

## The Colectivos' Role in the Struggle for Power in Post-Maduro Venezuela



Tension has flooded Caracas since the early hours of January 3, when then-[President Nicolás Maduro](#) and his wife were arrested and taken to prison in the United States. In response, armed men with their faces covered by balaclavas poured into the capital's streets.

Videos shared in WhatsApp chats and on social media show dozens of men patrolling the city on motorcycles, long guns slung across their backs. Other footage places them guarding the surroundings of key Chavista sites and setting up checkpoints on major avenues to inspect passing vehicles. Residents have even spotted them stationed at the entrances of shops and supermarkets.

“They were everywhere. I was leaving my business in La Pastora [in central Caracas] and saw them guarding supermarkets and stores and obviously intimidating people, because that’s what it is — intimidation — with machine guns in their hands,” a Caracas shopkeeper, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, told InSight Crime.

These men are members of *colectivos*, as pro-government armed groups are known in Venezuela. Since the January 3 US attack in Caracas, the *colectivos* have deployed across the capital and other cities to support and protect the Chavista regime, part of a broader crackdown on opponents.

Formed during the government of Hugo Chávez, these armed groups call themselves defenders of the Bolivarian Revolution. During the wave of protests against Maduro throughout the 2010s, they were the regime’s chief enforcers, using excessive violence against the opposition. They have also seized political and social control of key neighborhoods, preventing residents from protesting the government and pressuring them to vote for pro-government candidates in elections.

In this way, the *colectivos* act as an unofficial armed force for the government. Some *colectivos* even rehearsed drills near the end of 2025 in preparation for a foreign invasion. Yet the collectives also operate as criminal groups, exploiting their connections to power to commit crimes with impunity.

With Maduro behind bars and a new Chavista government in Venezuela, the collectives are now the criminal group closest to the country’s center of power. They are heavily armed and well trained and maintain close ties to radical elements of the ruling camp. This makes them a powerful force whose actions could shape the country’s uncertain future.

# Venezuela 'Colectivos': Crime and Social Control

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## WHO THEY ARE

Venezuela's "colectivos" are government-funded armed groups comprised of civilians as well as employees of state security forces and other government institutions. They were originally created to defend the government of former President Hugo Chávez, but have evolved to engage in political repression and criminal activities.

## WHAT THEY DO

Collectives attack, rob and kidnap supporters of the political opposition in Venezuela, diverting responsibility for human rights abuses away from the government while helping the government maintain social control over certain populations.

## CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES



Extortion



Robbery



Kidnapping



Hired killings



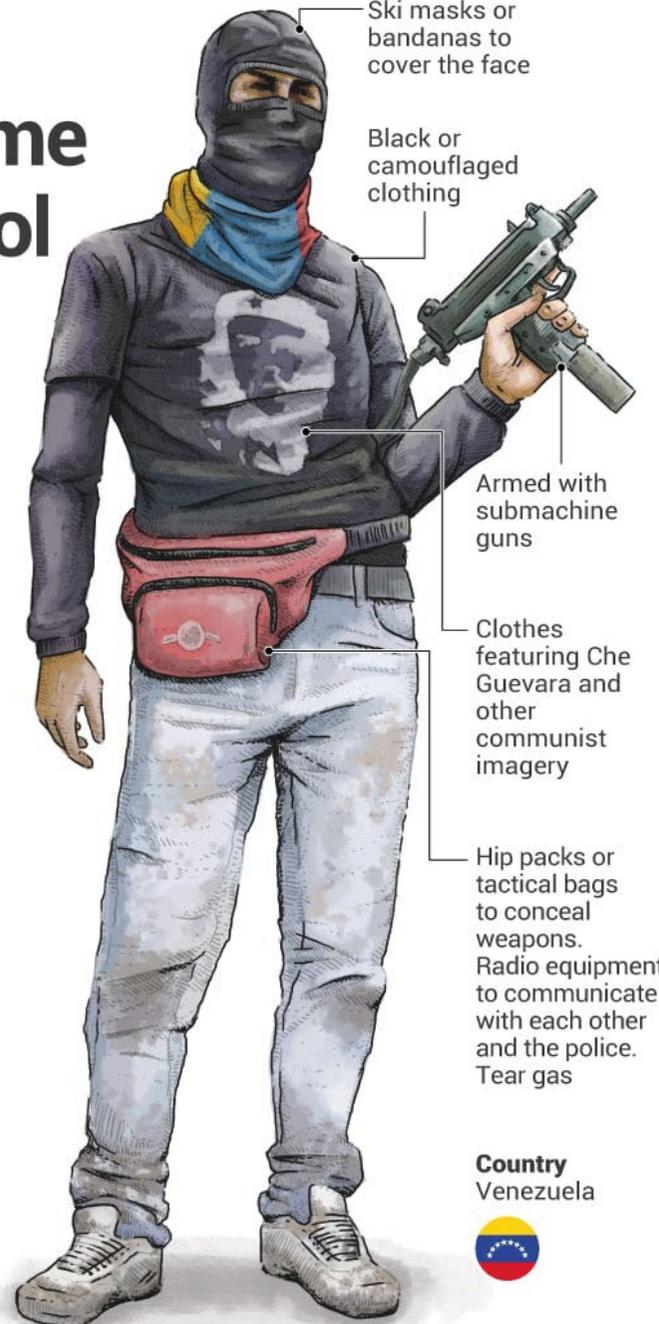
Small-scale  
drug dealing



Illegal food sales



Trespassing on  
private property



Ski masks or  
bandanas to  
cover the face

Black or  
camouflaged  
clothing

Armed with  
submachine  
guns

Clothes  
featuring Che  
Guevara and  
other  
communist  
imagery

Hip packs or  
tactical bags  
to conceal  
weapons.  
Radio equipment  
to communicate  
with each other  
and the police.  
Tear gas

Country  
Venezuela



## COMMONLY USED WEAPONS

9 mm pistols



AR-15



AK-47



## VEHICLES

Generally black or white Toyotas



Motorcycles



Pick-up trucks or four-wheel-drive vehicles

Source: InSight Crime and press reports

## How Have the Collectives Evolved?

The colectivos began as highly ideological groups under Chávez, financed and armed by the state. Over time, they took on an increasingly paramilitary character, incorporating active and retired security personnel. But as the economic crisis deepened under Maduro, state funding dried up.

This forced them to seek new revenue streams to survive. Their connections to the police, military, and politicians at multiple levels gave them access to subsidized food schemes, where they would take the low-cost food and sell it illegally at higher prices in neighborhoods they controlled. They began to carry out kidnappings, extort shopkeepers, and seize properties, which they later sold illegally. Many members of the colectivos also ventured into legal businesses.

Today few groups retain the ideological roots of the community movements from which they emerged. Instead, they are primarily focused on making money by controlling territory, managing businesses, and cutting deals with politicians.

Over the years, the colectivos have built a powerful system of governance in areas under their control. They enforce rules and punishments within the communities they oversee, as well as managing the distribution of subsidized food and public services.

They also maintain strong political connections. Local public officials affiliated with the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) — from city councilors to mayors and governors — have acted as intermediaries between the colectivos and the central government, negotiating mutually beneficial deals. Often, the groups influence local elections by ordering residents to vote for specific candidates, in exchange for political favors. For example, Caracas Mayor Carmen Meléndez has allegedly worked closely with the Tres Raíces collective in the 23 de Enero neighborhood, which campaigned for her in exchange for concessions and contracts.

These ties extend to the very top echelons of power. Interior Minister [Diosdado Cabello](#) has held multiple meetings with colectivos over the past year, and they seem to have increasingly taken up their former mantle as defenders of the government.

## Key Actors in the Struggle for Power

“They betrayed our President Nicolás Maduro, but history will make them pay,” said Valentín Santana, leader of La Piedrita, one of the oldest colectivos in Caracas’ 23 de Enero neighborhood, in a video released hours after the then-president was arrested.

Following Maduro’s arrest, the Venezuelan government has seen a realignment of power, with the colectivos as a key actor. If internal struggles break out between elements of the PSUV — particularly between Cabello and new President Delcy Rodríguez and her brother Jorge Rodríguez, president of the National Assembly — the colectivos’ support for Cabello could tip the scales.

Several of the strongest colectivos in the country occupy the 23 de Enero neighborhood, just blocks from the presidential palace. Many have joined forces under the Sergio Rodríguez Collectives Front, including La Piedrita and Tres Raíces. Groups such as the Peace Squads (Cuadrillas de Paz,

Cupaz), a grouping of colectivos created by Maduro, also control key areas around Caracas and Venezuela's main cities and could likewise play a role in the ongoing power reshuffle.

In their first days of power, the Rodríguez siblings have complied with requests from the Trump administration, suggesting that they could be pressured by Washington to dismantle the regime's most radical, violent, and armed components, like the colectivos. Cabello, who is a hardline Chavista and outspoken advocate of armed struggle and wanted by the United States on drug trafficking charges, could also find himself in the US authorities' crosshairs alongside them.

While the colectivos have adopted a transactional stance toward the government in recent years, their usefulness — and lifeline — is guaranteed by Chavismo's most radical wing. This could push them to take up arms against anyone who threatens them.

“We're telling the Americans: you can come, but you'll leave in black bags,” threatened Santana. “You have no idea what you unleashed.”

***Featured image:*** An armed civilian during a protest in defense of Nicolás Maduro in Caracas on January 4, 2026. ***Credit:*** Ariana Cubillos/AP.