



Cuba's intervention in Venezuela: the sordid truth

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January 11, 2026

Executive Summary

The spectacular capture of Nicolás Maduro in Caracas by U.S. forces last January 3rd exposed the vulnerability of Venezuela's security apparatus, overseen from Havana. Moreover, it laid bare the two regimes' mutual dependence and confirmed the military dimension of their ties. Although Cuba's presence in Venezuela has declined in recent years at least 20,000 are still operating there, including in defense, intelligence, and security.

The Cuban regime occupied Venezuela strategically, penetrating all spheres of Venezuelan society and its institutions. It exported to Venezuela its model of political control and repression supported by international criminal networks, and used Venezuela to fund its parasite state and carry out its plan of international expansion and regional integration. The Venezuelan case illustrates the asymmetric advantages of the Cuban brand and warns that underestimating its capacity for interference and survival represents a regional security risk with global implications.

The Cuban regime unmasked and humiliated after Maduro's capture

On January 3rd, the United States captured Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, in Caracas and transferred them to New York to face criminal charges. The complex military operation was a resounding success, an overwhelming display of U.S. military and technological power, and proof of the will and boldness of President Trump. At a press conference hours later, Trump said that many Cubans had died in the operation, while Secretary of State Marco Rubio highlighted Cuba's "takeover" of Venezuela and the colonization of its security apparatus.

In less than three hours —without an invasion and without a single casualty—"the empire" delivered a crushing, perhaps fatal, blow to the dictatorships of Venezuela and Cuba. The total incapacity of the Chavista regime and its purported security guarantor, the Cuban regime, was laid bare. The operation also forced Cuba to officially acknowledge that 32 Cubans from the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior had died "in direct combat against the attackers or as a result of the bombings of the facilities." But 32 appears to be below the real number of fatalities, and nothing has been said about the wounded or possible captives. The deceitful Cuban regime has for years vehemently denied Cuban presence in Venezuela's security organs. On January 5th, its representative at the United Nations denied before the Security Council the presence of Cuban military personnel on Venezuelan territory, calling it "unfounded accusations by the U.S.," and claiming: "We categorically reject that Cuba has an intelligence presence. Such assertions lack any factual basis." The fact is that Cuba, 67 years after the fall of Batista, it has not published the list of those killed on either side, nor that of Cubans who fell in the Angola war over three decades ago.

Reports indicate that the Cubans from Maduro's security escort killed or wounded belonged to a contingent —supposedly 140 personnel— of the Personal Security Directorate of Cuba's Ministry of

the Interior (MININT). Cubans from other MININT divisions and from the Armed Forces were likely providing various forms of support elsewhere at Fuerte Tiuna and at other targets of the U.S. bombings. Casto Ocando, a Venezuelan journalist based in Miami, has reported that U.S. forces had orders to neutralize—and annihilate if necessary—all Cubans who, according to infiltrators, had instructions to kill Maduro to prevent his capture. Maduro, of course, has broad information about the nature and criminal activities of the Cuban regime that he can hand over in a negotiation with prosecutors in New York.

Cuba's top leadership is in a panic faced with the looming loss of enormous revenues from Venezuela and the collapse of its image of invincibility. It seeks to distract the people with preparations for a "Yankee invasion" by ordering all troops to the barracks —most malnourished, poorly trained, and equipped with junk ordnance— and haranguing the population. On January 5th an "evacuation" of the medical brigade in Venezuela was ordered; its members have been instructed not to leave their residences and to await outbound flights. Unconfirmed rumors abound that that Cuban security or military forces are trying to pass themselves off as doctors and that Cuban troops are being extracted toward Colombia.

How many Cubans are part of the military and civilian missions in Venezuela?

Over the years, the Cuban presence in Venezuela has decreased in number, in parallel with the collapse of the Venezuelan economy —perhaps excepting the personal security and control of Nicolás Maduro. Nonetheless, Cuba had already consolidated sufficient control and its desired system was entrenched. Still, official numbers reported for Cuban "social missions" in Venezuela have never been verifiable, and Cubans present in security bodies, the armed forces, and other entities of the Venezuelan state have never been revealed.

The most visible Cuban presence has been in the so-called "social missions," instruments for implanting the Cuban political-ideological model, populist tokens used to cement loyalty and dependence on the government, and a convenient justification for financing Cuba. It should be noted that among the ranks of Cuban civilian "collaborators" in Venezuela are counterintelligence officers and trained paramilitaries; likewise, all civilians—doctors, nurses, athletes, teachers—are obliged to collaborate with intelligence services, have orders to fight for the Bolivarian revolution, and must monitor one another.

The late Hugo Chávez, then president of Venezuela, had said in 2012 that there were 44,804 Cuban collaborators in the "social missions," 31,700 in the health sector, and Cuban authorities at that time similarly reported around 45,000. According to ACN, the Cuban News Agency, as of the end of June 2025, Cuba had 12,930 medical "collaborators" in 24 Venezuelan states, in 1,200 medical offices, 586 rehabilitation rooms, and 572 diagnostic centers. This represents 54% of the 23,947 reportedly assigned to medical missions in 54 countries, of whom 46.4% (11,111) are doctors. The site Cuba Llama—which sell travel, shipments, mobile top-ups, and more, and is possibly linked to the regime—reported on January 3, 2026, without specifying a source: "According to official figures, more than 20,000 Cuban collaborators remain in Venezuela. Of these, nearly 13,000 are part of medical missions distributed across the country's 24 states. The rest corresponds to personnel linked to educational and technical areas."

In May 2019, Granma, the Cuban Communist Party's newspaper, published that 29,405 Cubans were assigned to Venezuela: 20,000 health collaborators distributed across Venezuela's 24

states and 9,405 in sports, cultural, agriculture, and education programs, plus others it did not specify in the energy sector.

Arturo López-Levy, whom several former colleagues report had been positioned as officer of Cuba's Intelligence Directorate to penetrate U.S. academia, claimed in an interview published this January 10th (2026), that around 20,000 Cubans are in Venezuela, including political advisers, doctors, teachers, and others appearing on the payroll of different ministries, with five to six thousand military and intelligence officers from Cuba's Ministry of the Interior and Armed Forces. López-Levy has stood out as a purported or subliminal spokesperson of desired narratives of the Cuban regime and its intelligence services—his numbers cannot be trusted but might well reflect the Cuban regime's attempt to save some face, and/or sow confusion, regarding its presence in Venezuela.

Cuba's leading role in Venezuela is not new

Cuba's unusual influence in Venezuela has been evident since Chávez became president. *Cuba's Intervention in Venezuela*, a book published by Cuba Archive in 2019, describes in detail how Cuba, despite being poor and highly underdeveloped—with a third of Venezuela's population and a territory eight times smaller—managed to conquer Venezuela. With more than 800 documentary sources, it explains in over 300 pages how Cuba established a controlling presence in all spheres of Venezuelan society, including the presidency—whose security Cuba has controlled since 2002—the armed forces, the security apparatus, ministries, immigration and foreign affairs services, the electoral authority, telecommunications, airports, ports and border crossings, state industries and companies—including PDVSA—public notaries, the management of IT systems and databases, and cyber surveillance.

For a quarter century, Cuba has provided Chavismo with intelligence, design, and operational support to exert military, political, and social control, receiving in return subsidized oil sales (or donations), management or brokerage contracts, and other gifts through preferential “cooperation agreements.” During the oil-boom bonanza and Venezuela's economic boom, flows to Cuba were estimated at \$10 billion annually. Although oil exports have declined considerably along with the Venezuelan economy's devastation—by 63% since 2023—they remain very significant, especially given the deep crisis of the Cuban economy.

Venezuelan opposition leaders have denounced Cuba's presence and intervention for years. In March 2014, when María Corina Machado was a member of parliament, the newly awarded Nobel Peace Prize winner led a march against the Cuban presence in Venezuela.

Cuban and Venezuelan leaders have repeatedly and publicly reiterated their strong alliance through countless statements, visits, meetings, ceremonies, celebrations, agreements, and joint projects since Chávez came to power. While impossible to outdo Chávez's verbosity in praising Fidel Castro and socialist Cuba, in 2016 Delcy Rodríguez, then Minister of Foreign Affairs and today de facto president, declared that “in part, Venezuela owes Cuba its happiness and development.” Maduro, for instance, defended sending oil to Cuba in 2019 by calling for strengthened military and intelligence cooperation, arguing that both countries were united by “love.”

Venezuela adopted—and took to its maximum expression—the Cuban model through Bolivarianism, perfecting a unique prototype of socialism (“of the 21st-century”) with forced poverty

for the population: central planning and “social” ownership of the means of production and distribution paired with captive, enclave capitalism (“state capitalism”) for the ruling elite. This formula can guarantee a constant flow of resources and allows a criminal, corrupt, predatory mafia to kidnap the state and entrench itself in power in association with other “Bolivarian” states and international criminal networks.

Cuba penetrated and co-opted Venezuela’s armed forces, imposing the Cuban template based on strong political indoctrination, a revolutionary strategic model of “war of all the people,” the militarization of society, the sharing of political and economic hegemony among high-ranking military commanders, and the direction and coordination of surveillance and repression, including through criminal gangs serving Chavismo known as *colectivos*. Although the phenomenon of regional expansion by criminal gangs linked to the Venezuelan state, such as the Tren de Aragua, postdates the book, it follows the same pattern as the *colectivos*, which this author [investigated](#) in 2014 and described as a Gramscian tactic. It deploys a dual strategy of mass migration and criminality to distract and occupy receiving states, destabilize and weaken democratic countries, and use violence to exert external influence and capture financial resources.

“Cubazuela” and its criminal networks

Cuba opened doors for Chavismo to its connections and networks established over three decades. Cuba under Castro had the script well staged long before Chávez came to power. It was widely involved in criminal activities: drug and human trafficking, money laundering, arms smuggling, kidnapping, banking schemes, large-scale theft, production and sale of counterfeit goods, and more. Thus, with Cuba’s guidance and encouragement, Venezuela became a narco-state. Both regimes could collaborate directly with partner states such as Nicaragua in the region (and at one time, Ecuador and Bolivia), authoritarian states in rivalry with the U.S. such as Iran, Russia, and China, and non-state actors with nefarious interests such as drug cartels, the ELN, the FARC, Hezbollah, and Russian mafias. They share hatred of the United States and of pluralist free-market democracy. Senior Venezuelan military leaders and the top PSUV (Socialist Party of Venezuela) leadership participate, headed by Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello. The partners share intelligence, methods, strategies, and asymmetric comparative advantages (technology, biotechnology, and others). A Venezuelan-Cuban joint venture has, for instance, issued countless passports and false identities including to Hezbollah terrorists.

Converging testimony on Cuba’s role in Venezuela

From within Chavismo itself, the book compiles extensive converging testimony about Cuba’s deep influence in Venezuela and the regimes’ structural dependence, establishing that Cuba:

1. participates in decision-making and has access to all information, including military secrets;
2. has been a strategic supporter and a pillar of survival for the Venezuelan regime;
3. provided institutional design and permanently penetrated the structure of the state in an operational manner: presidential security (the closest security details), intelligence organs, the Bolivarian National Armed Force (FANB), and all sensitive structures of the state;
4. is the architect of the system of social and military control and repression —the Venezuelan model was copied from the Cuban one and adapted and implemented with Havana’s advice and accompaniment;

5. reorganized and trained the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) to subjugate the FANB, directing internal control and surveillance mechanisms, detecting disloyalty, and preventing conspiracies.

The following testimonies from three of the closest Chávez collaborators indicate that without Cuban support the regime would have faced serious fractures:

- Retired Major General Hugo “El Pollo” Carvajal led Military Intelligence for long periods from 2004 to 2011 and again from 2013 to 2014. Since breaking with the regime in 2019, he asserted that Maduro was a “puppet” of the Cuban dictatorship and that “Cuba is the genesis of the Venezuelan crisis; if Cuba is not attacked as the fundamental problem, the system will not change.” Carvajal stated that the Cubans —more than 300 in the Ministry of Defense alone— set the guidelines for repressive policy, decided how to act before each protest, directed attacks, ordered killings, supervised torture, and trained Venezuelan torturers.
- Retired General Manuel Ricardo Christopher Figuera, former deputy director of the DGCIM and former head of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN), was trained by Cuba, traveled frequently to Cuba, and maintained a close relationship with Cuban advisers before being exfiltrated to the United States in 2019. While heading SEBIN, he had to obtain authorization from a Cuban adviser to Maduro so he could meet with the president, who was surrounded by around 200 Cubans, including electronic surveillance experts and three psychologists who analyzed his speeches and their impact on public opinion.
- Retired Brigadier General Clíver Alcalá, tied to Chavismo until 2013 —recently sentenced to 21 years in prison in New York— whose public testimony postdates the book’s publication but aligns with its conclusions. According to Alcalá, the Bolivarian National Armed Force was transformed into a “tutelaged force following the Cuban mold,” and Chávez placed Cuban advisers in military units and in training and indoctrination programs, granting Cuba deep doctrinal influence over commanders and troops.

Venezuelans trained to repress, as well as direct victims of repression, have also attested to Cuba’s presence and influence. The Casla Institute in particular, expands the cases collected in the book and continues documenting them.

Fidel Castro’s “crown jewel”: Chávez and Maduro, his minions

Fidel Castro came to power with an expansionist plan that immediately deployed by his new revolutionary government in numerous countries across several hemispheres, and with special interest in Venezuela due to its privileged geographic position and oil reserves. However, it was with Hugo Chávez that Cuba succeeded in occupying Venezuela —not in a traditional military sense, but by invitation and through the use of highly effective asymmetric means. Maduro was “Cuba’s man,” a key individual to achieve and consolidate it.

Nicolás Maduro was the one who, in theory, “recruited” Chávez in prison (1992–1994) to work for Cuba, developing Chávez’s bond with Castro after Chávez positioned himself as leader of the 1992 coup attempt against Carlos Andrés Pérez. Castro won over Chávez, convincing him he would be “the personification of Bolivarianism in Latin America”; he then shaped him, projected him politically, clandestinely supported his presidential campaign, eventually capturing the enormous

resources of Venezuelan oil and hijacking the Venezuelan state for his grand integration plans under Castro-communism. With Chávez's death, Cuba managed to replace him with "its man," Nicolás Maduro —ideologically and politically trained in Cuba from a young age, considered more loyal and manageable. Chávez transformed Venezuela into a dictatorship; Maduro consolidated it.

Maduro had held key Chavista posts from the start. He participated in the National Constituent Assembly (1999) that drafted the new Constitution, was a deputy and president of the National Assembly (2005–2006), and was Foreign Minister in the years of consolidation of the Cuban model and its international projection (2006–2012), when drug trafficking and money laundering networks, arms transfers, and issuance of passports and safe routes for criminals and terrorists were consolidated.

With Chávez convalescing from cancer in Havana, at least two of his closest collaborators publicly declared that the Cubans isolated and manipulated him so he would designate Maduro as his successor, convincing him he would recover. Diosdado Cabello, then president of the National Assembly, was the constitutional heir, but Havana did not want the nationalist military man who distrusted Cuba and claimed Venezuela was rich in oil and did not need alliances or tutelage. Today, Diosdado is the central figure behind the repression in Venezuela and the resistance to surrendering to the United States after Maduro's capture.

Cuba's strategy to colonize Venezuela

Former PDVSA president General Guaiacupuro described how, in 2000 during his "ideological induction" with Fidel Castro, Castro laid out his secret formula for dominating Venezuela. "Fidel's recipe" was a long-term strategy (over three generations or 30 years) of collective impoverishment and domination designed "to produce a cultural transformation in which Venezuelans would learn to think and behave differently in economic, political, and social terms." According to Lamedá, it called for, among other things, encouraging those who "don't like the revolution" to migrate, keeping people busy meeting basic needs, using state resources to buy loyalties, neutralizing adversaries, keeping the poor in poverty but with hope, instilling terror, manipulating the law to keep people committed, dominated, and disqualified, and using elections to corner the opposition.

The Venezuelan constitution was tailored to serve the revolution, subordinated to the executive, and a reform was imposed on the legal system that, among other things, enables Cubans to exercise repressive functions over Cubans in Venezuela and over Venezuelans in Cuba.

Cuba established control over the country's large cyberoctopus through cooperation agreements that handed all of Venezuela's informatics to Cuba. Thus, Cuba developed and manages all databases and the *carne de la patria* (Homeland Card), launched in 2017–2018 with biometric capacity used to control voting and financial transactions and required to obtain aid and government subsidies for basic products (gasoline, food) and social programs. Cuba pushed the Venezuelan regime to implement programs to monitor emails and social networks of opposition figures, armed forces members, and celebrities. It also deployed programs to manipulate electoral results and inflate voter registries. Forced by its lack of capacity in this area, Cuba had to seek help from its Chinese allies, who began managing Venezuela's telecommunications, gaining strategic access to the country's infrastructure.

Fidel Castro even used Cuban *santería* (Afro-Cuban syncretic religion) to manipulate Chávez, who from a young age was immersed in superstition and magic. Chávez began to spread it deliberately in Venezuela starting in 1999 and turned it into a state-sponsored cult aligned with Castro-Chavista leadership. Weekly trips to Cuba took high-ranking military officers and Chavista figures to be initiated into *santería* and Cuban *santeros* served as counterintelligence agents in Venezuelan government agencies and companies. At the time, it was a useful element of socio-political control —a form of religious-cultural colonialism used to gather intelligence, manipulate perceptions and dispositions, weaken established religious institutions and customs, change values, and advance cultural hegemony. After Chávez's death, its influence waned.

The ideological roots of 21st-century socialism

The Cuban regime gave rise to the neo-communist ideology rebranded as “21st-century socialism” and bears primary responsibility for Venezuela's political and economic ruin. With Chávez's support, it pushed hemispheric integration, enhanced by the creation of ALBA (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) in December 2004. 21st-century socialism is a radical, neo-Marxist, anti-capitalist, anti-United States model with revolutionary-populist characteristics derived from the Cuban model. Its ideological center is the São Paulo Forum, under Cuban direction —an offspring of Fidel Castro that Brazil's current president, Lula da Silva, helped implement. It was created in 1990 to rethink, revive, and coordinate the radical left after the collapse of Soviet communism and the USSR. The adopted model abandoned armed struggle as the way to power and instead seeks to win elections that lead to the gradual dismantling of democracies from within. When it was founded, Cuba advised participating groups that the parties should adopt the “M-19 model” (alluding to the Colombian narco-terrorist group supported by Cuba) to ensure self-sufficiency through drug trafficking.

With Venezuelan money and the effectiveness of Cuban services, the Forum advanced greatly: it sank the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) project, founded captive bodies like CELAC, (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), UNASUR (Union of South American Nations) and Petrocaribe; came to control eleven presidencies in Latin America, nearly destroyed the OAS (Organization of American States), and unleashed a violent wave in 2018 in numerous countries in the region. It was propelled by Obama-era “soft” policies of engagement. However, it began to wobble when Venezuela started having serious cash-flow problems. It has had political highs and lows in various countries and today hangs by a thread with President Trump's decisive crackdown on the Venezuelan narco-state. Only Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Suriname, and the small Caribbean islands of Antigua & Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Lucia remain as members. Nevertheless, Nicaragua persists as a Cuban satellite, and clear risks exist in Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil, whose presidents support the Cuban dictatorship and lead parties that belong to the São Paulo Forum.

The Cuban brand and its “core competencies”

Cuba's takeover of Venezuela has shown that its “brand” —a select set of methodological tools— has clear asymmetric advantages emanating from its totalitarian model and police-state methods. The Cuban regime does not have to answer to electoral pressures, checks and balances, legal demands, transparency, accountability, or bureaucratic-institutional limitations present even in the weakest democracies. Conceptualization, strategies, methodologies, propaganda, influence and international penetration, as well as control of global “solidarity” networks can be designed and

directed from above with total cohesion, long-term objectives, and without judicial, ethical, or moral limits. A large, consolidated infrastructure, led by the top nomenklatura of the Cuban Communist Party, carries out its objectives, including through large-scale disinformation and by buying and controlling other governments, international organizations, and the press that shapes public opinion. Cuba not only used these tools to occupy Venezuela but transferred its model, which Maduro's regime deployed zealously.

Although most Cubans live in misery, the regime maintains a [vast apparatus](#) of internal repression, intelligence, propaganda, and [one of the largest embassy networks](#) in the world. In addition, it coordinates around 1,700 solidarity groups across various hemispheres. It has planted influence agents globally, even at the highest levels of governments, which has allowed it to, among other things, enjoy impunity and receive large subsidies from numerous countries without conditions despite its paltry investment in health, energy, and other essential infrastructures, and the fact that exploiting its exported workers—running a massive human-trafficking business—constitutes its main official source of income.

For decades the Cuban regime has instrumentalized its citizens through forced mass migration. Humanitarian aid from the Cuban diaspora is the top source of income (estimated at around \$7 billion), not counting revenue from travel, phone services, customs duties, passport fees, and more. The regime also exports intelligence agents, criminals, and the mentally ill. During the Mariel exodus of 1980, it poured thousands from insane asylums and prisons into boats transporting families and political asylees to the U.S. Over time, a significant number arriving in the US have committed Medicare fraud, insurance fraud, cargo-truck schemes, and more. Millions of dollars from these criminal activities, described in detail by the [Sun Sentinel](#) in 2018, have ended up in Cuban banks. Without a doubt, Chavismo copied these tactics.

Conclusion

The Venezuelan dictatorship has generated immense human suffering, excessive material costs, and criminal activities with enormous national, regional, and worldwide repercussions. The Cuban dictatorship has been its principal mentor and enabler. Dismissing the threat it represents, with its “core competencies,” would be a grave error. It has survived repeated predictions of its fall and has reinvented itself more than once.