

The Future of the ELN



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The future of the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – [ELN](#)) is now intimately connected to Venezuela. As long as the Venezuelan government supports the Colombian rebel group, it cannot be fully defeated and is unlikely to sign any peace agreement.

The high hopes that accompanied Colombian President Gustavo Petro’s 2022 election in terms of a peace deal with the ELN have been dashed. Although nobody believed his election promise of securing a deal with the ELN in three months, there was a real hope that the Colombian president, a former guerrilla himself, could achieve what had eluded every president since the 1980s. Yet he was condemned to fail for two reasons. He did not fully understand the ELN and did not appreciate how crucial Venezuela was to its strength, and increasingly, identity.



**This article is the fifth in a [five-part investigation](#), “Peace Never Had a Chance: Colombia’s ELN in Venezuela,” analyzing the growth of the ELN in Venezuela and how this has allowed the rebel group to project itself into Colombia. Read the full investigation [here](#).*

“There are some fundamental misunderstandings about the ELN and its negotiating position. They are not interested in negotiating demobilization. They want to see fundamental transformations in society. And before any agreement can be signed, the transformations must already be underway and irreversible,” said Luis Eduardo Celis, one of the longest serving and most penetrating analysts of the ELN.

Petro also failed to understand that today the ELN is a Colombian-Venezuelan group, and that any peace deal must, inevitably, include Venezuela.

“Colombia needs to understand that the ELN is no longer just a Colombian guerrilla group; it is now a binational organization. This means that to dismantle it, there must be decisive action from

both sides of the border, something that will not happen until Maduro leaves power,” said Julio Borges, a longtime opposition politician and former president of the Venezuelan National Assembly.

The growth of the ELN and the survival of the Maduro regime are now connected. So long as Maduro remains in power, the favored position that the ELN enjoys in Venezuela seems likely to continue. Similarly, the Maduro regime now has its survival, in part, linked to the growing strength of the ELN. The ELN provides the Maduro regime with access to criminal rents that it needs to maintain the loyalty of senior officials and generals. It also acts as a political ally, suppressing opposition in its area of influence, it acts as a bulwark against any aggression coming from Colombia, and most recently, it may be acting as a deterrent against any possible US invasion.

All indications to date are that the US deployment in the Caribbean, while billed as a counternarcotics operation, is really intent on regime change in Venezuela.

Indeed, the US strikes on alleged drug boats have sought to drag the ELN into the current drug trafficking dynamics, according to a statement by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth:

What might be influencing US thinking with respect to any intervention in Venezuela is that the ELN could form an insurgency in Venezuela should there be a regime change.

Since its formation in the early 1960s, the ELN has been engaged in a low-intensity war against the Colombian state. Since 1999 and the establishment of the Plan Colombia assistance program, the US has steered more than \$10 billion in aid towards Colombia, much of that directed against the country’s illegal actors, including the ELN. Yet the ELN today is stronger than it has ever been, revealing its resilience, even in the face of a US-backed military. The ELN’s deployment in Venezuela now cuts across eight of the 24 states. While the ELN is currently a pro-regime paramilitary force in Venezuela, in the event of a regime change, could it become an insurgent force there, as it is in Colombia?

“The ELN is formally committed to the defense of the ‘Bolivarian revolution’ in Venezuela and has every incentive to resist its demise and the installation of any government committed to restoring the rule of law and establishing territorial control. It could end up waging low-intensity warfare against a future anti-Chavista government,” said former US Ambassador to Venezuela, James Story.

While the future of the ELN and the Maduro regime is clearly linked, the ELN’s presence in Venezuela would survive the fall of the Maduro regime. The rebel group is now so firmly embedded in several Venezuelan states – Zulia, Táchira, Apure and Amazonas among them – enjoying quasi legitimate status, political support at all levels of the state, and even support among some local communities, that rooting it out would require sustained whole-of-state offensives. Any new government in Caracas, especially one that could not count on the cooperation of formerly Chavista elements, would find it hard, if not impossible, to expel the ELN, at least in the short term.

Under current conditions, the ELN is set to keep strengthening itself in Venezuela and needs only the criminal conquest of the Venezuelan state of Amazonas to cement control along the entire 2,219-kilometer Colombia-Venezuela border. From there, it can project itself deep into Colombia and continue to feed its units scattered across that country, while maintaining its logistics networks, its training infrastructure, and much of its leadership, beyond the reach of Colombian security forces.

The ELN’s growing income, not only from the cocaine trade, but illegal gold mining, extortion, and contraband means that it has plenty of funding for future expansion. Just the potential income from the drug trade in Catatumbo, valued at up to \$600 million a year, would be enough to sustain the ELN indefinitely. And Venezuela has evolved from purely a sanctuary into an earner as well. The ELN is now earning millions on each side of the frontier.

Another failure of Petro’s government has been the increase in the cocaine trade and the growth of almost all of Colombia’s illegal actors, the ELN included. Current estimates put ELN membership

standing at 6,450. Colombia's next president faces a series of invigorated illegal armed groups and criminal economies. The ELN has the added advantage of Venezuela, making it the hardest illegal army to effectively tackle.

The possibilities of a US-prompted regime change may actually benefit the ELN. Any new government, especially an opposition one, will find it hard to govern after more than two decades excluded from power. Its only tools to fight against the ELN will be the same military that today works alongside, and profits from, the Colombian rebels.

A long-standing analyst in Caracas, who wanted to remain anonymous for security reasons, summed it up:

“Venezuela is packed with non-state armed groups of various kinds, all of them invested in the status quo and all of them heavily armed. Even if the FANB (Venezuelan armed forces) remains united and opts for allegiance to an incoming government (by no means guaranteed), internal security will be a major issue. The conditions are ripe for protracted, low-intensity warfare if a transition is not fully negotiated. Sudden change would be highly destabilizing under almost any foreseeable scenario.”

After more than 60 years, the prospects of the ELN, both in Colombia and Venezuela, look brighter than ever before.

[See the full investigation](#)