

The Expansion of Police Violence and Impunity in Venezuela

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Police violence in Venezuela has been on the rise since at least the 1980s. This violence attracted international attention in 1989 when police officers participated in viciously repressing protests and lootings referred to as *El Caracazo*. According to official figures state security forces killed 277 people over two days, but human rights organizations placed the number of deaths much higher (Coronil & Skurski 2006). By the early 2000s Venezuelan police forces were competing for the highest number of abuses in the region, moving from nine civilian deaths for each officer killed in 2000 to 28 in 2001 (Ungar 2003).

If excessive and extrajudicial use of force has long been accepted by and even encouraged within security institutions in the country (Antillano 2010, CONAREPOL 2007), police violence has reached unprecedented highs under the government of Nicolás Maduro. Since 2015 state security forces have been responsible for a significant portion of violent deaths each year, with special tactical units in the Bolivarian National Police frequently ranked as one of the most lethal groups in the country. A comparison between Brazil and Venezuela is instructive. Since 2016 state security forces in Venezuela have killed people at a rate three times higher than in Brazil. In 2016, in a country with 209 million inhabitants, Brazil's security forces were responsible for 4,219 deaths, or 7% of violent deaths in the country. In Venezuela, with a population of around 30 million, security forces killed 4,667 people, making the state responsible for 21% of deaths. By 2019 the percent of violent deaths perpetrated by state security forces had reached forty-four percent (Hanson, Smilde, and Zubillaga 2022).

My research in recent years has focused on this astonishing rise in police violence in the country, to understand how and why violence increased so rapidly and what policing practices can tell us about Chavismo's legacy. In my forthcoming book, *Policing the Revolution: The Transformation of Security and Violence in Venezuela during Chavismo*, I analyze how failed efforts to reduce police violence under Hugo Chávez and the political, economic, and humanitarian crisis that has defined Maduro's presidency saw his government support extreme *mano dura* policies, expanding impunity for the police.¹ At the same time, other government policies saw coercive power disperse and impunity expand for non-state armed actors (see also Smilde, Zubillaga, and Hanson 2022), resulting in a chaotic security landscape in which multiple state and non-state armed groups supported or tolerated by the government have competed for control over territory and resources. As I discuss below, this chaotic landscape and its primary victims contradict popular ideas about how authoritarian power operates in the country and who it targets.

In the case of impunity for police, I refer not only to crimes and violence that police officers get away with due to an *inability* of the state to investigate and sanction but also the *active participation* of state actors in allowing and encouraging violence and certain crimes. Two initiatives implemented by the Maduro government provide insight into how state policies have expanded impunity, resulting in the most lethal policing practices ever seen in the country. The first, the *Operación de Liberación*

¹ On efforts to reduce police violence in Venezuela see Antillano 2016; El Achkar, 2012; Gabaldón, 2013.

del Pueblo [Operation Liberation of the People] or OLP implemented in 2015, deployed police forces alongside the National Guard; state actors justified this deployment by claiming the plan would “eradicate” criminals and paramilitary forces. A year after the OLP was implemented the number of people killed by the police skyrocketed. In 2017, after consistent public criticism, the government added “humanist” to the plan’s name, changing it to *Operación de Liberación Humanista del Pueblo* (OLHP). The initiative did not last long after the name change; instead, it was phased out and replaced by new special tactical groups housed within the *Policía Nacional Bolivariana* [Bolivarian National Police] or PNB. These tactical units, the *Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales* or FAES, were created in 2017 and were announced by Vice-Minister of Citizen Security Alexis Escalona Marrero as working “day in and day out...in the streets with the goal of defending the people, always adhering to the respect and guarantee of human rights” (Runrun.es 2018). The units, however, quickly outpaced the OLP in terms of human rights violations. Only a year into their inception the FAES were implicated in numerous massacres, including a juvenile detention center in Amazonas state (Provea 2019).

Raids (often “mixed commissions,” or raids that involved both the police and military) were the modus operandi of both the OLP and the FAES. While raids have become an increasingly common crime-fighting strategy since the 1970s in Venezuela (Hernández 1991), the number of officers involved and the expansive impunity officers enjoyed in recent years distinguished these raids from their predecessors. In interviews, community residents described officers arriving in groups of 50 or more, unloading from unmarked trucks and jeeps, and swarming into the barrios on foot with high-caliber weapons. Officers often entered homes by breaking down doors, usually in the early hours of the morning when people were still asleep. In a survey we conducted in 2018, 53% of respondents said they felt less safe in their communities after an OLP raid (Hanson and Gómez 2018). When asked why, 61% responded that it was because officers “entered homes without permission or a warrant.”

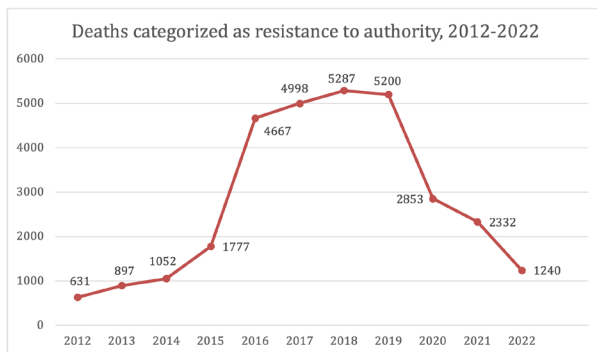
Robbery during raids became commonplace. After breaking in, officers often stole appliances, clothes, cash, and cellphones; refrigerators and furniture were even loaded into unmarked police vehicles. Memes began popping up online warning Venezuelans to hide even their dirty laundry before a raid took place.

If from the outside raids seemed like a continuation of traditional practices, they also indicated rupture as practices were aimed toward new ends. Past raids were focused on arrest and incarceration while, as Verónica Zubillaga, Leonard Gómez, and I have argued, systematic killing became an additional metric of success (Zubillaga and Hanson 2018, Gómez and Hanson 2022). Officers we interviewed consistently used words like “eliminate,” “liquidate,” and “wipe out” when we asked them why the government created the OLP and then the FAES. In the words of one PNB officer: “*La OLP no significa la Operación de Liberación del Pueblo, sino la Operación Liquidar al Pueblo*” [The OLP doesn’t mean Operation Liberation of the People but rather Operation Eliminate the People]. Nicolás Maduro has also deployed this rhetoric at public events. In a phone call to an event celebrating recent graduates of the SEBIN, Venezuela’s political police, Maduro referred to criminals as terrorists, declaring: “We must hit violence and terrorism before they act...our greatest victory is a preventative hit, to neutralize them, to ...wipe them out, before the terrorists act” (Provea 2021).

In interviews, officers spoke of killing as a requirement of the job, an indicator of success for those engaged in OLP and FAES raids. Rather than understood as “collateral damage”—language often used by police when they took a life before the OLP—officers spoke of death as the goal. In our interview with a former FAES officer, he stated without hesitation: “They line you up in formation, the big bosses [say]: “Today I want a body...each brigade has to bring in a body”.

This turn to systematic killing had devastating effects, resulting in thousands of people killed each year by state security forces. The International Criminal Court has taken steps to investigate these and other human

rights violations—Venezuela has been under preliminary examination for crimes against humanity by the Office of the Prosecutor since February 2018—despite numerous attempts by the government to block the investigation.



This graph shows the number of people categorized as killed by state security forces due to resistance to authority, which increased significantly the year after the OLP was implemented. Deaths within this category ostensibly occur when a person violently resists arrest or police intervention.

Sources: Ministerio Público, CICPC, United Nations, and El Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia

As I show in *Policing the Revolution*, impunity for crimes committed during raids was extended from the top down. Both the OLP and FAES units were proposed within the Ministry of Justice, with the minister overseeing their creation and implementation. As tactical groups within the PNB, the FAES should report and be accountable to a director of this police force. Yet, each of the FAES officers that we interviewed reported that they did not receive orders from the PNB director but instead from the minister of justice (at the time National Guard Commander General Néstor Reverol). Officers also spoke of protection they believed they would receive from the Ministry of Justice if someone lodged a report against them. One FAES officer told us: “If a complaint appears, at the end of the day nothing happens because we clean things up [*se cuadra bien*]. Besides, we are protected by the minister.” When we asked another FAES officer if he was worried someone might report violations committed by the tactical units he replied, “Who the fuck is going to report us? And if they report us, we have a green light, we are untouchable. Those who kill must die, it is the only way to solve this shit.”

A report issued by the UN’s International Fact-Finding Mission (2020) in Venezuela corroborates the impunity police officers who participated in raids enjoyed. According to the UN report, “far from being isolated acts...crimes are coordinated and committed in conformity with state policy, with the knowledge and direct support of commanders and high-ranking members of the government” (Venezuela-FFM 2020). The Fact-Finding Mission reported that in most cases where killings were committed by security forces, no one was prosecuted (Venezuela-FFM 2020).

This staggering increase in state violence is perhaps unsurprising given the government’s blatant turn to authoritarianism. Authoritarian states have historically been characterized by an excessive centralization of power and intense efforts to monopolize violence as they attempt to neutralize opponents and avoid overthrow. Impunity for repression and violence becomes widespread as the state empowers security forces to police resistance and opposition through highly coordinated violence wielded by ideologically driven officers (see Davis, 2010; Hagenloh, 2009; Savelsberg, 2000). Much reporting during this period has framed police violence in Venezuela in this way, with a focus on political persecution. For example, opposition politicians in the country have highlighted the police’s political persecution. After a battle for control over a National Guard command station between gangs and state security forces in March 2021, Delsa Solórzano—National Assembly representative and vocal member of the opposition—told the press “While Caracas is at the mercy of delinquents...state security forces dedicate themselves to political persecution but not to pursuing criminals.”

Indeed, both the OLP and the FAES were initially deployed in moments of acute instability for the government. In 2015, the same year that OLP raids began, there were National Assembly elections in which the opposition coalition won a majority of the seats. In 2017, the year the FAES were created, the government’s decision to rewrite the constitution and effectively dissolve the National Assembly and replace it with a Constituent National Assembly controlled by

Chavismo resulted in massive and sustained protests. Yet, a focus on police violence as a tool to punish political dissidents in Venezuela overlooks one of the most tragic ironies of the Bolivarian Revolution—the same populations that supported and had been the face of Chavismo were targeted and executed by Maduro’s government.

Indeed, most OLP and FAES raid victims were not political actors. Rather than political opponents it was young men from popular sectors who were positioned as the most dangerous threat to state and society. Around 96% of raid victims each year were men between the ages of 15 and 30 from excluded sectors with little education who worked in the informal sector or were unemployed (Monitor de Víctimas, 2018; Lupa por la Vida 2021). In interviews, officers alluded to a certain profile when talking about the targets of raids—“because he is black” or “he has a tattoo”—a profile built on the criminalized bodies of youths established by the media’s crime chronicles and discourses reproduced by state actors and the police.

The frequency with which officers killed and injured young men in the barrios was recognized in memes shared by barrio residents. Memes referenced young men’s response to FAES units when they entered a barrio, suggesting that running (and running fast) was the only option to stay alive. One meme used photographs of Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt to highlight men’s (particularly dark-skinned men’s) reactions when a FAES vehicle showed up.



The top frame of the meme reads, “Where did you learn to run so fast?” The bottom frame reads, “I was with some friends on the corner and a FAES truck showed up out of nowhere.”

It is also important to embed these raids within a broader transformation of the security landscape that has taken place in the past twenty years. As I show in my forthcoming book, Chavismo has never been an ordered or consistent project. Nor did it produce the kind of hierarchical regime or penetration of society often associated with socialist, revolutionary, and authoritarian projects of the past. Even as it shifted towards open authoritarianism under President Nicolás Maduro the state remained highly fragmented and internally chaotic. This is perhaps nowhere clearer than when we look at those institutions that we presume are synonymous with state control.

Rather than a police state, it is more accurate to think of Maduro’s survival as dependent on multiple armed groups with distinct interests competing for resources and recognition from state actors. Police power and impunity have expanded but at the same time coercive power has been decentralized and social control has been outsourced to non-state armed groups. In some places, this has involved efforts to expand the role of Chavista civilian organizations—including groups often referred to as *colectivos*—in national security. Take the *Plan Estratégico Especial Cívico-Militar Zamora*, which sought

to expand the role of civilian groups in securing the nation. While Maduro described the plan as a tool to liberate territory from right-wing paramilitaries, NGOs in the country argued that it allowed paramilitary groups to police territory alongside the National Guard (Provea 2017). In other places, the government has constructed pacts with gangs that allow members to engage in illicit activities in exchange for reducing visible violence in their areas (Zubillaga, Hanson, and Antillano 2021). All these moves have resulted in impunity for multiple state and non-state armed actors as the government attempts to survive and consolidate in post-Chávez Venezuela.

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