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Gangs in the post-Chávez Bolivarian revolution

How *mano dura* policies and political pacts have organized crime in Venezuela¹

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Introduction

On July 13, 2015, “La Piedad”, a populous poor neighborhood situated in the south periphery of Caracas, awoke at dawn under siege due to a spectacular and unexpected militarized invasion in which 14 people died and more than 200 were detained by the Bolivarian National Guard. Hours later, President Nicolás Maduro announced the new militarized operation – it was the fourth in the last five years. The military intervention was called *Operación de Liberación y Protección del Pueblo* (OLP; People’s Liberation and Protection Operation). President Maduro said in the afternoon: “With these four operations taking off . . . we have elements in hand to prove that Colombian paramilitarism, Colombian drug trafficking and all that conspirators have come to seize, to control and to establish [their] model”.⁵

One year and eight months after having launched and systematically deployed the OLP throughout much of the country, on March 31, 2017, Attorney General of the Republic Luisa Ortega announced that the year before, 21,752 people were murdered in Venezuela. Of these, she said, 4,667 people died at the hands of various state security forces. That day, the attorney general revealed that the Venezuelan state was responsible for 21% of the violent deaths that occurred in 2016 in our country. In short, our law enforcement agencies had turned into the most lethal in the world.

This chapter contributes to a critical approach to the study of gangs by highlighting the deleterious effects of *mano dura* policies, such as the ones exemplified by the OLP, on criminal groups. First, using the case of Caracas, we want to show how such policies encourage gangs to adapt in different ways, in some cases adopting a warfare mode. These policies have contributed to the transformation of gangs into organized criminal groups, which has been widely discussed in the literature (Cruz, 2010; Lessing, 2017). Second, we want to illustrate how these policies in Venezuela have contributed to the reorganization of gangs, turning them into informal political actors of importance with whom the State, in periods of contested legitimacy and high political instability, is compelled to negotiate. This is especially so given the highly disruptive power of armed violence acquired by the criminal groups and their internal cohesion developed during confrontations with the police (Hagerdorn, 2005; Cruz, 2016; Barnes, 2017; Cruz and Durán

Martínez, 2016). One of the main goals of this chapter is to tackle the diversity of the relationships between the Bolivarian state and armed actors. We understand the state not as a unitary and coherent set of institutions but as “congeries of institutions, agencies and agendas at different levels that are not necessarily connected with each other” (Gupta, 2012:56).⁶ By analyzing how some gangs evolve into organized criminal groups in response to state policies – from persecution to pacts, from pacts to declarations of war and back to pacts – we aim to enrich the literature on violence, organized crime and politics (Arias, 2013; Wennmann, 2014; Durán Martínez, 2015; Lessing, 2015; Barnes, 2017; Cruz, 2018). A third goal of this chapter is to contribute to an understanding of why Venezuela has seen such an increase in violence despite the fact that it has not experienced the civil wars that have occurred in countries with similar homicide rates through a focus on *mano dura* policies (Cruz, 2010; Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers, 2009; Antillano y Avila, 2017; Wolf, 2017).

In this analytical project, we build on the concept of *criminal politics*, which Barnes (2017:973) describes as

interactions between states and violent organizations that are motivated more by the accumulation of wealth and informal power and which seldom have formal political ambitions pertaining to the state itself; however have become increasingly engaged in politics of the state through the accumulation of the means of violence itself.

(see also Lessing, 2015). Furthermore, different authors propose a typology of state and organized crime group relations ranging from zero tolerance and eradication to attempts at transformation and integration into the political and social life (see Wennmann, 2014).⁷

While acknowledging that the militarization of citizen security is historically rooted in Venezuelan democracy (Hernández, 1986; Avila, 2017), we argue that we must analyze militarization in distinct phases in the Chávez era (Zubillaga and Hanson, 2018). In 2009, massive incarceration was the dominant security logic, one that contributed to the alliance of gangs and their transformation into criminal organizations. Later, in 2013, while continuing to imprison, the government experimented with a policy of integration referred to as the *Zonas de Paz* (Peace Zones). This failed integration attempt allowed gangs in some spaces to consolidate their territorial sovereignty. In response, the government declared a war on criminal groups, launching the spectacular military operation called “Operativo de Liberación del Pueblo.” In some places, criminal gangs have responded to this initiative with impressive lethal power, using weapons such as hand grenades that can only be obtained through the state security forces attacking these organizations, though, as we note subsequently, the effects of the OLP and *mano dura* approaches are far from homogeneous. Finally, there was a return to negotiations between high-ranking government officials and the leaders of criminal groups as the government sought stability and support in the face of a contested electoral process. Thus, we identify four strategies that were developed and juxtaposed with each other at distinct but also overlapping time periods: violent enforcement, failed negotiation and integration, confrontation and instrumental negotiation.

This research is based on ethnographic and interview data we have collected since 2017. Two years after the launching of “Operativo de Liberación del Pueblo”, we started to visit La Piedad, once or twice a week, to register the impact of “this war for territorial sovereignty” declared by the government in this urban poor community.⁸ From the beginning, we were astounded by the devastation caused in the community by the police forces; later on, we were impressed by the visibility of guns and hand grenades in public spaces in the barrio. From August 2017 to August 2018, a fieldwork diary of each visit was kept. For safety reasons, not all interviews were recorded, though many were. Seven group discussions and 16 individual interviews were

conducted with women. We also had the opportunity to interview young men, mostly about their experiences during the military interventions. The leader of the criminal group we focus on in this chapter (whom we will call here Doni) was usually around; we were able to speak with him four times about his life, a recent pact with high-ranking officials, his family and the transformation of his business. We also spoke with local drug traffickers.

Between March and July of 2018, we conducted 90 interviews with officers from various security forces, including the National Police, Venezuela's forensic police (CICPC) and municipal and state police forces. Our sample contained men and women officers between the ages of 23 and 47 from different rankings in the police hierarchy and different lengths of time on the job. While some officers were completing their first year in the forces, others had over 20 years' experience. All the group discussions and interviews recorded were transcribed and coded following the main principles of grounded theory in qualitative data analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Violence and street gangs before the OLP

In 2016, Venezuela became the second most violent country in the region, behind El Salvador, with a rate of 70 homicides per 100,000 residents. Like patterns throughout the region, those who are dying are mostly young poor men of color. The persistent exclusion of young poor men from popular sectors, the collapse of prisons due to the sudden massive incarceration of these youths – discussed in the next section – and the deepening of the economic crisis associated with the collapse of oil prices correlate with the strengthening of criminal networks and more visible crimes such as kidnapping and homicides (See Wacquant, 2001, 2008; Antillano and Avila, 2017).

This substantial increase in violence can only be explained by a multiplicity of interrelated factors and processes occurring within the frame of what is known as the Bolivarian Revolution (see Smilde, Hanson, and Zubillaga, forthcoming).⁹ Although we cannot review this complex phenomenon in full here, we argue that state fragmentation and inner struggles contributed significantly to an inability to develop sustained citizen security policies – such as police reform and gun control policies – and to the deterioration of the systems of justice administration and the police, with the latter overtly involved in killings and organized crime. Intense state fragmentation and progressive militarization of the Bolivarian government can be noted as well in the frequent rotation of ministers in the sphere of citizen security truncating the continuity of any public policy. From 1999 to 2019, 20 years of the Bolivarian Revolution, 15 ministers have been designated and removed – 12 of them have been from the military. Concerns over the potential threats posed by internal and external opposition have motivated an important increase in the purchase of weapons during the first decade of the 21st century in Venezuela. According to reporting by *El Nacional*, by 2009, Venezuela dedicated more resources to the purchase of weapons than any other country in the region. The country ranked eighth worldwide in this category.¹⁰ These legal purchases feed illegal weapons circuits (Cano, 2001).

Here we use the recent history of the territory of La Piedad in Caracas to consider gang modes of operation and transformation across the four security strategies identified previously, placing special emphasis on the process of militarization that has characterized the Maduro administration.

La Piedad, where the OLP was launched in 2015, is a popular neighborhood that is part of the territorial extension of slums, subject to a pathological imagination (Brotherton, 2015), especially of police officers and the media. As if to justify the cruelty and killing of the population, the conglomeration of slums began to be called “the Death Corridors” (*Corredores de la Muerte*) months after the OLP.¹¹

Located on the south-central periphery of the city, the neighborhood is closely connected with a variety of other middle-class neighborhoods and commercial areas. Its location plays an

important role in criminal activity in the area. The difficult terrain of the mountain the neighborhood is built on provides a degree of safety to groups operating in the barrio. The close proximity of a large number of poor neighborhoods provides important opportunities for collaboration, such as hiding stolen cars and kidnapping victims, and the clandestine movement of weapons across rough terrain that has a series of paths connecting different parts of the city. The neighbors describe their community as a labyrinth. Furthermore, the height of the mountain also provides strategic advantages. It is a lookout, and criminal groups with their surveillance crews can always detect when police agents are coming.

Gangs made their presence evident in La Piedad long before the network of organized crime groups we describe here developed. Previous to 2015, these gangs were the result of various characteristic conditions of poor and excluded neighborhoods, described in the literature on gangs of American urban sociology, incorporating other conditions of the Latin American context such as the chronic absence of justice, the abundance of uncontrolled weapons and high levels of police brutality and repression (Briceño-Leon and Zubillaga, 2002; Rodgers and Muggah, 2009; Rodgers and Baird, 2015).

Groups of young people, organically formed with a group identity, were attached to their specific territory. In fact, the gangs assumed the names of their neighborhood sector. They were involved in recurring armed confrontations with gangs of neighboring sectors. These armed conflicts, known as *culebras* (snakes), were unleashed for multiple reasons, for example, territorial invasions and robberies into neighboring sectors. *Culebras* entail the revenge for deaths of relatives or peers, thus constituting a network of obligations. The duty to avenge and respond on behalf of the “*dolientes*” (mourners) by family and friends has produced numerous deaths (see Zubillaga, 2008). One of the members of a gang that we interviewed explained that shootings he engaged in before were “for *culebras* we had with [other gangs]! I am involved with these faggots because they killed a friend, or a friend of a friend of mine. And that has been a chain; a chain that started when I was a child and extends to the present”.

These were gangs without formal hierarchies (Dubet, 1987), deploying expressive violence as a means of performing their masculine identities and defending their neighborhood from robberies and attacks by other gangs.¹² Excluded from the formal job market, they engaged in micro-trafficking to accumulate resources for the gang. This micro-trafficking was irregular and unstructured, oriented around profit but also individual consumption (see Decker and Van Winkle (1996) on this form of trafficking).

The participation in the micro-trafficking of drugs caused frequent clashes with the police. A police officer assigned to La Piedad in the past that contrasted the time he spent working in the area with the present:

La Piedad, *Tucusito, Cien Caminos* [we have changed the barrios' names]. There is an alley [that connects all these neighborhoods] and they all communicate with each other. I used to pass through all those alleys with five officials, running around, shooting up criminals! Now that cannot be done, you have to go in with three hundred other officers, and even then it's likely that you will be killed.

Militarization, violent enforcement, persecution and imprisonment

Despite a civilian-led police reform initiated in 2006, a new phase of military operations was inaugurated in 2009 (Hanson, 2013a, 2013b, 2017) with the launch of the *Dispositivo Bicentenario de la Seguridad* (Bicentennial Security Device operative), followed by the *Madrugonazo al*

hampa operative in 2011 and *Plan Patria Segura* in 2012. These plans consisted of massive invasions of neighborhoods and the intensive detention of poor young men.

A large increase in the prison population quickly became evident, with the prison population doubling between 2009 and 2011 from 30,483 to 50,000. In fact, Minister of Interior and Justice Tareck El Aissami commented on Twitter: “The situation is complex, during 2010, the prison system reached the largest population deprived of liberty in history”, revealing the strides made in incarceration during the socialist revolution.¹³

Most of those imprisoned were young men from popular sectors held for minor crimes such as drug trafficking. In the only prison survey published by the government, it was noted that 90.5% of those deprived of liberty are men, and almost half of them were young people, with 45% between 18 and 25 years old (88% under 40 years old). The vast majority were poor, with 56% from stratum IV and 11.6% from V, and almost a quarter of those were held for drug trafficking and distribution.¹⁴ The rapid increase of the prison population led to a critical prison situation, evidencing a loss of state control over some but not all of the prisons. In these spaces developed autonomous and sophisticated internal organizing of those deprived of liberty (see PROVEA, 2013; Antillano et al., 2015).¹⁵ This political prison order simulates a sort of state, with a government directed by leaders, a military branch and even mechanisms for capturing rent used to buy weapons and ammunition.

In La Piedad, many men were imprisoned and were socialized in this hierarchical prison order. The men involved in the illicit economies, aware that they would likely be imprisoned at some point, knew it would be advantageous to have acquaintances or contacts in prisons to ensure their own protection and survival. In some spaces, previously incarcerated youth, upon returning to their neighborhoods, reproduced a new order with clear hierarchies, headquarters and an army of vigilantes, prepared to respond to the official declaration of war.

The massive imprisonment and gathering of young men with knowledge and experience in illicit economies favored the creation of social networks in the world of crime. A policeman commented precisely on this porosity between the world of jail, the world of the neighborhood and the importance of social networks among criminals when explaining why Doni, the leader of La Piedad criminal gang, could not have been arrested:

He takes shelter, more than everything in prison, in Tocarón. He is hidden there. He goes there and stays several months and does not leave, and when he leaves, he goes to La Piedad and walks with several riflemen. We have tried to catch him, but he has friends everywhere. So when the police are already in civilian clothes and hidden in cars in the lower part of the neighborhood, they tell him and then he doesn't leave, he goes to another place.

It is important to clarify that the prison-gang connection in Venezuela operates at a much smaller scale than those found in places like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The degree to which prison hierarchies and social structures have influenced gangs in Caracas is more limited than in other places in Latin America. However, these connections are becoming increasingly important in understanding the modus operandi of criminal groups in the country.

A failed integration attempt: Las Zonas de Paz and the strengthening of the gangs

By 2013, it became clear that mass incarceration was not an effective solution to crime. Homicide rates had increased from 49 in 2009 to 53 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2012. It seemed to a sector of the Ministry of Interior and Justice that it was time to try other policies.

The “Peace Territories” were an initiative developed by the vice minister of internal policy and legal security, José Vicente Rangel Ávalos, in the framework of the *Misión a Toda Vida Venezuela* (Mission to All Life Venezuela).¹⁶ The goal of this plan was to establish meetings with heads of gangs in the country and convince them to agree to ceasefire pacts and turn over their weapons. In exchange, they would gain relief from police repression and resources and loans that would be provided by the government in order to create cooperatives and motivate agricultural development and construction within the gangs’ communities (see Gómez and Hanson, forthcoming). In 2013, Rangel announced that the plan would be piloted in the Valles del Tuy; Barlovento; and sectors in the states of Aragua, Falcón and Guárico, where the well-known gang of El Picure operated. The vice minister visited the identified areas in person and negotiated directly with the young members of the gangs.

Gómez and Hanson (forthcoming) write that the experiment, implemented with little planning and without trained experts and the support of local institutions, ended in complete disaster. Rather than establishing peace, the plan strengthened gangs in key territories. With no oversight or support to create cooperatives or engage in economic development, gangs in some places used the money intended for these purposes to buy high-caliber weapons and grenades from state security forces. In the interviews with police officers we conducted, one agent commented:

Since it was not fully planned, there was no supervision plan, or a control plan, or a follow-up plan. When they gave the money, what did criminals who have never had a micro-enterprise do? Upon receiving the money, they say: “What are we going to do with this money?” and they say: “We are going to buy more weapons then!”, they took it and invested the money in guns.

The transition to Peace Zones resulted in an unprecedented change in certain gangs, who grew in size and became increasingly capable of engaging in large-scale kidnappings, extortion, bribery, vehicle robbery and other lucrative illicit activities that were coordinated from within the Peace Zones. Indeed, by 2014, the collapse of oil prices had begun to affect both the redistributive capacity of the state as well as illicit economies. Traditional activities, like the micro-trafficking of drugs, were no longer sufficient, and gangs had to turn to other activities.

The vice minister claimed that the experiment was novel, without precedent. In an interview with the vice minister, while defending himself against “attacks” on his program, he commented: “First, it was not something we planned. This came out alone, and then nothing is written down. This is unique in the world. A Vice Minister who talks from you to you, with gangs totally armed.”

Yet El Salvador was already 16 months into a gang truce that had been initially negotiated between gangs and certain political actors. The truce consisted of a non-aggression pact between the two main Salvadoran gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha 13 and the Eighteenth Street Gang, as a first stage. During the second stage, “Violence Free Territories” were to be created. Unlike the Venezuelan experiment, the truce eventually involved church representatives, business leaders and local and international organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS) (see Táger and Aguilar Umaña, 2013; Aguilar Umaña, Arévalo de León, and Táger, 2014; Cruz, 2018).

In a talk show on August 25, 2013, the vice minister spoke, using the same vocabulary as in El Salvador, “Violence Free Territories” and “Peace Territories”, to describe the initiative he led. But, unlike the inter-institutional coordination of El Salvador and the later great visibility that the experience gained, in Venezuela, the improvisation of the program, lack of opacity and institutional linkages were evident.

In La Piedad, after years of official persecution and imprisonment, an alliance between gangs with long-standing rivalries began to form. As one youth said, this was seen as a strategy to confront the common enemy – the police. The Peace Territories experiment allowed space for these alliances to form. One of the drug dealers we interviewed told us:

In Ocumare del Tuy, José Vicente Rangel Ávalos, that fuck went and started talking to the gangsters there! Then, later, Doni, you know that Doni knows everyone! Then, [Doni] brought a guy from [Ocumare del Tuy, where the Peace Territories started], then they started with the thugs like “Look, the peace!” And now we are all calm. Because before we were enemies, and they killed people here and we killed people there too! But we reached a friendship. Totally serious.

The alliance of the different gangs and the relative peace established between them allowed the strengthening and expansion of this criminal network. Increasingly, gangs were organized by sector and had recognized leadership and defined positions. This new alliance later allowed for a common front against the police and the state’s *mano dura* policies (see Antillano and Avila, 2017). A young member of the gang, when recounting how his gang had organized, said:

By sectors, and each guy leads his sector. Doni takes his sector, Niki takes his sector, another guy leads his sector, there are thirty-six sectors, but there are sectors that are dominated by the same guy, so, I am the head here, here are ten *panas* of mine. Here I am the first, he is the second and he, the third. It is a hard safety ring to get there. To get to where they are, you have to go through like ten *alcabalas*. “*Gariteros*”. It is the structure they have in the neighborhood.

This structure is homologous to the prison, where the term “*garitero*” refers to the guards located at strategic points.

According to the interview we conducted with the leader of the La Piedad gang, the gang had about 100 members. According to both police officers and a young member interviewed, if all gangs in La Piedad and the neighboring sectors of the chain of barrios were added up, there would be about 300 members.

The visibility of criminal activities was astounding. Several neighbors reported with intense discomfort how common it was in their community to see kidnapped persons being held, and some reported hearing and seeing the blows and threats in phone calls with the kidnapped family members to negotiate terms. In a conversation with Doni, the leader of the band, he was quite sure of himself and the returns on kidnapping: “It is the activity in which you have a reward that you are going to charge. You have a victim, you negotiate with someone in the family to solve. It always goes well.”

A young man who belonged to the same gang remembered the period in the following way:

You had to sweat every day to kidnap or steal someone! You know that you can make twenty thousand dollars with a kidnapping, and you go and buy two rifles for ten thousand each. And if you want, tomorrow you sell [the rifle] and buy a smaller gun. But mostly, that AR-15 [a type of rifle], you buy from the National Guard.

Despite the fact that La Piedad was established as a Peace Zone, in which the police were formally prohibited from entering, some officers continued to “*cobrar su multa*”, as some youths described to us in interviews. A part of the gang’s earnings ended up in the hands of the police.

Thus, intermittent confrontations between the police and gangs and regular police extortion continued in La Piedad.

And, with the economic crisis deepening month by month, officers began to “adjust” agreements and unilaterally increase “their fines.” As one young drug dealer told us: “Doni has been seized a thousand times; he is basically a money maker for the police”. But there came a point that gang members said it was unacceptable:

then from there we ended up with that *vaina* of the peace zones. The issue was turned around. It became the Zones of Peace against the government, against the police! . . . Then that created a war. I don’t want any more “*pacos*” [police agents] here in my neighborhood! A “*paco*” that comes up the hill, we’ll hit him! It was then when the thugs got bloodthirsty, that, that was never seen in Venezuela!

This continued bribery would unleash a confrontation with the police agents that would culminate with the declaration of “the frontal war” with the OLP. On June 5, 2015, the gangs’ declaration of war on the police erupted in a spectacular expression: in a confrontation, the gangs of La Piedad burned nine police motorcycles (*Policaracas*), threw grenades and wounded at least six officials. The event was widely reviewed in the press: “Mega-Bands: violent groups, at Piedad”; “Camp battle! With rifles and grenades they attack policemen in La Piedad”. Neighbors remember the battle very well; they commented that this time “the thugs turned on and burned the police motorcycles with grenades.” An old lady added that the “*malandros*” were tired of the extortion, resorting instead to throwing grenades.

A little over a month after the attack on police, the People’s Liberation Operation began. Now the state had declared war on the gangs.

Confrontation and instrumental negotiation: a war declared on organized crime and the resulting pact

Officers pointed out that initially OLP raids were carried out in areas where the Peace Territories had been implemented. In other words, from their perspective, the OLP was a response created by the state to deal with the outcomes of a public policy over which they had lost control. While officers blamed the OLP for the reorganization and strengthening of gangs in certain sectors, many responded that it was policies like the Peace Territories that catalyzed these changes. With free rein, as officers described it, gangs were able to work together and strengthen their organizations, as well as invest in better weapons, such as grenades and tear gas. When we asked a member of the PNB’s special tactical unit (the FAES) about the Peace Territories he told us:

Look, these *zonas de paz* have been a disaster, they are the root of why delinquency has increased so much in the country. In those sectors gangs were able to gain more strength. The government gave them money, a credit to start a business or something, but what did they do with that money? They bought guns.

Gang members we interviewed corroborated these accounts. José, one of the young members of the gang we interviewed, commented:

the People’s Liberation Operation was our fault! We were living too fast and furious! We were at high speed all the time! The kidnappings, the car stealing. When they got into La

Piedad [the police officers in the OLP first intervention], there were eighty cars! Up there they took out ambulances, how are you going to have eighty cars here! And they were all from different gangs! Different *panas*! At that time the peace zones that had been created with Rangel Ávalos were destroyed.

Doni himself agreed with this statement; in a conversation, he told us: “We made mistakes. But here you don’t mess with people. They gave us the peace zone, but we made mistakes. We continued with kidnappings, stolen cars, we burned cars to the police.” A policeman also pointed out that visibility of crimes as “noise”: “noise began to be generated regarding what is kidnapping, homicide, in those sectors that were benefited with special terms, in those sectors called peace zones”. Another one said: “La Piedad was sounding [*sonando*] too much”. Different media kept on defining Zonas de Paz as zones of impunity.¹⁷

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the *Operación de Liberación del Pueblo* (People’s Liberation and Protection Operation) was initiated in La Piedad, “the Caracas sector with the most active criminal gangs”. Very soon, the abuse of force that occurred within various security forces marked the beginning of a new phase of systematic killing (see Zubillaga and Hanson, 2018).

Conversations with the women we interviewed in La Piedad made evident the systematic armed harassment they lived through two years under the OLP. In fact, we can grasp the systematic pattern of invasion in the narrative of a mother whose son was killed in one of the invasions:

Well, as I say, they enter the houses without even knocking. They burst in and enter violently. They steal what they have to steal. They kill who they have to kill. Do you understand? Then they do, we can say, their “show”. They set up the spectacle. “There was a confrontation!” they say. Shots in the air, everything! This reaches the ears of the highest [referring to highly ranked functionaries] and they believe everything they say. They have just to justify their operation. They have to take ten, fifteen dead bodies with them. Innocent [*sano*] or not. . . . It’s a successful operation for them, they came to the neighborhood, they “cleaned it” and left.

La Piedad was indeed a barrio where the warfare was very intense. Now, post-Peace Territory, criminal groups were both willing and able to respond to the declaration of war with high-caliber weapons to which they had access through the military.¹⁸

We noticed that it was in 2015, the year *Operativo de Liberación del Pueblo* was launched, that the press started to report killings by hand grenades during confrontations between the police and criminal groups in Caracas. In 2015, 15 killings by grenades were reported in this city, three occurring in *La Piedad*. The next year, a similar number was reported: 16 killings in Caracas, 4 of them in *La Piedad*.¹⁹

The military superiority of the criminal group was notorious, both because of the strategic geographical location – the altitude of the hill that allowed them to observe the movements of the agents – the high caliber of weapons and the organization of the men in arms at points in defense (the *Gariteros*). Furthermore, this superiority of the criminal group contrasts with the contradictions in the orders and counter-orders between the director of the National Police and the minister; in an account of the asymmetrical confrontation, a policeman who had to go to *La Piedad* told us:

The first time I went up I was scared! Because we were with guns and they, the *Gariteros*, [the gunmen] fired from a hill at a distance with rifles! And the bullets came close! Then

the director sent us down, go down! Descend! Descend! We cannot! Until finally the Minister: Go up there! And, well, do what you can do!

What we were witnessing was a “criminal war”, a notion used by Lessing (2015) to untangle the logics underlying conflict and confrontations between the state and criminal cartels (Lessing, 2015). In criminal wars, as Lessing points out, criminal cartels do not want to seize the state but rather seek alternative arrangements with the state in order to continue their illicit businesses. These are wars of coercion that seek to achieve prerogatives in terms of state practices or policies in order to continue in the illicit economies and its benefits.²⁰ In this type of war, the warring parties seek to change the opponent’s behavior with violence following a logic of coercive bargaining (Lessing, 2015).

The fierce response of criminal groups in La Piedad had the effect the groups had hoped for – an end to war. By mid-2017, Maduro’s administration was going through a tough period: four months of widespread anti-government protests, where at least 130 persons were killed, and an upcoming elections to elect a New Assembly – considered illegitimate by a majority of the population – created by the administration and parallel to the National Assembly elected in universal elections in 2015, formed with a majority of deputies from the opposition. By July 2017, the government decided to back down from the war it had declared.

According to gang leaders who took part in the negotiations, the government needed calm in the streets to guarantee there would be no sabotage to the elections and to drop “criminal indexes”, as the gang leader we interviewed put it. After phone conversations, high-ranking officials went to La Piedad and participated in talks with the leader of the criminal group. “There was a Word . . . a recognition between faces” (*Hubo una palabra un reconocimiento entre caras*), meaning there was a serious agreement: no more police invasions and raids if the criminals stopped killings and kidnapping – even though the Guardia Nacional could patrol the area, while drug trafficking would be tolerated. The government also committed to “improve social policies, the re-establishment of sports fields in the neighborhood, programs for young people and the repair of houses damaged by the military interventions”.

Different neighbors related that the relevant authorities visited La Piedad and had conversations with criminal leaders. When we started fieldwork in La Piedad, women related that it “has been a month” since the raids had stopped. Then, we started to hear about the pact, and in the weeks following, we started to see many young armed men near the community kitchen together with a crowd of children that were always playing in the area.

The agreement was not a secret. Media outlets reported on the pact, saying that thanks to the agreement, La Piedad “again” became a Peace Zone where no police agents could penetrate. Police officers corroborated these reports, claiming that the police could not enter La Piedad. A return to the pact suggests that at least one criminal group in La Piedad had become something of a political actor during a moment of political instability, wielding sufficient political capital to negotiate with the government. The ability to offer a cessation in violence was a resource that was used to manage de facto state policy (see as well in El Salvador, Cruz, 2018).

The pact then, was an instrumental alliance needed by the government in a perilous political period and in light of losing the war. As the Salvadoran sociologist Jose Miguel Cruz points out about the Truce in El Salvador, this pact did not aim to recover territorial sovereignty (as was declared the objective of the OLP) nor to disarm the criminal group. The government needed the armed group to impose legitimacy through coercion if required (Pansters, 2012). The alliance between government officials and armed parastatal actors for the sake of political domination and imposed legitimacy has a long history in the region (Pansters, 2012; Knight,

2012; Snyder and Durán Martínez, 2009; Cruz and Durán Martínez, 2016). Precisely, Cruz (2016) points out that

in contemporary post transition Latin America, states extend the limits of legal force, trespass their own legal restrictions on the use of force, and tolerate, even seek criminal involvement as part of the strategies of their representatives to claim legitimacy.

(288)

In this direction, one police officer stated that it has been the state's revolutionary politics in general that have strengthened gangs in the country:

Me, as a police officer, I think that the government has to do with all of this, it is a part of all this. Why? Because we cannot explain how there are so many high caliber weapons in the streets . . . how a group of people that don't even have the training, that have never stepped foot in a police academy . . . the government has facilitated access . . . with the goal of intimidating all those who stand against [the revolution].

Thus, two years after the pact, on July 26, there was again a notable confrontation between police agents – specifically the CICPC – and gangs in La Piedad that lasted three hours. After this long combat, police officers had to withdraw, following the minister of justice's order, which contradicted orders from CICPC leaders. The balance: four officers were injured. Media reaction was critical of the withdrawal, accusing the government the weakness in the face of the armed preponderance of the criminal groups. The event is significant, revealing once more the lack of cohesion in the state security apparatus and the degree of coordination among the criminal groups to confront the state.

Conclusion

The impacts of militarized policing on gangs: zooming out from La Piedad

In this chapter, we have analyzed how different strategies deployed by the Maduro government have contributed to cycles of violence in Caracas. We have been particularly interested in demonstrating how *mano dura* policing strategies have contributed to gangs evolving into more organized criminal groups as they confront systematic killing and police impunity.

Militarized operations in La Piedad and Caracas more broadly have made the city more, not less, insecure. While this point has been made in previous scholarship on *mano dura* policies, here we want to conclude by highlighting how the highly fragmented condition of the Venezuelan state has exacerbated *mano dura's* lethal impacts. In contrast to militarized operations before the Bolivarian Revolution, the OLP was implemented by state institutions – including but not limited to the National Guard, municipal and state police forces and the CICPC – that have become increasingly fractured and pitted against one another during the revolution. Inconsistent and contradictory policies that are poorly implemented, like the Peace Zones followed by the OLP and a return to pacts between the state and criminal organizations, only reinforce gang members' commitment to organized crime and violence, because it is never clear what the future might hold. The fact that some police forces abide by pacts while others do not require that gangs always be prepared to return to war with at least some state institutions.

As Durán-Martínez has noted, criminal actors' incentives to employ violence are not constant. These vacillate according to the cohesion of the state security apparatus, and competition in the illegal market determines traffickers' incentives to employ violence. According to Durán-Martínez (2015:7):

A cohesive security apparatus is likely to reduce the visibility of violence because it makes state protection more reliable or enforcement more efficient. By contrast, a fragmented security apparatus is likely to increase the visibility of violence because it makes protection less predictable or enforcement less effective.

Cruz and Durán Martínez (2016), when comparing truces and criminal pacts in El Salvador and Medellín, point out that “truces and pacts can reduce homicides when (a) they involve the state as an administrator of violence reduction incentives and (b) criminal groups have achieved group cohesion and leadership that facilitate territorial control and strategic dependability” (2).

Where state security is incredibly fragmented, as in the case of Venezuela, neither state nor criminal actors can trust that today's agreements will hold tomorrow. With state security forces unable and unwilling to coordinate and de facto policy changing according to short-term political ends, the Venezuelan state is unable to credibly commit to protection or prosecution of criminals.

That gangs and more organized groups all depend on the complicity of police and military agents for weapons capable of responding to militarized interventions like the OLP speaks to this fragmentation and incoherence. Despite the war declared on the “criminal groups and paramilitarism”, as President Maduro said, the use of grenades by criminal groups discussed previously reveals this collaboration between military officials and the criminal groups (see Arias, 2017). It is this corrupt collaboration that leads to such extraordinary levels of violence when pacts fall apart.

However, it is important to note that the impact of militarized policing on criminal groups is not homogeneous. La Piedad is an example of how *mano dura* strategies can produce more organized groups, a process identified in much of the previous scholarship. But the ways in which *mano dura* policies shape these groups depend on the local history of the neighborhood in which the gang operates, previous relationships between gangs and the police and the geographic location of the neighborhood where the raids occur (urban, peri-urban and rural, for example).

In our interviews, all officers agreed that gangs in the country were much better organized and armed and more violent than those in the past. Some of the officers identified the OLP as the main catalyst. According to one PNB officer, although the intention of the OLP was a good one, that is, to eliminate leaders of the gangs, once this mission was accomplished and the OLP moved to another sector, gangs returned with even more force than before. Neighbors, he reported, were more likely to collaborate with the gang members when they returned due to the resentment and anger that police repression had generated in the community.

This resentment also had implications for officers' sense of security. According to one officer from the PNB, this plan had increased violence against the police:

The number of police officers killed has increased, for different reasons. . . . the OLP was a cleansing, let's put it that way. So, delinquents become filled with even more hate for the police. They don't care what color your uniform is, what rank you are, if they were a friend in the past. . . . Since it was the police who participated in the OLP, now the delinquent says “Ok, now it's our turn to fuck the police. . . . After the implementation of the OLP, it has become more dangerous to be a police officer.

Yet in some sectors of the city, like La Vega and El Valle, officers reported that the OLP had successfully wiped gangs out. In other places, officers critiqued the OLP for dislocating gangs, forcing them to move to other sectors. It is important to note here that the OLP most likely contributed to gang violence not only by incentivizing increased cooperation between gangs but also by uprooting gangs from their territory and forcing them to establish control over gangs in another area. By disrupting illicit markets and relocating illicit actors, the plan exacerbated a key motivator of gang conflict.

In describing this process, one PNB officer told us that killing off gang leaders and/or wiping out gangs in some places only opened up space for new gangs to emerge, which generated new conflicts:

Those spaces that were without leaders, new delinquents appeared to take control over these spaces. So, they start off, they start committing crimes, they start killing, they start to rob. . . . And this generates conflict between these groups, armed confrontation between gangs, things that previous gangs did not allow. Because the gangs that left or were taken out, they had a long time operating in the area, they had learned to bring together the gang and community members, and they co-existed with residents and generated new security measures with them.

The OLP, according to the officer, eviscerated these ties and introduced new armed actors into communities who had no historical connection to the communities they took over.

What remains a constant throughout these reflections is the way in which the fracturing of state institutions and linkages between some state security forces and criminal groups feeds into varied forms of violence in the country, whether that be the increasing organization of gangs or whole gangs being wiped out during raids. Indeed, even ceasefire pacts do not put an end to this violence due to this fragmentation. While some police forces abide by the pacts, others do not. Conflict and competition between state security institutions themselves make peace under pacts short term and intermittent.

Notes

1 This chapter is based on three research projects carried out between 2018 and 2016 supported by the Latin American Project of the Open Society Foundations and CAF-Banco de Desarrollo de América Latina. We would like to express special gratitude to Caracas Mi Convive, who supported us as we conducted fieldwork.

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2 Universidad Simón Bolívar, Departamento de Ciencias y Tecnología del Comportamiento. Caracas. Red de Activismo e Investigación por la Convivencia REACIN. www.reacin.org/

3 University of Florida, Department of Sociology and Criminology and Law and the Center for Latin American Studies

4 Universidad Central de Venezuela, Instituto de Ciencias Penales.

5 The community name has been changed. All news and digital media articles that could identify the particular community have been explicitly changed. We only use digital media articles that refer to this vast popular sector area but do not allow any specific identification of the community.

6 A. Gupta's theoretical image of the state, in his ethnographic study about poverty and structural violence in India, is pertinent to what we are grasping and studying in Caracas: "a disaggregated view of the state makes it possible to open up the black box of unintended outcomes by showing how they are systematically produced by the friction between agendas, bureaus, level and spaces that make the State" (Gupta, 2012:47).

7 Wennmann proposes confrontation, accommodation and transformation (2014) whereas Barnes introduces the terms confrontation, enforcement, evasion, alliance and integration (2017). These typologies will be useful for our analytical purposes to track the type and chronology of the relationships between

- the Bolivarian government and gangs that became criminal organizations in Caracas with significant lethal power.
- 8 The official document entitled: “Protocolo de actuación de los cuerpos de seguridad del estado en la operación de liberación humanista del pueblo” explicitly declares that the OLP was launched with an objective to liberate Venezuelan territory and the protection of the people from common and organized crime (2017).
 - 9 The year 1998 marks the onset of a period of accelerated transformations and conflict escalation known in Venezuela as the Bolivarian Revolution with the beginning of Hugo Chávez’s government. In the frame of this process, Venezuela was renamed República Bolivariana de Venezuela.
 - 10 Diario El Nacional 03 de Agosto de 2009
 - 11 See <http://contrapunto.com/mobile/noticia/corredores-de-la-muerte-en-caracas-68397/> Consultado el 15 de marzo 2018
 - 12 In contrast with hierarchies described in American urban sociology (Sanchez Jankowski, 1991).
 - 13 Declarations made by the interior minister, Tareck El Aissami, on his Twitter account, @TareckPSUV, Feb. 8th 2011. Consulted on 10 March, 2012.
 - 14 Consejo Superior Penitenciario. Diagnóstico Sociodemográfico de la población penitenciaria en la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. Caracas, 2011.
 - 15 In other work on the formation of prison gangs as forms of internal governance, administered by prisoners themselves with a sophisticated hierarchy (see Antillano, 2015; Antillano et al., 2015). Similar self-rule regimes of prisoners have been reported in Latin America (in Brazil: Biondi, 2008; Nunes, 2011; Lessing, 2017; in El Salvador: Cruz, 2010).
 - 16 The Misión a Toda Vida Venezuela was conceived during the era of Hugo Chavez as a comprehensive public security policy. During its first year under the presidency of Nicolás Maduro, the “Movement for Peace and Life” was created, “an initiative to promote culture, sports, healthy recreation and the incorporation of youth in socio-productive activities, especially in popular areas”.
 - 17 www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/07/150727_venezuela_zonas_de_paz_dp; <https://issuu.com/eltiempovenenezuela/docs/0718054001433701268/11>; <https://runrun.es/nacional/venezuela-2/212961/10-claves-para-entender-las-zonas-de-paz/>
 - 18 Precisely, Arias points out: “Indeed the metaphor of war [war on drugs; war on Maras; war to paramilitaries, like President Maduro said when launching the Operación de Liberación del Pueblo] reinforces the worst tendencies of state actors, justifying a combat posture against the poor areas where crime is concentrated, while sweeping under the rug the corruption and complicity that make chronic violence sustainable over the long term” (2017:11).
 - 19 In their study “Trafficking and Criminal Use of Grenades in Latin America and the Caribbean”, Godnick, Quagliaro, and Bustamante (2015) conclude that except for artisanal grenades, the only sources of grenades are from military arsenals. The study, which included media monitoring between January 2013 and March 2015, showed that Venezuela, Colombia and Mexico, all countries with high levels of internal conflict, are the countries that present a concentrated use of hand grenades. Venezuela was the country with the most fatal victims of grenade outbreaks – 18, followed by 8 in Colombia and 7 in Mexico. In the follow-up to national press reports that we carried out between 2016 and August 2018 in the frame of our research, we recorded double this number: 36 dead and 24 injured due to the manipulation of grenades in Venezuela.
 - 20 In contrast, for example, with an insurgency, which seeks to seize the state or a territory completely. In these wars of coercion, the belligerent parties seek to constrain the opponent in order to change their behavior. Lessing identifies two main strategies: violent lobbying, where criminals aim to influence public policy and address it to high-ranking officers, such as the war declared by Pablo Escobar concerning extradition policies, and violent corruption that aims to influence enforcers (police officers, judges) in order to change repressive actions.

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