

Borderland Battles, the Maduro Regime and the ELN's Co-dependency

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After almost two years of inter-guerrilla conflict between the National Liberation Army (ELN) and factions of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Colombia and Venezuela's borderlands remain war-torn and an epicenter of the drug trade in the Americas.

Inconsistencies in official data for Venezuela's drug seizures in 2022, reinforce accounts that the regime of Nicolás Maduro plays the role of "criminal kingmaker," InSight Crime, a think tank dedicated to the study of threats to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean, indicated in a late December 2022 report. Throughout the Colombo-Venezuelan border, the ELN seems to be the chief beneficiary of collusion with the Maduro regime.

In cahoots with the ELN

In early 2021, in Venezuela's border state of Apure, the National Bolivarian Armed Force (FANB) executed one of the country's largest military operations against dissidents of the FARC's 10th front purportedly for control of drug routes, the *BBC* reported. Initially welcoming the arrival of FARC dissidents following desertions from the Colombian peace process, such as guerilla leader Iván Márquez in 2019, the Maduro regime seemingly turned against various factions of the ex-FARC.

By 2022, the campaign against the 10th front led to grievous human rights violations by the Maduro regime's armed forces including extrajudicial killings and the mass displacement of more than 6,000 civilians throughout Apure. Nonetheless, fighters from the FARC's 10th front dealt Venezuelan military forces a series of decisive defeats, including the kidnapping of eight FANB soldiers.

According to InSight Crime, ex-FARC factions, including the 10th and 33rd fronts, and the ELN, have been clashing for control of drug trafficking and smuggling routes throughout the Colombian border departments of Arauca, Norte de Santander, as well as the Venezuelan states

of Apure and Zulia. In early January 2023, at least 10 fighters died during clashes in Colombia's Arauca department, on the border with Venezuela, between the ELN, which has resumed peace talks with the Colombian government, and FARC dissident groups, Spanish daily *El País* reported. In hard-hit Arauca, the department registered more than 352 homicides in 2022 due, in large part, to fighting between rival insurgent guerrillas, Colombia's state-owned radio network *Radio Nacional de Colombia* reported.

What is essentially the same conflict on both sides of the border is complicated by the Maduro regime's relationship with armed groups. By the end of 2022, regime forces had reportedly succeeded in driving much of the 10th front out of Apure (and presumably into Arauca). The apparent key to military success, however, was outright collusion with ELN fighters in the state. With the ELN exercising increasing political control throughout border towns, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported as early as April 2022 that regime forces had engaged in joint operations with ELN fighters against the 10th front.

In a private interview with Charles Larratt-Smith, professor of political sciences at Mexico's Tecnológico de Monterrey University, and Andrés Aponte González, a researcher of conflict dynamics at Colombian nongovernmental organization *Fundación Ideas para la Paz*, an ELN commander said that the group was committed "to supporting Maduro, whose regime represents the political project the ELN has long aspired to establish in Colombia," *Americas Quarterly*, a publication of the Council of the Americas, published in April 2022.

Control over drug trafficking

The Maduro regime's commitment to combatting armed groups and drug trafficking is called into question by its own drug seizure figures in 2022. According to the regime's National Anti-drug Superintendence (SUNAD), officials seized 41.6 metric tons of drugs, destroyed 57 airstrips and 58 laboratories, and neutralized 40 light aircraft between January 1 and December 3. Individual seizures reported by independent media and regime outlets, however, total 33.2 metric tons during the same period, eliciting suspicions.

Particularly notable are the regime's figures for Zulia. The state of Zulia registered over 70 percent of SUNAD's official figures for 2022 at 29.4 metric tons. The state also registered the highest number of destroyed clandestine airstrips and drug production sites. InSight Crime monitoring, however, registered 19.6 metric tons seized in Zulia during the same period.

“The pattern of anti-narcotics operations suggests a much more complex dynamic, where Maduro's ultimate objective is not to eradicate trafficking completely but to control who can move drugs and where they can move them,” the organization's Venezuela Investigative Unit said.

The data suggests that the Maduro regime concentrates security and anti-drug operations opportunistically against armed groups that it sees as enemies. In Apure, drug seizures seemingly dropped once regime forces and the ELN succeeded in quashing the ex-FARC's 10th front, according to InSight Crime's data. Similarly, in Zulia, during the same period, regime forces concentrated security operations against the ex-FARC's 33rd front and other criminal groups while largely leaving the allied ELN alone. Today the ELN is reportedly stronger than ever in both Venezuelan border states and, according to an HRW report, exercises direct control over numerous towns along the border.

The ELN has established a “comprehensive system of rebel governance that stringently regulates social and political activities — including drug trafficking, contraband, and illegal mining — in its area of control. It then shares these revenues with regime players, including regional military commanders,” Larratt-Smith and Aponte González said. “In this way, the ELN has become a key pillar of the Maduro regime itself.”

The implication from this data is that the Maduro regime plays criminal kingmaker, allowing allied armed groups such as the ELN to operate with impunity while concentrating anti-drug operations against other armed groups such as ex-FARC fronts. While fraught, official figures such as those from SUNAD allow for a closer and much needed scrutiny of the regime's collusion with armed groups. In the context of Venezuela's ongoing conflict between Colombian

guerrillas, the ELN's increasing influence in Venezuela is thanks in no small part to the regime in Caracas.

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