

## Chapter Nine

# Organized Crime and the State in Venezuela under Chavismo<sup>1</sup>

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Venezuela is a country in the throes of profound political, economic, and social crises. Unpopular President Nicolás Maduro of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela—PSUV) has become increasingly authoritarian, creating a parallel legislative body to replace the opposition-controlled National Assembly, perpetuating electoral fraud in that body's election, and repressing dissent via the state's security forces. Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates the economy to have shrunk an estimated 50% between 2013 and the end of 2018,<sup>2</sup> as hyperinflation destroys the value of the country's currency and oil production collapses to levels not seen in more than 70 years.<sup>3</sup> As the social order has buckled, Venezuela's homicide rate has risen to become one of the highest in the world, and Caracas is now the deadliest city on earth.<sup>4</sup> Tragically, these circumstances have caused one of the largest waves of immigration in the Western Hemisphere, with an estimated 1.5-2 million Venezuelans leaving the country from 2015 to 2017.<sup>5</sup>

The current crises and poor policymaking have strengthened illegal economies and fed the growth of criminality and organized crime engaged in homicide, extortion, drug and contraband trafficking, kidnapping, and illegal mining. Out of this chaos, ever more organized structures have emerged to capitalize on weak state capacity and gaps left by the corrupt and incapable security and justice institutions. These range from the drug trafficking network of corrupt military officials and civilian political leaders informally known as the “Cartel of the Suns” (*Cartel de los Soles*)<sup>6</sup> to the armed, pro-government radical political collectives (*colectivos*)<sup>7</sup> that control a number of urban slums and the organized mega-gangs known as *megabandas* run by violent prison leaders.<sup>8</sup> Armed paramilitary groups from Colombia, such as the Urabeños and Rastrojos, and dissident guerrilla groups also operate un-

checked on Venezuela's borders. It is clear that Venezuela's role as a focus for organized crime in the Americas has deepened as social and economic conditions have progressively worsened.

Moreover, the state seems to be doing little to fight it, as many groups have developed a symbiotic relationship with the government. Venezuela severed ties with the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 2005, accusing its representatives of spying, and it has failed to fight organized crime through international bodies such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization of American States (OAS), or the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). Instead, the government is in the process of leaving the OAS and has used INTERPOL's Red Notices to target political opponents. Indeed, the Venezuelan government appears to possess neither the willingness nor the ability to combat the illegal economies and organized criminal networks that threaten domestic and regional security.

I begin the chapter by defining Venezuela's chief organized criminal groups, focusing on the mega-gangs, drug trafficking organizations, and collectives. In sections two and three, I unpack the causes behind the emergence and strength of these groups, first explaining how the country's economic and social crisis have created opportunities for organized crime and criminal organizations, and then elucidating how poorly thought-out government policies and weak state capacity have made these groups stronger. In section three, I use Lupsha's theory of organized crime-state relations to examine the type of relationship between these groups and the Venezuelan state.<sup>9</sup> Next, I evaluate the Venezuelan government's willingness and ability to challenge and fight organized crime and conclude.

## VENEZUELA'S PRINCIPAL ORGANIZED CRIMINAL ACTORS

Following conventional definitions of organized crime, Venezuela's main organized criminal groups consist of the *Cartel of the Suns*, a diffuse drug trafficking network of corrupt military officials and civilian political leaders; a number of civilian collectives, loosely connected, armed, pro-government groups; criminal gangs known as *megabandas*; armed Colombian paramilitary groups; and dissident guerrilla groups from the recently demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—FARC) and the partially de-mobilized National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional—ELN). These groups participate in a range of illegal activities, especially drug trafficking, contraband of products, and the theft and sale of vehicles and spare parts, although some are also involved in extortion, human trafficking, and arms trafficking.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, by some

estimates, they are responsible for at least one-third of the homicides in Venezuela—the second most violent country in the world according to the UN.<sup>11</sup>

Given their activities and internal structure, all of these groups fit the UN's definition of organized crime as a "structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences . . . in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit."<sup>12</sup> In this sense, organized criminal groups may consist of transnational, national, or local alliances of highly centralized enterprises run by criminals who intend to engage in illegal activity, most commonly for money and profit. And although popular wisdom tends to hold that these groups are highly structured—a definition which might even omit some of Venezuela's criminal gangs or drug trafficking groups—Edward Kleemans argues that these groups are more properly viewed as criminal "networks" rather than as centralized, hierarchical organizations.<sup>13</sup> As such, most criminal groups in Venezuela fit commonly accepted definitions of organized crime.

Venezuelan citizens seem to agree. In a national survey in 2015, the Observatory of Organized Crime (*Observatorio de Delito Organizado de Venezuela*), a non-governmental organization, found that citizens consider gangs, mafias, and *megabandas*, prison leaders (*pranes*), and armed collectives (*colectivos*) to be causes of organized crime throughout the country.<sup>14</sup> Respondents also recognize guerrillas and paramilitaries, although they are largely limited to the border states of Zulia, Táchira, and Apure.

### Cartel of the Suns

One of the most notorious organized criminal groups is the so-called Cartel of the Suns, a disparate drug trafficking network of state and non-state actors operating with the protection of senior figures in the Venezuelan government. The moniker for this group—which is really a series of often competing networks rather than a cartel—comes from the golden stars that generals in the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana—GNB) wear on their epaulettes, although other branches of the military are also active participants in the drug trade. The term was first used in 1993 when two GNB generals, anti-drugs chief Ramón Guillén Dávila and his successor Orlando Hernández Villegas, were investigated for drug trafficking. Today, however, the name is used to describe all government officials involved in narcotrafficking.

There are a number of causes for the military's involvement in this illicit activity. The promulgation of Plan Colombia in 2000 pushed the FARC and ELN towards poorly policed border states in Venezuela (as well as Ecuador). These guerrilla groups, which financed themselves in large part through co-

caine trafficking, often bribed GNB troops to allow them to move their drugs through Venezuela.<sup>15</sup> This only increased as Hugo Chávez set up military areas of operations along the border with Colombia after 2002, as elements of the GNB and the army came into frequent and direct contact with these guerrilla groups. Soon, Venezuela military cells began to purchase, store, and move cocaine itself by providing weapons to the FARC and ELN in exchange for the drugs.<sup>16</sup>

There is ample evidence of this behavior. Civilian trafficker Walid Makled, who was arrested in Colombia in 2010 and extradited back to Venezuela in 2011, claims to have worked with at least 40 top-level military officials.<sup>17</sup> According to him, the GNB and army actually compete with each other for drug sources and routes, often stealing cocaine shipments from one another and then reporting them as seizures. Foreign arrests also suggest complicity with organized crime at the highest levels of the government and military. For instance, in 2011 a small aircraft captured in the state of Falcón with more than 1,400 kilograms of cocaine was discovered to have taken off from La Carlota military base in Caracas.<sup>18</sup> In September 2013, authorities in Paris seized 1.3 tons of cocaine from an Air France plane en route from Caracas. Evidence pointed to extensive collaboration by members of the military, and 28 officers with the GNB were arrested.<sup>19</sup> In 2015, Leamsy Salazar, the former head of Chávez's presidential security, accused National Assembly President Diosdado Cabello of being a Cartel del los Soles leader. Then in August 2016, the United States unsealed federal indictments against Venezuela's former anti-drugs czar Nestor Reverol and the former sub-director of that agency Edylberto Molina Molina.<sup>20</sup>

There are many indications that drug trafficking continues to increase with the complicity of the government. Independent journalists have found "strong evidence" of the involvement of at least 123 current or past senior officials in cocaine trafficking from all branches of the military.<sup>21</sup> The GNB and the army in particular appear to be deeply involved in organized crime and the cocaine trade. In response, the U.S. and other states have brought economic sanctions against dozens of former and current high-ranking military and government officials, including Major Generals Cliver Alcalá (Army), Néstor Reverol (GNB), and Gerardo José Izquierdo Torres (Army), as well as civilians like President Nicolás Maduro, former Vice President Tareck El Aissami, and Cabello. And although 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.

## Collectives

A second major organized criminal group is the loose network of leftist paramilitary organizations known as collectives. Although often referred to as a single, coherent actor, there are a wide variety of groups that use that moniker. The majority identifies with the government, although their level of support and their motives vary greatly. Velasco identifies three basic types: a long-standing and rather autonomous type that traces its origins and inspiration to the guerrilla movements of the 1960s; a second set of groups that formed between 2007 and 2012 that is ideologically committed to Twenty-First Century Socialism and loyal to Chavismo; and so-called “disguised collectives,” groups made up of special forces and police units that sprang up during the protest cycle of 2014 and who act in name and tactics like armed civil groups, dress as civilians, and ride in motorcycle groups.<sup>22</sup> Depending on the group, collectives may perform public safety, intelligence, and repression functions in conjunction with state security forces, and in some areas they even control highly lucrative food sales.

The first group emerged out of urban guerrilla warfare in the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> These small, armed civilian groups are largely geographically restricted to the impoverished 23 de Enero neighborhood and other parts of western Caracas. They have long carried out social functions in their communities and offered protection against local criminal gangs. What sets them apart from newer collectives is their autonomy from the government and, at times, their criticism of Chavismo. Nonetheless, like other collectives, they control their own weapons and act as a state within a state.

The second set of collectives dates to the early 2000s under Chávez. In 2002, the then-president faced two attempts to unseat him from power: a military coup and a strike at the state oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)*. 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. In response, he ordered the creation and consolidation of new collectives to replace the so-called “Bolivarian circles.”<sup>24</sup> Many had their own names, flags and uniforms, and the government provided them arms and security training as well, entrusting them as a separate militia in defense of the government’s “revolution.” In 2006, the groups came under the umbrella of the government’s “communal councils” (*consejos comunales*) through which they received state funding and more resources.

The third group of collectives emerged under the Maduro presidency, as Special Forces and police entered slums and appropriated the repressive behaviors and tactics of collectives. Both the second and this third group have become key enforcers in crushing protest movements against Maduro's rule, beginning with anti-government protests of 2014. Reports and film evidence show members of these collectives killing and beating protesters, destroying vehicles, vandalizing homes and businesses—and also attacking pro-government forces, presumably in an effort to tarnish the image of peaceful demonstrators, escalate conflict, and justify strong-arm tactics.<sup>25</sup> There is also increasing evidence that the collectives are becoming increasingly criminalized. Some of them now extort the communities they are supposed to protect, while others have formed under the socialist guise of the collectives when they are purely criminal entities.<sup>26</sup>

They have also grown in number during this time: in 2014, the Ministry of Internal Affairs counted more than 90 groups of this kind in the Capital District during an ambiguous disarmament initiative, and they may exercise power in as much as 10 percent of towns and cities.<sup>27</sup> They have also become gained greater autonomy. Originally, the collectives depended on the government for their financing, arms, and training. However, as the groups have become more powerful, they have exerted their own influence independent of the government, most notably in controlling organized crime like drug trafficking in Caracas barrios.

### Mega-gangs

A third organized criminal network in Venezuela consists of massive, highly structured gangs known as *megabandas* (“mega-gangs”), criminal syndicates of 50-200 members that engage in drug trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping throughout the country. These mega-gangs do not represent an evolution of smaller street gangs, but are instead based on the criminal model developed in Venezuela's penitentiary system, where leaders known as “*pranes*” hold sway over hierarchically organized structures.<sup>28</sup> They differ in at least two chief ways: they are controlled from within prisons by *pranes*, and are much more heavily armed, using weapons such as assault rifles and fragmentation grenades.

Venezuela has a notoriously overcrowded and brutal prison system penitentiary system, with many prisons run by *pran* criminal bosses (the term “*pran*” usually refers to an incarcerated gang leader who control prisons from the inside while simultaneously directing criminal organizations outside of them).<sup>29</sup> Under Prison Minister Iris Varela (2011–2017; 2018–present), the government 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.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, *pranes* are responsible for managing a prison's black market and overseeing the internal order among inmates. To an even greater degree than other inmates, these *pranes* are able to easily obtain weapons, luxury goods such as televisions, or throw extravagant parties. Of course, the pran system concentrates criminal power in the prisons, and was instrumental in the establishment of mega-gangs.

In reality, though the emergence and consolidation of mega-gangs in 2014 are a direct result of the government's "Zones of Peace" (*Zonas de Paz*) policy. In September 2013, Deputy Minister of Internal Policy José Vicente Rangel Ávalos negotiated a tenuous truce between state security forces and armed gangs by granting the latter Peace Zones.<sup>31</sup> The logic of these zones was that the police and military had become a determining factor in driving homicidal violence in the country. Therefore, withdrawing them from certain areas would decrease violence. In fact, the police and military could not enter these areas unless they had a specific court order.<sup>32</sup> Immediately thereafter, criminal groups began using the Zones of Peace as a place to hide kidnap victims. Simultaneously they grew in strength and geographic coverage until some extended their criminal operations to places that were not protected by the ministerial program.<sup>33</sup> In fact, mega-gangs are now the *de facto* law in stretches of territory across the country.

### Paramilitaries and Guerillas

Other organized criminal groups have influence in Venezuela as well. Since at least the late 1990s, the Colombia's FARC and the ELN guerrillas and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia—AUC) have used Venezuelan border states of Apure, Táchira, and Zulia as refuge sites. Nonetheless, as of 2018, there were probably around 12 illegal armed groups were operating along the Colombia-Venezuela border, including dissident factions of the now demobilized FARC and rebels from the ELN, dissident AUC factions, the Urabeños and Rastrojos, as well as criminal gangs including the Gulf Clan and others.<sup>34</sup> In fact, the Colombian peace process may have pushed some of the more intransigent individuals into Venezuela: the local Fundación Redes denounced three Venezuelan FM radio stations in Táchira, Apure, and Barinas states that allegedly serve as platforms for Colombia's ELN guerrilla group<sup>35</sup>, as well as the explicit (and officially sanctioned) involvement of the ELN in distributing government-sponsored food rations to citizens.<sup>36</sup> Together, these groups are involved in contraband, drug trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping as means to finance themselves.

## THE ORIGINS OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN VENEZUELA

The prominence of so many organized criminal groups is a departure from Venezuela's past. From the 1970s to the late 1990s, organized crime in Venezuela was primarily restricted to drug trafficking organizations from Colombia and Bolivia that used the country as a transit hub. Although some Venezuelans such as Naval Commander Lizardo Márquez Pérez emerged as important transnational drug traffickers, the state was generally able to impose the rule of law more effectively than in places like neighboring Colombia or Brazil.<sup>37</sup> The emergence of prominent organized criminal groups—many of whom are tied to the state—is a direct consequence of three interrelated factors: poor policymaking, the country's profound economic and social crisis, and weak state capacity.

### Government Policies

Chávez's tacit (and sometimes explicit) acceptance of the FARC and ELN and blind to eye towards drug trafficking allowed the Cartel de los Soles to expand and Colombian guerrilla groups to entrench themselves in Venezuela. In the 1990s, the FARC and the ELN sought refuge in Venezuela's border states, a practice that increased with the implementation of Plan Colombia in 2000. Although both groups had long been involved in the drug trade, files seized from the camp of FARC commander Luis Edgar Devia Silva (alias "Raúl Reyes") killed in an aerial bombardment in Ecuador in March 2008, revealed that by the 2000s they had developed close links with a number of Venezuelan officials.<sup>38</sup> As described above, corrupt members of the GNB initially accepted bribes to allow cocaine shipments to pass across the border before certain cells began to purchase and move the drugs themselves.<sup>39</sup>

Venezuela's attractiveness for transnational organized crime grew significantly in 1999 when the National Constituent Assembly, convened by Chávez, approved a ban on extraditing both born and nationalized Venezuelans.<sup>40</sup> Following this, the government made several decisions that helped make the country an ideal territory for foreign criminals. In May 1999, after fewer than six months in power, Chávez suspended the DEA's flyover agreement with Venezuela for drug flight monitoring, casting the country into a black hole for U.S. counternarcotics intelligence gathering.<sup>41</sup> However, the key moment in the strengthening of drug trafficking in Venezuela came with 2005, when Chávez expelled the U.S.'s DEA, claiming that it was using the fight against drug trafficking as a mask to support drug trafficking and "to spy in Venezuela against the government."<sup>42</sup> This allowed criminal groups engaging in narco trafficking a great deal of impunity they had not previously enjoyed.

Lastly, a new drug law in 2005, the *Ley Orgánica Contra el Tráfico Ilícito y el Consumo de Sustancias*, decreed that counternarcotics investigations and operations would no longer be the exclusive domain of the National Guard but would include all other branches of the armed forces. This was also a definitive moment the military shifted from a facilitator in the drug trade to an active participant.<sup>43</sup> Before the passing of the law, drug trafficking was largely limited to the National Guard. However, once all branches of the military were given jurisdiction, competition among corrupt groups for participation in narcotrafficking increased. In particular, the army and GNB began to fight with each other for routes, and began dealing directly with the FARC rather than with Colombian civilian drug traffickers.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, government policies also helped the spread of other organized criminal organizations. The emergence of collectives can be traced directly to the government's decision to devolve power to them. As explained above, following the 2002 military coup that briefly ousted him from power and the subsequent general strike aimed at removing him ~~from power~~, Chávez made key changes to the state security apparatus to ensure he could not be toppled in the same way again. One of these was to take away the state's monopoly on carrying arms and to devolve state functions to collectives through training, provision of weapons, and financing.<sup>45</sup> Without this policy shift, there would undoubtedly be fewer, less well-armed collectives in the country.

Similarly, the Ministry of Penitentiary Services' decision to effectively ~~handed~~ governance of the country's jails to *pranes* in 2011<sup>46</sup> and the establishment of the so-called Zones of Peace, where security forces have no permanent presence, helped to directly create the mega-gangs.<sup>47</sup> Prison Minister Iris Varela passed along much of the control of the prison system to the *pranes*, a system that concentrated their power and allowed them to establish or fortify hierarchical criminal organizations that they could spread to the streets.<sup>48</sup> Then, in 2013, Deputy Minister of Internal Policy José Vicente Rangel Ávalos sought to engage in social investment in areas of high criminality and negotiate with local communities to reduce crime. Part of the negotiations between the mega-gangs and the government was a verbal agreement not to allow state security forces into the designated zones without prior agreement.<sup>49</sup> The absence of state security forces allowed the mega-gangs to become the de facto law in these areas, thus expanding their strength and territorial control.

Adding to all of this, ~~current~~ economic policies such as currency and price controls ~~have~~ greatly increased opportunities for corruption, black-market activity, and collusion between public officials and organized crime networks.

## Economic Crisis

Venezuela's **economic** ~~current~~ crisis has also created opportunity for organized crime to flourish. As Walter Lippmann first pointed out, organized crime meets the needs of the society in which it functions.<sup>50</sup> It is no surprise then that Venezuela's political, economic and social crises have strengthened illegal economies and fed the growth of criminality and organized crime. In fact, Venezuela's role as a focus for organized crime in the Americas has deepened as conditions have progressively worsened.

The IMF estimates that the Venezuelan economy will have shrunk around 50 percent by the end of 2018 and that inflation could hit 13,000 percent.<sup>51</sup> As a result, studies suggest that 82 percent of the country now lives below the poverty line.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, the country's homicide rate has become one of the highest in the world.<sup>53</sup> This context has helped create opportunities for corruption, and consequently, organized crime. In this situation, the financial benefits of criminal acts like narcotrafficking or extortion become increasingly attractive to desperate citizens. Hungry and penniless Venezuelans, many with little education or marketable skills, are easy prey for organized crime as victims and recruits. In fact, one national survey showed that nearly 85 percent of Venezuelans believe that the government's economic measures and the country's impoverishment contribute to the existence and sustainability of organized crime.<sup>54</sup>

## A Weak State and Corruption

The low capacity of the Venezuelan state is another major cause in the rise of organized crime. Charles Tilly argued that the state is a type of "protection racket" in which citizens voluntarily relinquish certain rights and pay taxes in exchange for protection from other citizens and external threats, as well as things like contract enforcement.<sup>55</sup> In the absence of a strong sovereign—or in the "ungoverned spaces" where the state is weak, ineffective, or corrupt, or simply absent<sup>56</sup>—organized crime can fill that role. In essence, organized crime becomes another type of racket that provides protection to citizens in the form of contract enforcement, dispute settlement, and competition deterrent.<sup>57</sup> This is especially true of places where the trust between the government and citizens is weak or nonexistent because of the corruption, absence, or ineptitude of government officials and state institutions.

This is certainly the case in Venezuela. Ungoverned spaces are often cited as "key threats to national and international security and are increasingly targeted by the international community for external interventions—both armed and otherwise."<sup>58</sup> Plenty of these exist, ranging from the Zones of Peace where the state literally ceded law enforcement to criminal groups to vast

stretches of the rural *llano* (southern plains) and *arco minero* (mining arch) where the presence of the state has historically been weak. Venezuela's ports and borders with Brazil and Colombia, where the state presence is minimal, fit this definition as well.<sup>59</sup> It is in these literal and figurative spaces that Venezuelan organized crime was born or has grown: the Cartel de los Soles and guerrilla groups in poorly governed border areas, collectives in weakly policed urban areas, and the mega-gangs in prisons nearly autonomous from the state—and then in Zones of Peace where police and state security ceded their role (albeit temporarily).

Corruption has the same effect of undermining trust between citizens and the state.<sup>60</sup> Here too, Venezuela rates quite poorly. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, the country consistently ranked in the top 10 percent of the world's most corrupt countries beginning with the first survey in 1995. Yet probity has dipped further since the mid-2000s, reflecting decreasing confidence in any measure of government rectitude under both Chávez and Maduro. In 2017, the country ranked 169 out of 180 countries in the world, with a score of 18 out of a possible 100. Such permissiveness and impunity perpetuates the types of illicit enterprises upon which organized crime thrives—especially within the military and police.<sup>61</sup>

## THE VENEZUELAN STATE AND ORGANIZED CRIME

Since organized criminal groups or networks can replace certain functions, like guaranteeing protection or enforcing contracts, in the absence of the state, their relationship is complicated. As Steven Dudley argues, it is necessary to consider organized crime from the state's perspective.<sup>62</sup> Economically, criminal groups can represent a source of revenue, economic growth, and economic and political opportunity. Likewise, militaristically, they can represent an ally that is ready to commit resources to help secure territory or space from a violent or destructive actor in ways the state is not willing or able to. Additionally, in Venezuela's case, certain organized criminal groups (e.g., collectives) are ideological allies that help suppress government opponents and keep the government in power.

Scholars have long taken an interest in the dynamism between the state and organized crime. In a seminal piece of scholarship, Lupsha theorizes three stages of relationships between them.<sup>63</sup> The first of these is *predatory*, where criminal actors seek expansion at the expense of all external actors, including the state. In it, criminal groups may prey upon the resources of local authority structures, in open conflict with them, and reap all benefits—providing no benefits to the state (e.g., theft). The second stage is *parasitic*, where groups

draw from these same resources, but at a level or in a manner that is sustainable. This often involves the extraction of rents rather than the consumption of the underlying resource, including in the form of protection rackets. Parasitic groups may provide the goods and services directly, as in a loansharking enterprise where funds are loaned and collected by members of the group itself, or indirectly, as where a gambling business and franchised and protected, but not operated, by organized crime. The last stage is *symbiotic*, in which the criminal organizations coexist with existing authority structures, either through overlapping membership or clandestine arrangements of reciprocity, collusion, and joint venture arrangements.<sup>64</sup> It is in this stage where the criminal organization and the state work with each other for mutual benefit. Although originally proposed as a sequence, where criminal groups are first predatory, then parasitic, and lastly symbiotic, it is possible to jump around or move backwards.

In Venezuela, the relationship between most organized criminal groups and the state is symbiotic. Although many of them began as predatory or parasitic organizations, the state now needs the groups to achieve what it cannot achieve alone: social and political order in prisons (*pranes*) or in violent neighborhoods (mega-gangs and collectives), or civilian protection from military or civilian threats to the Chavista project (collectives). In one case—the Cartel of the Suns—is it ambiguous as to whether or not the government merely tolerates the group or actually needs it for its survival, and therefore, whether the relationship is merely parasitic or has become symbiotic. Lastly, splinter guerrilla or paramilitary groups from Colombia, which have little relationship to the Venezuelan state, are best characterized as predatory.

Urban collectives represent a state within a state. From their development in the 1960s until Chávez came to power, the collectives enjoyed autonomy from the government.<sup>65</sup> However, the groups that have emerged since the early 2000s are much less autonomous and more closely aligned ideologically with the government—and they serve a number of useful purposes for the state, which does not seek to get rid of them. This is for two chief purposes. First, collectives provide social support and protection in certain urban areas that have historically been underserved by the state. Consequently, the government benefits from these groups' activities. Second, a number of collectives (though not all) have acted as storm troopers for the government during large opposition protests.<sup>66</sup> As such, they serve as armed civilian allies willing to engage in violence on behalf of the government—which not only tolerates their illegal activity but also depends on them to remain in power.

The *pranes* and mega-gangs have a symbiotic relationship with the government. With regards to the former, the government handed over de facto

control of the prison system to the *pranes* with the understanding that they minimize violence and essentially administer the chaotic penitentiary system as they best saw fit.<sup>67</sup> In doing so, the government tacitly acknowledged it would permit the *pranes* to continue their criminal activity if it meant order and control of the prisons. Likewise, the Zones of Peace proposal in 2013 was predicated on the assumption that a heavy police and military presence helped drive homicide rates in urban slums, and that withdrawing them from these areas would decrease violence.<sup>68</sup> Without the state to guarantee protection for citizens—a service it was only marginally achieving—mega-gangs and collectives moved in to provide some of these services, effectively serving as states within the state.<sup>69</sup>

The most complicated case to analyze is the Cartel of the Suns, which originates in the state itself. Despite its pedigrees, this network was originally predatory insofar as it accepted bribes in exchange for allowing Colombian guerrillas, paramilitaries, and other traffickers to bring cocaine into Venezuela, undermining the state and providing it no benefits. As Venezuelan military cells began to purchase and traffic cocaine themselves, they did so with cash or by selling weapons,<sup>70</sup> also predatory behavior that hurt the state without bringing benefits. Yet given the degree to which this “cartel” is likely to have penetrated the upper ranks of the officer corps as well as important civilian political leaders, it is possible that these drug trafficking organizations now have a symbiotic relationship with the state. This has come about since the Venezuelan government now depends on the loyalty of these senior figures to maintain the political status quo; by permitting drug trafficking, it alleviates the economic pressure these figures might feel (or outright enriches them) in exchange for their continued support. As such, the government has few incentives to fighting the Cartel of the Suns—or any of the other organized criminal groups that provide benefits for the state.

In all cases, citizens’ perceptions tend to support the characterization of the relationship between criminal organizations and the state as symbiotic. In fact, in public opinion surveys on the topic, Venezuelans tend to believe that state security bodies, instead of fighting organized crime, favor its existence and operation because it benefits the state. In 2015, for instance, the Observatory of Organized Crime (*Observatorio de Delito Organizado*) found that 66 percent of Venezuelans believed that the police and the military sell arms to organized criminal groups. Moreover, most people believe the government promotes armed groups, that official government discourse favors the action of organized crime, and that the Zones of Peace have favored organized crime and armed groups.<sup>71</sup>

## THE FUTURE

Amidst weak state capacity and economic crisis, the symbiotic relationship between the state and most organized criminal groups in Venezuela make fighting organized crime extremely difficult. Worse, it does not appear to be a priority of the government, as leaders have a vested interest in perpetuating the system. Given the permissiveness of the government, these criminal groups have not had to greatly modify their behavior via tactics of evasion, corruption, or confrontation.<sup>72</sup> Instead, they are largely free to expand their size and reach.

Making matters worse, the Maduro government's lack of cooperation with international law enforcement regimes undermines attempts by other actors to fight organized crime and curtail their illegal activities. In fact, the country has largely reneged or deserted international law enforcement regimes: it does not cooperate with the UN or the Organization of American States (of which it is in the process of withdrawing as a member), and although it was a signatory to the 2000 UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, it has not developed a single law to adopt the protocols outlined in the convention.<sup>73</sup> Nor does it cooperate with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) to pursue criminals from these groups; according to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, Venezuela is one of a handful of countries that uses INTERPOL's Red Notices as a tool to go after political opponents and economic targets, including ex-presidential candidate Manuel Rosales and Nelson Mezerhane, former owner of Banco Federal and opposition news channel Globovisión.<sup>74</sup>

Without a deviation in the political and economic situation or even state policy towards organized criminal groups, Venezuela ~~is likely to become~~ continue to be one of Latin America's regional crime hubs, with potentially grave consequences for neighboring countries and the region as a whole. This is most evident with the Cartel of the Suns, under which Venezuela has become a global cocaine and money laundering center.<sup>75</sup> The transit of cocaine through the country affects production centers in Colombia—and to a lesser extent, Peru, and Bolivia—as well as upstream transit markets and drug destinations, ranging from Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti, to the U.S. and Europe.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the presence of dissident Colombian paramilitary and guerrilla groups in border areas is likely to have regional effects by impeding full demobilization and implementation of peace accords in that country.

The deleterious effects of organized crime go beyond security. Markedly, its continued growth would be a threat to the recovery of democracy in Venezuela, in part by the way it undermines interpersonal trust.<sup>77</sup> As scholars have shown, organized crime provides incentives for people to behave in an un-

trustworthy manner and drives out the intrinsic motivations for cooperation.<sup>78</sup> The expansion of organized crime therefore produces a conflictive context that encourages the use of force and violence in society as a whole and undermines the law as a regulatory mechanism of social relations and democracy.

Given the scope of organized criminal groups in Venezuela, demobilizing and reintegrating them into society should be challenging. More than any other group, collectives pose a legitimate risk to the power of the state. Given their ideological devotion to the Bolivarian Revolution, it seems likely that if or when Chavismo loses power, the most radical collectives will not disappear or change, but instead run the risk of turning into an urban guerrilla movement—a threat that some collective leaders have already vocalized.<sup>79</sup> The best solution is for the Venezuelan government to improve its economic situation, as well as education, public health, and nutrition services so that individuals no longer have incentives to join criminal groups. If part of the cause in the rise of organized crime is the chaotic social and economic context, than improving these should help provide a solution.

## NOTES

1. The author would like to thank Ensign Rachel LaBuda for her research assistance and help in beginning this manuscript. The views expressed in this chapter are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of or endorsement by the United States Naval Academy, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, or the United States government.

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