



News Security Policy

Venezuela 2024: Elections and Criminal Consolidation

by *Venezuela Investigative Unit*

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It is an election year in **Venezuela**, and President Nicolás Maduro is determined to cling to power. His criminal alliances will be crucial for the survival of his regime.

The Maduro regime is built on a hybrid system of governance, an alliance between the government and organized crime networks, a symbiotic relationship where non-state armed groups (NSAGs) provide senior Chavistas with access to criminal rents and repress activity in their areas of influence. In return, the state tolerates, and in some cases actively protects, their activities. The year 2024 is likely to see the further consolidation of this system.

During 2023, Maduro's administration took a *mano dura*, or iron fist, approach to establishing order amid the proliferation of crime in the country, launching multiple "**mega-operations**." In a highly publicized campaign, authorities targeted prisons, drug trafficking organizations, urban gangs, and illegal mining syndicates.

However, many researchers, academics, journalists, and social leaders who spoke with InSight Crime agreed that while the government has made much of its large-scale police and military operations, these actions were more political theater than a real attempt to dismantle criminal economies. It seems as if those targeted were not adhering to the government's guidelines and regulation of criminal markets.

Hybrid armed groups such as the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – **ELN**) cooperate and coordinate actions with state elements. They are involved in illegal mining in the states of Bolívar and Amazonas, help shepherd tons of cocaine up to the Caribbean, run human smuggling and human trafficking networks, and manage contraband.

The 2024 presidential election will determine the future of this **hybrid state**, which has granted different types of licenses for hybrid armed groups and state actors to administer its widespread criminal enterprise.

Below, InSight Crime presents the 10 criminal dynamics that will mark the presidential race in **Venezuela** in 2024:

1. The Hybrid State Will Increase Repression During Presidential Elections

The **Venezuelan** government and political opposition agreed last year to hold free and fair elections, amid the lifting of some **US sanctions**. However, the Maduro regime has been tightening the screws against dissenting voices and in late January refused to lift the ban on opposition presidential candidate María Corina Machado. This violates the agreement.

Past elections were **overshadowed** by violence and intimidation, like in 2021, when a citizen was murdered in a polling station in the state of Zulia by armed groups loyal to the **Venezuelan** ruling party. Previous elections, including the 2018 presidential contest, have not received official recognition amid allegations of widespread intimidation and irregularities.

In mid-January, Maduro issued **threats** against non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and launched the Bolivarian Fury Plan (Plan Furia Bolivariana), which greenlights security force actions against dissidents to prevent “conspiracies” and “terrorist attacks.”

As the year progresses, we will likely see other forms of coercion, including hybrid armed groups such as the *colectivos* and the ELN controlling the supply of important goods such as gasoline and food to either bribe or strong-arm voters.

Despite the increased international attention and threat of sanctions, previous experience demonstrates that Maduro will not hesitate to use political violence if he feels his position is threatened.

2. Mega-Operations: PR Boost and Regulation of Criminal Economies

Since 2022, authorities have adopted large-scale military deployments as a method of targeting high-profile gang leaders who refuse to fall into step with Maduro's government.

But 2023's operations failed to bring down the criminal kingpins on the government's **top 10** most wanted list, including **Tren del Llano** leader, Óscar de Jesús Noguera Hernández, alias "El Pipi" or **Wilexis Acevedo**, alias "Wilexis," head of the gang that rules the José Félix Ribas neighborhood in Caracas. And although official reports state security forces wounded Miranda gang leader Deiber Johan González, alias "Carlos Capa," his death remains unconfirmed.

Mega operations deployed in Venezuela in 2023



Despite these failures, there has been a strong positive reaction to state content promoting the mega-operations on social media, so Maduro’s regime has a political interest in continuing them, Ezequiel Monsalve, litigation coordinator for Defiende Venezuela, explained to InSight Crime.

“The fight against crime will always be a good argument to gain followers, especially in populist governments,” he said.

In the coming year, as the government seeks to enforce political conformity and assert authority over illicit economies, mega-operations will likely be used to target criminal groups without connections to the state and further regulate criminal markets.

3. Venezuela Mega-Operations Unlikely to Stem Drug Flows Through Caribbean

Venezuela's role as a transit point **has grown** with rising **volumes of cocaine** flowing through Venezuela and the Caribbean, much of it headed for Europe.

The country saw a sharp rise in seizures on its eastern seaboard between 2022 and 2023. The state of Monagas **shot up** the country's drug-seizure rankings, with authorities seizing more than 2 tons of cocaine in 2023, compared to just 17 kilograms in 2022.

Although the government claims its large-scale military operations prove **Venezuela's commitment** to combating drug trafficking, the regime is also using them to **consolidate its control** of dominant trafficking routes. The rise in seizures is partially a result of both increased government interdiction and drug trafficking networks unaligned with state actors **looking for** alternative shipping routes.

InSight Crime predicts that in 2024 cocaine earnings will increase by billions of dollars as the global supply chain adjusts to Colombia's rising production. **Venezuela**, now a cocaine producer as well as a transit country, will likely see an even higher volume of drugs flow through its eastern states.

Still, **Venezuelan** security forces are likely to launch new **mega-operations** targeting regions that saw multi-ton shipments in 2023, with the goal of bringing these new routes under state control.

4. Elements of Underpaid Security Forces Just Another Crime Network

At the end of 2022, Maduro **announced** a program of police reform based on aggressive recruitment. Throughout 2023, the government added as many as 40,000 new officers to the force, according to public proclamations.

Reports of security officials participating in **extortion**, robbery, and **human smuggling** have regularly made headlines, especially in the latter half of 2023. In the Caracas neighborhood Cota 905, criminal networks embedded within security forces even replaced native organized crime, **according to** an investigation by the journalism outlet Connectas.

Venezuela was already struggling to pay, train, and oversee its security forces before the new recruiting drive. Security officials' salaries, which continue to be paid in bolivares despite an unofficially dollarized economy, start at around \$14 a month. Such is the cost of living in **Venezuelan**, that an average household needs \$500 a month to survive, **according** to the CEDICE Liberty Public Spending Observatory.

Venezuelan Security Force Salaries at Start of 2024

Position / Rank	Salary in Bolivares (per month)	Salary in USD (per month)
Policía Nacional Bolivariana (PNB) Oficial	505-517 bolivares	\$14.03-\$14.36
Policía Nacional Bolivariana (PNB) Supervisor	518-529 bolivares	\$14.39 - \$14.69
Policía Nacional Bolivariana (PNB) Comisionando agregado	532-544 bolivares	\$14.78 - \$15.11
Inspector in Venezuela's criminal investigation unit (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas – CICPC)	520 bolivares	\$14.44

Note: Due to the volatility of Venezuela's exchange rate all salaries have been converted to USD using the exchange rate on 19 January 2024, even though some sources reported salaries in USD.

Source: InSight Crime investigation and media monitoring.

But this hiring spree has caused minimum selection and training standards to be compromised, [according to](#) a 2022 report by MUFLVEN, a Venezuelan think tank focused on monitoring the use of lethal force. The combination of the rushed selection process and low salaries has made criminal activity increasingly tempting for security officers, Keymer Ávila, the report's author and a professor of criminology at the Institute of Criminal Sciences of the Central University of Venezuela, told InSight Crime.

“Venezuela is currently a police state, but a chaotic and fragmented one. The state has lost control over the officers, who have their own agendas and needs, which they satisfy at their own discretion and without limits,” he said.

The last batch of Venezuelan security force recruits — a reported 16,000 officers — [graduated](#) on December 21, 2023. If Ávila is right, we will see many of them directly participating in organized crime throughout 2024.

5. Venezuelan Migrants Seek Alternate Routes

The Venezuelan diaspora [grew](#) to nearly 8 million people in 2023, surpassing all previous records. In addition to the 600,000 that poured out of Venezuela last year, many left other South American nations, where they had previously settled, for new destinations. Nearly 350,000 crossed into the United States, [according to](#) data from US Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

To get there, many crossed the Darién Gap — a **dangerous patch** of jungle between Colombia and Panama where powerful organized crime networks **exert** control over human smuggling and migrant exploitation. But a growing number also sought alternative routes to the United States.

One such route takes migrants by plane from the Colombian border city of Cúcuta to the Colombian **island of San Andrés**, and then by sea to the coast of Nicaragua. This route made headlines in the second half of 2023 after Colombian authorities dismantled a sophisticated network of high-ranking state officials that smuggled migrants along it.

Such networks convince migrants that the San Andrés route is safer than the Darién in order to sell more expensive “VIP” packages.

Venezuelans are continuing to migrate, despite Maduro raising the minimum salary by 48% this year, an increase which will soon be consumed by inflation. They are traveling along a variety of routes, adapting to deterrents, whether **harsh migration policies** or dangerous crossing, by seeking alternative paths and new destinations. In 2024, human smuggling networks are set to continue exploiting these dynamics, exploiting vulnerable migrants, many heading to the United States as an alternative to **increasingly insecure** or **hostile** South American countries like Ecuador and Peru, which have hosted Venezuelan migrants for years.

6. Brazil Offers a Huge Opportunity for Tren de Aragua

No other Venezuelan criminal group has so successfully expanded on a transnational level as **Tren de Aragua**, which piggybacked on the flow of Venezuelan migrants throughout South America. With the September 2023 loss of Tocarón, the prison that had acted as the group’s headquarters, it appears that Tren de Aragua no longer enjoys the same level of cooperation from the Venezuelan state that it did in the past. As a result, its leaders may prioritize further foreign expansion, and neighboring Brazil could offer the greatest potential opportunity.

The group’s limited presence in Brazil has partly been due to the smaller number of Venezuelans migrating there amid language challenges. However, those numbers have shot up, almost doubling between November 2021 and 2023 to more than half a million, according to official figures cited by **R4V**.

And while Tren de Aragua has kept a lower profile in Brazil, the group has had a presence there for years. The security secretary of Roraima, a Brazilian state bordering Venezuela, **warned** that Tren de Aragua engaged in drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human trafficking in the city of Pacaraima, in September 2019. Police in the town of Boa Vista blamed the group for 12 murders in a six-month period in 2021.

There have also been reports that the group has an **alliance** with the First Capital Command (**Primeiro Comando da Capital – PCC**), Brazil’s largest criminal organization.

Such an alliance could potentially make both groups stronger and more difficult to tackle, Federal University of Roraima professor Rodrigo Chagas told InSight Crime.

“The biggest problem is, if Tren de Aragua forms a partnership with the PCC, what does the PCC learn from them and what do they learn from the PCC?” he said.

In 2024, we may find out the answer.

7. Venezuelan Prisons Remain Hubs for Criminal Activities

In late 2023, between September and November, the Maduro regime “[took control](#)” of seven prisons in Venezuela that were controlled by organized crime groups.

The government had ceded control to prison gangs since around 2011 after violence among prisoners reached record levels. The criminal leaders, or *pranes*, promised to [control violence](#) within prisons in exchange for power and privileges.

As part of its pre-election crackdown on crime, the Venezuelan government decided to target the pran-led prison system. However, several of the most powerful pranes escaped ahead of the security force raids, raising suspicions that they were tipped off, according to Humberto Prado, the director of the Venezuelan Prison Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones – OVP). Most notably, [Tren de Aragua](#) leader Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, alias “[Niño Guerrero](#),” fled Tocarón prison days before security forces moved in to take control.

Maduro has proclaimed the prison interventions a success and promised to continue them in the country’s other prisons. But the operations have not fixed the underlying issues that led to the evolution of the *pranato* system. With no state money to effect real change, and still more overcrowding, the prisons will likely remain centers of organized crime.

8. The Regime Will Continue to Exploit the Gold Trade in the South

Between July and September 2023, the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana – FANB) forcibly removed over 14,000 informal miners from the Cerro Yapacana National Park in the state of Amazonas, southern Venezuela. The outcome of this operation was presented as one of the most impactful crackdowns on illegal mining in the country’s recent history.

But what seemed like a targeted blow against illegal mining in Venezuela turned out to be yet another media campaign by the Maduro regime to appease [international pressure](#) around the environmental destruction of the Venezuelan Amazon. Informal mining in the area has not ceased, according to the director of SOS Orinoco, Cristina Burelli, who said that the military operation was merely a smokescreen.

“People are going up to the Yapacana National Park again, and they are reporting that the logistics remain the same,” she told InSight Crime. “That’s why we say: this was to take a photo, to make an announcement, to make a show.”

As Maduro seeks to increase revenue from gold for his beleaguered treasury, criminal structures like the **ELN** and the **Acacio Medina Front** of the **ex-FARC mafia**, manage mining activity in Amazonas and share illicit rents with the state. The regime **depends** on gold sales, amid high international prices, and will seek to tighten its grip on the gold sector during 2024.

9. Government Actions Against Smugglers Prove Toothless

The authorities hoped the reopening of the Venezuelan-Colombian border in September 2022 would **reduce** smuggling and the proliferation of via illegal border crossings known as *trochas* and provide some economic regeneration along the border.

Yet, around 60% of the vegetables sold in the country are imported **illegally**, according to the president of Venezuela's Center for Agri-Food Studies (Centro de Estudios Agroalimentarios – CEA). This illegal trade undermines efforts to rebuild Venezuela's agricultural sector.

In late October 2023, Maduro's government launched "Operation Iron Fist 2023," which aimed to "protect national industries" by employing the military to target smugglers. Despite the operation's formidable name, the results have so far been limited to mostly small seizures and little disruption of smuggling networks.

The lack of impact may be by design. Elements of the Maduro regime have come to rely on contraband, which provides an **income source** for local politicians, underpaid security forces and government allies such as the ELN who charge smugglers passing through their areas of influence. And smuggling also helps prevent shortages that could risk Maduro's popularity with voters during an election year.

10. ELN Remains Key to Colombia Border, Political Control

The signature policy of President Gustavo Petro, **"Total Peace,"** which seeks to bring an end to Colombia's six-decade-long civil conflict, has immense relevance for Venezuela. While the ELN is in stumbling peace talks with President Gustavo Petro's government in Colombia, the group's armed structures in Venezuela are growing and profit from collusion with local state elements. The Colombian rebels are now the dominant criminal actor on both sides of the border.

With a presence in **19 of the 20** Venezuelan border municipalities with Colombia, the ELN has established itself as the gatekeeper of cross-border corridors through which shipments of drugs, contraband merchandise, and migrant populations transit daily. This geographical advantage was one of the main reasons why InSight Crime **named the group** the most powerful criminal actor in the region for 2023.

In past years, the ELN used violence against civilians and other criminal actors to control the border region. But in 2023, the Colombian guerrilla group's factions changed tact, turning instead to **social and political control**.

With the state's implicit backing, the ELN has become a quasi-legitimate authority for residents in the Venezuelan border area, coordinating medical visits, delivering water, and providing economic aid to local Indigenous

communities. This has fostered a positive impression among residents, according to an Indigenous leader from the border state of Zulia who requested anonymity due to possible retaliation.

“Let it be very clear that the community does not reject the presence of the ELN in the area,” he told InSight Crime.

The Maduro regime will need the ELN to block opposition activity and campaigns during 2024. It will also need continued access to the criminal rents that the ELN manage in **Venezuela**. Thus, the ELN’s dominance over the Colombian-**Venezuelan** border will probably be one of the most nuanced issues in **Venezuela**’s criminal scenario in 2024 and affect ongoing peace talks in Colombia.

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