

FINAL MANUSCRIPT

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## **Venezuela's Criminal Gangs: Warriors of Cultural Revolution**

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When mass protests against the government erupted in Venezuela early in February, murder rates in the country were already shocking —close to twenty-five thousand people dead in the previous year, with ninety-seven percent of cases going unsolved. They would soon get worse, as motorcycle gangs in civilian clothes began attacking and shooting unarmed citizens, particularly youngsters, with the security forces standing by.

Known as *colectivos*, these paramilitary groups emerged during the presidency of the late Hugo Chavez to guard his revolutionary program. Officially, they are community organizations, but, according to the director of the “Venezuelan Observatory on Violence,” Roberto Briceño, they act as “guerrillas protected by the government.” Widespread reports and extensive film evidence have them killing and beating protesters, destroying vehicles, sacking homes and businesses and apparently also attacking pro-government forces, presumably in an effort to tarnish the image of peaceful demonstrators, escalate the conflict, and justify strong-arm tactics.

Although rampant crime is not typically allowed by an authoritarian government, *colectivos* and criminal gangs have enjoyed widespread impunity in Venezuela. Bárbara González, a six-year veteran of the country's intelligence service (SEBIN) who deserted last February, affirmed over Colombian radio that the “urban guerrillas” are mostly criminals armed by the government and coached by the Colombian terrorist group FARC, and that all security forces, including police and SEBIN, have orders to give them free reign. A former Cuban intelligence agent who served in Venezuela, Uberto Mario, reported that Cuba recruits criminals from poor neighborhoods for the *tupamaro*, a radical Marxist group that pre-dates Chavez and is incorporated into the *colectivos*. They are trained to destabilize Venezuelan society and contain opposition and unrest. Mario affirms that after receiving instruction in Marxism-Leninism, they are sent to Cuba to learn how to “kill and repress.”

Perhaps attempting to provide political cover for sending organized criminals to train in Cuba, in August 2013, Venezuela's vice minister of the interior spoke on television of discussing with members of two hundred and eighty criminal bands, of around ten thousand members, a government program to provide financial assistance “to those giving up their arms.” A few weeks later, in October, the vice minister for citizen safety acknowledged that delinquents voluntarily depositing their weapons were being sent to Cuba for rehabilitation, after which they would join the labor force. Coincidentally, she announced the deployment of twelve thousand more “soldiers” to the streets to support police.

In March, sources within Venezuelan security forces told the media that Cubans, including around twenty high-ranking officers at the presidential palace in Caracas, were directing the repression of protesters and coordinating the paramilitary groups.

Venezuela and Cuba have had an exceptionally close relationship since Hugo Chavez became president of Venezuela in 1999. Hundreds of joint economic and political projects tightly link the two countries and, deploy thousands of Cuban “advisors” to Venezuela while providing an estimated US\$10 billion a year in subsidies to the Cuban economy. Both countries have spearheaded an economic and political regional integration project known as ALBA —*Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America*— that has brought the revolutionary program to a growing number of nations of Latin America and the Caribbean. Officially known as “21<sup>st</sup> century socialism,” it is essentially Marxism-Leninism adapted to the region and present circumstances.

The key to understanding why the Venezuelan government would promote a crime pandemic lies in examining Marxist theories that hold that the bourgeoisie and the proletariat must be unnaturally forced into economic equality. The Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci held that cultural hegemony was the way to bring to power a new proletariat —one that will have many criminals at the top. His “long march through the culture” targets the traditional family and gradually engulfs schools, churches, the media, civic organizations, and all of society. Because Christianized Western culture stands in the way of the envisioned communist order, it must be conquered by a radical social and cultural transformation. A Robin Hood-style wealth redistribution empowers the lower classes, weakens middle and upper classes, and promotes class war. Empowering criminal gangs to kill, kidnap, rob, and extort weakens civil society and wears down fundamental Western values, such as the sanctity of life and the right to private property. Other tools of social fragmentation help this along, such as drug trafficking and support of terror groups like FARC; strong evidence links both to the highest Venezuelan officials and members of its Armed Forces.

The vacuum created when crime vanquishes rule of law allows a militarized state to step in with greater powers, as society, fearful and anxious, consents to the withdrawal of civil rights in return for the renewed stability. Violent crime also provides a powerful distraction from the radical changes simultaneously taking place. And the corrosion of morale caused by uncontrolled criminality pushes into exile those who oppose the changing socioeconomic conditions most strenuously—members of the stake-holding upper and middle classes. Since Hugo Chávez became the country’s president in 1999, an estimated one million Venezuelans, 3.5 percent of the population, have fled; this includes half of the nation’s Jewish community, particularly targeted by the regime.

Poverty as state policy has been a key element of the Castro-Chavist revolutionary blueprint. Extreme poverty is at first mitigated with government handouts —to create political loyalty, economic dependence, and a sense of hope anchored in the state welfare. (The irony is that these qualities discourage work and entrepreneurship, the actual roads to overcoming poverty.) Along with these dependencies comes indoctrination in class warfare. On February 25, 2013, Venezuela’s minister of education, Héctor Rodríguez, used standard class war bombast when he declared on television that elevating citizens from poverty did not mean “making them middle class, so they can then pretend to join the filthy.” (“Filthy” is the Spanish “escuálido,” a derisive term used frequently by government officials.)

General Guaicaipuro Lameda, former head of Venezuela’s powerful state-owned petroleum monopoly PDVSA, opened a window onto the government’s objectives when he related in a 2012 interview that ten years earlier Jorge Giordani, then and current finance minister of Venezuela, explained to him the rationale behind economic policies that did not appear to make sense. The revolution, Giordani confessed, was actually preparing a cultural transformation that would take around thirty years to achieve and would require keeping the most needy Venezuelans poor, yet hopeful. Lameda also said that Fidel Castro had expressed the same philosophy when he told him

that Cuba needed just \$4 billion a year from Venezuela because “more would be a hindrance, as people would start to live well and the poverty rhetoric would then die out.” Upon realizing that this plan required keeping the poor dependent while the other classes were brought down, General Lameda quit his prominent job.

According to this roadmap, when society is successfully “equalized” downward, most if not all capital and means of production will be in the hands of the state, i.e., the ruling elite. By the time this process is completed, the intelligence service (fashioned after Cuba’s) will have had years of experience to contain any remaining opposition. The armed volunteer militia, made up of eight hundred thousand fervent *chavistas* trained “to defend the revolution,” will be folded into the regular armed forces, which by then will be sufficiently purged and intimidated into submission. At this point, if need be, the paramilitary and criminal gangs that have been allowed to create the fear and disorder that justify authoritarianism would be absorbed or neutralized and disarmed. In a move that was to cut crime, but, in effect, curbs future resistance, gun sales to civilians in Venezuela were forbidden in June 2009 and all gun stores closed down.

In Cuba, totalitarianism was consolidated in the early 1960s much more quickly than in Venezuela, with the Cold War serving as a booster. A popular regime replaced a hated dictatorship and it was able to implant terror quickly with mass executions and political imprisonment. “21st century socialism,” the brainchild of Fidel Castro and the late Hugo Chávez, is predicated on gradually co-opting constitutional mechanisms, usurping the democratic process, and dismantling individual liberties. Rhetorical mantras are devised to disguise what is actually taking place: Chávez’s successor as president, Nicolás Maduro, saturates his speeches with “God,” “peace,” “love,” and “dialogue,” even as he derides and insults the opposition. Maduro must know the script well—a high-ranking former Cuban intelligence analyst living in hiding in the U.S. asserts that he trained in Cuba as a Communist agent.

Class war has been at the forefront of the regime’s steady radicalization. Although the late Hugo Chávez became president in 1999 by insisting he was not a socialist, after a decade in power, he was defiantly roaring that the revolution was “taking absolutely all power to totally eliminate the bourgeoisie from all political and economic space.” It took years of class warfare by deed and word for him to decide to walk around Caracas tailed by TV cameras, in February 2010, finger-pointing small businesses for immediate confiscation.

The strategic manual for this modern brand of socialism was a creation of the Castro brothers, supported by the huge oil wealth at Chávez’s disposal. Its ideological nest is the Foro de São Paulo, the forum cofounded in 1990 by Fidel Castro and the future Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, to reframe and revive the radical left after the fall of Soviet Communism. The goal is to advance towards a radical Marxist-Leninist transformation of society not by armed struggle, but gradually by undermining capitalism, democracy, and bourgeois institutions and values from within. Its collective expressions are the overtly anti-U.S. regional integration project ALBA and the recently created political forum CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), which excludes the U.S. and Canada and seeks to bypass and eventually replace the OAS (Organization of American States).

Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. ALBA members, are well on the revolutionary way, having, among other things, welcomed Cuban “collaborators,” engaged in populist handouts, amended their respective constitutions to perpetuate and strengthen the president in power, weakened the judicial branch, expanded the role of the state in the economy and eroded free markets and press freedoms. Four small island-nations of the Caribbean are also part of ALBA. Argentina, Brazil,

Uruguay, Chile, Peru, El Salvador, and Dominican Republic are not part of ALBA (at least for officially and for now) and are contained by stronger democratic frameworks at home, but their presidents are members of the Foro de Sao Paulo. According to an eighteen-year officer of Cuban intelligence now in hiding in Florida, Cuba has recruited, or has relations with, “all” Latin American leftist leaders, even the less radical, and helps them attain positions of power and influence. It is, thus, not surprising that almost all Latin American leaders have remained silent in the face of egregious human rights violations in Venezuela and Cuba and support having the Cuban dictatorship accepted as a credible regional actor.

Many Venezuelans, including high-ranking civil servants, members of the military, and prominent politicians, have denounced Cuba’s infiltration of the highest levels of Venezuela’s government, especially with its methods of social control, learned from former KGB and Stasi mentors and perfected over fifty-five years. In a 1971 speech at the University of Concepción, in Chile, Fidel Castro showed the role deceit played in acquiring power when he acknowledged that the struggle he led against the Batista dictatorship could not have been overtly socialist given the level of political “awareness” in Cuban society when he first took over. But, he insisted, “the path to revolution means precisely that each opportunity to advance must be exploited” and this will depend on “the degree of development of the social conscience and the existing correlation of forces.”

The *chavista* plan to destroy free markets and private enterprise involves stringent exchange restrictions, irrational price controls, widespread confiscations of businesses and agricultural land; the result is declining production—private and public— and lower export capacity, growing dependence on imports, and extreme scarcity of even basic products. Therefore, despite enormous oil revenues and the largest known reserves in the world (oil was nationalized decades ago), Venezuela is today a basket case. It has the highest inflation rate in the world (officially fifty-six percent, but this figure is too low, according to experts), an accumulated \$38.5 billion in debts with China, depleted monetary reserves, successive devaluations, rampant waste and corruption in the state sector and at all levels of government, and years of extensive capital flight and collapsed foreign investment.

The updated revolutionary model has had to adjust to instant mass communications and stronger international recognition of human rights than the Castro regime initially faced. Yet, terror remains an indispensable component. The paramilitary gangs seem fashioned after the Rapid Response Brigades of club-wielding thugs sent to repress the internal opposition or attempted public protests in Cuba. However, at this pre-totalitarian stage in Venezuela, when a full police state is not yet in place, these state-bred criminal gangs could also turn out to be the Achilles’ heel of the regime.

Rampant criminal violence and erosion of civil freedoms combined with a severe economic crisis is looking more and more untenable to Venezuelans. Students, followed by citizens of all ages, have taken to the streets massively and stayed there for weeks, bravely defying bullets, beatings, and tear gas. To date, at least forty two have been killed directly resulting from the demonstrations, dozens have been tortured, hundreds injured, countless arrested, and scores tear-gassed even inside their homes. The extensive graphic evidence of brutality is compelling and amply exposed in social and traditional media. Rather than contain unrest, it has fueled protest and resistance; moreover, it has generated widespread international outrage.

Conditions in Venezuela present a challenge for which even Cuba’s masters of repression have no experience. The Maduro regime has chosen to intensify repressive tactics by unparalleled means of state-sponsored violence to extinguish the revolt. The question that will decide the country’s future

is who will control the streets: criminal gangs willing to literally kill dissent or the protesters who realize that if they don't succeed Venezuela has no tomorrow?

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