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Criminal Governance in Times of Post-Chávez Revolution and Questioned Legitimacy: A Look at Different Territorial Orders and Armed Actors in Caracas[1]

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Governança criminal em tempos de revolução pós-Chávez e legitimidade questionada: Um olhar sobre as diferentes ordens territoriais e atores armados em Caracas compara a configuração de duas ordens territoriais armadas e as formas de governança local em contextos neopatrimoniais autoritários em Caracas que sofrem do que tem sido chamado de "crise humanitária complexa". Dialogamos com os conceitos de *governança colaborativa* e *governança criminal* para entender como o controle social funciona localmente em um contexto autoritário em que uma crise política, econômica e humanitária tem restringido os recursos e o escopo do governo. O caso venezuelano revela com especial interesse os processos de mutação nas relações entre os atores armados e um Estado fragmentado para funções de controle social em seus territórios, em um contexto de legitimidade disputada.

Palavras-chave: governança criminal, governança híbrida, ordens territoriais armadas, despotismo armado

This article compares the configuration of two armed territorial orders and forms of local governance in neo-patrimonial authoritarian contexts in Caracas that suffer from what has been called a "complex humanitarian crisis". Based on the analysis of ethnographic data, this text dialogues with the concepts of *collaborative governance* and *criminal governance* to understand how social control functions locally in an authoritarian context where a political, economic, and humanitarian crisis has restricted the resources and scope of government. The Venezuelan case is especially revealing of processes of mutation in the relations between armed actors and a fragmented state that involve social control functions in their territories in a context of contested legitimacy.

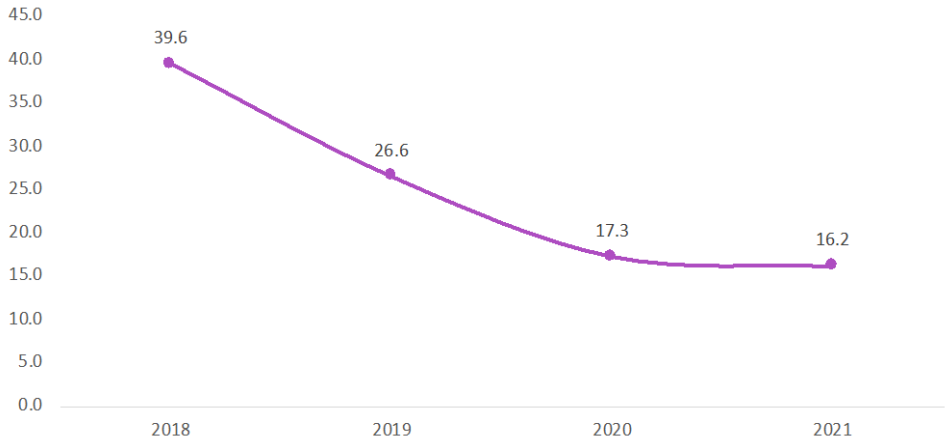
Keywords: criminal governance, collaborative governance, armed territorial orders; armed despotism

Introduction

In the middle of the decade of 2000 Caracas began to be classified as one of the world's five most dangerous cities[2]. Ten years later (in 2016, two years after the beginning of the Nicolás Maduro government), it made the news for its classification as the world's most dangerous city (OLMO, 2020). Four years later, it gained equal attention for a significant drop in violent crime rates, in a short time and in a context of political turbulence, economic collapse and humanitarian crisis. This decline was also noteworthy due to the absence of a comprehensive public safety policy or an institutional reform of the police forces that have been systematically denounced for their corruption and abuse of force.

The *Monitor de víctimas*, one of the most reliable records of violence deaths in the country, documented that since 2018 in Caracas the homicide rate fell from 40 deaths per 100 thousand residents to 16 deaths per 100,000 in 2021.

Graph 1. Greater Caracas. Rate of violent deaths, 2018 to 2021



Source: Monitor de víctimas. Proyecciones de población INE. Calculated by Andrea Chacón Chávez.

The drop in violent deaths in the country and in the capital city also convoked the analysis of journalists and Venezuelan and international experts. Some analysts have affirmed that this decrease responds to various phenomenon, including: the massive migration of Venezuelans due to the economic and political collapse since 2014; the severe economic contraction that decreased opportunities to commit crimes; and a greater organization of the world of crime that has produced a reduction in armed disputes among gangs, as well as greater territorial control. Our research supports this interpretation. This hypothesis has not been studied in depth until now and this is what we want to explore in this article.

We propose in this text that the reorganization of armed actors and changes in the forms of relations between these groups and sectors of the state are key to understanding the decline of violent deaths in Caracas. The case of Venezuela, which is an authoritarian context in which a political, economic and humanitarian crisis has restricted the resources and reach of the government, is especially revealing of changes in relations between organized armed actors and the state involving functions of social control in their territories.

We focus on the configuration of armed territorial orders (ANTILLANO, ARIAS y ZUBILLAGA, 2020) in two particular zones in western Caracas that are highly significant. On one hand is La Cota 905, which is formed by a chain of neighborhoods spread across mountainous regions of the southwest of the city and in which prevail a confederation of organized criminal

gangs that has become known as "megabandas". This organized association of criminal gangs is known by its place of origin as "the gang of La Cota 905".

On the other hand is the historic parish of 23 de Enero, which was constructed in the late 1950s during the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. This parish had historically been the center of urban guerilla movements of the 1960s and 1970s and a center of the political and social life of the country (VELASCO, 2015). In this parish a range of armed para-state actors prevailed that were loyal to the government and known as "armed collectives".

We propose that, in the context of the recent history of economic collapse and political turbulence, and through very different trajectories (which we will detail upon analyzing each case separately), an articulation and internal organization of these groups was established that favored the consolidation of their territorial power, which is manifest in: 1) territorial control and the exercise of a recognized sovereignty; 2) institutionalized forms of governance of the daily life of the population under their control; 3) illegal economic practices that involve the use of more organized violence; and 4) forms of relation with the state that in a context of intense political instability and the state's quest for legitimacy have tended towards collaboration and volatile strategic alliances. These forms of collaboration provide the state a minimum of governability and territorial control and the armed groups an endorsement of their existence and access to income. These relations, which are in constant flux, can vary temporarily between collaboration, persecution, and confrontation and depend on fragile agreements.

This article is based on the analysis of the data from an ethnographic study conducted in these zones of Caracas. It combines data obtained from observation and in-depth interviews conducted between 2017 and 2018 and then again in 2020 and 2021, with residents, members of police forces, and members of the criminal gang in La Cota 905. In 2021, in the parish of 23 de Enero, in the northwestern zone of Caracas, in-depth interviews were conducted[3] with members of armed collectives, a police agent, and with residents. We focused on the zones of the parish controlled by the collective La Piedrita and the collective Tres Raíces. In this article we have kept the names of the areas, which are widely known, and have kept and changed the names and details of our interviewees.

The decline in violent deaths in Caracas and the consolidation of armed territorial orders

One resident of the neighborhood of La Cota 905 told us:

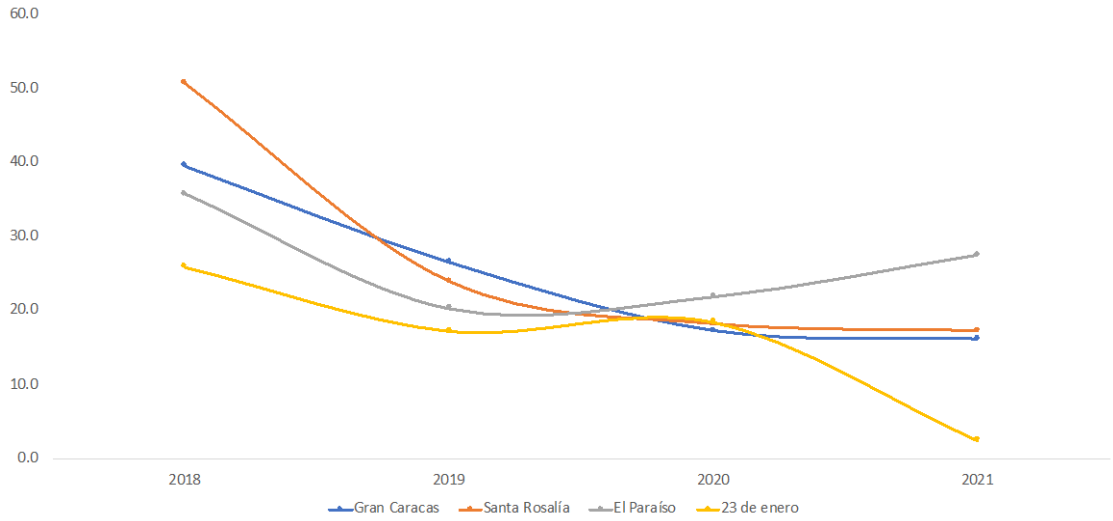
> Here, we don't lose even a pair of shoes now, not a telephone, nothing. No crooks are allowed here…before there was a lot of theft…It's complicated, but at the same time, it works. Here they know that if they steal something, they'll be killed, thrown down a sewer, and that's it.

More to the north in the city, a resident of the parish of 23 de Enero also compared the violent past with the peaceful present. He associated this contrast to the practices of the armed para-state groups loyal to the government known as "collectives". He said:

> I think it got rid of the government's headache from crime. Before, sometimes 50-60 armed criminals would come down. I don't see this anymore. At least they brought peace. And my grandson can go to the field and not see armed people.

The data about the rates of violent deaths by parish reveals this common trend of decreasing violent deaths. But it also reveals important differences in the local dynamics in the parishes where these communities are located. See the following graph:

Graph 2: Greater Caracas and three selected parishes: Santa Rosalía, El Paraíso and 23 de Enero. Rate of violent deaths, 2018 to 2021



Source: Monitor de víctimas, 2018 a 2021. Proyecciones de población INE. Calculated by Andrea Chacón Chávez.

Note the difference in the rates between the parishes in the chain of neighborhoods where La Cota 905 is located—Santa Rosalía and El Paraíso—in relation to the rate in the parish of 23 de Enero. The rate of violent deaths in Santa Rosalía was double the rate of 23 de Enero in 2018.

In the first of the two parishes, the base of the criminal gangs, confrontations broke out between them and the police forces between 2015 and 2017, in the context of operations known as Operativos de Liberación del Povo [*Operations to Liberate the People*] (OLP). These operations

included a massive invasion and sustained lethal police action for two years (2015–2017) in the poor and working-class communities, on a scale not previously seen in the country[4].

As in El Salvador, the military operations that became regular in 2010 contributed to the reorganization of the criminal gangs that were previously in dispute, leading them to articulate to confront a common enemy: the police forces (CRUZ, 2010). Nevertheless, unlike previous operations, the Operations to Liberate the People very soon began to be denounced for its violence (ANTILLANO y ÁVILA, 2017). The two years of confrontation between the police forces and the gangs did not lead to the expected results.

In 2017, in a context of intense political agitation in the streets and of elections of questionable legitimacy, the authorities dared to seek other options. This time they decided to enter agreements with the large confederation of criminal gangs. More precisely, when referring to the drop in homicides in El Salvador and Medellín associated to agreements between authorities and criminal organizations, José Miguel Cruz and Angélica Durán-Martínez (2016) highlight that "it is when criminal organizations notoriously challenge the authority of the state and only when they achieve a certain internal leadership and cohesion can they require the state to seek alternatives to reduce the violence" (CRUZ y DURÁN-MARTÍNEZ, 2016, p. 198).

The case of Caracas appears to be in line with this perspective. As we will discuss, and according to the statements of residents, members of the criminal gang, police agents, as well as press reports, 2017 marked the change in the state policy. It marked a shift in the confrontation towards a pact for pacification and tolerance by declaring these territories as "zones of peace" (ZUBILLAGA, HANSON y ANTILLANO, 2021, p. 474)[5]. Although intermittent confrontations continued, the internal articulation of the gangs and the pacts with sectors of the state contributed to decreasing the violent deaths in these parishes. The gangs no longer confronted each other in these communities, and the police forces decreased their lethal actions, at least until July 2021, when there was a rupture from the agreements.

On the other hand, the armed groups loyal to the government based in the parish of 23 de Enero, in a context of intense political conflict, also sought to establish alliances. They had to act in a coordinated manner in relation to the social protests that had been recurring since 2014. These protests became deeply threatening at times of intense conflict as in 2017 and 2019. Unlike his predecessor, the government of Nicolás Maduro lacked charisma, resources to incorporate the popular sectors and political legitimacy (HANSON y LAPEGNA, 2018), and thus consolidated the association with the collectives in order to exercise decentralized social control.

The residents who we interviewed and the data that we present provide keys to understanding some of the phenomena associated to the changes in the expression of the violence in the city. This evidence allows us to propose that the lethal violence in Caracas has decreased, at

least in the current conjuncture, because various armed territorial orders and local governances have been established that gave shape to violence that is more influenced by the growing power and territorial domination of the two most visible organized armed groups in the city. We can speak of "governances" as used by Lessing (2020), given that, in effect, the lives, routines and activities of the people have been regulated by the rules, norms, and codes of the armed groups that prevail in these territories (LESSING, 2020).

This text aligns with recent literature about criminality in Latin America dedicated to understanding the variability of violence and its different expressions in various local contexts of a single city or region. In this sense, we highlight the importance of understanding the "armed territorial orders" (ANTILLANO, ARIAS y ZUBILLAGA, 2020) derived from the particular local dynamics of each neighborhood, resulting from their history and from the local geographic conditions; the community organizations and their collective effectiveness; the types of illicit economies and armed actors; the situated practices of the police agents and the historic relations among residents, armed actors and state employees (WOLFF, 2015; ARJONA, 2016; ARIAS, 2017; ARIAS y BARNES, 2017; ANTILLANO, ARIAS y ZUBILLAGA, 2020).

We seek to analyze the process of configuration over time of two types of orders and armed actors in Caracas, according to the following questions: What type of relationship have they maintained with the state? Who do they govern? And how do they govern?

The expansion of the local governances of these armed actors has become increasingly evident in the post-Chavez period. This expansion has occurred in the context of a broader historic process, which in other spaces we have called "revolutionary governance" to identify the processes of intense conflict and state fragmentation that took place in the context of political changes—and the desire to break with traditional elites and with the past by the part of an emerging elite—known as the Revolución Bolivariana (SMILDE, ZUBILLAGA y HANSON, 2022).

More specifically, revolutionary governance emphasizes processes of confrontation between the ruling party and opposition actors, which mark the entrance of arms into political life, and alliances that some state sectors establish with armed para-state actors as survival strategies in face of the permanent perception of a threat from internal and external enemies (MIGDAL, 2001). It also alludes to a fragmentation within the state that involved a process of internal struggle for income, power and authority within the state, within Chavismo itself, and in particular in the framework of the state security apparatus (CRUZ, 2016; DURÁN-MARTÍNEZ, 2015).

In this context, defined as one of antagonism and of existential threat, which since the beginning of the post-Chávez period (in 2013) was marked by the collapse of the prices of oil and the oil industry and by a complex humanitarian crisis, distinct armed territorial orders and forms of local governance have been taking shape in the city. These orders, in association to the

particular geographies and histories of these regions, point to an increase in the economic power of these groups, to a greater visibility of their local governances, and to more visible synergies between these groups and sectors of the state.

One of the purposes of this article is precisely to explore, in a context of growing neopatrimonal authoritarianism (which we will discuss next), the transformations and differences in the forms of relation of the state and forms of local government with armed para-state actors—organized crime gangs like "megabandas" and armed groups loyal to the government known as armed collectives.

Criminal governance in contexts of neopatrimonial authoritarianism and questioned legitimacy

For some political analysts, the death of Hugo Chávez and the establishment of the government of Nicolás Maduro involved a step from a political regime that combined autocratic traits with democratic attributes (such as competitive elections, during the government of Hugo Chávez) to a mode of authoritarian and neopatrimonial domination (CORRALES y PENFOLD, 2015; LÓPEZ-MAYA, 2018). More precisely, the characteristics of a mode of neopatrimonial domination constitute the coexistence and interlinking of two logics of domination. One is the patrimonial, which is associated to personal ties, relations, and particular interests. The other is legal-rational, which is associated to the universality of the bureaucracy. Informal politics invades formal institutions, but they in turn constitute a framework in which this institutionalization of informality is produced (ERDMANN y ENGEL, 2007). The predominance of particularistic logics, informality and the adaptation of legal systems, make neopatrimonialism unpredictable and arbitrary and imply a greater exercise of coercion than in the context of universal legal-rational norms, which is associated to this logic of domination (ERDMANN y ENGEL, 2007; DEWEY, MIGUEZ y SAÍN, 2016).

Dewey, Miguez y Saín (2016) propose the concept of *hybrid orders* to characterize the types of orders and governances (present in Latin America, Africa and East Europe), in which prevail synergies between state actors and extra-legal actors. In these orders, these actors are involved in producing responses that provide services, jobs, security and more, in the areas they control. The hybrid orders are typical of regimes of neopatrimonial domination, in which alliances and interpersonal relations are fundamental, rational bureaucratic forms and laws are recognized, although not always complied with, and most importantly, they establish a framework of opportunities for the selective exercise of the law.

During the post-Chávez Bolivarian revolution, there has been an intensification of armed coercion and authoritarian forms of conflict management (LEWIS, HEATHERSHAW y

MEGORAN, 2018). The threat to legitimacy in a context of revolutionary governance (that is, state fragmentation) would lead to the establishment of coalitions with armed para-state groups that maintain (even if irregularly) social control of conflicts in the various territories of the city.

As in other Latin American cities, the state is an essential agent for understanding the perpetuation of violence in Caracas (ARIAS y GOLDSTEIN, 2010; CRUZ, 2016; MANTILLA y FELDMANN, 2021). On the other hand, in a context of economic collapse and humanitarian crisis, the distribution of income, and the tolerance of incomes associated to the illegal economies among the armed para-state actors (the armed collectives and the criminal gangs, the "megabandas") is another strategy for maintaining the order of domination and territorial control (NORTH *et al.*, 2011).

The data collected in this study allow us to propose that in Caracas the armed groups have become increasingly essential to the exercise of neopatrimonial domination. Their participation has been increasingly supported by informal mechanisms and on distinct legal frameworks and organizational elements of the government that have tended to construct a facade of legalization: the members of the armed collectives have come to form part of the militias and an element of local organization, the communal councils. The Zones of Peace constituted a social program in which, for a given period, the criminal gangs could count on a certain autonomy in the control of the territory, provided that they end the most visible crimes and engaged in pacification of their spaces.

We thus have in Caracas the configuration of hybrid orders, which are expressed in the urban space in armed territorial orders and forms of local governances that involve distinct forms of relation with the state. In recent years, these forms of relations have tended towards an eminently unstable collaboration: in the territories of the parish of 23 de Enero, we have some *collaborative governances* of illegal armed para-state actors that have mutated through integration into institutional figures with a legal facade. In the chain of neighborhoods of the south central zone, we have *criminal governances* by the *megabandas*—the organized crime gangs—which have maintained volatile relations with state sectors: there is confrontation as well as moments of strong questioning of the legitimacy of the Maduro government, as well as strategic alliances through fragile pacts, as we will see.

The concept of *criminal governance*, systematized by Lessing (2020), implies regulation through coercion by the criminal groups of aspects of political, social and economic life of the people within the spaces under their control and in an intimate relation with the state (see also MONCADA y FRANCO, 2020; MANTILLA y FELDMANN, 2021).

In the literature about criminal governances, one of the central foci of reflection has been on the relationship of the criminal actors with the state (ARIAS, 2017; LESSING, 2020; MANTILLA y FELDMANN, 2021). In fact, an important perspective considers the relations of collaboration

between the criminal groups and the state (ARIAS, 2017; BARNES, 2017; MAGALONI, FRANCO-VIVANCO y MELO, 2020; LESSING, 2020 MANTILLA y FELDMANN, 2021; CRUZ, 2021).

D. Arias (2017), in an empiric investigation in Medellín, Kingston and Río de Janeiro, proposes distinct types of urban hybrid governances, as a function of local history and consolidation of the armed groups and the more or less collaborative forms of relation of these groups with police forces. The notion of *collaborative governance* that we borrow from Arias highlights the spaces where the armed groups and the state work directly in conjunction to administer the various urban territories.

N. Barnes (2017) proposes a typology that is useful for our analysis of the criminal policies, or of the relations between the state and the organized crime groups that includes: violent confrontation; persecution-evasion; alliance; and integration, when collusion is verified and there is an overlapping of interests between criminal groups and state agents (for example in the security apparatus and in electoral politics).

On the other hand, P. Staniland (2015) emphasizes the importance of ideology for understanding the relations between the state and armed parastate groups, in particular the militias. He calls attention to how states frame their actions towards armed groups—suppression, incorporation, contention, collusion—by virtue of their ideological affinities or differences.

These differences will be key to understanding the variability in time of the forms of relations between the armed groups and various sectors of the state analyzed in this text.

B. Lessing (2020), concerned with conceptualizing the notion of criminal governance, proposes the concept of *symbiosis* to understand relationships of interlinking and mutual dependence between states and criminal organizations, entities that Lessing sees as being separate[6].

It seems important to us to keep in mind this imbalance of power and the difference between the entities of the state and the criminal organizations to which Lessing points. Nevertheless, in the context of the Maduro government, amidst the neopatrimonial consolidation and the intense questioning of its political legitimacy, it was necessary for the government to recur to organized armed groups, which were strategically loyal, to administer conflicts and the distribution of services. The concepts of *confrontation, symbiosis,* and *conjunctural alliance* help us to analyze the tension and volatility of the relationship between the government and the gangs of organized crime. Meanwhile, the concept of *collaborative governances* and *integration* help to understand the change in the relation from *symbiosis* between the government and the collectives, which have ideologically affinity, to more explicit "forms of collusion" (STANILAND, 2015). The collectives, which were recognized but marginalized during the Hugo Chavez government, have come to be armed para-state groups with more explicit forms of collaboration and a legal appearance during the Maduro government.

Thus, in the case of Caracas, we perceive forms of relation between the state and the armed para-state organizations that, if they could be described as contingent and variable as a function of the particular current situation, in the recent context of intense political conflict forms of relations are seen that range from collaboration and a tendency to integration to a legal facade, in the case of the armed collectives, to that of confrontation, a conjunctural alliance in peaks of dispute of legitimacy and once again confrontation, in the case of the organized criminal gangs (see also, ZUBILLAGA, HANSON y ANTILLANO, 2020). Thus, in a situation marked by threats and political insurrection, state agents turn to different types of collaboration and alliances with armed parastate actors whose proposal is not to seize political power, but to maintain the benefits from their income sources (LESSING, 2017). These alliances, in a highly unstable context, allow imposing order and maintaining control over territories and populations.

Both groups are based in zones of the city where they have clear territorial sovereignties, with explicit and identified borders. Forms of local government are found that are recognized by the population. The armed groups participate in and regulate legal and illegal markets. These governances offer a certain stability to zones where the state has a precarious presence, thus contributing in a perverse manner to consolidating the state (KNIGHT, 2012; DEWEY, MÍGUEZ y SAÍN, 2017, LESSING, 2020). In the following section, these four dimensions—territorial sovereignty; forms of local governance; legal and illegal economies, and relations with the state—will guide our analysis to characterize the armed territorial orders established in the city.

The criminal gangs: criminal governance and volatility in relations with the state

The organized crime gang known as the "*megabanda*" is a confederation of gangs with 36 allied sectors, with a central node in La Cota 905, according to the various people we interviewed. It is said to be formed by at least 200 men. The local press began to call this type of gang organization the "megabanda" because of its unprecedented size in the country. It has clear hierarchies, a recognized leadership, called the Principals or the Directory, as well as an army of youth at guard posts, (known as *gariteros*"), and a division of labor by tasks and shifts. The range of relations of persecution, and the intermittent confrontation-pacts-confrontation with different sectors of the state is essential to understanding the group's process of articulation and the territorial sovereignty that it commands (BARNES, 2017).

We can locate the policies of persecution and mass incarceration (since 2010) as a first milestone that, as in El Salvador (see CRUZ, 2010), led the alliance of armed gangs, which previously had been engaged in recurring disputes, to establish a common front in relation to the war on crime

declared by the government. A new phenomenon in Venezuela, criminal bands with clear leadership and numerous members (ANTILLANO *et al.*) originated from the mass incarceration and loss of state control within prisons; the formation of prison gangs with hierarchies and spatial control; the development of markets within the prisons for food, drugs, sex, and space; and the charging of taxes from prisoners. In the flow and exchanges between prisons and neighborhoods, these new organizational forms began to be reproduced outside prisons.

La Cota 905 was a neighborhood especially propitious to this, for many of the members of the gangs wound up in prison. Amid the communication flow between the neighborhoods, prisons, and the return of the inmates to their neighborhoods, new forms of discipline and organization were established among their members. This know-how, and the war declared by the government that is expressed in permanent police harassment, led to a large meeting among armed men belonging to the gangs in dispute to realize a pact and establish a common front.

This alliance was established in 2015 and was strengthened by the first intention of the pacts for pacification with the criminal gangs negotiated by the vice minister for public safety. This initiative at pacification by the vice minister led to the declaration of a zone of peace in the chain of neighborhoods in which La Cota 905 (see note 5) is located. The proposal for the zone of peace implied an end to police persecution, the assumption by the part of the members of the gangs of the responsibility for maintaining order in their communities, and a commitment to dedicate themselves to legal productive activities. Nevertheless, despite being a Zone of Peace, the criminal groups continued to suffer extorsion from the police on one hand, and on the other, the gangs did not comply with their part of the agreement and continued to be involved in highly visible crimes.

The irruption of the militarized operation known as the Operation to Free the People (OLP) in La Cota 905, on 13 July 2015, took many people by surprise. Fourteen people died that day at the hands of the police, marking the beginning of a violent police siege of the residents of the neighborhoods and a bloody war with the use of grenades and weekly armed confrontations between the gangs and police forces. During the two years of this confrontation (which lasted until 2017), highly visible crimes took place, such as systematic kidnappings and widespread vehicle theft.

The year 2017 was very politically delicate for the Maduro government, because of massive protests and elections to the National Constituent Assembly in July. These elections were considered illegitimate by vast sectors of the population. In this context, with an urgent need to guarantee order and maintain control in the city, officials of the Maduro government proposed a truce to the recognized bosses of this criminal confederation. The alliance attained between the gangs would facilitate internal cohesion and adherence to the truce and would mark the end of the war (CRUZ y DURÁN MARTÍNEZ, 2016). In these agreements, the government officials agreed to stop the police harassment under the Operation for the Liberation of the People and the

criminal group committed to giving up ostentatious and highly violent crimes, such as homicides and kidnapping, while counting on government tolerance to steer their economic activities towards the drug business. For the second time the region was confirmed as a Zone of Peace. This time the leaders of the criminal gang decided to adhere to the accords. And the government agents, now from a higher level, decided also to comply, and the accords were extended for four years (2017-2021), with respect for this *recognized territorial sovereignty.*

The territorial sovereignty of the gang was clear for both the police agents that we interviewed and for the residents of the territories. In interviews, two police agents affirmed: "This Zone of Peace, exists, we do not send up the police". Supposedly the gang members keep things peaceful and care for the citizens, but the police cannot enter". For the residents, the territorial borders are marked by the guard posts, known as "garitas". At these posts, youth with "binoculars, handguns and rifles" are permanently on guard, as one resident described, who also commented that official security forces cannot enter. The residents of the zone who we interviewed all affirmed that it is an order of armed domination that establishes a hegemony by avoiding and prohibiting the presence of the security forces.

The evidence of the *criminal governance* of these armed groups in their community is noted in the recognition and certainty of their capacity to regulate social life in the neighborhood: "they [*the armed groups*] are the law", the residents said. "They have their rules, and people know what they can and cannot do".

This order of domination is based on the ostentation of arms such as revolvers and grenades. It is also based on the implementation of a law of silence applied through public and spectacular punishments, like one public burning of a woman who was identified as an informer.

According to the statements of the people we interviewed, the criminal gang imposed the basic rules that guide social life, such as the prohibition on stealing, sexual abuse and domestic violence. The residents use the vocabulary of the state bureaucracy to speak about its functions for regulating social life. The gangs that were part of this confederation are recognized as "complaint centers", "tribunes", "prosecutors" and "judges", as the residents metaphorically call them. It is an expeditious or "effective" justice, according to the residents, which is imposed gradually beginning with warnings about an infraction committed, and intensifying up to shots to the hands or feet, and in a final instance, death.

The criminal gang is also engaged in activities related to the public life of the community. They maintain a community budget for celebrating festivals and community events. Tents are mounted for these events, there is music, they give out toys on Children's Day, and have raffles for motorcycles on Father's Day; for example. The residents call this gang leadership, speaking metaphorically with the lexicon of the state bureaucracy, referring to them with terms like

"ministers" because of their capacity to issue gifts and participate in the distribution of benefits and social services. With respect to this type of criminal governance, and in relation to the residents, we can say that it involves an ambivalent *armed, gift-giving despotism.* This gift-giving despotism, on one hand, imposes its domination through the ostentation of arms, the implementation of lethal public punishments, and on the other, forces compliance with the norms of social life that bring tranquility to the residents, while showering them with gifts.

During the period of the accords (2017-2021), the relation between this confederation of criminal gangs and high-level government employees could be described as a *conjunctural symbiosis and alliance*. Nevertheless, in the context of state fragmentation, the *confrontation* with sectors of the police never ceased, until the break from the pact in July 2021. It was an unstable relationship with a tendency towards collaboration in periods of dispute of state legitimacy.

The notion of *symbiosis* allows us to grasp the relationship of mutual dependency, but also the tension existing between the criminal gangs and the highly fragmented state. While the systematic armed invasions were suspended during the truce, the sporadic confrontations between the police forces and the armed groups continued and were increasingly repeated, until the break from the pact. On the other hand, one cannot speak of *one* relationship between the state and armed groups, but various relations among the groups and state institutions and actors, with different characteristics. The diversity of these relations generated tension and disagreements, and perpetuated intermittent urban conflict.

During the period of the truce, the criminal governance by the gang, while it seemed that its control over the territory and the population weakened the state, it also brought benefits to state actors, as other studies focused on Mexico and Brazil have shown (KNIGHT, 2012; WILLIS, 2009; LESSING, 2020). The armed group, in fact, constituted a source of social control, especially during periods of instability, as in the mentioned period of political turbulence associated to the elections for the National Constituent Assembly.

Similarly, during the Covid-19 pandemic, our fieldwork documented that the groups imposed measures to control confinement. We recorded audio communications 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. During an economic and humanitarian crisis when the state was incapable of coordinating and implementing public policies, the armed groups assumed the role of vigilance and organization of the food supply, from which they also obtained benefits. In a context of a complex humanitarian emergency, the criminal groups had influence in the official program to distribute bags of food known as the Local Supply and Production Committees (Clap), through direct ties with and control over the local representatives on these committees. One resident reported:

> The territorial bosses [*from the household meal distribution program*] are theirs, they [*the organized criminal gang*] appoints them. Later, those who come are from the community: the Clap [*food program*] street representative. Normally, they are his women [*the women of the leader of the gang*] who are left there [*in their community*].

The distribution of food by the armed gang thus shows how the intermittent presence of the state contributes to the consolidation of the power of the armed gang. In this sense, the armed confederation, by controlling food distribution, in association with the state officials, became an essential channel through which flows a resource of extreme importance during the current humanitarian crisis.

During the pandemic the regime became a flourishing zone for the drug business, which enjoys tranquility established by the articulation of the gangs, and the Zone of Peace. In this sense, in a context of economic restrictions and political instability, the accords with the government agents guarantee the tolerance from the police that is needed to maintain the drug market and the income it offers. This market produced huge social resources with differentiated consumer groups and points of sale according to the customers: from crack, for the most poor, to heroin. This vibrant business was an important source of work and stability for the army of abandoned youths. There are work shifts, weekly salaries and distribution of functions between those who serve at the guardhouses, the vigilantes at the points of control, and the "laboratories" where the merchandise is prepared, from weighing to packaging for consumers.

While the reorganization and articulation of the gangs contributed to the reduction of homicides in Caracas, in recent years, the agreements do not guarantee calm. The agreements were not supported by all of the state institutions, and police forces revealed disagreements with this policy from the beginning.

The desire to expand and exercise control over more territories by the La Cota 905 gang contributed to its later defeat and fragmentation. Between 2019 and 2021 the gang came to have sporadic confrontations with certain police forces, by trying to take portions of adjoining neighborhoods, like La Vega, an important neighborhood in western Caracas. In one of its last altercations, the gang took possession of a police station in the highest portion of the neighborhood, displacing the other armed actors from the zone. These expansion efforts made increasingly clear the fragility of the agreements between the gang and the state sectors involved. As a response to the gang's advances, the Fuerzas de Acción Especial de la Policía (Faes), (a police special forces unit in which members of the Tres Raíces collective participates) executed a lethal operation in which at least 14 youth were assassinated. Some were members of the gang and others were from the community.

The armed groups demonstrated their power by taking control of public thoroughfares on various occasions, blocking important highways in the city (Caracas' North-South highway). These conflicts show the fragility of the agreements and the fragmentation of the state institutions.

They also reveal the criminal confederation's desire to display its armed power. These dynamics continued until July 2021 when the police, after three days of clashes that paralyzed at least three Caracas municipalities, were able to enter La Cota 905, leaving at least 37 young men dead. In this operation, the police forces took territorial control of the neighborhood, marking a break from the pact and the escape of the gang leaders. The termination of the accord took place in a context in which the Maduro Government had grown stronger, in relation to an opposition that was fragmented, debilitated and dependent on international support.

The armed collectives: mutation towards integration with the state and collaborative governance

In the northwestern portion of the city, the armed collectives attained visibility and protagonism as "defenders of the revolution" during the periods of high social conflict.

The original groups are heirs of radical leftist groups and of the armed struggles of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The names of the groups that were created between the 1970s and the 1990s pay homage to this inheritance. The collective Botín y Marín, in the zone of El Paraíso, for example, carries the names of two revolutionary brothers who participated in the armed urban struggle and were assassinated by the investigative police (Disip) in the 1960s.

The members of the collectives that we interviewed referred to the police repression related to their situation of social class as formative experiences of their youth. In his book *Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela*, Alejandro Velasco (2015) presents a detailed history of the birth of these armed groups in the parish of 23 de Enero. This sector was a target of constant police repression against the first generation of urban guerrillas who would hide out in the city blocks and surrounding mountains. Velasco relates how the violence used by both the police and by the guerrillas left many residents nervous. This tension between the guerrilla groups and the residents cornered by the police persecution and the guerrilla's invasion tactics, is described by G. Ciccariello-Maher (2013) in his study of the parish.

The first guerrillas left a significant mark on the second generation of armed ideological groups. This generation adopted a leftist ideology and was socialized in the struggle under the doctrine of Latin American armed insurgency, as one person interviewed explained. This young man, a member of the Coordinadora Simón Bolívar, described that group as the "matrix": "La Coordinadora is like the matrix, the origins (...). Everyone meets specifically at the offices of the Coordinadora, all clandestinely; that's where it was all born".

La Piedrita, one of the oldest and most ideological collectives, began in the 1980s, on one hand, as a response to the state repression, which sought to eliminate the radical leftist resistance; and on the other, as a vigilante group that sought to control local criminality. According to an interview with its founder, they focused on the control and elimination of micro-trafficking of drugs, and on conducting community work (see also VELASCO, 2015, p. 181). Other more recent collectives, like Tres Raíces, which has connections with the police forces and a more instrumental than ideological relation with Chavismo, defines itself by its vigilante origin and practice. Jairo, one of the members, explained: "The thieves who entered the neighborhood, the delinquents, the drug dealers, we got rid of them…And, well, tried to save the kids who are homeless, abandoned, an easy target".

This history of its formation is key to understanding the ties of affinity between the collective and the government. Despite the internal conflicts and disagreements, they share an ideology that unites them (STANILAND, 2015). While the collectives identified themselves as armed revolutionary organizations long before Hugo Chávez irrupted on the political scene, the importance of these collectives in the political life in the country expanded considerably during his government, in a context seen as one of permanent threat. Unlike previous governments, which saw the collectives as an internal threat to the established democratic system and deployed police forces to persecute them, sectors of the Chávez administrations that were ideologically in tune with the collectives cultivated relations with them to guarantee their survival. At the beginning of his presidency, Chávez praised the collectives as "the armed wing of the revolution". In addition to the change in discourse, there is also evidence that suggests that the government offered material support to these groups, including providing them weapons and training.

After the coup d'état of 2002, Hugo Chávez, not trusting the police and fearful of foreign military intervention from the United States or Colombia, began to promote what he called a "peaceful but armed revolution"[7]. On various occasions the president explained that "the revolution is armed to defend its achievements, to defend its advances, to defend itself from threats and conspiracies" (ZUBILLAGA, 2022).

In our interviews with members of collectives, they described themselves as collectives and social movements, a category in the Chavist vocabulary that refers to the most grassroots movements. According to people we interviewed, the collectives are organized in distinct sections, or branches: "the cultural, sports and armed [*branches*], among others. The collectives are inserted within the perspective (which was accentuated in Chavism after the coup 'd'état) of the need for military-civil union to counter attacks from the opposition and from what they call imperialism, as the members of different collectives explained to us.

The collectives, defined as grassroots or "base" organizations, have undergone a discursive process of legal recognition under the Law for Communal Councils.[8] This law describes the "collectives" as an organizational component.

Similarly, a member of a collective that we interviewed explained to us that members of the collectives belong to the Bolivarian national militia:[9] "There are many militants in the collectives who belong to the militia. When Commander Chavez made a call to the militia, we all went and signed up". Thus, for this interviewee, the legality of the collectives is unquestionable: "It has been said that they are armed hordes against the population. I don't see it that way. I believe that this is a manipulation by the right or the Venezuelan opposition to try to tarnish what exists legally".

Nevertheless, another member of Tres Raíces recognized in an interview that the groups continue to be "at the margin of the law", highlighting the contradictions that characterize the constellation of relations between the formal institutions and the collectives.

Thus, although the collectives have been supported by the government since 2002, their relationship with the state has transformed during the Chavist administrations. The government of Hugo Chávez had an intermittent and unstable relation with the collectives. When La Piedrita and the Chavist leader Lina Ron undertook an assault on the guards of the Globovisión television station (a channel affiliated with the opposition), Chávez denounced the actions taken by the collective. He urged that "the full weight of the law" be brought against Lina Ron for having supported "counter-revolutionary and anarchist tactics", in the words of the president published in the press (CLARÍN, 08/04/2009). In 2009 an arrest warrant was issued against Valentín Santana, a leader of the collective La Piedrita, when he threatened to alienate voters in a period before a referendum.

Nevertheless, during the Maduro government, relations between the collectives and the state have stabilized, and the collectives have become increasingly less clandestine and, as we mentioned, have gained support from existing legal instruments to justify their legality. Lacking legitimacy, popularity, resources and charisma, Maduro has depended more on coercion and repression, and the collectives have played a key role in the social control typical of neopatrimonial and authoritarian regimes. We can say that there is a *symbiosis* that consists in a volatile and strategic alliance between these armed groups and the state.

This relationship is now more collaborative and explicit. There is evidence of *collusion* to control social protests, and of *integration* of members of collectives to the tactical police group Faes. Founded in 2017 under the Nicolás Maduro government, after the suspension of the Operatives of Liberation of the People, Faes was a police force that was systematically denounced for human rights violations. In one discussion group with former members of the Tres Raíces collective, they also said that high-ranking government officials use members of the collectives as bodyguards.

Thus, while the collectives were originally organized to protect poor communities from police repression, they have become part of the apparatus of state repression, informally, but routinely. Instead of protecting neighborhoods, the residents of the low-income neighborhoods that are not close to the collectives spoke of them as a politicized police force that acts with impunity by wearing berets and being supported by the government.

Similar to the transformation in the relationship between the political actors and the collectives, there has been an evolution in the relationship between these groups and the police forces. Under the Chavez government and during the first year of Nicolás Maduro's mandate, the communication media and NGOs speculated that the collectives and the police forces collaborated at times of high tension and mass demonstrations. Nevertheless, our fieldwork from 2012 to 2014 indicated that, while there were cases of mutual support, members of the police forces distrusted the collectives and saw them as an external threat, challenging the monopoly on violence historically held by the police (HANSON, 2017).

Since 2017, with the creation of the Faes special forces, in which members of the Tres Raíces collective participated, the older members of the police force that we interviewed described the collectives as a threat that had infiltrated the police forces. The participation of members of the collectives in police operations of Faes was explicit. For example, their protagonism in a police operation that led to the assassination of a member of the police responsible for an attempted armed uprising in 2017. The members of the Tres Raíces collective who died in the operation were buried with honors by high government officials.

Members of this collective have also had an important role in controlling protests, as we mentioned earlier. This is perhaps the aspect that gains most media attention among the actions of the collectives, which are generally referred to as "government shock troops". One person we interviewed, a former member of the Tres Raíces collective, commented on the participation of this collective in these tasks during the protests: "Friends of Tres Raíces were there with trucks, with shock troops confronting the protestors there with firearms, they shot them, yes."

The zones in which these collectives dominate have clear *territorial sovereignties*. The territorial sovereignty in the zone of the La Piedrita collective is evident with checkpoints for controlling entrance and flags to mark the territory. In our fieldwork, we had to be accompanied by a member of the collective to conduct the visits.

The governance of these groups over the population is noted in the recognized social regulation of community life and, just like the organized crime gang, in the use of weapons. For the residents we interviewed, the collectives also exercise what they called "police" powers in their sectors. In the words of women residents, they govern with guns, coercion, and fear. When there are parties, the residents know when they must turn off the music and breakup the gathering.

Both in La Piedrita and in the zone under control of the Tres Raíces collective, the residents said they know the clear norms that prohibit theft in the community and recognize who are the groups that exercise the punishments when norms are violated.

During the pandemic, the collectives were explicitly responsible for overseeing their regions and sanctioning those who did not comply with the quarantine: they drove around with vehicles with loudspeakers to close the businesses; they watched over community activities; threatened with guns and hooded men those who did not comply; and even shot at people found in agglomerations. A resident of La Piedrita spoke of the fear sown by the collectives to impose the quarantine. She spoke of an event in which they shot and killed some residents who were playing dominos in the street during the day. This resident also spoke of daily fear: when someone knows they are going to go up [*into the neighborhood*], everyone goes inside because we were really afraid". Another resident of the area controlled by Tres Raíces told us that, at a small gathering in her home during the quarantine, members of the collective entered with heavy weapons, hit the participants of the party and required them to end the gathering. In these cases, both described that the men of the collective have their heads covered with knit caps to avoid being identified.

We also witnessed talks in community spaces and entities such as community councils to speak of care, to issue statements about the level of infections in the neighborhood and report on discrimination against infected people.

The work of social and political control of discontent and protests in their neighborhoods were also mentioned by the residents and by the members of the collectives themselves. The residents who disagreed with the government said they felt they were watched and the little help they received was subject to their silence. Members of collectives affirmed that they did not allow protests in their territories.

With respect to the provision of services and community work, the older generation of armed actors considered themselves social workers. Collectives like La Piedrita continued to offer services to the communities where they governed. Magdalena, a resident of 23 de Enero and a self-described Chavista, clarified that the collectives provide materials to repair homes and lend money to residents who do not have money to buy bread, sugar, and basic foods. They recently renovated a health clinic with explicit official support. Magdalena told us:

> I can feel subjugated to him [*the leader of La Piedrita*], but when he gives something to my father, who is alive, I have a 24-hour health clinic, a doctor, I have an ambulance, they bring food to the community, paint my home (…) These are the social groups that appear to be doing a good role.

This same resident complained that in her zone, where the Tres Raíces collectives "ruled," they subjugated the residents with their heavy weapons and profited from businesses linked to food.

Figure 1: A healthcare clinic supervised by collectives

Source: Photography by Francisco Sánchez.

Thus, our interviews and fieldwork revealed that the collectives, and more visibly a collective like Tres Raíces, administer a range of profitable businesses related to the sale of food. The strengthening of these groups and the relationship with the state (particularly the military) has made them important partners in food distribution and in earnings from food sales. Some of the people we interviewed said that drugs are no longer a profitable business, compared to the earnings from food distribution. In this sense, in an increasingly authoritarian context and in a closed economy, the profits from overcharging for food, aimed originally at the family food bags, as well as the "vaccines" or fixed commissions charged to informal vendors to let them sell at their stalls, have become a fundamental income permitted to maintain the loyalty of these groups (NORTH *et al.*, 2011).

The residents we interviewed denounced the "betrayal of the revolution" and complained repeatedly of the removal of foods from the food bags to allocate them for sale by this collective.

Figure 2: Popular market in Catia. Collectives charge "taxes" on merchants

Source: Photography by Francisco Sánchez.

In a conversation with a few workers from 23 de Enero, they commented about the security tax that the merchants in the surrounding areas must pay. The residents gave detailed narrations about the profit obtained by the collective from the accumulation of food thanks to its ties with the military and the charging of the "vaccine" or tax on the informal street vendors for the space in the street and the opportunity to sell. One resident said:

> Now it's all about profiting. If you have a business, a hardware store in 23 de Enero, they say: "Look, I'm from such and such collective, I give the orders here, no one will rob you but you have to give me so much each month".

His wife added:

> The *buhoneros* [*informal street merchants*] sell the bags [*of food*] that are supposedly given to the neighborhoods. But these merchants, to be able to do this, have to pay the fee to the collective so that they can work. Shoe repairs, hardware stores, someone with a cyber [*cafe*] everyone, everyone has to pay.

This situation was made evident in our observations in particular places, as in the market in Catia, an open-air market in one of the most populated and symbolic places of Caracas. Every merchant or vendor must pay a tax or "vaccine" to the collectives or to some police forces to be able to sell their goods at the location. According to the people we interviewed, a large portion of these goods, like soap, soft drinks, toilet paper, sausages, rice, and pasta, enter the country illegally and are shipped from the

border with Brazil or Colombia to Caracas. Along this chain, there is an association between the armed actors, the military, and customs agencies to make these shipments possible.

Thus, food is converted into a strategic and very profitable good in times of the post-Chavez revolution and humanitarian crisis by certain actors loyal to the revolution.

Figure 3: Sale of domestic and imported products in Catia

Source: Photography of Francisco Sánchez.

Finally, a key dimension in the conceptualization of criminal and collaborative governance in the city is the relationship between the different armed groups among each other, and in particular, the relations between the collectives and the organized crime gangs of La Cota.

The founders of the oldest collectives explain their origin as a response to the local criminality (particularly to drug trafficking in the neighborhoods) (see also VELASCO, 2015). We can say that the identity of the collectives is constructed in opposition to the gangs. According to this perspective, the collectives are considered groups with an ideology that are focused on the community and tied to the government. Nevertheless, in groups like Tres Raíces, their ideological orientation has been overshadowed by the income obtained from their needy neighbors through the food business and the extorsion of merchants in the zones they control.

Although the dividing lines between the criminal gangs and the collectives are blurry, the members of the collectives that we interviewed explained the difference. Moreover, their discourse about the gangs is similar to the discourse of the police: the gangs represent a danger to the communities, they harm society, and must be eliminated.

Jairo, a member of the Tres Raíces collective, mentions the fact that the founding leader of his collective "was clear" that in his words, "the war" was with the leader of the criminal gang of La Cota 905:

> He was focused on this. He would say: "Look, our war is against the criminal world, and I swore against Roni [*one of the leaders of the gang La Cota who was killed by the police in February 2022*]". He also said with dismay that a mixed operation [*that is with police forces and members of the collectives*] in which he participated to confront this criminal gang, was, in his words, aborted: "The orders from above were "don't mess with these people".

Thus, although the state support for the criminal gangs under the truce generated ill will and was not approved of by members of the collectives, this contradiction could be rationalized through the discourse about the need to defend the revolution at all costs, as people we interviewed affirmed. The members of the collectives did not agree with this support. However, any strategy could be justified by the importance of defending the revolution from domestic threats (the coup-plotting political opposition) and foreign ones (the US imperialism).

Conclusion

Hugo Chavez's revolutionary project generated intense fragmentation and struggles for power. On one hand, the previously dominant social, economic, and political groups, which were displaced, fought intensely to maintain their positions. These political confrontations weakened not only the capacity of the state, but also the interest of the state actors in intervening in key areas of public safety. While they tried to establish a new hegemony, the actors destabilized the state institutions, from the central government to local and municipal institutions. The reaction against these changes and the competition within the government institutions in some cases led to violence and reduced the capacity and the interest by the state to exercise a monopoly over violence. The permanent dispute over the legitimacy of the Chavist government—and even more so in the period after Hugo Chávez—promoted various types of association with para-state armed groups to assure social control.

The governances that we have analyzed here are modalities that have evolved within the context of revolutionary governance. They have become entrenched in their territories while the competition for resources has intensified, and the state institutions are increasingly less capable of mediating the resolution of social and political conflicts. In the post-Chavez period, the revolutionary governance is inextricably linked with these other modalities of local governances assumed by the different armed para-state groups in their territories of domination.

This article has documented and analyzed the reduction of the most violent crimes, such as violent deaths, the configuration of armed territorial orders and the forms of local government in neopatrimonial authoritarian contexts that suffer from what has been called a "complex humanitarian crisis". In this sense, this article also documents the mutations in relations between the armed para-state groups in contexts of political turbulence and questioning of legitimacy and explores the symbiosis between them and their evolution in forms of more explicit collaboration.

In comparison to his predecessor, Chavez, who in large part constructed relations with the popular sectors through recognition, incorporation, and popular mobilization (HANSON y LAPEGNA, 2018), the Nicolás Maduro government seeks to dominate the population through coercion. His dependence on armed groups has allowed some of these groups to be consolidated and exercise territorial control never before seen in the city.

We have analyzed the confederation of criminal gangs and the collectives considering four dimensions: territorial sovereignty; forms of local government; legal and illegal economies; and forms of relation with the state.

In La Cota 905, the policies of persecution, mass incarceration and the police operations motivated the gangs in the region to establish a common front against the war on crime declared by the government. Recently, the relationship has been based on fragile pacts, followed by ruptures and phases of confrontation. When the pacts are maintained, the groups enjoy the tolerance and development of the illegal drug markets that allow them to establish themselves at the center of this dynamic business in the city. When the pacts are broken, bloody conflicts arise between the security forces and the organized criminal gangs.

We have seen how the eminently unstable relations shift between symbiosis, intermittent alliance, and confrontation. The gangs control a region through coercion and repression, but also impose rules that guide social life and participate in the distribution of social benefits and services, so much so that residents refer to gang members with the vocabulary of state bureaucracy calling them: judges, ministers. It thus involves an armed, gift-giving despotism.

The armed groups in 23 de Enero have an older legacy, shaped long before Hugo Chávez became president. Their relationship with the state is based on a leftist and anti-imperialist ideology, although the ideological affinity with some collectives—the Tres Raíces for example—is reduced to the preservation of interests, power and income extracted from the most vulnerable population. Nevertheless, this affinity in ideology and interests makes the relations more stable (in contrast with the criminal gangs) although not without tension.

The relations between this group and the state have come to be increasingly less clandestine and have tended to become visible in a frank association, using the existing legal framework to provide them a legal facade. While Chávez maintained a fragile and volatile collaboration with

the collectives, similar to the notion of symbiosis proposed by Lessing (2020), with Maduro there has been more integration and their loyalty to "the revolution" has implied a collaborative governance and the delegation of services in the geographic regions under their domain. In the case of the Tres Raíces collective, there is a relation of pragmatic collaboration in which mutual benefit prevails, even when conflicts and disagreements exist with sectors of the state. This collective has been an ally in the control of protests and the control of the quarantine during the pandemic in its territory.

The collectives administer clear territorial sovereignty in their zones, counting on weapons and charging taxes. Similar to the criminal gang in La Cota 905, the collectives have imposed norms and exercised punishments for infractions. With respect to the provision of services and community work, some collectives continue to provide services to the communities that they govern. In both cases, the armed groups—both the criminal gang and the collectives—took it upon themselves to impose measures to control confinement during the pandemic and punished those who did not comply with the quarantine. The two groups had profited and benefitted from the humanitarian crisis, taking over the distribution and sale of food.

Making a comparison between distinct armed actors, we demonstrate how an authoritarian government, but one that is highly fragmented, in a context of severe dispute over legitimacy, has been strengthened by heterogeneous armed groups. Our field work shows the heterogeneity among the armed orders and the importance of analyzing them according to their particular histories and geographies with distinct identities, histories and a particular relationship with the state and their communities.

The armed groups govern their territories in different ways, but the net result is a social control based on an armed despotism that, by providing certain services and offering some gifts, contributes to the continuation of the government despite its inability to implement public policies and control the population's social discontent. For the government, they are a means for protecting itself and attaining objectives in a situation of social, political and economic uncertainty created by public institutions that behave in unpredictable ways.

Our collaborators and interviewees expressed ambivalent impressions about the command of the armed actors in their territories. If for some it was problematic to have armed men charged with caring for their regions, given the lack of the state's social polices, people recognized in these actors a source of benefits in some aspects of their lives, such as security and conflict resolution.

Our findings highlight the importance of looking beyond the formal institutions to understand how authoritarian command functions in the twenty-first century and how social control functions in the current Venezuelan context.

While it is true that the Maduro government has become increasingly authoritarian, it is not the authoritarianism to which social scientists usually refer to. Authoritarianism in Venezuela operates through fractured and combative power relations; it is not characterized by a consolidation of power within the state but the decentralization of it through the pluralization of armed actors. Nevertheless, while fragmentation continues within the state, the armed actors have tended towards greater internal articulation, which has contributed to reducing violent disputes. Forms of collaboration have been forged between the state and the armed groups (although volatile ones) that have reduced violent confrontations with police forces and established collaborative or criminal governances that have in common armed despotism and the subjugation of the population in their territories.

Notes

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[2] This is an annual report of the Mexican organization Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal, **"**one of the most highly regarded in this field" according to BBC Mundo (01/06/2016).

[3] Forty-six in-depth interviews were conducted in the communities.

[4] These militarized initiatives began to be denounced by international human rights organizations. It was highlighted by both the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and by the report of the UN's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission.

[5] The Zonas de Paz [*Zones of Peace*] were an initiative undertaken by the Vice Minister of Domestic Policy and Legal Security José Vicente Rangel Ávalos, since 2013. To present the experience he led, the vice minister used the same vocabulary associated to the truce with the *maras*, in El Salvador, entered in 2011: "territories free of violence" and "zones of peace". In another space we suggest that there are indications that the vice minister was inspired by the Salvadorean experience to conceive his initiative in Venezuela (Zubillaga, Hanson y Antillano, 2021).

[6] In this sense, B. Lessing specifically distinguishes this notion of symbiosis from the collaborative forms that Barnes identifies (integration and alliance), given that for Lessing the criminal organizations are clearly marginalized and stigmatized by the state, which makes integration unthinkable, for example.

[7] This declaration was made in 2003, one year after the coup d'état of 2002, in a discourse to commemorate the return to power. The statement was often repeated: we found it in at least 14 public speeches given between 2003 and 2012.

[8] Los Consejos Comunales [*Community Councils*] are an organizational element of local government dedicated to the execution of community development projects.

[9] The Bolivarian militia is the fifth component of the National Armed Forces created by Hugo Chávez. These military reserves were established as a Bolivarian militia in 2009. They combine civilian volunteers who receive training, perform military functions, and were called by H. Chávez "the people in arms". There is no official information about the number of members of the militia, although in February 2020 Nicolás Maduro declared that it exceeded four million, a quantity much higher than those of the FANB, which extra-officially is calculated to have 130,000-160,000 soldiers (JÁCOME, 2020).

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RESUMEN: Este artículo compara la configuración de dos órdenes territoriales armados y las formas de gobernanzas locales en contextos autoritarios neopatrimoniales en Caracas que padecen lo que ha sido denominado como "crisis humanitaria compleja". Dialogamos con los conceptos de *gobernanza colaborativa* y *gobernanza criminal* para entender cómo funciona el control social localmente en un contexto autoritario donde una crisis política, económica, y humanitaria ha restringido los recursos y el alcance del gobierno. El caso venezolano revela con especial interés los procesos de mutación en las relaciones entre actores armados y un Estado fragmentado para funciones de control social en sus territorios en un contexto de legitimidad disputada.

Palavras-chave: gobernanza criminal, gobernanza colaborativa, ordenes territoriales armados, despotismo armado

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