

# Venezuela's Cocaine Revolution

#CocaineInVenezuela



## Venezuela's Cocaine Revolution

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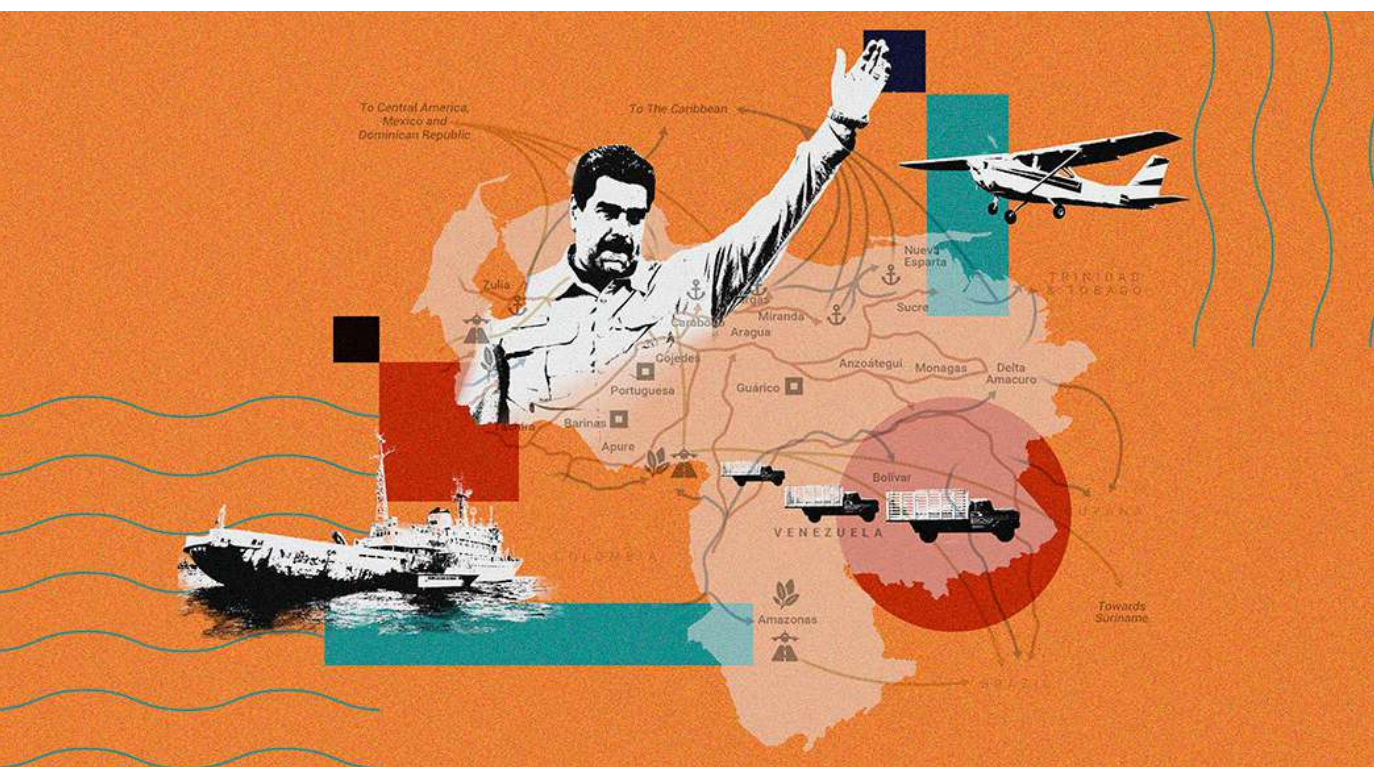
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1

# Venezuela's Move to Cocaine Production: Crops, Chemists and Criminal Evolution



*In October 2021, the Venezuelan Ministry of the Interior issued an ordinary looking statement about an antinarcotics operation in the state of Zulia that had extraordinary implications: the military had destroyed eight cocaine laboratories, seizing nearly half a ton of cocaine and nearly ten tons of coca paste in the process. But more than that, they had also eradicated 32 hectares of coca crops, destroying over 300,000 plants.*

Venezuela is producing cocaine.



In the Colombian region of Catatumbo, which lies across the border from Zulia, 32 hectares is nothing more than a mid-sized coca field. But it is far from all the coca in Venezuela. InSight Crime has uncovered evidence of the presence of significant quantities of coca in at least three municipalities in Zulia, and two more to the south in the state of Apure, each time verified and corroborated by multiple reliable sources.



In addition, sources in the field, international agencies, and the Venezuelan government's own reports show that the crystalizing laboratories used to process coca paste into cocaine hydrochloride have been proliferating in the same areas.

All of these plantations and laboratories are located in territories dominated by Colombian guerrilla groups, which have generations of experience in sowing the coca trade and maintain close ties to elements of the Venezuelan state. And in contrast to the operation taken down in Zulia, most appear to be operating freely.

So far, cocaine production in Venezuela is nascent, representing just a drop in an ocean of coca compared to the historic levels seen in Colombia in recent years. But the country's border region, poor, isolated, abandoned by the state and dominated by armed groups, represents a perfect petri dish for it to spread. And in a country trapped in an economic crisis, ruled by a corrupt regime, and ravaged by criminality, that is a dangerous proposition.

## Catatumbo and Zulia: A Criminal Contagion

Colombia's northeastern Catatumbo region and Venezuela's northwestern state of Zulia have long been criminal counterparts.

Here, the border between the two countries is marked by the Sierra de Perijá, a remote mountain range that offers both excellent climatic conditions for coca cultivation and the ideal geography for keeping crops, laboratories, and the armed groups that protect them hidden from the authorities.

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*“Coca pickers always have damaged hands;  
their skin color changes.”*

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Historically, the Colombian and Venezuelan sides of the Perijá range have played complementary roles in this economy.

On the Colombian side, guerrilla groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) have exploited their ties to local peasant communities to encourage coca cultivation. Today the ex-FARC Mafia, the dissident FARC groups that do not recognize the 2016 peace deal, continue their involvement in the drug trade.

On the Venezuelan side, Zulia's access to the Caribbean via Lake Maracaibo and numerous clandestine airstrips have made the state a key dispatch point for drug shipments to Central America and the Caribbean.

This binational criminal economy is facilitated by a porous border that allows both illicit goods and people to move freely between the two countries. While Colombian cocaine flows into Venezuela for export, Venezuelan labor moves in the other direction to work in Colombia's coca fields.

These migrant workers are so much a feature of life in the border region that officials of the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB) recognize them by the state of their hands, according to one local resident who asked not to be named for security reasons.

“Coca pickers always have damaged hands; their skin color changes,” he said. “[The GNB officers] know which people are going to pick on the other side and they don't stop them, but when they come back, they demand an extortion payment.”

These migrant laborers bring back to Venezuela not only much-needed income, but also the knowhow of cocaine production. In Jesús María Semprún, a border municipality of Zulia, InSight Crime spoke to one of these coca pickers as he visited his family. On condition of anonymity, he described how he had found work on an ELN-run coca farm in Colombia and worked hard to rise up the hierarchy.

“It was over there I saw how much money could be made and then I got more involved, watching how they made the [coca] paste,” he said. “A chemist in charge of the paste can make 100,000 pesos [approximately \$25] on a good day.”

Eventually, he invested the money and skills he had earned into starting his own small coca farm, working with an associate to acquire six hectares of coca in Colombian Catatumbo. He claimed that more than two dozen people from his hometown had followed similar paths to become coca growers in Colombia, laundering the money they earned from coca sales through businesses in Zulia.

And migrant labor is not Venezuela's only contribution to Colombia's cocaine production.

“Chemical products are very easy to get in Venezuela,” an opposition politician in Zulia, who didn't want to be named for security reasons, told InSight Crime. “These go directly to cocaine production.”

Both the politician and the coca picker as well as other residents of the border region described how these chemical precursors move freely through Zulia and across the border, with the complicity or even active assistance of the Venezuelan military. This dynamic was exposed in 2019, when General [Aguiles Leopoldo Lapadula Sira](#), then commander of the army forces in Zulia, was arrested for drug trafficking offenses, including authorizing the trafficking of chemical precursors.



The easy availability of these precursors, coupled with a boom in coca production in Colombian Catatumbo, has sparked a rapid proliferation of cocaine laboratories on Venezuelan soil. In November 2021, the Venezuelan government reported anti-narcotics officials had destroyed 60 laboratories so far that year. In 2020, officials reported destroying 79 laboratories. The vast majority were in Zulia.

In this context, the spread of coca crops into Zulia was perhaps only a matter of time.

Coca has been creeping towards Zulia for some time. A low level of coca cultivation was recorded in the state as far back of the 1990s, and mapping of Colombian coca production in 2020 by the United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime (UNODC) shows that one of Catatumbo's most productive coca enclaves runs along the border with Jesús María Semprún.

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*“Here the ELN dominates; they’re the ones who control the whole area from Río Bravo to Río Abajo.”*

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While the operation in October 2021 was the first major coca eradication of recent times, it has not been the last: Venezuelan authorities eradicated a further 31 hectares in two more operations in Zulia in February 2022.

In interviews undertaken during 2021, more than eight sources, including local residents, ranchers, journalists and researchers, confirmed to InSight Crime that coca crops are now taking root in Zulia's municipalities of Jesús María Semprún, Catatumbo and Machiques de Perijá. The scale of the plantations is unknown, as they are located in remote areas and often guarded by armed men.

In many cases, the sources alleged, these fields are controlled by ELN guerrillas who acquire land suitable for coca production by buying out or extorting local farmers. Since the demobilization of the FARC in 2017, the ELN have come to dominate coca cultivation in Colombian Catatumbo while also consolidating their presence in Zulia, where they appear to operate with near-total impunity.

“Here the ELN dominates; they’re the ones who control the whole area from Río Bravo to Río Abajo,” one resident of Catatumbo municipality, who didn't want to be named, told InSight Crime. “They have been buying hectares from farm owners for [coca] cultivation.”

“If you have a farm they want to buy, you have to sell it to them whether you like it or not, because they are going to plant coca,” another resident of the area, who also requested anonymity for security reasons, agreed.

In some areas the guerrillas have even forcibly displaced landowners, according to two local ranchers who spoke to InSight Crime anonymously for fear of retaliation.

“Groups of guerrillas are occupying lands together with indigenous people or local residents who are then used as forced labor,” one said. “They are supported by state security forces.”

In some cases, according to the second rancher, security forces have accused landowners of drug trafficking to force them to leave their land.

“There have even been cases where they planted parts of a plane or things like that on a farm, in order to accuse and extort the landowner,” he claimed.

## Apure, Venezuela's Guerrilla Heartland

To the south of Zulia, the state of Apure, in the western plains of Venezuela, seems an unlikely candidate for coca cultivation. Compared to Zulia's tropical mountains, Apure's low-altitude grasslands are ill-suited to the crop.

In other ways, however, Apure shares many of Zulia's criminal characteristics. Bordering the Colombian department of Arauca, a historic guerrilla stronghold, its sparsely populated savannas have for decades served as a refuge for FARC and ELN guerrillas and a departure point for drug flights to Central America.

According to Mildred Camero, a former president of Venezuela National Commission Against the Use of Illicit Drugs (Comisión Nacional Contra el Uso Ilícito de las Drogas – Conacuid), small-scale coca plantations have occasionally been found in the state since at least the early 2000s. And now, as in Zulia, there are signs that the region's cocaine production is picking up pace.

A social leader in Rómulo Gallegos municipality, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, explained that coca cultivation in Apure started tentatively, with soil studies and tests on small plots to identify the varieties of coca best suited to the region's geography and climate. Although coca generally grows best at altitudes of 1,000 to 1,200 meters, in recent years drug producers have developed more [versatile strains](#) that open possibilities for coca cultivation in [regions previously thought unviable](#).

In Apure, these trials appear to have yielded results. Today, coca plantations are found scattered throughout Rómulo Gallegos and Pedro Camejo municipalities, particularly along the banks of the Capanaparo, Cinaruco and Riecito rivers, according to local residents, political leaders and researchers.

“They are planting a lot; they plant a bit over there, they find a good bit and plant two hectares over here, another hectare over there, half a hectare further down,” one of the politicians said. “Where they can plant 50 [hectares] they plant them; where they can plant 20, they plant them.”

The sources could not give details on the size of the plantations, as they are closely guarded by guerrillas, mostly members of FARC dissident groups, and often concealed behind other crops.

“In front of the [coca] crops they put two, three hectares of plantain or yuca to conceal the plantation behind,” the social leader in Rómulo Gallegos said.

“The area where they have the crops is impenetrable; they have a tight ring of security all around,” he added. “Nobody can enter with a telephone, or camera, or watch. If you go there, they strip you naked and if you are not approved by the organization they don’t let you enter.”

Many of the plantations are located in indigenous regions, where the guerrillas exploit local communities for cheap or even forced labor.

“The FARC use peasants or indigenous groups to prepare the soil, plant and harvest the crops,” a former member of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela – PSUV) in Apure, who did not want to be named, told InSight Crime. “The best cheap workforce are the indigenous people. They pay them when they feel like it; when they don’t want to pay them, they threaten them.”

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*“They have been working to install laboratories in Apure since 2014, but it has picked up pace since 2016.”*

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As in Zulia, there is evidence that the expansion of coca cultivation in Apure is being facilitated by guerrilla groups using frontmen to buy up tracts of land from impoverished local farmers, threatening those who refuse to sell. A member of Apure’s cattle ranchers’ association alleged to InSight Crime that these forced purchases are taking place with the knowledge and complicity of state authorities, in what he called “the colonization of the Apure countryside.”

As coca crops have proliferated in Apure, so have cocaine laboratories. In the first four months of 2022 alone, authorities reported destroying 17 laboratories.

“They have been working to install laboratories in Apure since 2014, but it has picked up pace since 2016,” the former PSUV member said.

“They brought some men they called ‘the chemists’ from Putumayo, near [Colombia’s] border with Ecuador,” he added. “They were giving classes to young people on how to prepare cocaine.”

He claimed that around 20 to 25 local youths were recruited to learn the process, and offered a cash payment of \$5,000 each. Mildred Camero corroborated his story, stating that she had received similar information of young people recruited to learn cocaine crystallization processes in Venezuelan laboratories, many of which are now operating with a high degree of sophistication.

## Venezuela, Latin America's Next Cocaine Producer Country?

The extent to which cocaine production has taken hold in Venezuela is still unclear. While InSight Crime only has substantial evidence of plantations in two states, further production is rumored throughout the Colombian border region and even beyond.

In the far southwestern state of Amazonas, which borders both Colombia and Brazil, an indigenous representative, who didn't want to be named for security reasons, told InSight Crime that coca crops have been seen in the municipalities of Autana and Maroa, with crystallizing laboratories in Autana.

"The [coca] crops started to appear about three years ago," he said, during an interview in 2020. "They are planted in unprotected areas that do not have legal titles. [The guerrilla groups] recruit indigenous people to plant, harvest and take care of the land."

The geography and climate of the state make the claim plausible, but its extreme remoteness means InSight Crime has so far been unable to verify the claims.

Former anti-drug tsar Camero stated that in her years of experience, she has registered coca crops in Amazonas and the border state of Táchira, and even occasionally in central states such as Guárico. She has also received reports of small cocaine processing facilities in the states of Guárico, Falcón, Bolívar and Monagas, although it is unclear whether these were crystallizing laboratories, or merely sites where processed drugs are prepared for retail.

But no matter the scale currently, the risk remains high: once cocaine production takes root in a country, it is very hard to go back.

As the experience of neighboring Colombia shows, coca crops offer irresistible revenues to criminal groups and impoverished farmers alike – and once the practice is firmly established, attempts to eradicate it only foment conflict, resentment, and deeper ties between armed groups and rural communities.

Currently cocaine production in Venezuela is being driven by the same groups that have so expertly capitalized on these dynamics to foster cocaine production in Colombia. And these guerrilla groups have a powerful motivation to drive

it across the border: the chance to control self-contained supply chains where they can grow coca, process cocaine and dispatch international drug flights all within an area where they can operate with virtual impunity thanks to their ties to corrupt elements of the state.

As Venezuela has slid ever further into economic ruin and criminal chaos, it provides fertile ground for such dynamics to take hold. Added to this volatile mix there is also a cash-strapped and internationally isolated government that has long shown itself willing to tolerate or even facilitate drug trafficking.

And while most Venezuelan cocaine production so far seems no more than a junior offshoot of Colombian operations, the country is also host to a plethora of homegrown criminal actors that, as appears to be happening in Zulia, may seek to stake a claim in this nascent economy.

“[The Venezuelans] have more capacity than before,” Camero said, when asked about the factors driving escalating cocaine production in Venezuela. “They have learned; they have their own contacts. They know where the routes are and can manage themselves independently without depending on the Colombians.”

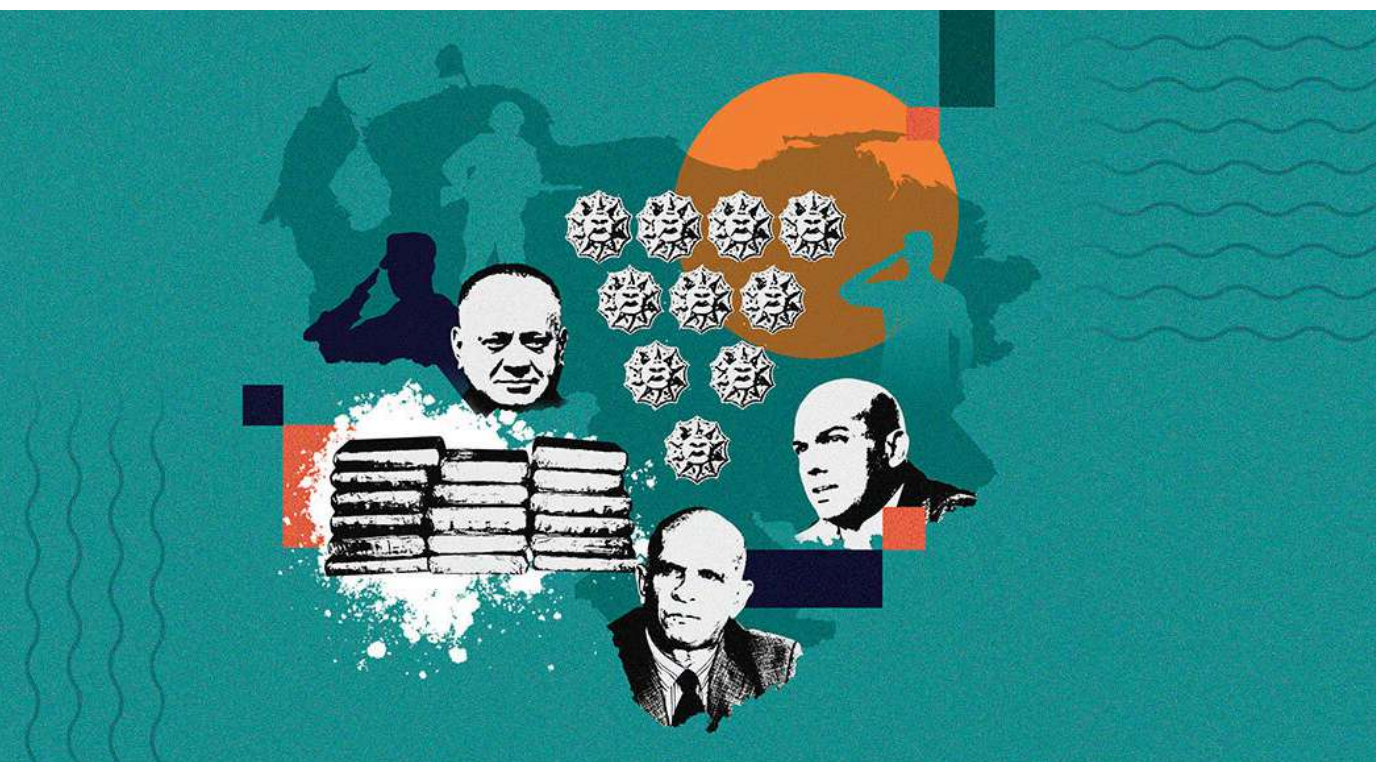
If these processes continue unchecked, Venezuela's move from transit nation to cocaine producer country could be only just beginning.





## 2

# Maduro Seeks to Regulate the Cocaine Trade



*In 2013, Nicolás Maduro became president of one of the world's most important cocaine hubs, inheriting a unique drug trafficking eco-system where the line between the underworld and the state had become blurred. Since then, both the drug trade and state involvement in it, have strengthened.*

The Maduro era has seen the Venezuelan cocaine trade atomize as criminal actors seeking access to its riches have proliferated. And the country's role in the global supply chain has expanded as Venezuela has taken its first, tentative steps towards becoming not only a transit zone but also a cocaine producer nation.

Over the same period, drug trafficking has become an important component of the strategies Maduro has used to cling onto power as his government has been rocked by constant social, political and economic crises. His objective has

been not to capture the riches of the transnational cocaine trade for himself, but to control and channel their flow, using it to reward the political, military and criminal powers that Maduro needs to maintain his hold on government.

Today, tensions are building within the drug system that has evolved under Maduro. Criminal groups that have grown wealthy and powerful from cocaine are growing ever more difficult to control, state actors scrabbling for resources compete as much as they cooperate, while new trafficking phenomena, such as the developing cocaine production in the country, spread. And Maduro is trying to bring order to the growing criminal chaos.

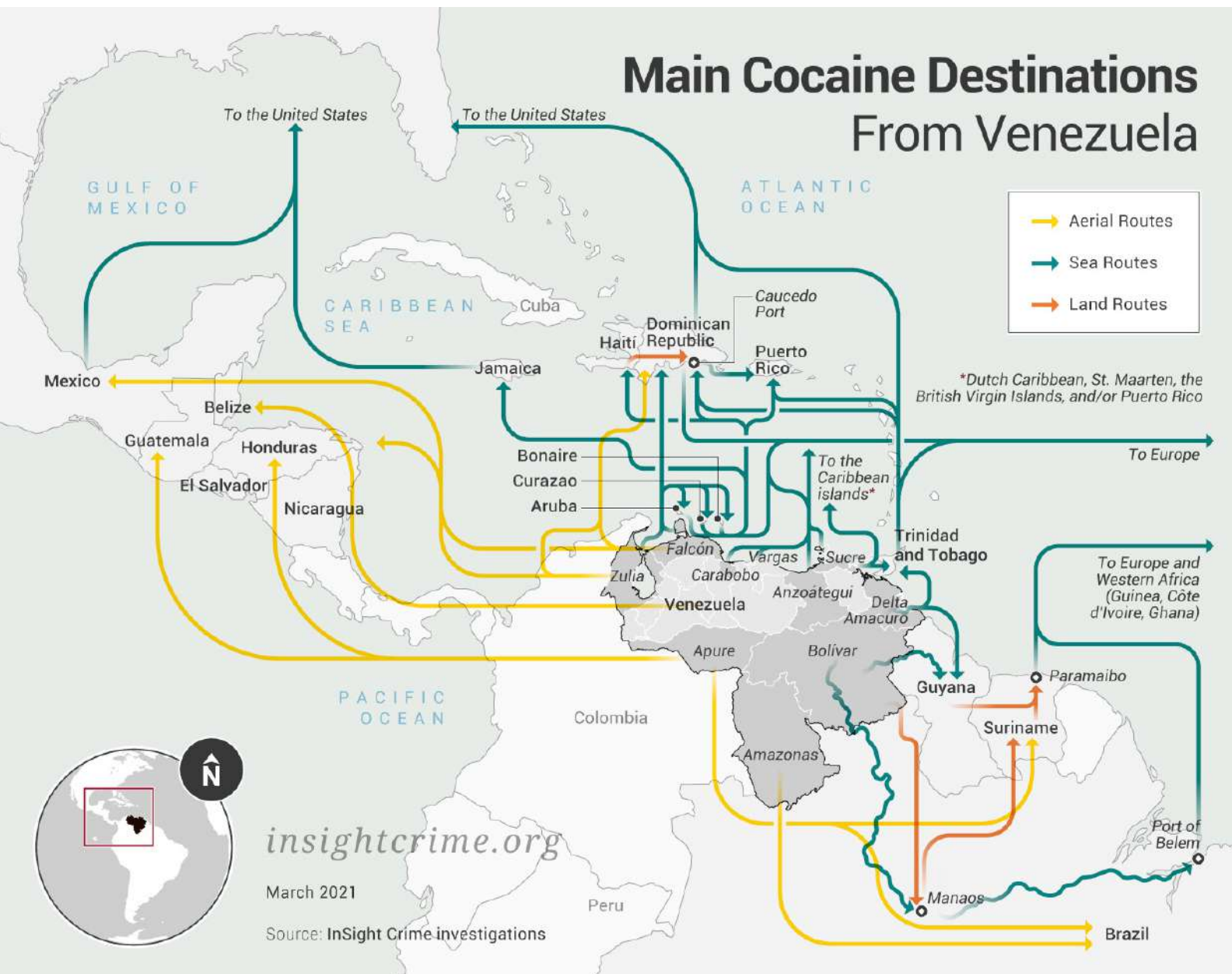
## Venezuela's Narco-Map

The [US government estimates](#) that around 250 tons of cocaine are trafficked through Venezuela each year, representing roughly 10 to 15 percent of estimated [global production](#). Over three years of investigations involving field work in trafficking hotspots, hundreds of interviews, and daily monitoring of seizures, arrests, and anti-narcotics operations, InSight Crime has mapped the flows of this cocaine through Venezuela, and the criminal networks that keep it moving.

Venezuela's cocaine routes pass through nearly every state in the country. Most shipments begin their journey in Colombia before crossing into the border states of Zulia, Táchira, Apure, and Amazonas. It is also here in the border region that Venezuela's incipient cocaine production industry is taking root.

Some shipments are then dispatched directly from the border region aboard light aircraft, while others continue inland towards the Caribbean coast or to Venezuela's ports or airports. From there, the cocaine travels north to Central America or the Caribbean islands, or southeast to Brazil, Guyana or Suriname. Eventually, it will end up supplying the world's two biggest cocaine markets, the United States and Europe.

In the border region, these routes are dominated by Colombian guerrilla groups. The National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – [ELN](#)), and dissidents from the demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – [FARC](#)), known as the ex-FARC Mafia, control border crossings, trafficking corridors and clandestine airstrips that they charge independent drug traffickers to use. Their dominion over cocaine production zones and connections to Mexican and Brazilian buyers mean some guerrilla factions also produce, transport, and sell their own cocaine shipments.



Outside of the border region, it is Venezuelan traffickers that dominate the trade.

The western Caribbean region is the domain of groups such as the [Paraguaná Cartel](#) and the [La Guajira Cartel](#), the leaders of which broker transnational cocaine deals, control routes and act as mafia godfather figures to local communities.

Along internal transport routes and in the east Caribbean meanwhile, ultra-violent gangs known as “megabandas,” including [Tren de Aragua](#), [Tren del Llano](#), the [San Juan de Unare gang](#) and [Los 300](#), have tapped into the transnational drug trade, either by charging traffickers to move through areas they control or by seizing strategic territories and setting up their own export networks.



But while these criminal organizations move most of the cocaine, it is actors within the state that shape and control the world they operate in. And the traffickers are dependent on access to these state embedded networks and the blessings they bestow.

“Criminal organizations have infiltrated all of the institutions of the state,” said a former official with the Attorney General’s Office, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. “They all have a number of officials paid off so they can move their shipments.”

Trafficking cells embedded within the military and the police, collectively referred to as the [Cartel of the Suns](#) – which is explored in depth in Chapter 3 of this investigation – transport drugs through the country on behalf of traffickers, control exports through ports and airports and facilitate and protect trafficking networks. The country’s corrupt judiciary sells freedom from prosecution. And, as revealed in Chapter 4, local governments manage the trafficking environment in key territories.

As it moves along these routes, cocaine money strengthens these criminal groups and deepens the corruption. In most countries, this is seen as a cancer that corrodes both the institutions of state and the social fabric as it spreads. But in Venezuela, Maduro and his regime have turned it to their advantage.

After years of kleptocracy and economic mismanagement, and subject to one of the harshest sanctions regimes in the world, the Venezuelan state is near bankrupt and desperate for hard currency. And cocaine can do what it cannot – pay people. Whether it is ensuring that Venezuela’s soldiers can earn enough money to eat, buying the loyalty of corrupt political chieftains, or incentivizing armed groups to defend the regime, drug money can provide.

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*“The state has substituted the resources it does not have for tolerance towards illegal activities,”*

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It is unlikely Maduro is aware of specific cocaine deals, much less personally involved in them. But he has positioned himself and his regime as the gatekeepers of the cocaine trade. The regime’s clientelist control over political, military and judicial institutions means it can decide who is allowed to profit from drug trafficking, as well as other criminal economies such as contraband smuggling, embezzlement, arms trafficking and the gold trade.

“The state has substituted the resources it does not have for tolerance towards illegal activities,” said a Venezuelan political scientist, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of persecution. “The state knows that as long as someone obtains resources through these mechanisms, they have no interest in overthrowing the government.”

By facilitating their involvement in transnational drug trafficking, Maduro also makes sure the most important players are deeply invested in maintaining the status quo for their own protection.

“The International Criminal Court, trials in the US, investigations, internal trials,” he said, listing the threats looming over public officials involved in the drug trade and other criminal activities. “The costs of political change are too high.”

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For Maduro and his allies, maintaining control of this complex drug trafficking eco-system is a delicate balancing act.

The Venezuelan drug trade, the state and the Chavismo political movement are all increasingly fractured and divided. There are too many actors and too much competition, not only between rival drug trafficking operations, but also between rival security forces units and political factions.

The system periodically breaks down in local power struggles, miscommunication between trafficking nodes, or because those involved do not want to play by the unspoken rules.

Criminal conflicts over trafficking turf sporadically break out, leading to [massacres](#), [shootouts](#) and [displacements](#), and [fueling](#) some of the region's highest murder rates.

And there is frequent turmoil between and even within state agencies, as security forces commanders rotate into zones where they do not understand local dynamics and loyalties, or one branch of the security forces [stumbles upon](#) – or [deliberately targets](#) – the trafficking operations of another.

“Sometimes these economic dynamics get out of hand because everyone starts doing what they want, managing things in their area under their own criteria, and this means the government loses control,” said the political scientist.

Such chaos is bad for governance, but more than that it is bad for business. While cocaine can be moved through the country with the tacit approval of the country's highest leaders, traffickers lack two of the things they prize most: trust that a shipment will arrive, and accountability if it does not.

“In the end, you don't know who you have to talk to in Venezuela,” said a drug trafficking expert in the Colombian department of Norte de Santander, which borders Venezuela, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons.



“You might make arrangements with one National Guard commander but then another one stops you - traffickers have lost big shipments like that in Venezuela.”

The Maduro regime has several tools it can use to try and impose order on this system.

One is its control over Venezuela's highly corrupted judicial system, which allows political leaders to grant impunity to favored actors – and remove it if they fall from grace.

“The judicial system has been totally taken over by politics,” said the former Public Ministry official. “Politics subjugates the prosecutors.”

Perhaps the state's most visible attempts to corral and control cocaine trafficking, though, is through its deployment of security forces in anti-narcotics operations. The strategies behind these deployments are evident in the wildly divergent patterns of drug seizures.

“Loads are lost when Caracas blows the whistle – when the orders come from the top,” said an official from the Ministry for the Interior, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

The southern Colombian border state of Amazonas, for example, is one of the most stable territories for cocaine trafficking. Its drug routes have long been controlled by the ex-FARC Acacio Medina Front. There is [strong evidence](#) of collusion between these guerrillas and the military, and the state is governed by a Maduro loyalist.

InSight Crime's review of media and official sources found zero seizures of significant amounts of cocaine in this state between January 2019 and April 2021.

The northern states of Zulia and Táchira, in contrast, accounted for the bulk of the seizures registered between 2019 and 2021. These are [disputed territories](#) that have been overrun with warring criminal gangs, paramilitary successor groups, rival guerrilla groups, and independent drug traffickers.

The pattern is repeated across the country. Where there are reliable trafficking partners paying off the right people and operating without too much noise, seizures and other indicators such as arrests and raids remain low. But where there is criminal chaos, or actors that break the rules, then they surge.

The strategy has been clearly on display in the most dramatic underworld conflict to hit Venezuela in recent years – [the battle for the state of Apure](#).

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*“The judicial system has been totally taken over by politics.”*

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For years, drug seizures were almost unheard of in the state, even though it has been a major cocaine exit and entry point for **more than a decade**. But since **relations broke down** between the Venezuelan military and the ex-FARC 10th Front in 2021, authorities have **seized hundreds of kilos of cocaine** and destroyed **clandestine airstrips** and **cocaine processing laboratories**.

These security operations and judicial investigations are a demonstration of Maduro's power – but also his weakness, especially if they cannot immediately crush dissenting groups. While actors that fall foul of the system can be removed, the system itself might be too unruly and too powerful to ever truly control.

The Maduro regime's political enemies like to see the Venezuelan cocaine trade through the prism of the government's own left-wing rhetoric; depicting drug trafficking as a nationalized state monopoly. But in truth, it is more akin to the wild west capitalism seen following the collapse of the Soviet Union: a game of wealth and power with oligarchs and gangsters jostling for position as an authoritarian leader tries to hold it all together.

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## Beyond the Cartel of the Suns



*In 2020, the US Department of Justice released a bombshell indictment charging sitting Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and other senior members of his government with “narco-terrorism” and accusing them of leading the drug trafficking organization the Cartel de los Soles – the Cartel of the Suns.*

The [indictment](#) paints a lurid picture of the Cartel of the Suns as a fearsome drug cartel, led by a dictator and with the most powerful guerrilla insurgency in Latin American history as its armed wing. These drug traffickers posing as politicians and their terrorist cohorts, it alleges, hatched a sinister “narco-terrorist” plot to “flood” the United States with cocaine and inflict the drug’s harmful and addictive effects on users in this country.”



# Venezuelan Military Trafficking Networks



## Collecting trafficking “taxes”

Trafficking networks make regular payments to local military units to be allowed to operate with impunity, for example by not intervening in the operations of clandestine airstrips, or cocaine laboratories.

## Creating movement corridors

Trafficking networks pay off military units to guarantee safe passage of drug shipments through certain territories. This can include collecting payments at roadside checkpoints, ensuring that authorized clandestine drug flights are allowed to move through Venezuelan airspace, or by ensuring maritime patrols are not conducted at certain times to allow drug boats to pass.



## Transporting drugs

Along certain trafficking routes, military units transport drugs themselves using military vehicles, especially along internal corridors linking the border region to dispatch points by road.

## Controlling trafficking infrastructure

Military control of infrastructure used for dispatching drugs, above all ports and airports, can mean drug exports are organized directly by military officials stationed in these areas. Such officials coordinate operations by paying other officials or workers in key positions to ensure the drugs pass through security checks and are safely loaded.



January 2022

The truth defies such easy characterizations. The Cartel of the Suns has never been a drug cartel. Instead, it emerged as a fluid and loose knit network of trafficking cells embedded within the Venezuelan security forces, facilitated, protected, and sometimes directed by political actors.

And today, it is evolving. Since Maduro became president in 2013, drug trafficking in Venezuela has becoming increasingly fragmented and complex, while the most powerful national figures in Chavismo appear to have become ever more distanced from actual dirty work of moving drugs. Today, the catch-all term “Cartel of the Suns” masks the fact that the state-drug trafficking axis in Venezuela is now less an organization run by the Chavista regime and more a system that it regulates.

## Myths and Realities of the Cartel of the Suns

The indictment of Nicolás Maduro and his co-conspirators constructs a simplified and occasionally distorted narrative of drug trafficking in Venezuela, a Hollywood version of the Cartel of the Suns. But while the prosecutors' conclusions may be overblown, much of the actual evidence presented in the indictment - and the numerous indictments and sanctions designations that preceded it - is not.

Over three years of investigations, InSight Crime corroborated many of the structures, relations, practices and operations that emerge from that evidence through field work in strategic trafficking regions. This has generated countless interviews with current and former members of the security forces, anti-drugs officials, prosecutors, political leaders from both sides of the divide, people who have worked in and communities affected by the Venezuelan drug trade, experts, investigators and analysts, among others.

There are times the accusations contained in the 2020 indictment stray into hyperbole. The document describes how Chávez plotted against the United States with the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) to “prioritize[e] using cocaine as a weapon against America and importing as much cocaine as possible into the United States.”

But this claim flies in the face of drug trafficking patterns at the time. The Chávez years did see a flood of cocaine surge through Venezuela – from 50 metric tons in 2004 to 250 metric tons in 2007, according to [US government estimates](#). But much of the increased traffic was bound for Europe as Venezuela carved out a niche as the [principal launchpad for the burgeoning European market](#).

Elsewhere, prosecutors allege that the FARC trained “an unsanctioned militia group that functioned, in essence, as an armed forces unit for the Cartel de Los Soles.” But [while there is evidence](#) the FARC trained pro-government armed



groups like the colectivos, these organizations bear little resemblance to a cartel army. Instead, they are primarily politically motivated, have limited geographical presence and military capacity, and play no known role in transnational drug trafficking.

The main flaws of the indictment though, come from prosecutors' attempts to build a neat narrative from a messy reality.

The story they tell begins in 1999, the year Hugo Chávez first became president of Venezuela.

The prosecutors allege the Cartel of the Suns was formed that year by “high-ranking Venezuelan officials” from the “military, intelligence apparatus, legislature, and the judiciary.” The Cartel, the indictment states, immediately made a deal with the leaders of the FARC, which controlled much of the cocaine production in the border region, to “relocate part of their operations to Venezuela under the protection of the Cartel.”

This, the indictment says, marked the start of the “narco-terrorist” conspiracy that would last more than two decades.

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*“But they didn't just look the other way, they got involved in the business.”*

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But the involvement of senior Venezuelan officials in drug trafficking and even the name the Cartel of the Suns – which refers to the sun insignia designating the rank of general in the Venezuelan military – both predate the rise of Chávez.

And while there is no doubt the FARC set up operations in Venezuela with the Chávez's blessing, as documented in InSight Crime's recent [investigation](#) into guerrilla dynamics in the state of Apure, this was a gradual process, as political sympathies solidified into a strategic alliance.

The drugs came later, as one former Chavista official from the border region, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of persecution, described to InSight Crime.

According to the source, Chávez told local government officials he would put trusted generals in place to oversee cooperation with the FARC, and that the military and the government should turn a blind eye to the guerrillas' drug trafficking activities.

“But they didn’t just look the other way, they got involved in the business,” he said. “Each of them had a trusted narco to manage the business. They looked for trusted people, they gave them money, they connected with the narcos that they allowed to move cocaine and they created a relationship with them to buy and also to distribute the drugs.

“And with the control they had of the airports and the ports, and of course the highways, they made it all flow through Venezuela. That’s how it started.”

The story of former Venezuelan military spymaster Hugo Carvajal, documented in various sanctions designations and indictments, shows this evolution.

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*“[The Cartel of the Suns] is a structure to keep the military happy.”*

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In 2008, [the US Treasury sanctioned Carvajal](#) for his connections to the FARC, accusing him of protecting the guerrilla’s drug shipments from seizure, supplying them with arms and government identification documents, and allowing them to control the Apure-Aracua border region – one of the main trafficking arteries into Venezuela.

An [indictment drawn up in 2013](#) then traced his growing involvement in the drug trade through his relationship with Colombia’s Norte del Valle Cartel, which prosecutors say began around 2004. The initial allegations in the case depict a classic protection racket, with Carvajal turning a blind eye to the cartel’s trafficking operations, protecting members from capture, and providing intelligence on anti-narcotics operations. But, the prosecutors describe, he later sold hundreds of kilos of cocaine to Norte del Valle traffickers, and invested in shipments that other traffickers were exporting out of Venezuela.

The 2020 indictment alleges that by 2013 Carvajal was organizing transnational shipments. Prosecutors accuse Carvajal of coordinating [the notorious Air France case](#), where French authorities seized saw 1.3 tons of cocaine from a flight arriving from Maiquetía Airport, where Carvajal’s nephew was at the time the military officer in charge of security.

As the Cartel of the Suns networks took shape and gained influence, [the president’s own anti-drugs officials raised the alarm](#). But for Chávez – scarred by the memory of an attempted military coup against him in 2002 – the systemic corruption of his military was a small price to pay to guarantee their loyalty.

The true function of the Cartel of the Suns was not to use cocaine as a bioweapon against the United States, but to shore up political power at home.

“[The Cartel of the Suns] is a structure to keep the military happy,” a former Venezuelan anti-narcotics official, who didn’t want to be named for security reasons, told InSight Crime.

But the cancer of drug corruption soon spread throughout the state.

“The army and the GNB [Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – Bolivarian National Guard] were corrupted 30 years ago, then the anti-narcotics groups were corrupted, and they also corrupted DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] agents in Venezuela, CICPC and politicians,” a former division chief of the police’s criminal investigation unit (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas – CICPC), who spoke on condition of anonymity, told InSight Crime.

The indictment’s determination to depict these disparate networks that were proliferating within the state as a coherent and centrally controlled drug trafficking organization leads to some paradoxical claims about its operations. In one section, the Cartel is accused of paying bribes to facilitate drug trafficking while simultaneously being the beneficiaries of those same bribes.

In reality, there was no central control or hierarchy.

“They say ‘the Suns’ because there is a lot of people from the government and military involved but it doesn’t work as a cartel as such,” said the former Chavista. “It is not something that is organized, they don’t all meet up to do this. It is an institutional thing.”

## The ‘Cartel Bosses’

The concrete evidence and accusations in the indictments and sanctions designations, many of which InSight Crime was able to corroborate with multiple sources in Venezuela’s key trafficking zones, reflect a much messier world than the one described by the prosecutors.

On the ground, drugs were [moved by trafficking cells](#) embedded in the military but also incorporating other branches of state such as the police or customs. But they were also moved by the FARC and by “authorized” trafficking networks.

Those labelled by the US authorities as ‘[cartel bosses](#),’ meanwhile, used their power, influence and connections to carve out their own niches offering the owners of the drugs protection, access to trafficking infrastructure and connections with trafficking networks. Some allegedly took it one step further and began making their own cocaine deals, although hard evidence of these arrangements is lacking.

Each had a different portfolio of services they could offer traffickers.

Some were based on their position, especially for military operators. Current Minister of Defense General Vladimir Padrino, for example, [stands accused](#) of creating free movement corridors for drug flights dispatched by traffickers who had paid him off – while interdicting those that had not.

Others could offer traffickers powerful underworld connections. Army Major General Clíver Alcalá, for example, was allegedly one of the state's main interlocutors with the FARC, offering him direct access to the cocaine supply. He also maintained a [close relationship with the Guajira Cartel](#), which ran smuggling routes to Caribbean islands.

For others, their competitive advantage was their control of infrastructure. Among these were current Minister of Industries and National Production Tareck El Aissami and his close ally, current Minister for Energy and former head of the GNB Nestor Reverol. The pair [allegedly charged traffickers](#) to use the shipping ports and air bases under their control. While many of the shipments they helped dispatch belonged to traffickers such as Venezuela's most notorious drug lord, the now detained Walid Makled, others were part or fully owned by El Aissami, US investigators allege.

The two most contrasting profiles among the Cartel of the Suns operators are of the two men who would come to dominate Chavismo and Venezuelan politics after the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013: Nicolás Maduro and Diosdado Cabello.

The fingerprints of Cabello are everywhere. The 2020 indictment describes him on the scene in nearly every event detailed, making multi-ton cocaine and arms deals with the FARC, and organizing exports to Central America, Mexico, and Europe.

The [sanctions designation](#) against Cabello accuses him of also organizing shipments to the Dominican Republic for dispatch to Europe, and of compiling loads from seized drugs then exporting them through a Venezuelan government-owned airport.

Sources that spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, including current and former government and security forces officials, experts, and on-the-ground sources in trafficking zones repeated these allegations and made many more, although there were few of these that InSight Crime could independently verify. These sources routinely referred to Cabello as the man who controls or leads the Cartel of the Suns, “the capo of capos” as one former anti-drugs official described him.

Other sources scoffed at some of the more outlandish allegations, such as Cabello personally overseeing the delivery of machineguns, ammunition, and rocket launchers to the FARC as payment for cocaine, and this conclusion may be another Hollywood version of a more complicated reality. But whatever the truth, Cabello has become the public face of the Cartel of the Suns.

The evidence linking Maduro to direct involvement in trafficking deals, in contrast, is scant.

Instead, the indictment depicts him as a largely behind the scenes operator, purging the judiciary of honest judges or using his position as foreign minister to intervene with other nations to protect trafficking interests or to broker international trade deals so they could be used to launder drug money.

On one of the rare occasions he is mentioned in direct connection to a cocaine load, he is described rebuking Cabello and Carvajal for their use of Maiqueíta for the Air France shipment.

Such experience manipulating the conditions to protect his allies and their criminal operations would go on to serve him well after he succeeded Chávez as president in 2013.

## The Cartel of 2,000 Suns

The evidence against the alleged “leaders” of the Cartel of the Suns laid out by US investigators, as well as the allegations made by [informants](#) and [regime turncoats](#), begin to get ever thinner following the death of Hugo Chávez, and dry up altogether after 2017.

This is likely no coincidence.

“The Cartel of the Suns as we once knew it may no longer exist,” security analyst Douglas Farah, who has led investigations into the criminal connections of the Chavistas in Venezuela, told InSight Crime. “The Cartel has gone from being a military structure to one more open to the entry of civilians and criminal actors with real economic power.”

The core purpose of the Cartel of the Suns today remains the same as ever – to help a Chavista president hold on to power. But the challenges facing Nicolás Maduro have changed as the country has spiraled into an economic and political tailspin. The president heads a near bankrupt state, and he is under constant pressure from political opponents at home, abroad and even within Chavismo and the Venezuelan state.

The Cartel of the Suns has changed to meet these challenges, evolving from a loose knit trafficking network to an elaborate system of patronage used to distribute the wealth of the drug trade to those Maduro needs to stay loyal.

Like Chávez, Maduro knows he must keep the military on his side if he is to remain president. But Maduro has no money to pay them: the collapse of the Venezuelan economy has seen rank and file military salaries drop to less than [\\$20 per month](#).

And the military has traditionally been closer to the man who expected to succeed Chávez as president and has led a rival faction within Chavismo since those dreams were dashed: Diosdado Cabello.

Maduro had to find a way to pay his soldiers and buy the support of military commanders while also restricting the generals’ ability to build their personal power so they can’t become a threat to his position. Drug trafficking has played a central role in how he has been able to do this.



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*“There is no Cartel of the Suns, because a cartel would not sustain all the ‘suns.’”*

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Under Maduro, power has been dispersed by inverting the traditional military hierarchy. Whereas once it was a rare achievement to achieve the rank of general and become a “sun,” the Venezuelan military now has as many as 2,000 generals according to [US military authorities](#).

“The traditional military structure is a pyramid - as you climb up it gets narrower. But here they promote everyone, there are no restrictions on promotion,” one former general, speaking on condition of anonymity for his safety, told InSight Crime.

Rising to the rank of general offers access to lucrative regional postings, which are often more sought-after than the senior ranks of the military high command.

“The high [military] offices are awarded to those who are loyal to the chief,” said the ex-general. “They are placed in positions where they can manage dirty businesses, such as the border regions for drug trafficking.”

These regional postings are determined according to a system first devised by Chávez in 2009, but hugely expanded by Maduro. The military is divided into a patchwork of [geographic units](#), which numerous sources across the country report serve as coordination centers for military involvement in criminal economies.

Postings are rotated frequently, distributing access to criminal profits throughout the armed forces, while keeping the military subordinated to the political powers who determine the postings.

“There is no Cartel of the Suns, because a cartel would not sustain all the ‘suns,” said Sebastiana Barraez, a Venezuelan journalist who specializes in military issues. “What there is, is military officials that are involved in drug trafficking because of the positions they hold at that moment.”

## A New Cartel for a New Cocaine Trade

This replacement of military-embedded trafficking cells with a military-embedded trafficking system mirrors changes in the cocaine trade. The all-powerful cartels of the past have been consigned to history, and today most cocaine trafficking is carried out by ad-hoc networks formed for each assignment and then dissolved.

In Venezuela, this means the world of a few chosen traffickers backed by Cartel of the Suns heavyweights has fragmented into a multitude of transport networks, territorial gangs, and narco-brokers. Even the guerrillas have atomized, with the demobilization of the FARC in 2017 leaving a power vacuum filled by various ex-FARC dissident groups and the guerrillas of the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN).

In both the military and the underworld, the faces of those trafficking cocaine now change constantly but the system remains the same. Together they form what Venezuelan investigator Maibort Petit describes as a “network of networks,” in which drugs can pass through the hands of several different trafficking nodes – both military and criminal – as they move through the country.

In some regions, especially those with reliable trafficking networks with close connections to the state, sources describe how the military has stepped back from active trafficking and is now content to just [take pay offs](#) from authorized traffickers. In others, [military cells continue to transport shipments](#) themselves. Often, the two modalities intersect.

In the western border state of Apure, drugs enter Venezuela through clandestine border crossings controlled by the ex-FARC dissidents and the ELN. From there, loads are either exported directly on light aircraft, or moved through the country to the coast.

The military's involvement depends on which route the drugs take, according to the former Chavista political leader. The ex-FARC handle the flights directly with buyers or intermediaries, paying off the military for the right to operate.

“The FARC pay the government for every ‘kilo despegado’ [kilo that takes off], and this payment goes to ‘the generals’,” he said.

But the drugs that continue through Venezuela's interior are moved by a military trafficking cell, he claims.

“An army colonel controls the land routes,” he said. “He has a government freight concession and the army lets his trucks pass through the checkpoints.”

In the Caribbean state of Falcón, a fisherman who has worked for drug traffickers, who asked to remain anonymous, told a similar story.

“A lot of the time the merchandise is brought to the coast in National Guard trucks,” he said.

The shipments are then handed over to fishermen who are contracted by groups such as the Paraguaná and Guajira cartels, who then load the drugs onto their boats and set sail for Caribbean islands. Their passage is guaranteed by pay offs to the GNB units responsible for patrolling Venezuela's maritime territories.

“We don’t see them, all we know is that at night it is free passage, there is not going to be anyone moving around.”

His account was corroborated by a GNB officer in Falcón, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity.

“You have to work for these people [drug traffickers] and stay quiet about it because otherwise you’ll end up in [military prison] Ramo Verde,” he said.

While much of the cocaine exported from Venezuela is now moved by criminal groups using clandestine light aircraft or small boats, control of ports and [airports](#) also remains a key part of military involvement in the drug trade.

“The administration of the port of Puerto Cabello is in the hands of the military and it’s there that most drugs transit,” a former Public Ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told InSight Crime.

## The Power Brokers

While cocaine trafficking in the military has been institutionalized, the role of the “cartel bosses” identified by US investigators is today shrouded in uncertainty.

Two of the biggest names, ex-army general Clíver Alcalá and former spy chief Hugo Carvajal have both turned on the Maduro regime, with Alcalá even [attempting to overthrow the government](#) in a mercenary coup. Carvajal is currently in prison in Spain where he has been fighting extradition to the United States, while Alcalá is in a US prison [awaiting trial](#) on drug trafficking charges.

Sources across Venezuela’s trafficking regions continue to insist that “the suns” are among the owners of the loads they see move through. But there is little evidence to directly connect these to the alleged Cartel chiefs.

Instead, actors such as Diosdado Cabello, Tareck el Aissami, Nestor Reverol and President Maduro himself appear to be keeping a safe distance from any drug shipments.

Several sources claim such actors have found less direct ways of profiting from the drug trade, such as buying properties through frontmen then renting them out to trafficking networks for dispatching or storing drugs, or by owning freight companies whose vehicles are rented out to traffickers. But the Chavistas’ expert use of straw buyers and Venezuela’s opaque land and business registries make these claims near impossible to verify.

Their principal role, though, is to ensure the drug trafficking system functions to the benefit of the regime by placing corrupt and loyal personnel in strategic political and military positions. Today, the directing roles in key trafficking positions are in some way affiliated to one of the Cartel of the Suns “leaders.”

While several sources speculated that these actors receive a cut of the trafficking profits in return for this patronage, analysts and former military members who spoke to InSight Crime emphasized that drug revenues play a subordinate role in the Cartel of the Suns system. Their purpose is to prop up the state edifice after the Chavista elite bled it dry through corruption.

The evidence suggests some, if not all of these actors have transitioned from trafficking brokers to power brokers, who use their position not to move drugs but to administer the drug trafficking system the Cartel of the Suns has become.

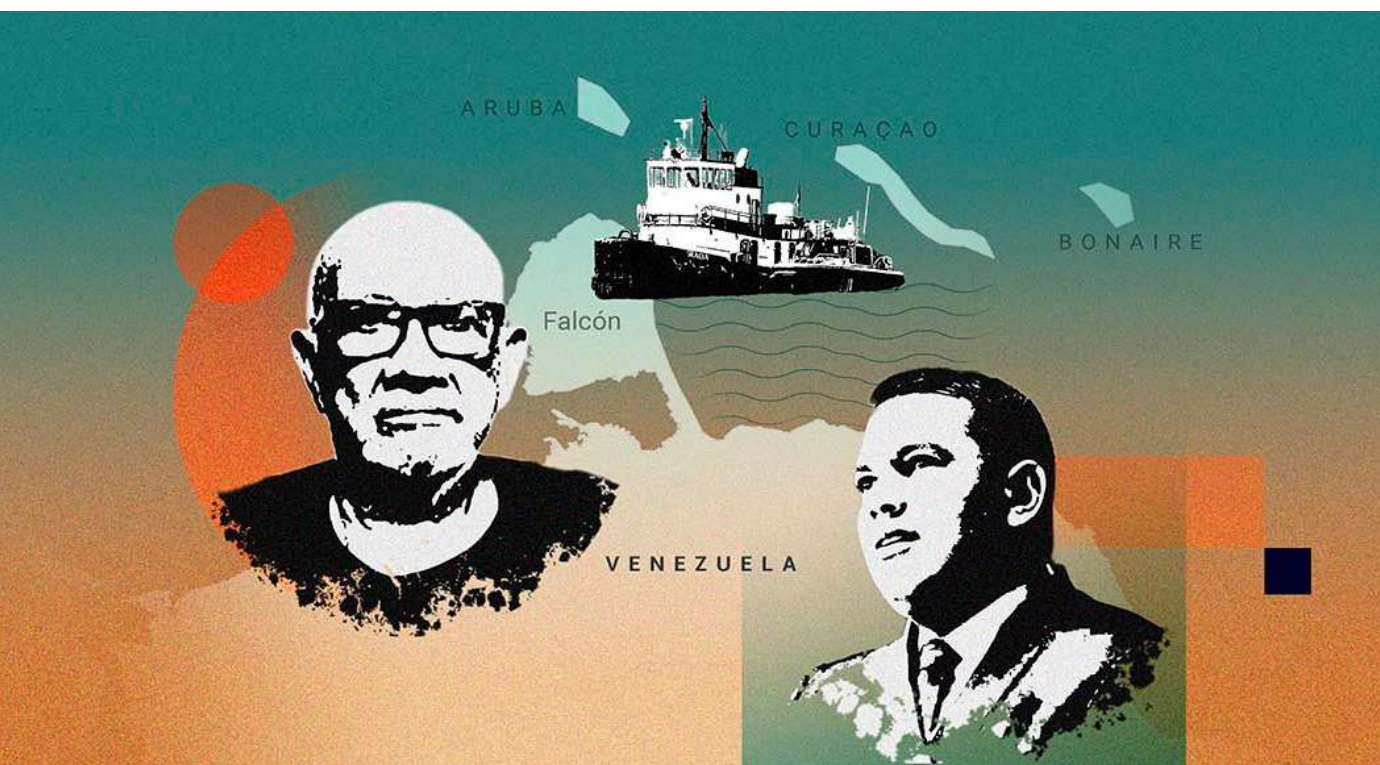
“The regime facilitates all the elements: the security, the connections with local military and civilian actors, the government-run transport, the mayors, governors, representatives, the directors of airports, customs – everything that is necessary [for drug trafficking],” said the ex-Chavista.

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## 4

# The Paraguaná Cartel: Drug Trafficking and Political Power in Venezuela



*On April 3, 2021, police in the east Venezuelan state of Anzoátegui acted on a [tip-off](#) to intercept a silver Toyota Corolla. They interrogated the driver, a middle-aged woman accompanied by a young relative. Under pressure, she led the officers to a residential building where her father, a large, balding man in his late 60s, was residing.*

The man claimed to be an ordinary citizen, presenting an identity card under the name of Ramón Guillermo Valera. But under questioning, he admitted the card was fake. His real name was Emilio Enrique Martínez, better known as “Chiche Smith” – one of the most notorious drug lords along Venezuela’s Caribbean coast.

Martínez's capture sent shockwaves through the country. His arrest marked the fall of one of Venezuela's longest-standing drug traffickers, whose connections to powerful actors within the state had long appeared to put him beyond justice.

The story of Martínez's Paraguaná Cartel is emblematic of the deep synergy between politics and drug trafficking in Venezuela. His rise is a case study in how the interconnections between drug traffickers and local politicians, as well as security forces and national power players can form the basis of entire systems of criminal governance. His fall hints at how factional struggles at the highest levels of the Venezuelan state can bring these criminal empires crashing down.

## A Criminal Fiefdom on the Caribbean

Martínez has long been a legendary figure in Paraguaná, a peninsula that juts out into the Caribbean sea from the coastal state of Falcón. The son of a local smuggler, he started out as a member of one of several mafias that moved contraband goods from Falcón to the nearby islands of the Dutch Caribbean in the 1990s.

He was jailed in 1998 but released [six years later](#). By that time, he had his sights on more lucrative products. In 2010, "Chiche Smith" was named in [court records](#) as the owner of 600 kilograms of cocaine seized from a small boat off the coast of Falcón.

According to local journalists and political leaders, his buyers included Mexico's [Sinaloa Cartel](#) and his [business partners](#) included [Walid Makled](#), then one of Venezuela's most notorious and well-connected drug brokers. But Martínez himself preferred to remain in the shadows.

Then in 2017, Victor Clark was elected Governor of Falcón, and everything changed. Young and ambitious, Clark was considered by political analysts to be an acolyte of President Nicolás Maduro. But his campaign was also [personally backed](#) by Diosdado Cabello, the former President of the National Assembly, who has often competed with President Maduro for power.

Clark celebrated his electoral victory with a lavish concert in the beach town of Cabo San Román, on the tip of the Paraguaná peninsula. Local people described to InSight Crime how no expense was spared, with trucks filled with beer and spectacular fireworks. But that was not the only thing to raise eyebrows.

"Chiche Smith's whole family were there as VIPs and guarded by soldiers," a local journalist, speaking on condition of anonymity for her safety, told InSight Crime. Several other local residents verified her account.

Soon after the party, Clark was photographed with Martínez's relatives at public events. Chiche Smith had gone public.

Martínez quickly became well-loved in Paraguaná. Locals describe how he started buying up properties in the municipality of Carirubana, paying handsomely in cash for beachside shacks as he pledged to construct a tourist resort.

He also poured money into the area through his [Carmen Virginia Martínez Foundation](#), named after his late mother. The foundation distributed food and toys among poor families, organized public works such as street cleanings, provided well-paid employment and renovated local infrastructure.

But according to numerous local residents, journalists, politicians and security forces members who spoke to InSight Crime, the communities of Paraguaná were not the only beneficiaries of Martínez's largesse.

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*“When a new commander comes in, he meets with those people and then they begin to work together.”*

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“Victor Clark allowed drug traffickers to make improvements and modifications [to the area] and the regional government then inaugurated them as if they were public works,” said a local military official, who ask not to be named for fear of persecution.

“The [military] commands also received food, telephones, logistics for sporting activities [from Martinez],” he added.

Chiche's collaboration with Clark also had a darker side for local communities.

“The Paraguaná Cartel knows everything about everyone, so you pay attention when they say not to vote against Victor Clark or to speak badly of him, because they know where you live,” a local resident, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, explained to InSight Crime.

In return, Martínez expected one thing: free rein to move drugs through Falcón.

To do so, he required the complicity of the security forces.

“[Chiche Smith] and his family meet with all the [military] commanders,” explained a Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB) official, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. “When a new commander comes in, he meets with those people and then they begin to work together.”

These relationships are facilitated by the governor, another military official who also requested anonymity, told InSight Crime.

“As head of the state, [Victor Clark] is the intermediary,” he said. “He doesn’t get involved, but he allows everything to happen.”

Several sources also alleged there is political influence over who is placed in military command posts in the region, and that Clark has intervened in the process over the years.

“The changes in military command, above all at the state level, are political actions,” said the GNB official. “The people in those positions are more politician than military, and to get to that level you have to be well-connected.”

## Drug Trafficking and Local Politics

The tight web of connections between Martínez and Falcón’s local government, military and population created a very particular form of criminal governance, a narco-fiefdom where politicians and security forces allied with criminal actors to use illicit profits not only for personal enrichment but also to maintain their power.

As Venezuela’s economic, political and social crises have deepened, such arrangements have proliferated across the country, playing a crucial role in both propping up the Venezuelan state and ensuring that the drugs keep flowing.

“Crime works with politics; it takes control of the governorates,” said a former Venezuelan antinarcotics official, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity for his safety. “And it converts those governorates into centers of organized crime.”

At its most basic, the relationship between politics and drug trafficking in Venezuela is based on mediating the relationship between security forces and favored criminals. Governors and mayors have a level of control over the activities and determine the leadership of state and municipal police bodies, influence regional military appointments and coordinate with the military on security issues.

By using these powers to install and manipulate corrupt security officers, local politicians can not only ensure impunity for favored traffickers. They also secure the loyalty of the security forces by allowing them to make money from the flow of drugs.



Politicians themselves may also be beneficiaries of these corrupt funds, although direct payments are very hard to trace. However, the synergy between local politics and organized crime in Venezuela runs deeper than simple bribes.

As the case of the Paraguaná Cartel demonstrates, state and municipal politicians can come to rely on drug traffickers to support them politically – by funding their campaigns, getting out their vote, or providing the public services that near-bankrupt administrations cannot.

Sources, ranging from former prosecutors to senior local officials, all spoke on condition of anonymity, describing to InSight Crime the numerous services that local politicians allegedly provide to traffickers. These included leveraging [their influence](#) over the security forces to [direct operations](#) against criminal rivals and their influence over judicial institutions to protect them from prosecution. It can also involve them using their administrative powers to facilitate trafficking, such as by issuing transport licenses and authorizations or granting concessions that allow access to trafficking infrastructure such as ports.

In the dozens of interviews about political figures conducted for this investigation, InSight Crime heard allegations implicating current or recent governors in more than half of Venezuela's 23 states. Although most remain unverified, and several were little more than rumors, there is more than enough evidence to show that serious drug trafficking accusations are no obstacle to a political career in Venezuela.

Among the most persistent allegations were those levied against Ramón Carrizales, a former vice-president and minister of defense, who was governor of the border state of Apure for over ten years until losing his position ahead of local elections in November 2021.

Several figures from within the Chavismo regime have [alleged](#) that Carrizales' son worked for drug trafficker [Walid Makled](#), while his wife was [in business](#) with Makled's company, Almacenadoras, at the same time as she was Minister for the Environment. In Apure, meanwhile, numerous sources, including drug experts, local journalists and residents and politicians from both sides of the political spectrum, accused Carrizales of presiding over a virtual free-trafficking zone for allied guerrilla groups and their cartel customers.

Several other former and current governors have also been accused of protecting guerrilla groups as they have trafficked drugs through Venezuela. [US authorities have sanctioned](#) former governors Henry Rangel Silva in Trujillo and Ramón Rodríguez Chacín in Guárico and the current [governor of Táchira, Freddy Bernal](#), over such allegations.

Other governors have been investigated by international law enforcement over trafficking allegations, including former Governor of Barinas, [Adán Chávez](#), and the governor of Delta Amacuro, [Lizeta Hernández](#), who have been investigated by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), according to media reports.

# Political Allegiances of Governors in Key Drug Trafficking States



Recent cases have also exposed the involvement of municipal mayors and National Assembly representatives. In early 2022, a mayor from Zulia, a representative from Falcón and another from Táchira were arrested in possession of cocaine allegedly belonging to a trafficking cell security forces sources say was linked to the Paraguaná Cartel.

One security forces official familiar with the case, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, said the trafficking network paid the politicians to move drugs as their official cars were unlikely to be stopped.

However, while these connections are widespread, they are also fragile and ever-changing – as Chiche Smith was to find out.

## The Fall of Chiche Smith

On 15 April 2020, forces from the GNB and the National Anti-Drugs Office (Oficina Nacional Antidrogas – ONA) stormed properties linked to Emilio Martínez in Falcón and the neighboring state of Carabobo. In 20 raids over the next four days, they [seized](#) six properties and eleven vehicles, and made at least [20 arrests](#).

Outraged residents of Paraguaná took to the streets in protest.

“They went into the foundation and stole everything,” one protester told [Primer Informe](#). “We want an explanation.”

The following weeks were to bring some explanations, but also more questions. In June, the ONA filed [drug trafficking charges](#) against Martínez and seven of his associates, accusing them of laundering drug profits through the Carmen Virginia Martínez Foundation.

Intense scrutiny was suddenly not only on Chiche Smith but also his connections to the state. And these went far beyond Victor Clark.

The detainees included two police officials in the state of Carabobo – Raúl Roberto de Gallego Salas and Orlando José Silva Moreno – who stand accused of helping the Paraguaná Cartel dispatch shipments of cocaine from Carabobo's port of Puerto Cabello.

Police sources and [photographs](#) suggested that both were closely linked to Carabobo Governor Rafael Lacava and his security chief José Dominguez, and they had attended events with officials including Attorney General Tarek William Saab, police Criminal Investigations Unit (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas) Director Douglas Rico, and mayor of Miranda municipality, Pablo Acosta.

Both [Rico](#) and [Lacava](#) denied any wrongdoing – but former Carabobo police chief Salvatore Luchesse claimed otherwise.

“The shipment that left Puerto Cabello was authorized by Rafael Lacava and supervised personally by ‘El Portu’ José Dominguez,” he [wrote on Twitter](#). Both Dominguez and the director of the Carabobo police were [forced to resign](#) over the scandal.

Luchesse also claimed that the crackdown had been triggered by a flare-up of tensions between the divergent political factions within Chavismo that have emerged since the death of the unifying figure of President Hugo Chávez in 2013.

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*“Detained in Venezuela, the government can play around with the case until people forget about it.”*

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“What’s going on in Valencia [capital of Carabobo] over the last three days is a power struggle between the gangs of Rafael Lacava and Diosdado Cabello,” he alleged in a [separate tweet](#).

Similar claims were made by several local residents, journalists, security force members and former employees of the Martínez family, who insisted to InSight Crime that the crackdown represented a move by President Nicolás Maduro to bring to heel Martínez’s operations, which had been a source of conflict between local political factions.

They also believed that Martínez had been allowed to flee, and would return once calm was restored. But on that, they were wrong. A year later, he was arrested in Anzoátegui.

In Paraguaná, the raids and then the arrest of Martínez overturned what had seemed to be a firmly established order.

“It’s like a triangle, Maduro orders the military to obey the regional government and the regional government ordered us to protect and guard those people [of the Paraguaná Cartel],” a local anti-narcotics officer said, under the condition of anonymity. “So when they told us to arrest them we felt bad because those people had stopped us going hungry.”

The reasons for Martínez’s sudden reversal of fortune remain shrouded in mystery.

**One theory** is that Martínez was targeted to prevent him from surrendering to the DEA and supplying compromising information against Venezuelan government officials.

“If Chiche was captured by the DEA, a lot of heads would roll for drug trafficking, from soldiers to mayors and governors,” a police official in Falcón told InSight Crime, under the condition of anonymity for his safety. “Detained in Venezuela, the government can play around with the case until people forget about it.”



Other sources believe the arrest was connected to a five-ton [cocaine seizure](#) from a boat off the coast of Aruba, which had caused the government international embarrassment and had drawn unwanted attention to drug trafficking from Paraguaná.

“The Maduro government gave the order to arrest him to show that drug trafficking is being combatted in the country,” said another GNB officer, who also requested not to be named.

## Drugs and the Balance of Power

While sources consulted had different theories about why Martínez was detained, all agreed that the decision must have come from the highest levels of the Venezuelan state. Chiche had become a pawn in a game that stretched far beyond Paraguaná, in which access to drug trafficking profits is used to buy, balance and break political loyalties in a state divided on itself.

The main divide is between President Nicolás Maduro and Diosdado Cabello, who have competed for influence ever since they both staked a claim to succeed Hugo Chávez as president, forming rival poles of power within Chavismo. Other senior Chavistas also maintain their own sub-factions, such as former vice president and current Oil Minister Tareck El Aissami, while some, such as Governor Lacava in Carabobo act as unaligned free agents.

“[These factions] evolve, connect or clash with each other,” a Venezuelan political analyst, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, explained to InSight Crime.

Several analysts and former Chavista politicians described to InSight Crime how the strength of these factions is in large part determined by their ability to channel resources to loyalists by maintaining them in key military and political positions.

In the near-bankrupt Venezuelan state, the transnational cocaine trade is one of the few remaining sources of hard currency. So for these factions, control of trafficking zones translates into political power.

In 2021, the map of political power in these drug trafficking zones was redrawn in November's regional elections. And the main winner was President Maduro.

Allies of Diosdado Cabello lost the governorship of Apure to a Maduro loyalist, and the governor of the northern Colombian border state of Zulia to the political opposition, compounding a year in which Cabello suffered a series of blows to his influence in both [politics](#) and the [military](#).

The elections also saw Maduro loyalists claim a string of other victories that left his faction in charge of all but a handful of Venezuela's most important states for drug trafficking.

“Maduro continues to have control of the situation, at least for now, and I think with the election he’s gained additional control over the process,” a political scientist, who asked to remain anonymous, told InSight Crime. “But the whole government has an interest in staying in power; they are able to overlook their internal differences if those differences threaten their stay in power.”

Among the winners in the November 2021 elections was Victor Clark, whose political trajectory has been unaffected by the Chiche Smith scandal.

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*“[Chiche’s] people keep moving everything and the euros from Europe keep coming.”*

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And for the moment at least, he rules over a state where Paraguaná Cartel continues to traffic drugs even as Chiche Smith is in prison.

“[Chiche’s] people keep moving everything and the euros from Europe keep coming,” said a fisherman in Paraguaná, who asked not to be named for security reasons.

Whether the network is still operating with Clark’s authorization or not, it has not lost its capacity to corrupt.

“There are still many [security force members and politicians] who collaborate with those people,” one of the GNB officials said. “Of course there’s interest in working with them,” he added. “Where else would a soldier get money to have ranches, trucks, houses, businesses and everything else?”

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## 5

# Gordito González and Venezuela's Narco-brokers



*In 2016, two adopted nephews of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro were found guilty of a conspiracy to bring 800 kilograms of cocaine into the United States. Their boastful claims that the drug proceeds would fund first lady Cilia Flores' political campaign made international news.*

The “Narco-Nephews,” as they were labelled, became symbols of Venezuela’s new, moneyed, and corrupt oligarchy. But while headlines focused on Venezuela’s political elite, the critical role played by the middlemen who sourced their cocaine was lost in the noise of the coverage.

One of these intermediaries was known by the alias “El Gocho.” El Gocho [had access](#) to Colombian cocaine suppliers, Venezuela’s first family, and, prosecutors suggested, Mexican cartels. Yet, even the Flores brothers, who pinned their whole operation on El Gocho’s ability to source the cocaine, did not [know](#) his real name.

Deepening the intrigue, prosecutors recounted how the nephews’ drug operation with El Gocho had a [side deal](#): to free incarcerated drug trafficker, Hermagoras González Polanco, [alias Gordito González](#). Where El Gocho was an unknown entity, Gordito González was a notorious drug trafficker with a long and storied history and an international profile.

Gordito González could not produce his own cocaine, did not have the infrastructure to move it, and was apparently sat in a Venezuelan prison cell. Yet the Flores nephews’ deal with El Gocho suggested Gordito González had found a new, low-profile, but central role in the drug game. Even from within prison walls, Gordito González could act as a bridge builder who knew all the right people and could connect them – he was Venezuelan a narco-broker.

As the transnational drug trade has evolved in Venezuela, there have been several generations of brokers managing relations and making connections between cocaine suppliers, transporters, and buyers, as well as the corrupt state actors involved in drug trafficking.

Gordito González has been there throughout it all, shape-shifting to ensure he always has a role in Venezuela’s constantly changing drug trafficking landscape. He has been able to survive as his peers, rivals, and successors have been imprisoned or have disappeared.

And as drug trafficking in Venezuela enters a new era shaped by the political, social, and economic crises of the Maduro years, Gordito González has remained one of the country’s principal brokers by ensuring he can always make money for the corrupt state actors that regulate and facilitate the transnational cocaine trade in Venezuela.

## The Battle of the Brokers

Gordito González was born to a family from the binational indigenous Wayuu population in the northeast Colombian department of La Guajira, a traditional smuggling hub that Pablo Escobar and his Medellín Cartel turned into a major cocaine dispatch point in the 1980s.

He broke into the drug trade in the late 1990s by partnering with Salomón Camacho Mora, a former Medellín Cartel drug runner who also had connections to the Cali Cartel and the Norte del Valle Cartel, according [to US authorities](#). Together, Gordito González and Camacho led what was dubbed the Guajira Cartel.

A [2005 US indictment](#) against the pair describes how Camacho would buy cocaine from processing laboratories in Colombia and smuggle it over the border to Venezuela, where Gordito González would receive and store the shipments before sending them by sea to Puerto Rico and the United States. The pair supplied buyers in the United States, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, the indictment alleged.

The Guajira Cartel caught the crest of a trafficking wave. [Fueled by rising demand for cocaine in Europe](#) and the push by traffickers to open up new routes [to escape security forces pressure](#), Venezuela was rapidly becoming one of the region's most important transshipment points.

From the start, Gordito González built his success not only on his capacity to move drugs but also on his capacity to build networks.

“The Guajira Cartel had an important role here in Venezuela because it had the best connections with all the small capos in the country,” said Mildred Camero, who at the time of the cartel's rise was Venezuela's top anti-drugs official as president of the National Commission Against the Illicit Use of Drugs (Comisión Nacional Contra el Uso Ilícito de las Drogas – Conacuid).

But in Venezuela, it was not just criminal capos, but also corrupt elements of the state that were driving the cocaine boom. These corrupt officials were moving from [just taking bribes](#) to let cocaine shipments pass towards actively facilitating and even directly participating in drug trafficking. Their loose-knit and fluid networks were collectively labelled the [Cartel of the Suns](#).

To thrive in this new cocaine frontier, traffickers needed three things: access to the cocaine supply in Colombia – provided primarily by the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – [FARC](#)) – relationships with buyers supplying the US and European markets, and finally connections with the Cartel of the Suns networks to guarantee safe passage for shipments.

Most of those that could meet these requirements were major Colombian traffickers, such as [Daniel “El Loco” Barrera](#), the [Norte del Valle Cartel](#) and the [Galeano Clan](#). The expanding role of the state embedded trafficking networks, though, began to change this dynamic.

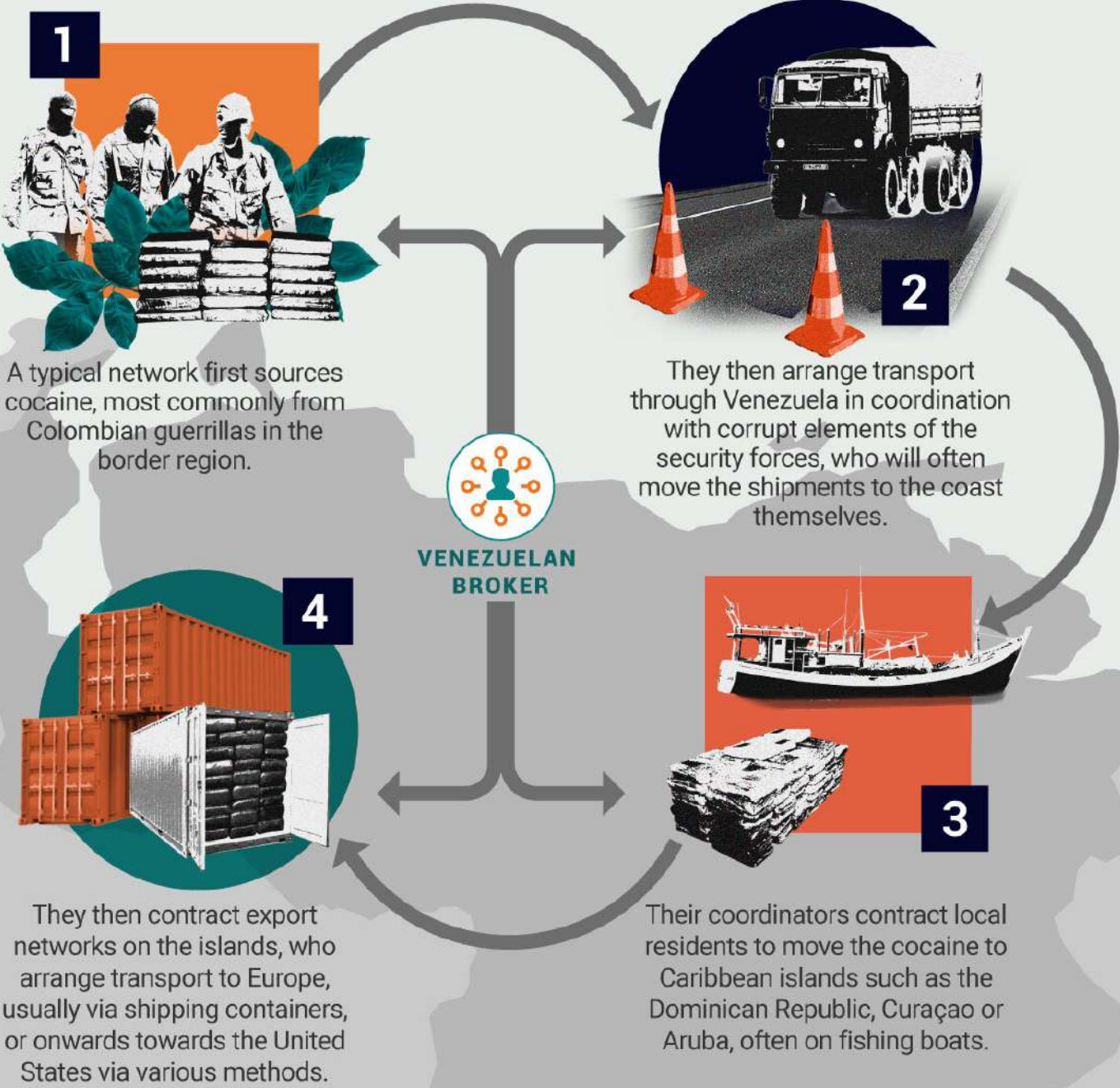
“As the Chavista government progressed, the Venezuelans, above all the army, took over the routes, removed the Colombian traffickers from Venezuela and took control of their operations,” said Camero.

Gordito González thrived in this changing environment by making himself indispensable to the Cartel of the Suns networks.



# A Venezuelan Caribbean Broker Network

Cocaine brokers coordinate and orchestrate the flow of drugs, relying on their connections with each actor along the supply chain. In Venezuela, their operations are most evident in the Caribbean region.



He established a partnership with one of [the most important players](#) in the Cartel of the Suns, [Clíver Alcalá](#), an influential army general with [close ties to the Chavista elite](#) and, [according to US prosecutors](#), to the FARC. Alcalá quickly grew close to the Gordito González clan, bonding not only over business but also starting a relationship with Gordito González's niece, Martha, [whom he later married](#).

Gordito González also used his knowledge of trafficking through the Caribbean to forge a role for himself as a bridge between the Cartel of the Suns networks in Venezuela and the Caribbean islands, above all the Dominican Republic, according to Camero.

“The Guajira Cartel had had a base in the Dominican Republic for some time, so they managed relations with the Dominican Republic, Haiti and some other Caribbean islands,” she said. “They had all the connections, the routes, and the contacts.”

With Alcalá's support and their Caribbean connections, the Guajira Cartel established itself as one of Venezuela's top drug trafficking organizations. But its aggressive expansion threatened the business of the most important of Venezuela's first generation of drug traffickers, [Walid Makled](#).

[The Makled clan](#), which based its operations in the state of Carabobo, owned an airline, a warehousing business at Venezuela's biggest port, Puerto Cabello, and multiple front companies, all of which Makled used to create his own cocaine transport chains. According to his own accounts, he then used his connections with corrupt elements of Venezuela's military and with the FARC to sell the safe passage of cocaine shipments to the highest bidders.

According to an investigation by [Colombian conflict monitoring group Nuevo Arco Iris](#), corroborated by Camero, Alcalá [pushed](#) for the Guajira Cartel to have more control over cocaine routes, including the use of Makled's principal dispatch point, Puerto Cabello. The move infuriated Makled.

The conflict between the trafficking networks drew in rival factions within the Chavez regime, members of which were working with one or both sides. As the drug trade rivalry turned political, it claimed the freedoms of both Gordito González and Makled.

Gordito González was the first to fall. [He was captured](#) in a joint security forces operation on his estate on Lake Maracaibo in March 2008 and [sentenced](#) to 15 years and six months in a Caracas prison.

But Makled's apparent victory was short-lived. In November 2008, Alcalá ordered his military unit to storm the Makled family's ranch, seizing 400 kilograms of cocaine and arresting three of Walid's brothers. To this day, Makled [maintains](#) the cocaine was planted to justify the raid. Though Makled managed to flee to Colombia, he was [arrested](#) in 2010 and extradited to Venezuela where he was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

The same year that Makled was arrested, Gordito González's partner, Salomon Camacho Mora, was [arrested in Venezuela and extradited](#) to the United States on drug trafficking and money laundering charges.

## The Next Generation

In 2013, Cliver Alcalá suffered a sudden fall from grace. After President Hugo Chávez's death in 2013, Alcalá [retired](#) from the armed forces, fell out with the government and fled to Colombia. There he would go on to play a leading role in a [botched attempt to overthrow Maduro](#) in a mercenary coup before later surrendering to US authorities to face drug trafficking charges.

By the time Alcalá fled Venezuela, many of the first generation of traffickers to capitalize on the Venezuela cocaine boom [had been captured](#). Whether these arrests were the result of international pressure, internal conflicts between the different Cartel of the Suns networks – as appears to have been the case with Gordito González and Makled – or part of a deliberate plan to take out competition is unclear.

But no matter the intentions, the results were clear. The FARC [began dispatching shipments](#) from their own trafficking infrastructure, principally airstrips, inside of Venezuela. Some of the [Cartel of the Suns networks also allegedly](#) began dealing more directly with suppliers and buyers. They had removed the middlemen and dramatically increased their influence in the drug trade.

But this consolidation of drug trafficking was not to last. With Chávez's death, and then the demobilization of the FARC, power in both the Venezuelan state and the drug trade has fragmented.

In many parts of the country, cocaine is now trafficked by fluid networks comprised of a constantly rotating cast of military and criminal actors that may form to move a shipment then dissolve. Within this system, anyone who can bring together the disparate pieces has become a valuable asset.

A new generation of narco-brokers has emerged to take on this role, and once again the Caribbean, and above all the Dominican Republic is where their presence has been most visible.

The drug trade in the Dominican Republic has changed since the days when Gordito González first turned it into his Caribbean headquarters, but it remains a place, rife with criminal opportunities for brokers.

Today, the island nation is what one senior security official in the Caribbean, speaking to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, described as “open to everyone,” meaning all nationalities are welcome as long as they play by the

rules. Locals are contracted out to do the dirty work, the ruling elite take their cut to look the other way, criminal groups share the profits and respect each other's space, and no one makes noise.

“There's a code of respect between those who operate in the region and locals because we are a small island. At the end of the day when we talk about crime here, we're talking about a business,” one money laundering and organized crime expert, who asked not to be named for security reasons, told InSight Crime.

Amongst [the most visible](#) of the new generation in the Dominican Republic was Carlos José Gascón González and his business partner Yoel Palmar, who [Venezuelan Attorney General Tarek William Saab labelled](#) the “biggest capo in trafficking drugs between Venezuela and the Dominican Republic.”

Palmar had been trafficking drugs through the Dominican Republic [since at least 2015](#) and had built up [an extensive money laundering network](#) on the island consisting of property investments, vehicle dealers, and other businesses. The centerpiece of his operations was the luxurious Malecón Palace Casino, for which his organization, the Malecón Cartel, would be named.

In 2017, the loss of a large cocaine shipment drove Gascón and the Malecón Cartel, to break the main rule of trafficking in the country – keep the violence low, because it is bad for the business.

In June of that year, the bodies of two Dutch nationals – Rachid Benbouker and Cuma Ceviz – were [found buried](#) in a shallow grave in a cane field near the Dominican district of El Seibo. Authorities named six suspects of various South American and European nationalities, with Gascón and an Englishman, Michael Murphy, accused of masterminding and carrying out the killing.

Violence connected to the transnational drug trade is relatively rare in the Dominican Republic, and the murder of Europeans caused a stir on the island. Within a year, both [Palmar](#) and [Gascón](#) had been arrested in connection to the case.

Since his detention in 2017, Palmar has [been held](#) in Colombia, whose government [continues to deny](#) Venezuela's extradition requests. Gascón was [detained](#) in Santo Domingo in 2018 and, after being charged, was [put in preventative detention](#). Then he disappeared.

Rumors persist that Gascón's Dominican connections arranged for him to be let out of preventative detention, allowing him to escape to Colombia, but that once there he was killed in a case of underworld score-settling. But InSight Crime could not confirm this account, and all other traces of Gascón disappear from 2018.

While Gascón and the Malecón Cartel's time at the top table of the Caribbean drug trade may have been brief, there are signs they likely represent just the first of a more transnational generation of Venezuelan narco-brokers to be



identified and taken down. Over the last three years, InSight Crime sources in national and international security agencies have also reported the presence of Venezuelans coordinating trafficking operations in countries such as Costa Rica, Peru and the islands of the Dutch Caribbean.

## A Cartel of Contractors

The Malécon Cartel case contained a peculiarity. Carlos José Gascón González had a familiar alias – “El Gocho.”

The real name of the El Gocho who had brokered the Narco-Nephews case was Juan Carlos González Contreras, who is identified in [Venezuelan court documents](#) as one of Gordito González’s frontmen, with his name appearing on the legal documents of properties and businesses traced back to the cartel boss. But all trace of him disappears in the early 2010s.

The first traces of Carlos José Gascón González appear shortly after. When he was arrested, he was in possession of multiple passports in different names, one of which, several news sources suggest, was [Juan González](#).

InSight Crime could not confirm whether there were two El Gochos brokering drug deals in the Caribbean or just one, and the name is commonly used to describe people from Venezuela’s Andean region. But even if they are not the same person, González Contreras’ maneuvers in the Narco-Nephews case exposed the continuity between the generations, as he was almost certainly not doing a favor for a retired trafficker – he was working with someone still very active in the drug trade.

Operating from prison, Gordito González could not re-build the Guajira Cartel’s infrastructure nor attempt to recruit a large base of new members. Instead, he turned it into a cartel of contractors that can put together tailor-made teams for each shipment. Its new base of operations was the principal dispatch point for cocaine shipped to the Dominican Republic and the Dutch Caribbean: the state of Falcón.

In Falcón, Gordito González and other traffickers, such as his occasional business associates in the Paraguaná Cartel, organize shipments through coordinators, who contract residents of local communities to store, guard and transport cocaine.

“You don’t know who the shipment belongs to, you don’t have direct contact with them, there is always an intermediary” one local fisherman, who asked to remain anonymous, told InSight Crime. “It is one person who recruits you, another who pays you, another who hands over the merchandise, each one you see only once.”



The brokers themselves, though, work far from the action and are never seen anywhere near the drugs.

“[González] Polanco is one of them but almost nobody has seen him,” said the fisherman. “All of us who move merchandise get paid when we hand it over, and that is it.”

Despite his drug trafficking conviction, Gordito González’s main advantage is his ongoing alliances with corrupt state actors. Multiple sources in the region and nationally told InSight Crime he had close ties with the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB).

“[González] Polanco is a heavyweight with the National Guard, he has a lot of allies in the ranks,” said a military officer in Falcón, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. “The GNB commanders in Falcón help him move the merchandise and he has political support as well.”

How Gordito González salvaged his state connections, even as his niece settled in Colombia with one of the regime’s most reviled traitors, is a mystery. The same goes for how he continues to operate from prison – or even if he truly is in prison.

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*“There are military and government officials that are accomplices of these brokers, their aim is to get money and to keep themselves in power.”*

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In early 2020, several sources told InSight Crime that Gordito González was running his operations from a prison in Barquisimeto in the state of Lara, though one source named him as being at Vista Alegre Prison in Anzoátegui. By 2021, multiple sources were convinced that Gordito González was, in fact, in El Helicoide, the prison that houses political prisoners and other high-profile inmates in Caracas.

Several others claimed that he now lives with his family in Panama. Media reports are no clearer and [include reports that he escaped](#) prison as long ago as 2013. One source even suggested that Gordito González’s whole imprisonment is a ruse.

Many of those consulted said they would not be surprised if any of those versions turned out to be true, but all were convinced of one thing – wherever he is he is not confined to a prison cell.

No matter his location, the fact that Gordito González is still one of the most powerful traffickers in Venezuela over a decade after his arrest is testament to his ability to adapt to the evolving role of broker in the Venezuelan drug trade. But the real secret to his longevity has been his capacity to continue making himself useful to the Cartel of the Suns networks and the regulators of the drug trade at the upper levels of the Venezuelan government.

“There are military and government officials that are accomplices of these brokers, their aim is to get money and to keep themselves in power,” said Camero. “There are many, many people involved in the drug trade in Venezuela at the very highest levels.”





InSight Crime is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime. For a decade, InSight Crime has crossed borders and institutions – as an amalgam of journalism outlet, think tank and academic resource – to deepen the debate and inform on organized crime in the Americas. On-the-ground reporting, careful research and impactful investigations are hallmarks of the organization from the very beginning.

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