



Venezuela: A Mafia State

by Dr. Jiri Valenta

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: President Nicolás Maduro’s Venezuela is effectively a mafia state, run by a military leadership that is heavily involved in the drug trade and security forces that aid the criminal networks they are supposed to be battling. They are shored up by 15,000 Cuban military and security personnel and in cahoots with Iran, the world’s largest state sponsor of terrorism.

In an [op-ed in *The New York Times*](#) on June 11, Abraham F. Lowenthal and David Smilde proposed a humanistic vision for the [Oslo negotiations](#) between representatives of the regime of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro and the democratic opposition, led by Juan Guaidó –recognized by [more than 50 countries](#) as Venezuela's interim president.

According to Lowenthal and Smilde, “The divisions within Maduro’s coalition laid bare during the failed April 30 uprising, coupled with Juan Guaidó’s unsuccessful call for the support of the armed forces, may have finally persuaded key people on both sides that the only viable way forward is a negotiated transition.”

To support this argument, the authors provide examples of previous “negotiated transitions” – such as [Chile in 1988](#) and [Poland in 1989](#). Neither case can be applied to Maduro’s Venezuela, however, which is neither a military dictatorship like that of Augusto Pinochet nor a classical Communist regime.

Venezuela – as described in an [interview with *The Hill*](#) in May by Navy Admiral Craig Faller, head of US Southern Command – is “a mafia... an illicit business that [Maduro is] running with his 2,000 corrupt generals. It’s ruining the country. And the effects of that are compounding every other security problem in our neighborhood. Every security problem is made worse by Venezuela.”

In the [interview](#), Faller pointed to Venezuela’s gold and drug trades, which are helping to fund the remnants of Colombia's FARC communist guerrillas. “The data

and statistics show that their numbers have increased because of what they can gain in terms of freedom of maneuver and the economic opportunity that they get from illicit trafficking and partnering with the Maduro regime," [Faller said](#). "Illicit narco trafficking through Venezuela is up some 40 percent."

In addition, according to a May 1 [report in the Miami Herald](#):

Worried by signs of dissatisfaction in the barracks, the Nicolás Maduro regime is trying to buy the loyalty of Venezuela's armed forces by increasing their access to loans and other benefits and giving them control of enterprises, according to internal documents and military sources.

The initiative, which builds on a practice started by the late Hugo Chávez, was adopted amid a generalized mistrust between Maduro and the National Bolivarian Armed Forces (NBAF) and a wave of arrests of military officers early this year...

Maduro increased the participation of military officers in his government in July of 2017 and it now stands even higher than during the Chávez era. Ten of the 30 ministries are in the hands of armed forces officers, and Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López controls the critical food distribution sector.

Other key government posts in the hands of officers are the Foreign Ministry, headed by National Guard Gen. Néstor Reverol; the National Bolivarian Intelligence Service, headed by Gen. Gustavo González; the Ministry of Agricultural Production and Lands, headed by Wilmer Castro Soteldo; and the Ministry of Electric Energy, headed by Gen. Luis Motta Dominguez...

To make matters worse, many of Maduro's 2,000 generals are also heavily [involved in the drug trade](#), aiding the very networks they are supposed to be battling. These military men/drug traffickers have become known as the "*Cartel del los Soles*" ("Cartel of the Suns"), due to "the golden stars that generals in the Venezuelan National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB) wear on their epaulettes."

Meanwhile, much of the country is also controlled by "[pranes](#)," crime lords who run gangs from within the country's prisons.

The Venezuelan security forces, which crack down heavily on dissidents, have been aided for years by Cuba, whose own "socialist" regime was created with the aid of the Leninist Soviet Union in the 1960s. In May 2014, General Raúl Baduel, Venezuelan Defense Minister under Hugo Chávez, who was later held in custody at the Ramo Verde military prison, [told The Guardian](#) how the Cubans "...have modernized the intelligence services... set up a special unit to protect the head of state and... computerized Venezuela's public records, giving them control over the issue of identity papers and voter registration. They have representatives in the ports and airports, as well as supervising foreign nationals."

While most US military studies of Venezuela focus on its armed forces, there is a parallel security structure on which Maduro relies – the “[colectivos](#)” trained by the Cubans and modeled on Fidel Castro's original 1960 [Committee for the Defense of the Revolution](#). Members of the [colectivos](#) operate as armed motorcycle gangs that have been terrorizing and even killing anti-Maduro protesters.

Where dangerous outside influence is concerned, in testimony before the [House Armed Services Committee](#) on May 1, 2019, Admiral Faller said:

Iran is also looking to re-energize its outreach after reducing its efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean in recent years. It has deepened its anti-US influence campaign in Spanish language media, and its proxy Lebanese Hezbollah maintains facilitation networks throughout the region that cache weapons and raise funds, often via drug trafficking and money laundering.

As Lebanese author and American University of Beirut history professor Dr. Makram Rabah [explained in 7Dnews](#) in February:

Hezbollah's survival is heavily dependent on the current Venezuelan regime, which helps the group launder its money [and] benefits from drug trafficking networks not only to launder money, but to also procure intelligence data collected by international crime organizations.

In April, Mayhan Air, a private Iranian airline sanctioned by the US for providing support to the terrorist Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), [initiated flights](#) between Tehran and Caracas.

Such burgeoning ties between Venezuela and Iran, the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism, should not be treated by the US as secondary to the [crisis in the Persian Gulf](#); nor will the Oslo process bear fruit, because a [mafia state](#) such as Maduro's cannot be negotiated with. Mafia thugs do not cede power and profit out of respect for the civilized world.

According to US National Security Adviser John R. Bolton, [as reported](#) in the *Washington Free Beacon* by Bill Gertz:

The administration's strategy seeks to force the estimated 15,000 Cuban military and security personnel out of Venezuela. The administration recently tightened sanctions against travel to Cuba in a bid to pressure Havana.

“If by magic we could make them disappear and go back to Cuba immediately it would be a very short period of time before Maduro fell,” Bolton said. “And that’s what’s so ironic here. You’ve got an imperial power, Cuba, in effect ruling Venezuela. And what’s the benefit, what’s the reason Cuba does this? They get their oil at substantially below global market prices from Venezuela.”

The people of Venezuela, by contrast, receive no benefit from the Cubans, he said.

The administration is studying several other additional measures aimed at pressuring Cuba.

“There are additional designations of individuals in Venezuela and Cuba,” he said. “We’re going to do more to prevent the transfer of oil from Venezuela to Cuba. Obviously, every time we put sanctions in place, the Maduro regime tries to evade them, so we’re looking at new ways to prevent that.”

Bolton said that while it has become clear that the Maduro regime will eventually be ousted, it is possible another player in that regime could take over. “But once the rocks start rolling downhill, the regime itself is unsustainable,” he said.

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