7 metric tons in 2021, according to InSight Crime's monitoring.

In contrast, hybrid economies without such high costs, like black-market sales of subsidized goods and [profiting from public services](#), have largely been left untouched.

Maduro's biggest challenge, and his main strategic objective, is to control the most lucrative hybrid economy: [the gold trade](#). Here, developments over the last year suggest the government is once again seeking to impose state control over the country's primary gold mining hub, the state of Bolívar.

Multiple sources interviewed by InSight Crime, including local miners, journalists, and residents, describe how security operations have targeted both adversarial and previously cooperative armed groups while leaving those with more [hybrid-style relationships untouched](#). While the overall objective of the operations remains unclear, the armed forces have also been displacing informal miners and taking more direct control of mine sites, while sources talk of new mining companies arriving in the area.

It remains to be seen whether the mining gangs known as *sindicatos* can be kept at bay -- and whether, this time, the government can find the capital and technical expertise to set up a legal gold trade less dependent on armed groups.

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