



Venezuela's government has taken over several prisons previously run by criminal leaders, or pranes.

News Prisons

Is the 'Pran' System in Venezuela's Prisons Finished?

by *Venezuela Investigative Unit*
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The system that delegated power in Venezuela's prisons to *pranes*, or criminal leaders, seems to be ending after a series of military takeovers of jails by President Nicolás Maduro, as he eyes re-election in 2024.

On the morning of November 10, security forces **stormed** the San Felipe Judicial Prison, known as La Cuarta, in Yaracuy state, releasing yet another prison from the grip of pranes and seemingly returning it to state control.

Hours before the intervention, Fredy Barboza Ilarraza, alias "La Charro," the pran of La Cuarta, said goodbye to the prison population with a message he posted on his social networks, thanking them for their support. Local media reported unofficially that the pran and his six closest associates were the first to leave the prison, in a scene that has become common in the growing list of prison takeovers, where criminal leaders are suspected of negotiating handovers with the government.

Por aquí la charro , gracias gracias gracias .
por su preocupación de esos hermano amigo
amiga, familias , cuenten conmigo por q soy
amigo de los amigo como se lo demostrado
fue un placer aver ayudado a muchas
personas q lo necesitaron lo hice con todo el
corazón del mundo , feliz por q se q no lo hice
mal en el poquito tiempo q estuve aquí. Dios tu
más q nadie lo sabe , bendiciones para todos q
dios me los bendiga, . El. Brother 🙏🙏🙏

San Felipe Judicial Prison's pran, alias "La Charro" says goodbye to his supporters via social media.

Retaking Control of Prisons

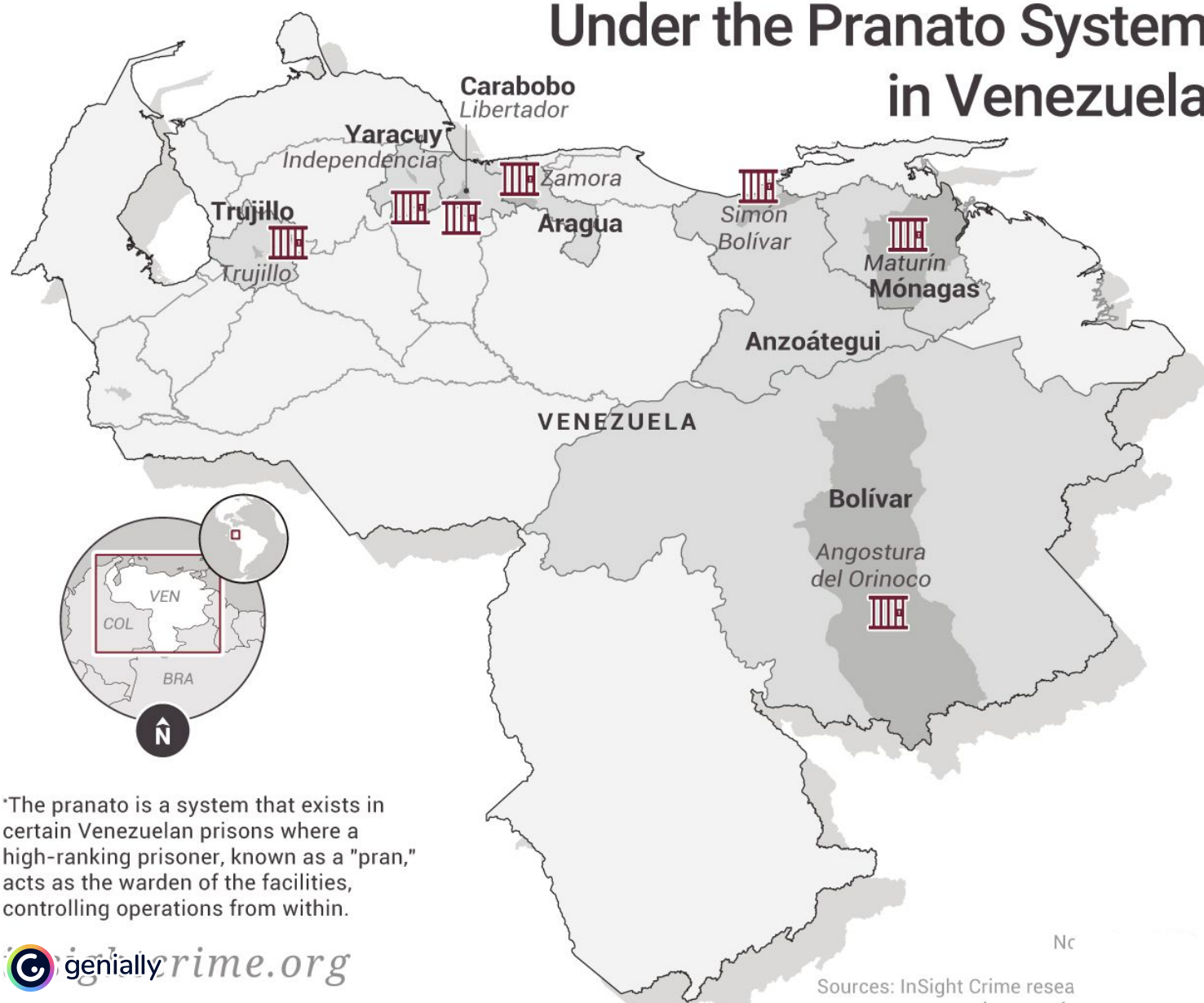
La Cuarta is one of seven prisons that have been **seized** in the last two months as part of Operation Gran Cacique Guaicaipuro, a government plan to retake control of jails governed by pranes. The operation began with the September 20 takeover of Venezuela's most **notorious jail** of Tocarón, **home** to the country's most powerful prison gang, the **Tren de Aragua**.

On October 25, authorities seized the Tocuyito prison in Carabobo state, which was controlled by Néstor Richardi, better known as "Richardi," whose location remains unknown after the takeover. Five days later, the operation **took** the Puente Ayala Penitentiary Center, in Anzoátegui state. This, like most of the other invasions, seemed to be a pre-announced operation. Prison leader Yuniór Yagüez, alias "Pata e' Queso," and his *luceros*, the name given to a pran's lieutenants, had been **removing** their belongings — including cash, animals, and electrical appliances — for days.

The first week of November, the military took the Monagas Judicial Prison, also known as La Pica, in Monagas, and the Vista Hermosa Judicial Prison, located in Bolívar state. Just 48 hours later, security forces **deployed** around the Trujillo Judicial Prison. The prison was controlled by Alvaro Montilla, alias "**El Loro**," who along with two of his lieutenants surrendered to authorities and left the prison in vans guarded by police the night before the takeover, **according to** the Venezuelan Prisons Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones – OVP).

 Click on each state to see further details

State Takeovers of Prisons Under the Pranato System in Venezuela



*The pranato is a system that exists in certain Venezuelan prisons where a high-ranking prisoner, known as a "pran," acts as the warden of the facilities, controlling operations from within.

 [genially](https://genially.com) crime.org

With the operation in Trujillo, the Minister of Interior and Justice, Remigio Ceballos Ichaso, effectively announced the end of the pran-led prison system.

“We have eliminated the *pranato* in Venezuela, and those who try to implement these practices again will be brought to justice,” Ceballos **declared** in a video statement filmed in Trujillo.

SEE ALSO: [*The Devolution of State Power: The Pranes*](#)

Despite Minister Ceballos’ **boasts** that the state now controls “100% of all the prisons in the country,” there is a great deal of uncertainty around the operations and many of the pranes’ locations. Several of the pranes have simply disappeared, most notably Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, alias “**Niño Guerrero**,” the head of Tren de Aragua.

Officials have also **failed to report** how many inmates were killed during the prison takeovers, how many escaped, and what weapons and money they took with them.

End of a Criminal Era

The practice of giving power to pranes in exchange for help controlling prisons in **Venezuela** began to emerge after 2007, during **Tareck El Aissami's** tenure as Minister of Interior and Justice. In 2011, it was fully cemented under Iris Varela, the first Minister of Penitentiary Services.

The pranato system was created in response to a **humiliating uprising** in **Venezuela's** already notoriously violent and chaotic prison system. In what **became** a media circus, a 26-year-old *pran* held some 4,000 members of the security forces at bay for 27 days in Miranda state's Rodeo prison, just 40 kilometers east of Caracas, in May 2011. Then-President Hugo Chávez set up the Ministry of Penitentiary Services with orders to ensure he was never embarrassed by this type of event again.

Thus, the pranato system was implemented. For years, the tacit agreement between state authorities and the pranes consisted of allowing, and even protecting, the existence of criminal structures inside the prisons in exchange for order.

“For the state, it is easier for Niño Guerrero to run the prison because he has been able to manage it,” a former official from the Ministry of Penitentiary Services **told** InSight Crime before the September takeover of Tocarón.

After Varela's decision to hand over jail management to the prisoners, the pranes extended their reach far beyond the prison walls. The most successful of the prison gangs was Tren de Aragua, which **grew into** a transnational criminal actor with an established presence in Colombia, Chile, and Peru by using migration routes and exploiting Venezuelan migrants.

SEE ALSO: Tren de Aragua: From Prison Gang to Transnational Criminal Enterprise

While the government's recent offensive has made headlines, removing some of the most notorious pranes and shifting inmates around an already overcrowded jail system will not solve **Venezuela's** prison crisis. Brutality and violence are likely to continue. The Maduro regime has been skirting bankruptcy for years, and there is no funding available to significantly improve prison conditions, especially with regard to **overcrowding** and food **shortages**.

“We don't know what the impact of these measures will be in terms of citizen security, in the penitentiary area, and with organized crime,” warned Ronna Rísquez, a prison researcher and author of the book *The Aragua Train: the gang that revolutionized crime in Latin America* (*El Tren de Aragua: la banda que revoluciona el crimen en América Latina*).

The 2024 Presidential Elections

In the 2018 elections, Maduro's victory was widely disputed internationally and by the **Venezuelan** opposition. As the country prepares for presidential elections next year, Maduro is not only seeking international recognition for the electoral process, but also legitimacy for his government as he bids for reelection.

Maduro has turned to burnishing his security credentials — a familiar path for incumbent politicians.

“It seems to me that this is a political move to make it look like they are doing away with the pranes, that the security of the country is the priority,” Una Ventana a la Libertad research coordinator Magally Huggings said. “Everything has to do with the current political situation, with the crisis that the government faces after the [opposition] primaries.”

The **Venezuelan** opposition, long divided, appears rejuvenated after María Corina Machado's overwhelming victory in the primaries held in October, threatening Maduro's chances of remaining in power. Despite allowing the primaries to happen, Maduro has blocked Machado from running for now, but the reapplication of US sanctions and international condemnation await him if he maintains this position.

On the domestic front, the government is trying to sell the operation as a successful result of its security policy. State media and officials have replicated images depicting the deployment of thousands of soldiers and police with riot gear, armored vehicles, and helicopters around prisons, making a show of security forces' power.



Not found

Seguimos en el combate directo contra el delito y la delincuencia, estén dónde estén. Gracias al trabajo mancomunado de todos los organismos de seguridad, hemos tomado control total de los recintos penitenciarios del país, siguiendo las instrucciones de nuestro CJ Nicolas Maduro...

pic.twitter.com/bquYzLrcjr

— M/G Elio Estrada Paredes (@ElioEstrada18) **November 10, 2023**

Abroad, Tren de Aragua, now **present** in at least three other South American countries, has become an international liability. By taking Tocorón jail, Maduro looked to weaken international criticism and portray strength at home. With **Venezuela** now exporting crime, attacking the pranato system had apparently become a political no-brainer.