CONCEPTUALIZING CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE IN THE AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXT OF VENEZUELA: A RELATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract: How do authoritarian governments survive and consolidate? Much of the scholarship on this topic has focused on elites, state security forces, and the cohesiveness of the state apparatus to explain why some regimes fall while others do not. Here we propose a novel explanation for survival and consolidation: the outsourcing of governance to gangs. Drawing on recent scholarship on criminal governance in the Global South, we analyze the case of the Maduro government's *zonas de paz* (peace zones) policy, which prohibited the police from entering gang territory and charged gangs with social and crime control. Authoritarian consolidation in Venezuela (2013-2021), we argue, occurred alongside the consolidation of criminal governance. Finally, this paper proposes a relational ethnographic approach to studying authoritarian regimes and the contradictions and conflict their policies produce on the ground.

INTRO

The survival of Nicolás Maduro's government in Venezuela has surprised many. He first entered the presidential palace in a weak position, with only the legitimacy conferred on him by Hugo Chávez's endorsement right before his death. Maduro inherited a highly fragmented and internally conflictive state and security apparatus from Hugo Chávez (Smilde, Zubillaga, and Hanson 2022; Hanson 2025). Moreover, Maduro's time in office has been marked by frequent mass protests, a devastating economic and humanitarian crisis exacerbated by U.S. sanctions, and some of the highest homicide rates in the region. In many ways, the regime's strategies to survive these challenges and crises map onto those highlighted in previous scholarship on authoritarianism. The government fortified its relationship with the military and greatly expanded the military's control over state institutions. It invested heavily in spectacular displays of violence and repression by state security forces. And it distributed oil rents among elites and state actors to ensure their loyalty.

Here we propose an additional factor to explain the regime's survival, arguing that the government turned to criminal groups to govern territory during volatile periods as Maduro worked to consolidate power over key state institutions. We focus on pacts between the government and criminal actors in urban Caracas and in the rural subregion of Barlovento in the state of Miranda. These pacts established *zonas de paz*, or peace zones, in which criminals regulated behavior and imposed norms, provided goods and services, and controlled licit and illicit markets. Elsewhere we have used the concept of *zona franca* to highlight the opacity of

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government-gang relationships and theorize spaces in which explicit agreements between political actors resulted in deregulated economic activities within peace zone borders (Zubillaga and Hanson 2024b). Here we focus on how authoritarian consolidation in the country occurred alongside the unabashed ceding of territory to gangs and the consolidation of criminal governance in parts of the country. These simultaneous moves resulted in stability for the government but also led to intermittent and unpredictable armed conflict between gangs and state security forces and contributed to already frayed ties between the government and the police.

Exploring the diverse relationships that connect armed groups and the state, we answer recent calls by scholars to document the distinct ways in which coercion is utilized within authoritarian contexts (Greitens 2016). Rather than cohesion and centralization, our paper points to distinct mechanisms that allow for authoritarian survival and consolidation. By analyzing how criminal groups operate within authoritarian contexts, this paper also moves forward current conversations on criminal governance in the Global South. Previous scholarship has focused on criminal governance in formally democratic contexts. In contrast, this paper examines how a transition from a hybrid democracy to an authoritarian regime empowered criminals to govern their territory and populations. The paper also calls attention to a threat often overlooked within studies of authoritarianism: crime. Finally, this is one of few ethnographic studies conducted in authoritarian contexts. An ethnographic sensibility guides us to look beyond the traditional foci of political power--state actors, state security forces, elites, etc.--to explain authoritarian survival and consolidation. Where possible, we advocate for *relational ethnography* as a methodological approach to studying authoritarian regimes. Relational ethnography pushes us to trace the differently positioned groups involved in governing territory and the struggles that take place between them. Moreover, relational ethnography allows us to grasp authoritarian consolidation and criminal governance in the flesh.

The paper is organized into six sections. In the first section we review and put into conversation 1) scholarship on authoritarian regimes and coercion and 2) recent research on criminal governance. In the second section we provide a brief overview of the methods used to collect data for this project and describe the methodological approach of relational ethnography. In the third section, we review the challenges and crises that the Maduro government has confronted and survived. In the fifth section we analyze pacts state actors made with gangs, demonstrating that pacts outsourced social and crime control to gangs during periods of crisis. In the final section we explore how this outsourcing altered dynamics between gangs, the police, and the government. In the conclusion we discuss the implications of our findings for studies of authoritarianism and the new insights brought about by our relational ethnography approach.

Authoritarian Survival and Criminal Governance

While little has been written about authoritarian consolidation (Polga-Hecimovich and Sánchez Urribarrí 2025), there is no shortage of literature on regime survival, durability, and stability.[3] Survival and durability has often been explained as depending on carrots and sticks (Frantz 2024), with elites and political actors being coopted through the distribution of resources and benefits and the opposition and general population repressed by the police and military. Regimes have also adopted elections to comply with international norms and perform legitimacy and domination within the country. In these places meaningful democratic institutions coexist with serious abuses by rulers that allow for real but unfair electoral competition (Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2006). Overall, theories have tended to focus on variations in how electoral and political power is organized within these contexts, less often exploring variation in how coercion may be deployed, and by whom, according to perceived threats (but see Collombon and Rodgers 2018).

There are understandably few empirical studies of the state security apparatus in authoritarian regimes. It is taken for granted that security forces work to neutralize threats to a regime. The studies of security forces in authoritarian contexts that do exist highlight their policing of resistance and the opposition through highly coordinated violence exercised by ideologically driven agents (see Davis 2010; Glaeser 2011; Hagenloh 2009; Savelsberg 2000; Shelley 1996). Albertus and Menaldo (2012), for example, stress the importance of the coercive capacity of the state in order to endure and prevent democratization. Authoritarian regimes that stabilize tend to successfully centralize and consolidate the state security apparatus and protocols and deploy coercive state capacity rooted in cohesion and scope (Way and Levitsky 2006; Scoggins 2021). Way and Levitsky (2006), for example, categorize Armenia in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a stable authoritarian regime and explain its durability as the result of a powerful coercive apparatus built in the 1980s through the successful subordination of paramilitary groups to the government. Similarly, in Georgia, another stable case, the president was able to consolidate "the most serious paramilitary forces into the Georgian military" (399). Indeed, authoritarian states have historically been characterized by an excessive centralization of power and significant investments in the state's repressive apparatus.

This focus on state security forces and classic features such as centralization overlooks what is rapidly becoming apparent in contemporary authoritarian regimes. Governments in countries such as Libya, Syria, Nicaragua, and Venezuela rely on multiple state *and* non-state armed groups to remain in power, including criminal groups. In order to better understand regime survival in Venezuela, we engage with recent scholarship on criminal governance in the Global South. This concept recognizes that in many parts of the world criminal groups govern by implementing rules and restricting behavior in the territories where they operate, often with state support or its acquiescence (Lessing 2020; Mantilla & Feldmann 2021). Studies of criminal governance at the urban peripheries in Brazil, Colombia, Jamaica, and Mexico have frequently

[3] Previous scholarship has tended to focus instead on concepts like durability and stability, both of which imply consolidation but are distinct. Here we understand consolidation as "the expectation of regime endurance" (Polga-Hecimovich and Sánchez Urribarrí 2025:13) as well as a regime's increasing control over and penetration of key state institutions.

observed collusion “in situations in which the state’s coercive power is used to jointly advance the interests of state agents, politicians, and organized crime players” (Feldmann and Luna 2022:450).These studies, however, have been conducted in formally democratic contexts. Indeed, one of the founding scholars of criminal governance studies, Desmond Arias, has long been interested in how transitions *from* authoritarianism *towards* democracy can facilitate governance by criminals and collusion between criminal groups and the state (see Arias 2006 and Arias and Goldstein 2010). We believe this concept is crucial for studying contemporary authoritarian regimes as it draws our attention to characteristics not often associated with authoritarianism. This paper, then, suggests a novel mechanism for explaining authoritarian consolidation. Studying criminal governance in this context also points to a less often studied aspect of authoritarian coercion: crime control. Political opposition and resistance have been extensively studied as threats to regime survival. However, an inability to control crime and non-political violence can also indicate regime vulnerability and spur social discontent. As Suzanne Scoggins (2021:310) has noted “a state’s institutional ability to ensure ground-level security matters for regime durability…If regime leaders wish to stay in power, they must provide some degree of security for citizens through the management and prevention of crime.”

We draw inspiration from recent work by Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley on the state-criminal nexus during the PRI’s authoritarian seventy-year rule in Mexico. For Trejo and Ley state security actors’ key mandate in authoritarian contexts is the political survival of the regime. Security agents go about securing this survival by repressing dissent, training civilians as “shadow powers,” and gathering information on the opposition as well as members of the regime. These tasks can eventually position security agents as a threat to the regime, a threat that regime leaders neutralize by providing state security actors with “access to the criminal underworld” (42). This access converts state “violence specialists” into regulators, leaders, and beneficiaries of criminal organizations and markets.

We also build on scholarship acknowledging contemporary authoritarian regimes’ reliance on informal institutions to repress dissent and resistance (see Levitsky and Way 2010). Lynette Ong (2018), for example, has argued that thugs-for-hire play an important role in policing dissent in China, where local governments contract thugs to implement unpopular and controversial policies and “subjugate a recalcitrant population to quell dissent” (685) (see also Chen 2017). Kuzio (2014) has documented similar practice in Ukraine, where President Yanukovych contracted skinheads to assault political opponents, journalists, and peaceful protestors. Putin’s administration is also notorious for hiring criminal groups to assassinate opponents it cannot reach abroad.

As we will see below, the Venezuelan case and our approach to it varies in important ways from this previous scholarship. Most importantly, to our knowledge this is the first study of how and why criminals govern in an authoritarian context. Trejo and Ley (2020) focus on how the state-crime nexus resulted in the regulation of illicit markets in Mexico. For Ong thugs for hire are “ruffians, hooligans, and unorganized stragglers” who “render violence as a form of service for profit or in exchange for in-kind benefits” (682). The gangs we studied did not only regulate

criminal activities and repress dissent. They became managers of territory and the people in it. In short, they governed.[4]

Moreover, in research on the informalization of coercion in authoritarian contexts, informal actors are positioned as carrying out violence orchestrated by the state (see Levitsky and Way 2010). In China, Ong argues that thugs for hire serve as “an extension of the state, bolstering the state’s coercive capacity” (2018:681). In Mexico, state actors effectively regulated the state, society, and criminal organizations. In Venezuela, criminal groups did not serve as an extension of the state. Gang-government relationships did produce order for periods of time but also produced moments of police resistance to those relationships. While the state-criminal nexus did contribute to regime consolidation it did not bolster the state’s coercive capacity nor its capacity to govern territory. As we discuss below, when pacts between the government and gangs were broken, spectacular violence erupted that demonstrated the state’s limited capacity to control gangs during the period of consolidation. In this sense, the Venezuelan case demonstrates the volatility of authoritarian consolidation in contexts of state fragmentation and the extreme violence it entails, not only political violence but also the violence deployed as actors struggle to govern territory.

METHODS

This paper is based on research with gang members, community residents, and police officers. Research with gang members and community residents was conducted in La Cota 905, a poor sector in Caracas made up of a chain of self-built neighborhoods in the southern center of the city. These neighborhoods were built along a chain of mountains overseeing the city and are interlaced with commercial sectors at the mountain base. We also interviewed gang members and community residents in Belén in the rural subregion of Barlovento, Miranda, which is two hours from the capital. Research with police was less place specific and instead focused on gathering data with a variety of officers from different police forces and different ranks. Here we provide an overview of the different phases of data collection:

1. Research in La Cota 905: Between August 2017 to August 2018 we visited a neighborhood in this sector once or twice a week. We engaged in ethnographic observations and kept a fieldwork diary of each visit. We conducted over 30 interviews and focus groups with women from the community, women community leaders, and young men from the neighborhood. We also did a focus group with the younger members of the gang, mostly about their experiences during militarized police raids. Koki, the leader of the largest gang that belonged to the gang confederation in La Cota

[4] As the name implies, the act of governing is a scope condition of criminal governance. Criminals who govern not only do so through coercion but also through the provision of goods and services and the regulation of actors not associated with illicit activities. As Ben Lessing (2020:3) reminds readers: “It is not surprising that gangs predate, control the physical space where they conduct illegal transactions, or regulate those transactions. What is puzzling is that they also provide public goods and impose rules on additional actors.”

was usually around, so we were able to speak with him four times about his life, his family, and, at the time, the recent pact with high-ranking officials. We also interviewed one member of the gang, who was the mediator between the gang and state officials three times in different moments. Between 2020 and 2022, we conducted research in another community in La Cota that was also part of the peace zones, where we conducted ethnographic observations and interviews and participated in cultural activities with young people from the community. In that wave of fieldwork we interviewed a woman resident and community leader on multiple occasions. In July 2024 we also interviewed a community leader and her mother. This last wave of interviews was to corroborate findings.

2. We conducted ethnographic and interview research with police officers deployed across Caracas and in Miranda state between 2018 and 2020. Ethnographic research largely consisted of spending time with officers off-the-clock. Between 2018 and 2019 we conducted interviews with 105 police officers. In Spring 2022 we conducted 13 additional interviews with police officers and professors at the police university via WhatsApp. Here we cite interviews with officers from two police forces: The Policía Nacional Bolivariana (PNB) or Bolivarian National Police and Venezuela's forensic and investigative police force, the CICPC.
3. We conducted interview research with gang members in Barlovento between 2018 and 2020. In total we conducted two individual interviews with two gang members and two focus groups with four gang members in each group. We also conducted an interview with a representative of the municipal government in Barlovento who knew about the pacts between gangs and the mayor. Finally, we conducted interviews with three residents of Belén who lived in gang territory. Our data collection in Belén is ongoing as we seek to interview additional gang members who were active during the time of the pacts.

This is not a paper that compares criminal governance in La Cota 905 (henceforth La Cota) to criminal governance in Belén. It is not a paper about how negotiation between gangs in La Cota and those in Belén looked similar or different. It is a paper about relationships among mutually interdependent actors--the government, gangs, and police--the volatility of these relationships, their evolution within an authoritarian context, and the implications of this evolution for authoritarian consolidation (Ayling, XXX).

We take a relational ethnographic approach to studying authoritarian survival and consolidation, an approach that we believe facilitates constructing novel insights into authoritarian regimes. Political scientists have long focused on state institutions, elite actors, and political parties to explain authoritarian survival and consolidation. Relational ethnography points our attention to quotidian interactions and forms of everyday state making that are often ignored in studies of authoritarianism (but see Wedeen 1999). It focuses our attention outside the "halls of power" to other social and political spaces that can play a role in facilitating or resisting consolidation. Rather than study power and struggles over it from the top down, we prioritize the relationships between actors "from below" (Gupta 2012). Approaching an authoritarian regime from below

opens up new avenues of research, allowing us to capture the messiness, contradictions, and contingencies of authoritarian consolidation on the ground.

Relational ethnography, influenced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, calls for us to focus on a field of struggle and the relationships that connect actors within that field. Relational ethnography "takes as its scientific object neither a bounded group defined by members' shared social attributes nor a location delimited by the boundaries of a particular neighborhood or the walls of an organization but rather processes involving configurations of relations among different actors or institutions" (Desmond 2014:547). Relational ethnography integrates into the ethnographic sample at least two different actors or groups that hold different positions within a field and are "bound together in a relationship of mutual dependence or struggle" (Desmond 2014:554). This integration allows the ethnographer "to view processes from multiple and even opposing perspectives, to follow—and not just theorize— broader relations of power: to witness the clash first-hand" (Desmond 2014:559; see also Jerolmack 2013: 19).

Challenges to Regime Consolidation in Venezuela

On March 5, 2013, after a successful campaign for presidential reelection, Hugo Chávez passed away at the military hospital in Caracas while undergoing medical treatment for cancer. Before his death, he endorsed Nicolás Maduro as candidate for president at a press conference. After a close election, Maduro won against opposition candidate Henrique Capriles with a mere 1.6% difference, entering the presidential palace in a weak position and marking a new era--Chavismo without Chávez. Not even a year before his predecessor had been reelected with a 10 point difference between him and his competitor.

Maduro's time in office (2013-2017; 2018-2024; 2025-???) has been marked by significant political turmoil and unrest, the most devastating economic crisis in the region's history, and a related humanitarian crisis that pushed over seven million Venezuelans to immigrate within a five-year period. His first years in office were marked by waves of protests calling for his removal. As early as 2014, the political opposition was in the streets demanding Maduro's "exit" [La Salida]. The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict reported at least 9,286 street protests that same year, some of which saw barriers of trash, burning tires, and barbed wire erected throughout the largest cities, paralyzing parts of the country for months. Mass protests kicked off again in 2017 as the government proposed writing a new constitution (more on this below) and in 2018 when Maduro declared his electoral victory after highly questioned presidential elections. The following year the opposition-led national assembly declared representative Juan Guaidó interim president, resulting in another round of widespread protests and international support for the opposition.

In 2014 the price of oil on the international market crashed and continued to fall in the following years. In 2016, the price reached a low of $31 per barrel, significantly lower than most of Chávez's time in office when the price of oil vacillated between 60 and 140 dollars.[5] In 2019 the

[5] As in other oil rentier countries, governments in Venezuela have long directed resources to the production of their most profitable export, ignoring other economic activities like agriculture. However, this

US declared general sanctions on Venezuela's state-run oil company PDVSA (Petroleum of Venezuela; Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.), prohibiting the US from having any financial transactions with the company and strangling the sale of materials threat country needs to process and transport its heavy crude oil.[6] This economic crash and later sanctions had devastating effects on the population. By 2018, the minimum salary could not even cover a carton of eggs. In 2019 inflation hit 10,000%. Surveys reported that nearly 90% of households had insufficient income to purchase food, 80% had reduced meal size, and 61% reported going to bed hungry (Doocy et. al 2019).[7]

Political turmoil and food and medicine shortages were not the only concerns of Venezuelans. Violent crime also saturated much of daily life. The country had maintained one of the highest homicide rates in the region since the mid-2000s, a trend that continued under Maduro. Crimes such as kidnapping, car thefts, and robberies were common. The economic crisis decimated police department budgets, resulting in an inability to engage in daily policing activities like patrolling and writing reports. Chavismo also generated fragmentation and internecine conflict within the state security apparatus more generally, with mistrust characterizing relationships between the police and the government (Hanson 2025).[8]

Despite this incredibly challenging landscape, Maduro remained in power and was even able to consolidate control over key state institutions. One of the ways he did this was to hand state ministries over to military officers. Indeed, the number of heads of ministries that came from the military increased under Chávez but soared in 2013 after his death (see graph 1). Maduro also rolled back a civilian-led human-rights oriented police reform that Chávez had backed, replacing civilians at the head of citizen security institutions created by reform with military officers (Hanson 2025). The government used traditional authoritarian strategies like illegally packing courts, banning candidates, and intervening in dissenting Chavista and opposition parties to deal with a lack of legitimacy and popularity (Corrales 2020). In 2015 the opposition won a majority in the National Assembly, representing an important check on executive power, until the government created a new National Assembly to replace it. In 2017 the Supreme Court usurped functions of the opposition-dominated National Assembly, an act that even the Chavista attorney

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crisis was particularly devastating because the economy had become even more dependent on oil during the Bolivarian Revolution (Wilde 2023). By the late 2000s oil represented between 90%– and 96% of exports compared to 60%– to 70% in the late 1990s (Monaldi 2015).

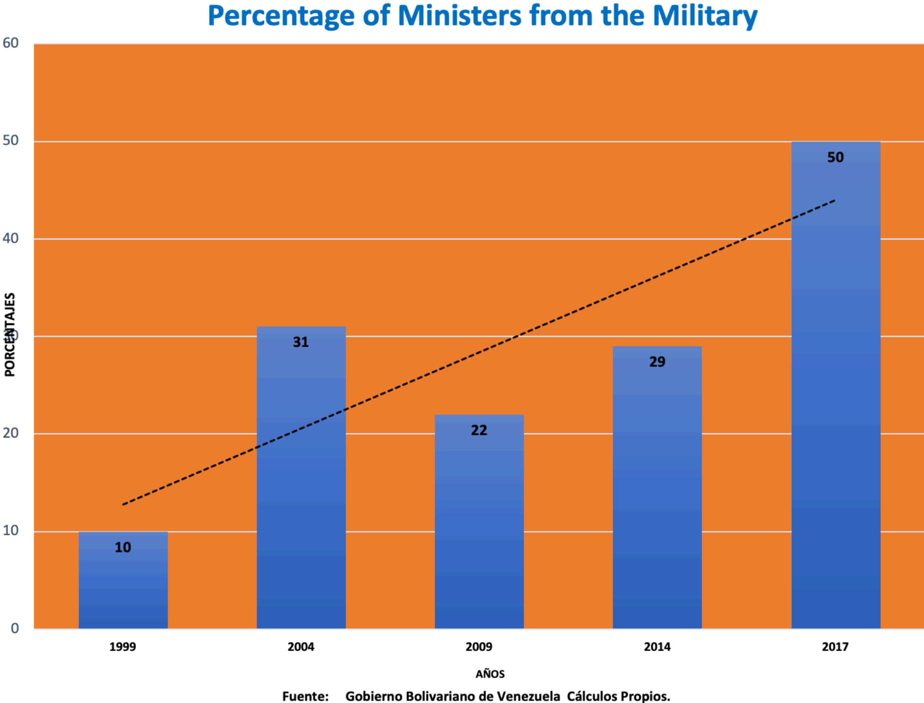
[6] These sanctions were heavily criticized by leading human rights organizations in the region, which voiced concern that sanctions were exacerbating an already grave economic and humanitarian crisis. As human rights organizations predicted, U.S. financial sanctions placed on the government further strangled production. Economist Francisco Rodriguez (2019) estimated that financial sanctions were associated with a loss of $16.9 billion in foregone oil revenues each year.

[7] According to the International Monetary Fund, between 2013 and 2017, GDP declined 35% and real per capita income shrank by 40%. The black-market exchange rate surged, from 90 bolívares:/1 dollar in 2014 to an unbearable rate of 100,000:/1 in 2020.

[8] The Chávez government distrusted the police after Caracas's Metropolitan Police force participated in a failed coup d'état against him in 2002. Reforms and attempts to centralize policing from 2006 until 2013 resulted in intense institutional resistance to the new national police force created by the Chávez government. The outsourcing of police functions and erasure of lines between the police and non-state armed groups under Maduro saw police forces pitted against each other and officers distrustful of others in their own force (Hanson 2025).

general characterized as a coup d'etat that broke with the constitution. Later that year the government announced that a new constitution would be written and a new national assembly that would replace the pre-existing national assembly. Repression at protests also increased. While six percent 6% of protests were violently repressed in 2009, the worst year on record while his predecessor was in office, by 2014 the Maduro government was repressing 34% of protests—an increase of 486% (Provea 2008–/2009; 2014). Repression and systematic killings by police in popular sectors (Zubillaga and Hanson 2018) saw the United Nations send a commission to the country to investigate human rights abuses. In 2018 the International Criminal Court opened a preliminary investigation into these human rights abuses and in 2021 declared that there was sufficient evidence to warrant a criminal investigation, which is ongoing.

Graph 1



In many ways, then, consolidation in Venezuela has followed the authoritarian playbook of other regimes. However, as we discuss below, during the 2013-2021 period of consolidation the government also willingly ceded territorial control to criminal groups. As Maduro worked to consolidate institutional control he also outsourced policing functions with the goal of maintaining, as one community leader put it, calm in the streets. This outsourcing allowed criminal groups to consolidate governance in places the state had been unable to manage.

GOVERNMENT-GANG PACTS

In this section we look at the evolution of gangs in Venezuela leading up to pacts between the government and criminal groups in La Cota in Caracas and in the town of Belén in Barlovento. These pacts produced *zonas de paz*, or peace zones, which were governed by gangs. We analyze the first round of government-gang pacts, which took place between 2013 and 2015; the rupture of these pacts with the implementation of militarized and highly lethal police raids from 2015 to 2017; and the second round of pacts, which held from 2017 until 2021. We show that pacts, negotiated by high ranking members of Maduro's government, allowed gangs to consolidate and expand control over licit and illicit markets as well as daily life in communities. This consolidation complicated the government's efforts to eliminate gangs when pacts ruptured in 2015, efforts that eventually failed. Finally, we show that the outsourcing of governance produced social and crime control within peace zones but conflict between gangs and the groups normally charged with this control: the police.

Gangs in Venezuela and the First Pacts

Gangs throughout Venezuela have historically been small and disorganized with close ties to the particular neighborhoods in which they operate. When Hanson was conducting fieldwork in 2012 police officers referred to gangs of 20 men as large. Years before, in April 2000, a news headline story in El Nacional declared: "In Caracas there are as many gangs as there are barrios and residential areas" (Davis 2000). According to a police commissioner interviewed for the story: "There are 1,200 barrios [in the Libertador municipality] and we know of at least one gang in each zone."

Policies implemented while Chávez was still alive contributed to the evolution of some gangs into larger and more complex criminal organizations. From 2008 on the penal population boomed, increasing almost 100% in less than five years. In 2007 there were 21,000 inmates in prison; in 2013 this population surpassed 50,000 (Antillano et al. 2015). Skyrocketing incarceration rates driven by militarized security plans facilitated cooperation and learning among incarcerated gang leaders. Similar to the case of the Comando Vermelho in Rio de Janeiro and Primeiro Comando da Capital in São Paulo incarceration laid the groundwork for criminal governance by putting leaders into close quarters and inhumane living conditions, facilitating knowledge sharing and providing incentives to join forces (Lessing 2017). Upon returning to their neighborhoods, some gang leaders constructed a new order with clear hierarchies, headquarters, and a division of labor, which enhanced their capacity to govern territory and populations (Zubillaga, Hanson, and Antillano 2021). Gangs that were previously at war with each other agreed to instead confront the police, forming a confederation led by three men (more on this below). By 2013, media outlets began to refer to the gang in La Cota and gangs in surrounding rural areas as *megabandas* [megagangs] due to their size (between 50 to 200 members) and reach, pointing at a visible reconfiguration of the criminal landscape of Venezuela.

It was during Maduro's first embattled year in office that the first references to gang-government pacts that would create *zonas de paz* or *peace zones* appeared in the news. This first attempt

in 2013 was led by Vice Minister of Citizen Security José Vicente Rangel Ávalos in the Caracas periphery of Valles del Tuy and in the rural subregion Barlovento in the state of Miranda. News outlets also reported that peace zones were reportedly established in the states of Aragua, Zulia, Táchira, and Guárico (Rísquez 2015). Two years later, in 2015, pacts were negotiated in La Cota 905 (henceforth La Cota).

An image of José Vicente Rangel Ávalos talking about meetings with gangs in 2013

En 2013, el Viceministro José Vicente Rangel Ávalos encabezó la llamada pacificación de bandas. El objetivo era lograr la "reinserción social" de delincuentes a través de la entrega voluntaria de sus armas a cambio de ayudas socioeconómicas. El plan fue ensayado sin éxito en Caucagua

During an interview on a talk show on August 25, 2013, Rangel borrowed vocabulary from the El Salvadorian case, where negotiations between gang members and state actors in 2012 resulted in a dramatic reduction in homicide rates (see Cruz 2019). Although he used terms associated with the truce in El Salvador, such as "violence-free territories" and "peace territories," the experiments in Venezuela looked very different in practice. The truce in El Salvador eventually involved church representatives, business leaders, and local and international organizations such as the Organization of American States OAS (see Aguilar, de León, and Táger 2014). In Venezuela there was no inter-institutional coordination and, thus, little to no supervision. As we will see below, this lack of supervision and accountability is important in understanding how pacts contributed to the consolidation of criminal governance.

Our interviewees in La Cota told us about seeing the vice minister during his visits in 2015 as the initial pacts were negotiated. One neighbor in La Cota described it this way:

> José Vicente Rangel Ávalos came up here and they began to implement the peace zone (...) then [the gangs] reached an agreement with the state that there

> would be no more shootings. And that the police would not enter. All the gangs joined together and formed a big gang, and the cure was worse than the disease. Before [the gangs] confronted each other, they killed each other. Now they don't. Now it's growing, growing, growing!

Neymar, a gang member in Belén, described the initial negotiations this way:

> You know, all the gangs united, so the president decides to negotiate with us, the ministers negotiate with us and [agree to] erase arrest warrants so that we have a clean slate. . .So what was the negotiation? It was an agreement for them to hand over a bunch of money to gang leaders so people could open a restaurant, open a *bloquera* [a business that produces blocks for construction], have a farm…

Government representatives agreed to keep the police out of gang territory, handing them responsibility for maintaining order in their communities. Gang members committed to dedicating themselves to legal economic activities. As Neymar alludes to, the government agreed to provide financing and credits to support gang members and community residents in opening local businesses and cooperatives.

Both quotes point to an important mutation process that gangs underwent during the first round of peace zones. In La Cota, gangs, which were previously in conflict with each other, decided to form an alliance through a process of internal negotiations that they called *La Palabra*. They united and formed a large confederation of gangs, with a recognized leadership made up of three members: el Koki, Vampi and Galvis. La Cota and its surrounding territories were the space in which this confederation of gangs established themselves, with the peace zones contributing to these alliances (see Zubillaga, Hanson, and Antillano, 2022; Antillano 2023). In Belén, gang leaders established alliances with gangs in La Cota and other gangs in Barlovento.

Importantly, all of the gang members and most of the police officers we interviewed reported that it was during this period that gangs were able to acquire more and larger weapons (see also Gómez and Hanson 2022). Rather than using money provided by the government to invest in local businesses, interviewees reported that gangs instead chose to buy high-caliber weapons and grenades, largely purchased from military officers. When we asked a PNB officer about his perception of the peace zones in Barlovento, he explained:

> Look, these peace zones have been a disaster. . . delinquency increased in these sectors thanks to the peace zones, because [gangs] had more strength, they got stronger. The government gave them money, gave them credits to produce housing materials, to mount cacao businesses. But what did they do with this money? What they did was buy weapons, with all these sectors watching. In all of the cacao zones around here, most . . . gangs are organized and have these weapons thanks to this, that the government gave them credits so that they would create cooperatives. And that was the last thing they did.

Similarly, Neymar reported that rather than invest in agriculture "what we did with the money was buy a bunch of guns, tons of bullets, lots of bulletproof vests, everything. We didn't pay attention to anything [the government] said." These statements point to one of the many weaknesses of the implementation of the peace zones: improvisation and naivety that resulted in a complete lack of supervision.

Peace zones, then, allowed gangs to consolidate control over territory by incentivizing alliances between former rival gangs and allowing them to amass an arsenal of weapons. Ironically, this "pacification plan" ended up justifying the implementation of the lethal militarized raids that ended the pacts in the summer of 2015. When state actors decided that the situation had gotten out of hand, that gangs in these zones (and elsewhere) were becoming a threat, they moved to wipe out gangs through joint police-military raids.

Rupture and the Second Round of Pacts

The first experience with peace zones lasted about two years in the Caracas periphery and Barlovento, and only a few months in La Cota. Pacts were ruptured in the summer of 2015 when the government implemented *la Operación de Liberación del Pueblo* [Operation Liberation of the People or OLP], a security plan that consisted of violent police raids in popular sectors.[9] The first raids took place in La Cota and in other areas previously designated peace zones in Caracas and the states of Miranda and Aragua.[10]

The raids went on for two years, during which time the armed and disruptive power acquired by gangs during the peace zones was put on display. In La Cota gangs used grenades and high powered weapons against the police and national guard. A CICPC officer stationed in Miranda told us that grenades were thrown into his police department after the police killed a local gang leader. He was lucky, he said, because the grenades did not explode. According to one PNB officer, "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

[9] In Venezuela *sectores populares*/popular sectors refer to poor and working-class neighborhoods.
[10] Why the government decided to rupture these first pacts depends on who you ask. Some gang members, for example, say that they "went too far" by engaging in exactly the types of crimes the pacts sought to reduce; from this perspective, gangs violated the terms of the agreement first (Zubillaga and Hanson 2024b). Police officers we interviewed believed that gangs in the peace zones had become too powerful, too much of a threat to the government (Hanson 2025). According to the president, the raids were intended to remove the gangs from power, claiming that they were conspiring against the government. Finally, as mentioned above, Maduro spent years building support within the military, the institution that would decide the fate of any potential coups. Unlike Chávez, Maduro did not have a military background to shore up support within the institution that would determine the success of another coup attempt. Thus he worked to assure its high-ranking members that they would continue to play an indispensable role in his administration. One of the ways he gained support within the military was by rolling back a civilian-run police reform that his predecessor had backed (Hanson 2025). Between 2013 and 2014 Maduro replaced civilians in all important citizen security roles with military officers. The re-militarization of the police that took place in the first few years of Maduro's government opened the doors to the most lethal militarized raids ever seen in the country.

delinquent says ‘Okay, 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.”

In 2017 intense political and social conflict erupted again when the government moved to usurp and then replace the opposition-led National Assembly with one dominated by Chavistas. A new protest cycle took place between April and July, with 9,787 street protests registered. According to data from the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict, the vast majority of protests (74%) were politically motivated, demanding the removal of Maduro's government (rather than motivated by demands for economic or social rights).[11] In this context the government turned again to negotiations in an effort to reduce visible violence and “keep the streets calm,” as one member of the gang members we interviewed put it, leading to another phase of the consolidation of criminal governance.

In La Cota, the second peace zones were established during a meeting between gang leaders and Delcy and Jorge Rodríguez.[12] In Belén, in the subregion of Barlovento in Miranda state, a new pact was negotiated by gang members and the Chavista mayor’s office. This round of negotiations included commitments on both sides. In interviews with neighbors, police officers, and gang members there was a consensus on the terms of the alliance: a reduction of violent crimes (especially those that were spectacular and generated a lot of fear, such as kidnappings, homicides, and massive vehicle thefts) and controlling social unrest in neighborhoods. The government, in return, agreed to order the police to stay out of gang territory.

Agreements facilitated criminal control over local licit and illicit economies. In La Cota the pact included tolerance of drug sales, which allowed the gang to create one of the most important drug markets in the city in exchange for maintaining a “peaceful community.” This vibrant business was an important source of work and stability for youths employed by the gangs in a context of severe economic deterioration and humanitarian crisis. There were work shifts and weekly salaries, with a distribution of labor between those who worked at the guardhouses, those at the points of control, and the “laboratories” where the merchandise was prepared. When asked about the relationship between the gang confederation and the state, Sandra, a community leader in La Cota, she spoke about what each side got out of the pact:

> So for the government it was like: “I let you sell drugs and you have power, but what do you give me in exchange? You have to keep the people under control.” [The government] knew that the people were not going to vote because they didn’t care,[13] and so [the leadership of the gang confederation] guaranteed that residents would not protest, that the area would remain calm, and when there were elections, they guaranteed that the people would go out to vote. In the end, it suits them because you

[11] https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/categoria/tendencias-de-la-conflictividad

[12] Delcy and Jorge Rodríguez are both important and powerful figures within Chavismo. Delcy, for example, is former minister of foreign affairs and became president of the National Constituent Assembly (the body that replaced the opposition-led national assembly) and Jorge Rodríguez, was at that time minister of communication and information.

[13] Here Sandra refers to the 2017 elections for the National Constituent Assembly, the parliamentary body that the government created to void the power of and replace the opposition-led National Assembly.

give [the gangs] the power to own a community in exchange for what? In exchange for a peaceful community where people don't protest and go out and vote.

One of the CICPC police officers who lived in La Cota spoke about how the government's tolerance of micro-trafficking affected drug sales in the sector: "The *plaza* [alluding to the marketplace areas where drugs were sold] in La Cota, it is the only plaza where they [drug buyers] can enter and leave without any problem. It's a *plaza*, super big, super big". Tolerance saw La Cota become one of the most active hubs in the city, generating enormous profits (see Antillano 2023). Neighbors we interviewed referred to queues of buyers waiting in the neighborhood to complete purchases. Similarly, a member of the gang explained to us: "In Caracas, the other *barrios* [popular sectors] had no life because La Cota is where you went up at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and there was a queue of 100 *periqueros* [cocaine consumers]".

In rural Belén the economic benefits for gangs looked different. Cacao has long been Barlovento's most important and profitable export and became even more valuable than drugs during the economic crisis.[14] The gang had already begun to supervise agricultural sales, particularly cacao, and extort farmers before the pacts. According to our interviews, gang members required farmers to hand over half of their cacao production. The gang then paid farmers for the other half but paid half the price of the market rate at the time (for example, if a kilo of cacao sold for $10 to a regular buyer, the gang would pay $5). Gang members were free to continue with this practice during the second peace zone without police intervention.[15] Moreover, the pact opened a channel for the local government to provide support for agricultural production and to buy products sold by the gang. According to a representative from the mayor's office that we interviewed in 2019:

> Effectively there exists an agreement with the Belén gang, which is that the mayor's office will facilitate the machines needed for agricultural production and other state resources…Moreover, no state security force can enter the gang's territory without the direct authorization of the mayor while the gang should not commit crimes within the Buroz municipality. Robbery, theft, kidnappings, extortion, among others.

During the interview this representative also stated that the gang sold all of their agricultural products--including cacao, plantains, peppers, and beans--to the mayor, which the mayor then sold to other commercial businesses.

Indeed, food became a crucial source of power and resources for gangs during the humanitarian crisis. As a neighbor told us, "Drugs don't pay as much anymore, now what pays is food." Gangs were able to distribute state subsidized food supplies, essential to the survival of many, that were provided through the Local Supply and Production

[14] According to an investigative report published by Venezuelan news portal Efecto Cocuyo, in 2018 alone, at the height of the economic crisis, Barlovento exported 22,427,454 dollars of cacao (https://www.connectas.org/especiales/el-amargo-cacao-venezolano/).

[15] Here we are not necessarily suggesting that police presence would have ended extortion. Instead, the police might have challenged the gang for control over extortion or charged them a fee to continue with the practice.

Committees (CLAP). Gangs in both La Cota and Belén controlled food distribution through intermittent relationships with state officials, becoming an essential channel through which a resource of extreme importance flowed.

When asking about the control the gang exercised over local communal councils, the local organizations officially charged with distributing CLAP goods, Neymar explained:

> We received a message that the woman in charge of distributing the food bags in the communal council was taking more than 10 bags of food to her house. We called up the council and *le prendíamos la mecha* [we kicked things off]: "Look sister, this is happening, and this and that...we are going to take over." Everything is already squared with the mayor. What do we do with the 200, 300 bags of food that show up [from the CLAP]? We take one for each of us first and then we distribute the food bags to the population. So we get 200 bags, there are 200 households, and each household is given a bag…[Before] they [the communal council members] were splitting up items from the bags, taking out a package of flour, of rice, a thing of oil. That was bad. It can't be like that because (knocks on the table for emphasis), the entire bag has to reach each household.

Criminals' governance of their territory and populations during our fieldwork was clear. In our ethnographic observations and interviews we documented gangs using *garitas* or guard posts to monitor neighborhood boundaries. In La Cota residents recognized gang capacity to regulate social life in the neighborhood, telling us that "they are the law" and "they have their rules, and people know what they can and cannot do." According to some of the people we interviewed, the gang imposed basic rules to guide social life, such as prohibitions on stealing, sexual abuse, and domestic violence (though these were most likely applied selectively).

Gang members made clear that it was thanks to the government that they were able to govern in their territories during this period. According to one gang member from La Cota:

> The government was the one that gave *el hampa* [the criminal underworld] the power to grow. This is a government that included criminal organizations within their *plan de Gobierno del Estado*,[16] the CLAP bags arrive with *los malandros*, they are the ones who make that happen. There are community spokespeople for everything but when something happens in the neighborhood the spokeswoman goes to talk to *el malandro*, not to Maduro, *el malandro* is the one who takes the reins of the neighborhood. This government included us a lot, they gave us opportunities.

As Sandra alluded to above, neighbors in La Cota said the gang exercised social and political control through prohibiting protests during this turbulent period for the government. One neighbor complained to us: "They wouldn't let us touch pots and pans, they wouldn't let us go

[16] The *plan de Gobierno del Estado* is a plan that lays out future goals and strategies that is created and published by the national government.

down to protest. It was impressive how we bowed to their rules."[17] One gang member we interviewed emphasized: "The *panas* [gang comrades] have played a great role in this historic moment. We would be worse off than we are! We would have the gangs *enculebradas* [in armed confrontations]...The neighborhoods would be *on fire* [lit up with protests]!... but we have the satisfaction...that the people are calm in their neighborhoods."

Gangs did not only govern through coercion. They provided certain types of security for residents. In Belén community residents reported that even before the pact the gang had begun “helping the people.” One example was prohibiting robberies in the area and killing those who did not respect this principle. According to one resident: “Now thanks to these guys no one robs. Imagine how it was before, here they [the thieves] would even invade your home.” Before the pact there had been conflict between the gang and police but according to one interviewee, “After there was an agreement reached with Mayor Johan Ponce the police stopped coming around. Now the pueblo is much more peaceful.”

Gangs in La Cota and Belén engaged in activities related to the public life of the community. They maintained community budgets for celebrating festivals and community events. Tents were mounted for these events and there was music; toys were given out on Children’s Day, and gangs held raffles for motorcycles on Father’s Day. In La Cota residents used the lexicon of state bureaucracy when referring to gang leaders, referring to them as “ministers” because of their capacity to issue gifts and participate in the distribution of benefits and social services.

Neymar explained how the Belén gang “benefited the community” through “*piratería de carretera*” [highway raids] in Belén. Taking advantage of their close proximity to Caracas, the gang would rob trucks carrying food products on the highway that connected farming sectors in the municipality to Caracas. They would then distribute the stolen food to the community, a practice that was referred to as “like Robin Hood” by another gang member. Neymar described it this way:

> We are in communication with the bosses and the lookouts and they tell us, “*Mira, ya la gallina está lista*.”[18] So we head to the highway, and we have the highway, the highway is ours. Trucks that pass through with food, we take it with us. We give out half to the population and we keep the other half.

A crucial aspect of the pacts for the government was the reduction of certain crimes, including kidnapping, car theft, and homicides. Control of these crimes in La Cota was exercised through spectacular punishments that convinced some residents that the gang had the ability to adjudicate life and death. One story that was recited over and over again was the murder and then burning of the body of a woman suspected of having informed on the gang confederation (see Zubillaga and Hanson 2024a). Residents also discussed the common tactic of murdering individuals whose corpses were then thrown into a garbage dump. In this sense, there was a rationalization of lethal punishment.

[17] In Venezuela a common protest tactic is the *cacerolazo*, which involves banging pots and pans together to make a loud noise.
[18] Literally “Look, the hen is ready”, which meant “The truck is coming.”

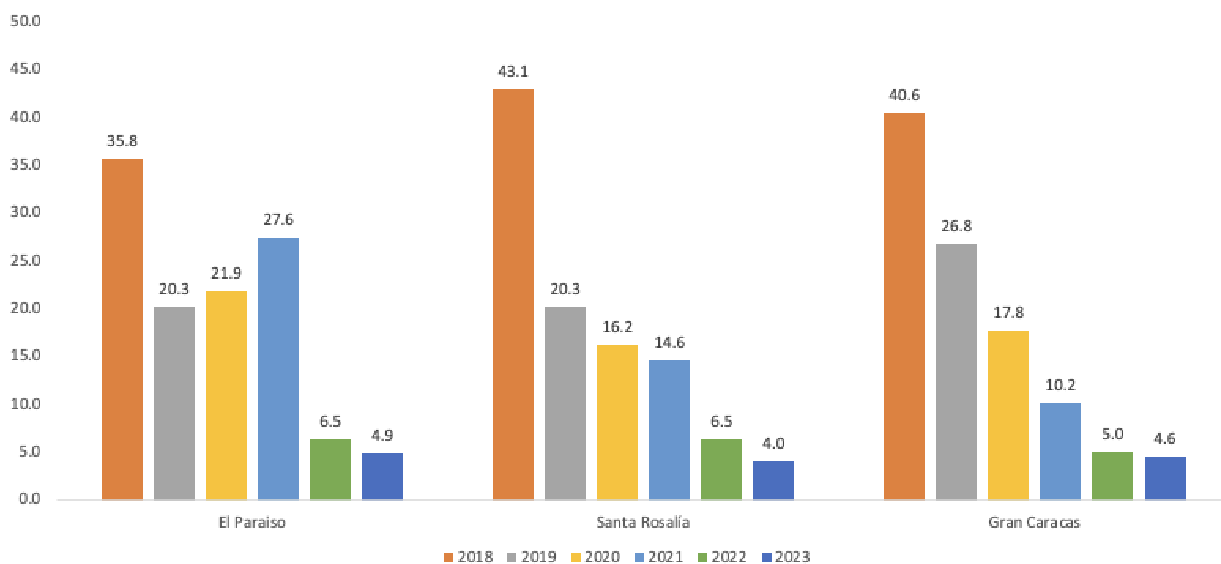
Deaths resulting from confrontation between gangs stopped but there were killings carried out after gang deliberation. In the words of La Cota resident Ana:

> There was no longer a war between gangs, but when they [el Koki, Vampi, and Galvis] caught a person committing what they saw as 'a mistake' [she makes quotation marks with her hands], then he had an impressive death. There is an area here that is called *El Bajante*, where an infinite number of people who were killed were thrown.

Despite these deliberate killings, the peace zone in La Cota resulted in a successful reduction in homicides, a problem that Chavista governments had been unable to get a handle on for years. Within a year of the agreements, between 2018 and 2019, homicide rates in the parishes of the gang confederation dropped by half - in Santa Rosalía parish, homicide rates dropped from 50 to 24 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. In El Paraiso they dropped from 36 to 20 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. [WE ARE WORKING TO OBTAIN SIMILAR DATA FOR BELEN TO CONFIRM A SIMILAR DROP IN HOMICIDE RATES]

Graph 2

Homicide Rates in Peace Zone Parrishes and Greater Caracas



Source: Monitor de Víctimas

In Belén, Neymar and a government representative told us that the pact with the mayor included regulations on where the gang could and could not commit crimes. It was agreed that the gang would not commit crimes within the municipality but were allowed to commit them elsewhere. During his interview Neymar told us: "Of course, we go outside of the municipality to rob. We go

to Higuerote, one of the closest towns to us. We go up to Río Chico to look for gringos with money." When we asked Neymar why they go to other municipalities to commit crimes he responded: "*Como quien dice, eso es una palabra que hay*" (As they say, we have an understanding). The government representative we interviewed also reported that the mayor was particularly interested in reducing robbery, theft, kidnappings, and extortion in his territory but agreed to allow the gang to commit these crimes elsewhere. Neymar even spoke about hiding kidnapping victims in homes outside of the municipality out of respect for the pact.

Gangs played an important role in the communities where we worked during Covid-19. Like Colombia, Venezuela confronted the pandemic by deploying the military to enforce quarantines and prohibit travel. However, the military was not the only armed institution that policed the streets in the face of a health emergency. In La Cota, gang members distributed masks, mounted hand-disinfectant stations, and even organized food delivery to keep people from leaving their homes. A woman living in La Cota at the time told us that neighbors who gathered for social events in the street during the day were punished, and sometimes were shot. According to our interviewees, they recorded audio communications transmitted through WhatsApp to decree curfews and designate some houses as posts of sale for food so that residents would not have to go out to the market. But these decisions were also arbitrary. Months after the implementation of quarantines the gang infrequently organized large parties, during which time music blasted into neighbors homes into the early morning.

When we asked Neymar about what his gang did in Miranda during the pandemic he told us:

> Look, we were clear with the people: "'Make sure people aren't coming over here [from another barrio] all the time, use your face masks, and keep yourselves inside. Leave to buy what you have to buy and get back to your homes."… . . . "'Look, you can't have parties'," so there weren't parties. "'Look, you can't be wandering out in the street at this hour", so they aren't out walking in the street during certain hours. Only we were out in the streets, those who belonged to the gang. You get me? So they had to respect our decisions, and the people obeyed, recognizing that they couldn't be going out in the street at any hour because then the government would mess with us.

Gang Consolidation and Conflicts with Police

In this section we analyze how the outsourcing of coercion and social control was perceived by the police to understand unintended consequences of the pacts. As mentioned above, the pact that led to the peace zone implied the restriction of police powers in gang territory. Officers perceived these areas as a state-supported *zona franca* of criminality (Zubillaga and Hanson 2024b) that placed them at a disadvantage. The peace zones represented a tool to regulate police power by placing certain areas outside their jurisdiction and to outsource police functions

to gangs that had become allies of the government.[19] It also deprived them of a source of income by preventing them from charging the traditional *vacunas* [extorsion fees] to gangs for selling drugs, an important source of income during the economic crisis.

In our interviews with officers from the Metropolitan Police (eliminated in 2011), the Bolivarian National Police (PNB) officers, and investigative police (CICPC) officers they talked about how the participation of the upper echelons of the state in the second edition of the peace zone represented an affront to the police, an outrageous and transgressive situation. For officers, the government was nurturing precisely that which the police believe they are dedicated to eliminating: crime and criminal actors. One CICPC police officer, who was the head of the CICPC's anti-drug division, told us: "The police never liked this business of the peace zones. *Les daba la madre de las arrecheras* [It was the mother of all infuriations]." In the words of several officers, these zones were "crime nests" created by the state. According to one PNB officer: "These peace zones have been a disaster, they are why delinquency has increased so much, because delinquents gained strength. The government wanted to give them money, give them credits, but what did they do with the money? They bought guns. Gangs are more organized and better armed now because of them."

Indeed, officers described the peace zones as allowing gangs to become better organized and armed and, thus, better prepared to later confront the police. The confederation of gangs acquired levels of organization and coordination that made it increasingly difficult to counter for law enforcement agencies (Gómez and Hanson 2022), agencies that became more fragmented and internally conflictive during the Bolivarian Revolution (Hanson 2025). One CICPC officer who lived in la Cota 905 put it this way: "[The gangs] are strategic and became quite intelligent, quite organized. I tell you, I have seen them. They have an organization that I have said: I wish the police worked like that! There is an impressive brotherhood."

The peace zones saw the "us vs. them" mentality well documented by studies of police forces throughout the region position the state in the latter category, not *with* the police but *against* its mission. The policy put the government on the side of *los malandros* [thugs or criminals] rather than on their side in the fight against crime. One PNB officer described it this way: "The government is making a pact with *malandros* [*thugs*], with the delinquents [we are meant to fight]. Either you are on the side of the police or with the thugs. Because officers are the ones in charge of ensuring security, not a civilian who is going to kill another because of his position in a gang."

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[19] It is important to recognize that research throughout Latin America, Europe, and the United States has documented accounts of police officers complaining about "no-go" zones. As Didier Fassin (2013:37) reminds us, the trope of no-go zones is "with rare exceptions, much less a description of reality than a mobilization slogan based on a fantasy of danger and reconquer. The image of danger magnifying the courage of those who face it, and that of reconquest justifying the action aimed at realizing it." In fact, this was the language used in an OLP protocol given to us by a police officer, which situated the OLP as a plan to reconquer territory in the face of "criminal, paramilitary, destabilizing and violence-generating activities." We must be careful, then, when we encounter these narratives while conducting research with the police. However, as we have shown above, it was not only the police who spoke of the peace zone as a no go zone; neighborhood residents and gang members also spoke of the restriction of police presence in gang territory.

Pedro told a particularly detailed story about a case that occurred two weeks before we conducted our interview with him. A high-ranking CICPC officer's car was stolen, which officers were able to locate using GPS tracking. The car was in gang territory, so officers requested and were granted permission by their supervisors to enter the area to get the car. However, they were told to "turn a blind eye" to whatever they saw. According to Pedro: "We had to enter [the sector] and go after the objective and if we came across some delinquents we couldn't do anything. That is the reality we are living." Officers found the car they were sent to rescue parked among 20 other stolen vehicles in various stages of being broken down. They were able to get the car out but, reflecting on the incident, Pedro told us: "If a car gets stolen now and you don't have some kind of power or alliance with the [police] director, with the mayor, with the governor, your car is just lost. Why? Because what ends up [in the sector] isn't going to leave. Everyone knows that." For Pedro politicians made these concessions to keep problematic neighborhoods under control: "According to the meetings with our bosses, what we have learned is that the mayor has this important relationship with the governor of Miranda, [who says] 'I am the governor of Miranda and I need everything to be under control, I don't care how you do it . . . If you have to align yourself with criminals, align yourself with criminals.'" Pedro believed that without these pacts, "everything would get out of control."

If officers saw the peace zones as attempts by politicians to produce social control in rebel spaces, they did not believe that this social control would imply a reduction in crime per say. On the contrary, they saw the peace zones as extending impunity for gangs in exchange for *less visible* crimes. Pacts provided guidelines for criminality, a way to regulate where and which types of crimes could be committed. "They [the government] are institutionalizing *el malandraje* [criminality]" explained a retired Metropolitan Police commissioner. For the officers, then, the politicians who maintained pacts were more interested in the appearance of social order than in reducing crime. Indeed, officers felt that the government's policies created spaces where crime would not only exist but flourish (as indicated in the above reference to peace zones as nests of crime). According to another PNB officer: "There was a lot of concern about kidnappings and homicide [in La Cota before the pacts]. These were sectors that then benefited from special terms [with the government]...the peace zones, which allowed these people to set themselves up, generate defense strategies, and use all this to their advantage to organize and be able to operate with all the impunity extended to them as a benefit by the Venezuelan state."

This state sanctioned criminal governance ended up producing intermittent confrontations between gangs and the police in peace zones and unpredictable moments of armed conflict in poor neighborhoods. In the first edition of the peace zones, even though pacts prohibited police officers from officially intervening in la Cota 905, officers from the Policaracas (one of Caracas's municipal police forces) still entered to bribe gangs, provoking intermittent confrontations. Before the government ended the first pacts with the OLP, the increase in "fees" charged by officers unleashed spectacular attacks by the gang on the police. During a confrontation on June 5, 2015, the La Cota gang confederation burned nine police motorcycles and threw grenades at officers, wounding at least six officials.

During the second round of peace zones, in July 2019, four CICPC officers were injured when gang members in La Cota attacked them for attempting to arrest one of their members.

According to media reports, Minister of Justice Néstor Reverol himself ordered the CICPC to withdraw from the area. That same month, two gang members in La Cota and a local business owner were killed during a roadside chase as CICPC agents attempted to arrest members they suspected of planning a kidnapping (Losada 2018b). Despite the pacts, police officers sought to arrest gang members, leading them to relocate for periods of time. According to Neymar:

> The leader in La Cota comes down here [to Belén], when La Cota *está prendida* they all come down and we take them in and hide them…we take in the leader of the orchestra from San José and el Delirio [other sectors of Barlovento] also…we take in *el Loco* [one of the gang leaders in La Cota] because he also helps us out, so we aren't going to let him die.

When we asked Pedro if there were confrontations between the CICPC and gangs in peace zones in Miranda he told us, "Of course. I would say every week, every two weeks gunfire is exchanged with gang members. Of course, this exchange is always fortuitous because anytime we decide to approach [the sector] we immediately get calls from higher-ups like the minister or our director or the mayor, and since we are a police force we do what we are told."

Pacts in Venezuela did not divide territory up among state security forces, as was the case in Mexico (Trejo and Ley 2020). Instead, they prohibited state security forces from entering gang territory, making it much more difficult for the police to patrol but also extort and bribe in those spaces. This restriction of the police's jurisdiction exacerbated already frayed relationships between the government and its own police forces and catalyzed intermittent and unanticipated armed conflict between the police and gangs. By analyzing the perspectives and actions of the police alongside those of gang members, we see the inconsistencies and contradictions produced by the government's efforts to "calm the streets."

Pacts, then, drastically reduced police presence in gang territory, wherein criminal governance degrees of stability and security within this territory. However, "fortuitous" armed confrontations between the police and gangs continued. Moreover, as we discuss next, when pacts again broke down the police confronted gangs with a zealous rage.

The End of the Peace Zones

By 2021 the pandemic, the militarization of Caracas, and the disarticulation of the opposition movement put the government in a less precarious position than when it negotiated the peace zone II pacts.[20] That year, gang leaders in La Cota began working to expand their control over neighborhoods in other parts of the city, leading to a cycle of violent encounters between them and gangs from la Vega, a neighboring sector. This expansion was driven by a desire to take over drug sales in the area, but was also strategic. La Vega was one of the few sectors that still provided the police with entry into La Cota. As one gang member put it:

[20] Protests registered in 2021 by the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict showed a significant reduction (6,560 protests), and only 26% were politically motivated (compared to 42% of protests in 2019).

> The police starting entering [La Cota] through La Vega, so *los panas* [the gang members] starting studying the situation and said: "We have to take La Vega so they aren't coming up here through La Vega. Because [the police] could not enter through El Cementerio [another peace zone], they could not enter through La Cota, they couldn't enter here, they couldn't enter there, but they could through La Vega. So because of this *los panas* decided to go to war there.

According to La Cota residents, the gang confederation at this time returned to excessive killings that had been put on hold. The confederation even carried out an ambush of a CICPC patrol in a city tunnel in which civilians were trapped in their cars in and around the tunnel for hours. Several residents that we interviewed described the situation as "out of control," alluding to excessive murders by gangs. In several interviews, residents mentioned the "big monster" that the peace zones had become. As one community leader said: "In fact, it got so out of control that, in order to keep the community under control, they were committing any number of murders on a weekly basis. Everything changed, everything was getting out of control (...), and they began to exceed the limit of what was their negotiation". A member of the gang confederation also spoke of this overreach: "We began to get creative and we made some mistakes that led the *doctora* [Delcy Rodríguez] to decide to take us out of the game (...) Remember that when you have power you want more power (...) The gangs had the power in those neighborhoods, and wanted to have another neighborhood to show the [other] *malandros* and the state that we had power. And that was what weakened all of this, that war between gangs [in La Cota and La Vega]."

In 2021, after a change in the minister of justice, the new minister, Carmen Meléndez, announced the "Indio Cacique Guaicaipuro" raid in La Cota with the goal of capturing the main leaders of the confederation (Flores 2021). One police officer explained the end of the pact this way: "Remember that the government gives [the gangs] an opportunity. But when they no longer need that chess piece and it is causing problems, they have it eliminated. Do you understand me?" The raid was launched on July 7, 2021 and paralyzed the city for three days as the police and military clashed with the gang. One police officer highlighted, "We all united out of hatred for the criminals." During the raid, communities in La Cota were terrorized by the militarized invasion. Electricity was suspended and in our conversations with residents they recounted the horror of living three days in darkness, lying on the ground, listening to the detonations. Some of them were left without food. Families moved their sons out of the sector, afraid that they would be killed by the police or recruited by the gang to fight back.

On Twitter Minister of Justice Carmen Meléndez stated that this raid was intended to "liberate" areas affected by crime.[21] This "liberation" resulted in incredible state violence. Monitor de Víctimas, a Venezuelan NGO, registered 38 deaths during the three-day raid. In the following days it registered 27 additional deaths. Operation Cacique Guaicaipuro succeeded in dislodging and dismantling the power of the gang confederation. The highest-ranking gang members were forced to flee the sector, with news outlets later reporting that some had migrated to Colombia.

[21] (https://x.com/gestionperfecta/status/1414002262335229958)

While not killed during the raid, el Koki, the leader we interviewed, was forced to go into hiding. He was later killed by police in February 2022.

AFTER COMPLETING DATA COLLECTION WE WILL ADD INFORMATION ABOUT HOW THE PACTS BROKE DOWN IN BARLOVENTO.

CONCLUSION

Nicolás Maduro's government has undoubtedly relied on violence and repression deployed by state security forces as it consolidated its power over key state institutions. It also relied, as we have documented here, on pacts with armed criminal groups that restricted police powers in certain sectors and generated discontent within state security forces, discontent that could have important implications for the regime's survival in the future. The outsourcing of governance resulted in a reduction of certain crimes and the control of social unrest within the peace zones during crucial moments of regime consolidation. However, it also produced intermittent and unpredictable confrontations between the police and the gangs that had taken on their functions and solidified police resentment of the government. The consolidation of criminal governance that took place during this period had important implications for those who lived within their territory. Residents were provided with certain types of security but lived under the armed domination of criminal groups. Moreover, the Maduro government used the consolidation of gang domination that was facilitated by the peace zones to justify lethal militarized police raids, unleashing unprecedented violence against the poor—traditionally the core base of Chavismo (Zubillaga and Hanson, 2018).

The Venezuelan case proposes a new avenue of research for scholars of authoritarian regimes by bringing studies of criminal governance into the conversation. Previous literature on authoritarian governments has tended to explain the durability of a regime by focusing on a handful of groups--elites, the state, and security forces--and how the centralization of power and cohesion of security forces contributes to durability. Here we have demonstrated the importance of decentralization and the outsourcing of coercion for the survival and consolidation of the authoritarian state in Venezuela. This decentralization and outsourcing helps us to understand how a government whose policies and practices have resulted in intense state fragmentation and internecine conflict (see Smilde, Zubillaga, and Hanson 2022; Hanson 2025) has survived and even consolidated over time.

This paper also contributes a novel case study for analyzing criminal governance, as it is one of a few that focuses on this phenomenon in an authoritarian context. Because studies of criminal governance have largely taken place in formally democratic contexts we know little about how and why authoritarian regimes might support or acquiesce to governance by criminals.
This is despite the fact that "[o]ne of the most important--though often unnoticed--facts about authoritarian regimes is that they provide the natural political environment for the rise and orderly expansion of the criminal underworld" (Trejo and Ley 2020:40). In demonstrating the outsourcing of governance that occurred under Maduro during this period, we show the importance of considering criminal governance as another resource in the authoritarian toolbelt. In a context of contested legitimacy, the outsourcing of governance to criminal actors and the

tolerance of illicit economies constitute other strategies to maintain the order of domination and territorial control in the process of authoritarian consolidation (North et al. 2011).

We also contribute to scholarship on criminal governance by analyzing how relationships between state actors and non-state armed groups affected those most often associated with authoritarian coercion: the police. Currently little is known about how police officials perceive the blurring of lines between state and non-state groups, either in authoritarian or democratic contexts. The Venezuelan case demonstrates the need for more granular analyses of the uneven nature of police power and the varied motivations officers have for violence (see also Hanson 2025).

Our relational ethnographic approach focused our attention on multiple and differently positioned actors struggling for territorial control and recognition. Because relational ethnography requires the examination of relationships between two or more distinct actors, we have captured how mechanisms that regulate and stabilize some relationships within a field (for example, between gang members and the government) also disrupt other relationships in that field. Indeed, had we focused on gangs as bounded groups, rather than actors embedded in a complex field of power relations, our findings would have focused only on how the peace zone policy resulted in less crime, violence, and social conflict--the intended consequences of the pacts. This approach captures the tensions produced by the government's security policy, a policy always teetering on the brink of eruption during confrontations between police forces and gangs. Relational ethnography also offers valuable insights into the emotional and affective dynamics of criminal governance, which have long been ignored within this scholarship. It sheds light on the profound sense of discomfort and humiliation experienced by police officers when they are compelled to halt their pursuit of gang members. Finally, relational ethnography guided our attention to power struggles in spaces often overlooked in studies of authoritarianism, contributing to our understanding of everyday state making in these contexts.

We are currently discussing what the rupture of government-gang pacts in 2021 indicates for the future of authoritarian consolidation and territorial control in Venezuela. While the Maduro government seems to have ended alliances with the gangs we have focused on in this paper, it has continued to tolerate the presence of other criminal groups in the country. After the gang´s elimination from those territories, police returned to collecting fees (vacunas) from young drug retailers. Relationships with other non-state armed groups that we have analyzed in other publications, such as *colectivos* (Zubillaga, Hanson, and Sánchez 2021) remain strong. There are some indications that armed community groups with ideological affinities that have developed into parastate actors are playing an increasingly important role in territorial control. This requires asking if government-gang pacts were a temporary strategy, a tool used during a period of extreme vulnerability.

EXTRAS

Inheriting a strong and effective state apparatus is also good for authoritarian durability (Slater and Fenner 2011).

In order to govern political dissent, authoritarian governments invest extensively in the state coercive apparatus. They “strengthen the armed forces and the police, keep tight controls over the prison system, and develop secret service agencies” (Trejo and Ley 2020: 41). However, they may also empower….

Recent events in Venezuela also show us that this is a temporary control strategy. After the Indiio Guaicaipuro operation that eliminated criminal governance, the government has tended to strengthen the presence of colectivos in areas where they had no presence before, notably Cota 905. During the 2024 elections, in which the Maduro government allegedly committed fraud and we experienced in the street, again a period of riots and street protests. Hooded policemen and alleged colectivos were this time the agents of repression. This could be indicating that the government's relations with armed para-state actors for the control of discontent is moving closer to the traditional strategies of authoritarian states. It is also relevant to note that in order to achieve this, the government has had to resort to the dispersion of coercion and to the use of force to guarantee its power.

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