

## After Venezuela Elections, Criminal Groups Work For or Against the Regime

by *Venezuela Investigative Unit*

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On the morning of July 29, a few hours after the announcement of controversial results of the presidential elections in Venezuela, the sound of pots and pans rang out in the 23 de Enero neighborhood in Caracas, a Chavismo stronghold and pillar of the “Bolivarian Revolution.” Residents of the neighborhood, where the remains of former President Hugo Chávez lie, were protesting in rejection of the declaration of victory by President Nicolás Maduro.

In 23 de Enero, it wasn’t just the eyes of Chávez, painted on the walls every few meters, that were observing the residents. Armed pro-government civilian groups called *colectivos* also kept watch. In the days after the vote, they mobilized, with government protection, to leave written messages on the houses or streets outside the front doors of opponents, activists and citizens who came out to march.

The *colectivos* have long been a weapon for state repression, and this time was no different. They’re known as **hybrid groups**, because they maintain a symbiotic relationship with the state, via which they systematically collaborate and cooperate. And they’re not the only ones. In border areas, the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) has been carrying out threats against protesters, and even pressuring them to vote.

Other criminal groups, such as the Tren del Llano, have declared war against the regime, opening a battlefield in which the civilian population is caught in the crossfire.

The roles played by non-state armed groups, whether adversarial or hybrid, following the electoral outcome in Venezuela have an agenda that reflects their particular interests. While some seek to maintain the criminal status quo in Venezuela, others seek to regain ground amid the fight against the government. Following allegations of electoral fraud by Maduro, waves of protests have rocked the country, and the repression of the demonstrations has been fierce. To date, 23 people have been killed, according to media reports, and between 1,500 and more than 2,500 people have been detained, according to human rights organizations.

InSight Crime explores three different responses from criminal groups in Venezuela following the elections.

## The Return of the Colectivos

After a long time operating in the shadows, the colectivos have returned to the limelight in one of the most crucial moments for the government. Since the presidential vote, they have been mobilized by the Venezuelan regime, confirming once again that they are a strategic tool for dispersing protests.

Repression by the colectivos began long before Maduro was declared the winner. In Monagas, for example, the colectivos carried out armed attacks against citizens at voting stations, injuring an elderly woman.

This was only the beginning. In Caracas, colectivos deployed during protests and shot at civilians in front of law enforcement officers, demonstrating their collusion with government officials. At least six people have been killed by colectivos, according to newspaper [reports](#).

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One of the sectors most hit by colectivos is the 23 de Enero neighborhood, in Caracas, in particular the Sierra Maestra and La Piedrita sectors. Both for years have been under the control of the [Piedrita colectivo](#), one of the best-known and most violent of these groups that has sworn to defend the Bolivarian revolution “at all costs.”

The regime's use of the colectivos is a win-win strategy for both sides. On the one hand, the reliance on paramilitary forces prevents high-ranking members of the security forces from being held accountable

in international courts in the short term, while, for the colectivos, government protection helps them secure control over criminal economies and key territories.

## Guerrilla Take Low Profile on Border

The ELN, which has a presence in the states of Táchira and Apure on the border with Colombia, helped secure votes for Maduro ahead of the July election. But after election day, the Colombian guerrilla group has acted cautiously.

The ELN's usual role in Venezuelan elections stems from their interdependent relationship with the government. It needs the approval of the regime to operate freely, while the state needs its presence to help maintain social and criminal control.

InSight Crime sought statements from multiple sources in both Táchira and Apure, but the constant threats against citizens and journalists made it difficult to gather more testimonies about the ELN's actions in the area.

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According to an inhabitant of Lobatera, a small municipality located in Táchira who spoke to InSight Crime anonymously because of safety concerns, the ELN was patrolling the streets before and during election day to get residents to vote for Maduro. "They were intimidating and the people didn't stop halfway. People voted against. That is Chavista territory, but the people lost their fear," he said.

During the night they were present again, stealing and instilling fear to avoid protests. "They pointed [firearms] at the boys. They told them to stop calling the people [to protest] and that what will happen was their fault and they had better leave," he said.

In San Pedro del Río, a town in the municipality of Ayacucho, **citizen reports** claim that the guerrillas were responsible for leaving graffiti threatening anyone who dared to protest. In El Nula, Apure, they allegedly held meetings with sectors of society, encouraging them to vote for Maduro, a resident told InSight Crime on condition of anonymity. Meanwhile, in the municipality of Romulo Gallegos, **the group prevented** opposition personnel from getting to polling stations in rural areas. According to published reports, the opposition won in both places.

The absence of violent actions against residents is a cautious strategy for the ELN, which may be aimed at avoiding more attention from the international community, which is closely observing the



situation in Venezuela. In addition, the role of the ELN in scenarios of social repression may also be a double-edged sword in the peace negotiations with the Colombian government, in which Caracas has participated as a mediator.

## Tren del Llano Goes Against Maduro

The Tren del Llano, criminal group, on the other hand, came out against Maduro, who has launched a number of attacks on the gang, which began in a local prison. Amid the political commotion, this group has taken the opportunity to strengthen its “Robin Hood” reputation, claiming that it will defend people from the repression orchestrated by the regime.

The gang has used social media to threaten the security forces, including a video featuring the alleged leader of the group, Óscar de Jesús Noguera Hernández, alias “Óscar del Llano.”

“We are making this video to make a call to the armed forces and the public forces of the state. We do not want to generate more violence. My advice is that, listening to the people, they stay in their trenches and let the people decide and install and remove who they choose to put in and who they have to remove,” said Noguera Hernández, who is one of Venezuela’s **10 most wanted** criminals.

The Tren del Llano appears to be using the political situation as an excuse to take to the streets and conquer territories they had lost following government repression, as well as to increase their resources. A video showed them attempting to enter a police station. The gangs’ posturing is also helping strengthen its reputation among residents who may oppose the security forces due to the serious human rights violations they committed in Guárico, such as those registered in **Operation Thunder**. This notwithstanding the Tren de Llano’s own reputation for brutal violence in the pursuit of its own goals.

But the uprising against the Maduro government did not go unnoticed. Since August 6, about 6,000 military personnel have been **deployed** to Guárico, the hometown and base of Tren del Llano, and several members of the gang have been arrested. So far it is unclear how long the regime can maintain such a deployment, since military resources are also being used to manage anti-government protests around the country.

The Tren del Llano has demonstrated a high level of criminal resilience, surviving the death of its leaders, fragmentations, and heavy state operations against it. But the new affront against Maduro could be severely punished by the regime to make an example of them, and as a warning to other non-aligned groups considering following the same path.

*Featured image: Threatening graffiti displayed in municipalities on the Venezuela-Colombia border.*

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