

News Judicial Reform

Back-to-Back Scandals Lift Lid on Venezuela's Judicial Corruption

by *Venezuela Investigative Unit*

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In an unusual start to the year, Venezuelan authorities have charged, dismissed, and even arrested a series of judicial officials accused of corruption across Venezuela.

Venezuelan authorities rarely make such accusations this publicly, so the arrests and the release of evidence, including covert audio recordings, offer an unexpected insight into the black box of judicial corruption.

Below, InSight Crime maps these recent cases and unpacks the underlying dynamics driving this corruption, which experts say is less institutional failure and more institutional manipulation.

A Flurry of Corruption Cases

The biggest of the judicial corruption scandals alleges that a human rights prosecutor and a public defender took bribes from Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, alias “[Niño Guerrero](#),” the fugitive leader of Tren de Aragua, Venezuela’s most powerful criminal outfit.

At the end of January, Venezuela’s Attorney General, Tarek William Saab, [ordered the arrest](#) of prosecutor Renny Amundaraín Durán and public defender Adys Salcedo on charges of intentional delay or omission of duties, obstruction of the administration of justice, and criminal association.

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Venezuelan authorities **alleged** that the two judicial officials accepted \$360,000 from an unnamed Tren de Aragua leader, promising to secure favorable treatment for imprisoned members of the leader's family and to return assets seized by the state. When the prosecutor and the public defender allegedly failed to hold up their end of the deal, the Tren de Aragua leader mailed an envelope with incriminating recordings to the Attorney General's Office, Venezuelan authorities said.

"He is more of a criminal than I am, he is more of a bandit than I am," the frustrated gang leader **can be heard** saying to public defender Salcedo in one of the calls, referring to prosecutor Amundaraín's failure to deliver on his promise.

Although Venezuelan officials have not confirmed it, the leader is widely believed to be Niño Guerrero, the powerful Tren de Aragua chieftain.

Guerrero has been on the run since October 2023, when Venezuelan authorities **retook control** of Tocarón prison, the seat of power from which Guerrero ran Tren de Aragua.

This judicial scandal involving Guerrero followed on the heels of another, which dominated headlines in Venezuela throughout December 2023.

It broke when a Venezuelan journalist **released audios** in which a woman, allegedly the presiding judge of the Judicial Circuit for the Protection of Boys, Girls, and Adolescents (Circuito Judicial de Protección de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes) in the Venezuelan state of Zulia, Marjorie Zucoswki Portillo Ramírez, can be heard instructing judicial employees to demand food and money from people who need the court's services.

Portillo Ramírez's corruption was reportedly an open secret, and prior to the leaked audios, judicial workers had **published** an open letter in which they said she was unfit for the position.

"Since Portillo Ramírez's arrival, practicing the law in this Judicial Circuit has become an ordeal," the letter reads. "Outrage, humiliation, and violations of rights, including human rights, have become the order of the day for lawyers and users of the Protection System."

A Broken Institution

While the cases seem driven, in part, by some element of organized crime — especially that regarding Niño Guerrero — they also highlight how dysfunctional, backlogged courts and low government salaries are driving systemic corruption in Venezuela's court system.

Portillo Ramírez, Amundaraín Durán, and Salcedo are not the first to be accused. **According** to Saab, the Attorney General's Office has charged 412 judicial officials for corruption during his tenure and convicted nearly 40.

Earlier in 2023, Una Ventana a la Libertad (A Window to Liberty), a Venezuelan non-governmental organization working on prison issues, **said** it had received multiple complaints about judges demanding bribes in exchange for everything from granting basic human rights measures to rulings on releasing gang members. It cited the case of Óscar Enrique Guzmán Chirinos, alias "Conas," who, after escaping prison in 2021, **accused** the judge presiding over his case of soliciting \$50,000 in exchange for a "not guilty" verdict.

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As with other Venezuelan public institutions, corruption is systematic; without it, judicial employees fall below the poverty line.

Salaries for Venezuelan judges range from \$100-240 per month, depending on rank. **According to** the CEDICE Liberty Public Spending Observatory, the average Venezuelan family needs about \$500 to survive. InSight Crime could not confirm the average salaries for prosecutors and public defenders, but experts say they are equally inadequate.

"The administration has become flexible, allowing civil servants to have other jobs or other sources of income. What happens is that in some cases these sources of income are illegal," a Venezuelan judicial expert who asked to remain anonymous for fear of government reprisals told InSight Crime.

In coercing her subordinates, Portillo Ramírez seemed to directly play on this reality.

"We are not going to live off of our salaries," she allegedly told them in the recordings. "We all live on the favors that we do for our acquaintances, contacts, etc."

And, while low salaries drive judicial officials to corruption, a dysfunctional court system gives them cover for that corruption.

For instance, although Venezuelan law **gives** officials two years to sentence someone accused of a crime, in reality that law is not enforced, multiple experts told InSight Crime. This provides judicial authorities with an opportunity to extort convicted criminals, they said.

"No one complies. It is a dead text within the Organic Code of Criminal Procedure," Carlos Nieto, Una Ventana a la Libertad coordinator, said. "We have had prisoners who have had their release papers for months, but they continue to be detained."

In the recordings of Portillo Ramírez, for example, she can allegedly be heard encouraging her subordinates to promise detainees' desperate family members to resolve long overdue legal issues in their case in exchange for bribes.

Corruption By Design

Venezuela's judicial branch is not immune to the country's overall corruption and clientelism. It **rank**s near-last for adherence to the rule of law in the world, according to the World Justice Project index. This failure is by design, experts told InSight Crime.

Before he cut a deal with Niño Guerrero, Amundaraín led the investigations for **several** high-profile extrajudicial killing **cases** and spearheaded the arrests of **activists** and **journalists** critical of the regime of President Nicolás Maduro.

Experts told InSight Crime that this is not a coincidence. Salaries are kept low in part to allow the regime to control Venezuela's judiciary, they said.

The logic is that, since surviving on a judicial salary is impossible, some level of corruption becomes inevitable. This allows Maduro insiders to leverage impunity, offering it to those judicial officials loyal to its interests while holding the possibility of prosecution as an implicit threat for those who do not go along.

Investigations by the **United Nations** and **Venezuelan NGOs** have come to the same conclusion. Senior government figures routinely dictate how judges rule on cases, **according to** a United Nations fact-finding mission report, which found that judges themselves commit crimes with impunity.

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