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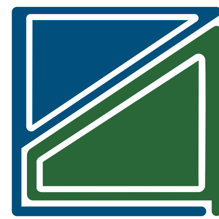

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*Críticas y paradojas de una revolución dentro de la Revolución. Sujetos contenciosos en Venezuela*

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# From “Grupos de Trabajo” to “Colectivos”: The Evolution of Armed Pro-Government Groups in the Chávez Era

***Alejandro Velasco***

## Abstract

The term “colectivo” has arguably become one of the most widely deployed, and fraught, words in the Chávez era. Nominally used to refer to a particular subset of pro-government supporters – namely, para-state groups who employ armed violence to enforce the government’s hold on power – conceptually and empirically “colectivos” remain significantly understudied a phenomenon, by some described as “paramilitaries,” by others as “vigilantes,” even at times speculated to control as much as ten percent of Venezuela. This paper seeks to cut through the conceptual and empirical confusion surrounding the term. Instead it offers a comprehensive assessment of the evolution of armed pro-government groups with very diverse origins, organizational structures, ideological postures, relationships with the state, and repertories of contention, but that nevertheless came to be encapsulated under the umbrella term “colectivo” and in doing so, eliding important nuances that may provide a fuller picture of how chavismo transitioned from a participatory democratic project, to a top-down socialist project, to an authoritarian state, to a nation on the verge of collapse. It asks: how did the rise into prominence and notoriety of groups once seen as fringe in chavismo’s early years, even undesirable by Chavez himself, take place, and what does the Maduro government’s growing reliance on such groups suggest about the state (both as condition and as governance system) of chavismo today?

**Keywords**: urban violence; vigilantism; social movements; chavismo; organized crime

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# De "Grupos de Trabajo" a "Colectivos": La Evolución de Grupos Armados Pro-Gobierno en la Era Chávez


## Resumen

"Colectivo" se ha convertido en una de las palabras más controvertidas en la era Chávez. Usado para referirse a un sub-conjunto particular de partidarios chavistas – en particular, grupos para-estatales que hacen uso de violencia armada para imponer al gobierno en el poder–. Conceptual y empíricamente "colectivo" aún es un término y fenómeno poco estudiado, descrito por algunos como "paramilitares," por otros como "vigilantes," incluso –plantean otros– llegando a controlar hasta un diez por ciento del territorio venezolano. Este ensayo intenta ir más allá de la confusión conceptual y empírica en la cual se ve inmerso el término. En vez, ofrece una evaluación a fondo de la evolución de grupos armados pro-gobierno con distintos orígenes, ordenamientos, posturas ideológicas, relaciones con el estado, y repertorios contenciosos, pero que no obstante han sido encapsulados bajo un mismo término general –"colectivo"– y así, elidiendo matices importantes que pueden contribuir a presentar una imagen más completa de como el chavismo pasó de ser un proyecto de democracia participativa, a un proyecto de socialismo vertical, a un estado autoritario, a una nación al borde del colapso. Pregunta: ¿cómo llegaron a tener prominencia y notoriedad grupos que alguna vez fueron vistos como marginales en los primeros años del chavismo en el poder, incluso indeseables por el mismo Chávez? ¿Qué sugiere esto sobre el estado del chavismo en la actualidad, dada la dependencia cada vez mayor del gobierno de Maduro en estos grupos?


**Palabras clave:** violencia urbana; vigilantismo; movimientos sociales; chavismo; crimen organizado.

On 24 February 2005, several dozen people packed one of the narrow alleys that snake across the "Los Arbolitos II" sector of the *23 de enero* neighborhood in western Caracas. They were there to witness a heated confrontation between a group of area residents and a small work crew installing a trench meant to improve drainage and access in and out of the area during rainy seasons. At issue was the quality of the work: residents objected to what they considered shoddy construction using inadequate materials they feared would quickly wash away, and demanded the crew start anew. Workers refused. As tensions mounted the crew chief called his supervisory engineer, who arrived sometime later donning pressed dress slacks and shirt, moccasins, and designer sunglasses that looked decidedly out of place in this densely packed, long since incorporated squatter settlement overlooking western Caracas. As he and his crew chief attempted to explain the terms of their contract with the city, residents grew impatient, refusing to back down

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on their demand that the crew undo the work they had already completed and begin from scratch with better materials and planning.

Standing to one side wearing jeans, a tucked in t-shirt, and a buzz cut was Valentin Santana, leader of the then “Colectivo de Trabajo La Piedrita.” Tall and broad-shouldered, Santana stood out in his own right, his back resting on a wall while residents occasionally gestured in his direction or spoke with him about the situation unfolding below. Years later, both Santana and La Piedrita would become well known across Caracas and, more and more, nationwide and even abroad as perhaps the most visible –and fearsome– example of “colectivos,” armed pro-government groups committed to defending the governments first of Hugo Chávez and later of his successor Nicolás Maduro against all opposition, by any means necessary (Infobae, 2017). But in 2005, Santana’s and La Piedrita’s renown was limited largely to the *23 de enero*, as one of several local groups with a history of blending community activism, leftist politics, and anti-crime vigilantism going back to the 1980s.

As residents and the crew chief continued to argue in increasingly strident tones, the discussion turning more and more chaotic, two dry cracks rang out in rapid succession. Santana had fired an automatic pistol into the air, and as suddenly as he had done so, slipped the weapon to Carlos Martínez –his neighbor and fellow La Piedrita co-founder– standing beside him. Martínez in turn quickly slid the gun into a large fanny pack wrapped around his waist. No one moved, and Santana uttered no words. But the tenor of discussion shifted decidedly. From a messy jumble of shouting and traded barbs and accusations, what followed was a still tense but more ordered exchange between residents, workers, and their supervisor. Over the next 30 minutes the parties at odds again and again turned to Santana for validation as they made their claims. And again and again and with growing impatience Santana balked, telling them to resolve the matter on their own. With discussion continuing and some semblance of an agreement on the horizon, Santana left the scene, leaving the parties to work out details on their own.

Standing on a ledge overlooking the scene below, Santana’s position well captured a symbolic hierarchy in which he stood as enforcer in a local dispute, his authority backed by a very real –if discretely stowed away– threat of force. What he sought to enforce, however, was order and discipline in the proceeding, not summary judgement. Yet for residents, workers, and their supervisor, it was that same threat of force and the authority it conferred that made Santana into judge and jury. The gap between the two –on the one hand Santana’s self-image as enforcer of order, evening rather than tilting the scales of power between area residents and authorities and their representatives (in this case, the work crew and their supervisor) long accustomed to sidelining the demands of people like those of Arbolitos, on the other hand the expectation by others that Santana’s authority, rooted in the threat of force, granted him final say over outcomes, not just process– reflected at a micro-level an ever more untenable tension playing out nationally and abroad in the heart of Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution. That is, between a leader seeking fundamentally to transform how and who could participate in the conduct of decision-making, and those around him –whether in support or opposition– increasingly looking to Chávez to impose outcomes outright.

That tension would again be on display several months later, when a group of area women –including Santana’s aging mother– gathered at the nearby Barrio Adentro module that since its construction the year before had doubled as primary care clinic staffed by a Cuban doctor and meeting hall for the La Piedrita health committee. They

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were there to read a statement announcing the formation of the Comité de Mujeres en Defensa de la Revolución Argelia Laya (CMDRAL, after a noted Venezuelan Marxist guerrilla commander turned socialist politician, who had once lived in the 23 de enero), which would ostensibly serve as the women's wing of La Piedrita. But as the women sat, an awkward dynamic ensued as the women looked to Santana for guidance while Santana and Martínez encouraged the women to take the lead. In the end, it was Santana and Martínez who did most of the speaking, about the scale of the commitment they were entering into, in essence pledging their lives less to Chávez than to socialist revolution, and in particular, to defend their community from reactionaries, traitors, and counter-revolutionaries –opposition *escuálidos* for short– by force if necessary.

Today, either at the local level or nationally, little remains of that tension between participatory impulses and top-down directives, overtaken in the intervening fifteen years by a full verticalization of the Bolivarian Revolution. To be sure, it can be easy to overstate the degree to which that tension truly existed in the first place. But so too is it easy to overstate either its complete absence or, even more so, the Bolivarian Revolution's ineluctable move towards authoritarianism first under Chávez and much more fully since Chávez's death in 2013, under his successor Nicolás Maduro. The transition from the participatory democracy that characterized chavismo's early years in office, as codified in the 1999 Constitution, to a 21st century socialism that began to take hold in 2005 but grew to become chavismo's core project in earnest by the constitutional reform of 2007, to a fully authoritarian one-party state proved a gradual, contingent process, less a matter of strategic forethought than of opportunity and circumstance which in turn dramatically changed the aims, incentives, and nature of chavismo at large.

This essay considers chavismo's changing nature through an examination of groups like La Piedrita: What they were, what they have become, and why. It suggests that the evolution of what has come to be known as colectivos offers a window into the evolution of chavismo more broadly, from a diffuse effort, underlain by the threat of force, to promote participation especially among long sidelined sectors, to a much more top-down phenomenon in which outcome and later, survival, trumped process. In the main, the essay aims to disentangle the term "colectivo" and its evolution over time to determine when and how it arrived at its present meaning: a type of catch-all signifier of chavismo's violent, authoritarian essence, with particular, at times contradictory instrumental uses for the government, for the opposition, and for colectivos themselves.

The essay develops three interrelated points: 1) It is important to distinguish not so much between *types* of colectivos (though this is in itself important), but between the specific conjunctures that have altered both, the definition of the term, and the empirical experience of what constitutes colectivos; 2) The main cleavage in the evolution of colectivos –as term and empirical reality– is territory/ideology, which is to say, all of them share an ideological project, broadly defined as socialist, but not all emerge from defined territorial spaces like Arbolitos II or the 23 de enero more generally. Among the second group, they derive their power vis-à-vis the government from their control over defined territories, which itself is rooted in and legitimized by historical experiences of organizing and mobilization predating chavismo. By contrast groups who emerge primarily as ideological projects without a defined territorial attachment are more useful for and dependent on the government; and 3) the relationship between government and colectivos is far more contradictory and even conflictual than commonly understood, especially abroad, precisely because of their simultaneously diffuse, evolving, and instrumental nature. In this sense,

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colectivos function more as metonym or even shibboleth than as an empirical reality.

At core, the essay argues that the dynamic between colectivos and the government is one of mutual but unstable dependence: they need one another to exist, and that need has accentuated at times when the government has lost legitimacy and grown cornered. But that dependence is highly conditioned both by colectivos who demand autonomy, and by the government who goes on the offensive against colectivos at times of relative political calm in order to reassert its command and control.

To develop this argument, the essay draws on three sources: Google analytics to track mentions of the term "colectivo" between 2000 to 2021, in English and Spanish. (In English I used the search terms "colectivo" "armed" and "Venezuela," and in Spanish I limited search results to pages originating in Venezuela, with the terms "colectivo" and "23 de enero" to reflect the oversize influence of this Caracas neighborhood in structuring both the reality and the imaginary of colectivo operations in Venezuela. These systematic searches suggest that the term, as presently understood, begins to circulate around 2007 but explodes in use – and confusion – in 2014 (against the backdrop of the "La Salida" round of nationwide anti-government protests); online press accounts in English and Spanish; and ethnographic evidence based on fieldwork in the 23 de enero with La Piedrita and the Coordinadora Simón Bolívar, among the most visible of groups classified as colectivos, in order to examine the evolution of the term using a concrete case study.

## Colectivos as Myth and Metonym

*"We have to take to the streets to defend the revolution. To the loudmouths who threaten the colectivos, I say that if you use your rifles, we'll use ours. We'll give an overwhelming response because no one will take this dream from us"* (Crónica Uno, 2019). So declared Valentín Santana just days before Nicolás Maduro's swearing-in for a second term as president on 10 January 2019, following an election boycotted by most opposition parties and denounced as fraudulent by many international observers. Heading a caravan of hundreds of colectivos on motorbikes and four by fours from several west Caracas neighborhoods to the Capitol downtown and ending at Chávez's mausoleum in the 23 de enero, Santana warned, "*Today we defend the fatherland with weapons*," later adding via video posted on youtube: *"We will give our lives if necessary to defend the nation and the revolution"* (Colectivo La Piedtria, 2019). The following day in el 23, area colectivos doubled down, staging a mock defense of the neighborhood against a hypothetical invasion, coordinating actions via closed circuit television, strategically posting sharpshooters, and detonating explosives. Said one area resident: *"It's a type of simulacrum, they've done several... they fire their shots in the air, the sirens sound, [set off] smoke signals, then all goes back to normal"* (Efecto Cocuyo, 2019; El Cooperante, 2018).

Nominally, the actions were a show of force aimed at US "imperialism and its lackeys," from President Donald Trump to National Security adviser John Bolton to several high-profile opposition activists in exile, who had threatened in both direct and indirect ways –and would continue to do so more plausibly in the ensuing two years– to overthrow Maduro by force if necessary if he insisted on remaining in power (Winter, 2019). But it was also a warning directed at those within the government itself –from the military to police forces to Maduro himself– who had at times violently clashed with colectivos in the past, despite also directly and indirectly calling on and coordinating with them to help

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repress opposition protests in moments of high political tension since 2014, as part of a "civic-military union" in defense of the Revolution (UN Human Rights Council, 2020: 61).

In part, that armed groups that the government had at times violently attacked were also among its most stalwart defenders reflected a larger question –and fiercer debate– about just who and what these groups were in the first place, a debate well represented in the wide and contradictory range of meanings associated with the term "colectivo." The US government has labeled colectivos "the Venezuelan regime's armed mercenary groups" (US Embassy, 2020) while Florida Senator Marco Rubio has sought to designate them as "foreign terrorist organizations" (Rubio, 2019). A Wilson Center study bills them as one part of a "five-headed monster" of state repression under Maduro (Romero, 2020: 44). In Caracas, the Observatorio de Violencia has referred to colectivos as chavismo's "shock troops" (Zuzunaga Ruíz, 2014) while Transparencia Venezuela has concluded colectivos are "para-police and paramilitary groups who sow chaos and anarchy" (Transparencia Venezuela, 2019: 86).

Other accounts offer a more processual view, pointing out colectivos' changing nature and relationship with the government but generally arriving at similar conclusions. The United Nations via a fact-finding mission on human rights violations in Venezuela singled out colectivos as especially fearsome elements of the state security apparatus, identifying them as "citizen security groups that evolved from 'Bolivarian Circles' [...] formed in the time of Hugo Chávez as grass-roots support for defense of the Bolivarian revolution." It adds: "While the term colectivo has been used as a catchall to refer to these groups, in practice they operate under parallel command structures [and] some colectivos have morphed into criminal structures" (UN Human Rights Commission, 2020: 59). "Colectivos," wrote the International Crisis Group in a 2020 in-depth report on violent groups in Venezuela, "are civil associations that in some cases function as para-police groups and that have gained prominence as Venezuela's political conflict has intensified" (International Crisis Group, 2020: 7).

Still other reports suggest a more variegated field. In 2017 a BBC long piece observed that, *"Many [colectivos] are peaceful. Many play a very political role with a long leftist tradition. This tied them to Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution, now led by Nicolás Maduro. But others have come to control several areas with weapons and impunity, according to neighbors and NGOs"* (García Marco, 2017). Self-identified colectivos meanwhile portray themselves as "community organizations that have flourished under Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution," simultaneously seeing as their role "to train cadre and teach people about the strategic vision of the commune" in their local spaces, and to *"defend our sovereignty, the sovereignty of our country, of our nation … willing to fight back to defend every centimeter of this territory"* (Fuentes-Green, 2019). In the case of La Piedrita, that work blending leftist organizing and control and defense of territory included sponsoring sporting and cultural events, providing security while at the same time enforcing order over the neighborhood. In turn, control over territory, experience with micro-level organizing, and longstanding leftist orientations well placed colectivos as organic examples of precisely the kind of local level popular power and participatory praxis that Chávez sought to promote. That made them early and eager loci of most of the social programs and policy initiatives that would come to define chavismo at various stages of its own evolution – from Bolivarian Circles, to Urban Land Committees, to Barrio Adentro, to Mercal, to communal councils, to communes, to CLAPs.

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At the same time, proximity to state initiatives in a context of territorial control and prior organization brought colectivos into close contact with chavista bureaucracy in ways that spotlighted ever growing gaps between lofty ideals and poor execution. This proved especially true during chavismo's transformation into an explicitly socialist movement beginning in 2005, which took place against the backdrop, paradoxically, of a massive consumerist boom underwritten by the largest influx of petro-dollars in Venezuela's history between 2004 and 2012 and the attendant direct and indirect redistribution of rents through those same social programs and initiatives. The proliferation of government institutions to administer rent distribution, and of dwindling oversight as chavismo gained more and more exclusive control over the state, contrived to explode corruption. That placed colectivos in the awkward position of being at once among the most stalwart supporters of chavismo, and some of its fiercest critics: "There are people that claim to be chavista but that are killing chavismo," proved a common lament among colectivos. "There are people who have infiltrated state institutions and who work against us," adding even that "state intelligence agents had either infiltrated certain colectivos or masqueraded as ones to attack and intimidate opposition protests" (Fuentes-Green, 2019). And yet for Maduro, who called himself "the first defender of colectivos" in 2019, colectivos are *"made up of good people, patriotic people, people who sacrifice. From the start of the revolution, colectivos have produced, they produce rice, yucca, yams, raise animals, produce milk, meat… They bring peace to their communities, help people in need… They are pure Christians, pure chavistas"* (Maduro, 2019).

Ultimately, the ICG offers perhaps the most succinct assessment of colectivos both as an empirical phenomenon comprising multiple, seemingly at odds but in fact interrelated realities, and perhaps more so, as a metalanguage of sorts: "Both colectivos' opponents and their defenders tend to attribute almost mythical dimensions to their importance, yet they have without doubt become chavismo's backbone through coercive control over street protests and influence in low-income communities" (International Crisis Group, 2020: 7). In other words, colectivos exert power through metonymy, violence, and influence in ways that are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. How colectivos have come to hold this seemingly mythical power is in part captured in the term's use and evolution over the last 20 years.

An advanced Google search of the terms "colectivo," "armed," and "Venezuela" between January 2000 and January 2021, limited to English language hits, for example, offers an intriguing window into this process. To be sure, this is an imperfect metric –pages disappear over time, indexing , returns can change depending on distinct user preferences, and as returns become more plentiful it is difficult to review each result for relevance or duplication.[1] However, it provides a baseline approach into the term's usage over time from which we can glean illuminating patterns about how colectivo has come to occupy the diffuse and contested discursive space it currently holds.

1 I selected these search criteria for the following reasons. "Colectivo" in Spanish is a generic term meaning "collective," making any search limited to this term alone too expansive to be useful analytically. Further limiting the search to include the term "Venezuela" and to consider only English language pages offers more specificity, however here too there is significant noise since returns may include references or footnotes in Spanish that use "colectivo" generically. Adding a third criterion – "armed" – reduces much of that noise but introduces other problems, mainly a bias in favor of understanding colectivos as armed groups, even though this is contested. Yet adding "armed" as a search term returns pages that capture that debate, rather than assume already that all colectivos are indeed armed.

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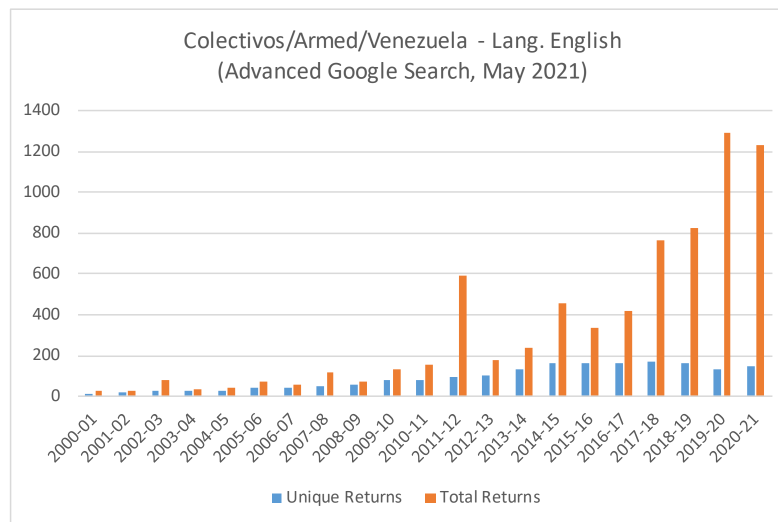


Using these search criteria in May 2021 yielded 7133 returns over 20 years. (Captured in orange in the table above. The returns in blue are those the search engine identified as unique. In other words, returns above that number were tagged as "very similar" to the initial return yield, suggesting possible duplicate content existing in otherwise different pages. Again, this is an imperfect metric, as I discuss in more detail below.) Specified from year to year, the distribution of those returns reveals important results. The terms are largely consistent through 2011, experiencing a steady but minor increase from year to year. (There is somewhat of a jump in 2002, although as I mention below, a deeper dive into the returns for that year indicates that the use of "colectivos" in those pages is not in reference to the use with which it would later become associated.) In 2011, however, there is a sizable jump in total returns, before dropping again through 2013, then doubling in 2014, then dropping, then again doubling in 2017, remaining steady through 2018, and jumping again in 2019, before dropping slightly in 2020.

Before drilling into the year-to-year returns, in the aggregate what immediately emerges is a correlation, beginning in 2014, between moments of high political tension and incidence of use of the terms "colectivo," "armed," and "Venezuela" in English language sources accessed by google. In 2014, anti-government protests denominated "La Salida" (the exit) between February and April resulted in over forty dead, among them chavistas, anti-chavistas, and bystanders (Speri, 2014). Several of those deaths, according to a later United Nations report, resulted from actions attributed to presumed colectivos (UN Human Rights Commission, 2020). (It is also against the backdrop of La Salida, in March 2014, when the first English language Wikipedia page for "colectivos (Venezuela)" appears, with most subsequent edits taking place in 2019 (Wikipedia, 2021)). In 2017, another round of months-long protests to prevent a planned National Constituent Assembly election that would have, ostensibly, rewritten Venezuela's constitution but which in effect aimed to sideline the opposition-controlled National Assembly, also featured violent and sometimes deadly clashes that left over 100 dead. A Human Rights Watch report concluded that "Venezuelan security forces … systematically used excessive force to suppress anti-government protests," adding that "'Colectivos' at times worked alongside Venezuelan security forces to suppress demonstrations" (Human Rights Watch, 2017). In January 2019, National Assembly president Juan Guaidó declared himself interim-President after Maduro began a new six-year term of office following elections that most of the opposition

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boycotted in 2018. Recognized as Venezuela's legitimate head of state by the United States as well as most Latin American and West European countries, Guaidó's interim presidency sparked a geopolitical crisis leading to months of tension, including a showdown at the Venezuela-Colombia border, a failed coup d'etat, and later a failed invasion bid, all against the backdrop of crippling sectoral sanctions that contributed to an already dramatic years-long humanitarian crisis.

## From Many to One: Colectivos Before and After 2014

How do we make sense of this shift before and after 2014, and what granular level differences –beyond the aggregate patterns– emerge when we examine returns in greater detail? To be sure, moments of high political tension have marked not just Maduro's tenure but Chávez's before that. And, in fact, several colectivos –including some that would become prominent nationally and abroad– date their origins to those moments in the Chávez era. Consider for instance Alexis Vive, considered among the most powerful and best organized colectivos in Venezuela, and operating out of the Zona Central sector of the 23 de enero, itself the primary hotbed of colectivo organizing as described in further detail below (Venezuela Investigative Unit, 2018). Alexis Vive formed in the wake of the April 2002 coup that sought to oust Hugo Chávez from power. According to witnesses, Metropolitan Police officers shot local activist Alexis Gonzalez dead as he returned home to the 23 de enero from demonstrating in support of Chávez. To commemorate him, fellow area activists organized a group in his memory to combat police violence in their community and mobilize political support for Chávez (Fundación Alexis Vive, 2021). Likewise, the Colectivo de Trabajo Muro de la Dignidad formed in late 2002 in the Monte Piedad sector of the 23 de enero following armed clashes between area residents and the Metropolitan Police. The common thread in both cases was claiming and defending territory from what groups of residents understood to be a corrupt security force that had wreaked havoc in their community for decades, and which was now at the service of anti-chavismo in the context of a still incipient effort at promoting not socialism, but participatory democracy and popular power in Venezuela.

Importantly, coverage of colectivos prior to 2014 reflects some of this granular detail, which in turn would shape a meta-dynamic of split representation. The first mentions of "colectivos" in reference to groups that would come to be associated with armed para-state organizations in fact centers on Alexis Vive.[2] In a 2007 report, the International Crisis Group cited the "colectivo Alexis Vive" as one of "at least twenty ... irregular armed groups in Caracas, some unarmed, some with assault rifles and rocket propelled grenades," which "they were prepared to use if the revolution was threatened by 'reactionary elements'" (International Crisis Group, 2007: 21; International Crisis Group, 2008: 19).[3] While the focus for ICG was exclusively on these groups as chavismo's defenders, "by force if

2 Before this time, mentions of "colectivos" referred to book or article titles, or to legal content especially around growing discussion collective rather than individual rights in the context of chavismo's push for participatory democracy, or the names of private cooperatives of micro-bus transit vehicles, which are known in Venezuela as colectivos.

3 A subsequent report the following year by ICG, this time quoting local newspaper El Nacional, continued the same line, focusing on La Piedrita as "a neighborhood association in the 23 de Enero [whose] representatives say they are in charge of security in their sectors. Billboards at the neighborhood's entrance read: "Welcome, 'La Piedrita' guerrilla zone, fatherland or death" or "'La Piedrita' commands and the government obeys."


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necessary," a New York Times piece also from 2007 linked the work of Alexis Vive as both armed defense and community organizing, calling it and other such groups in el 23 "potential militias" imbued with socialist, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist ideals beyond support for Chávez alone (Romero, 2007).[4]

This dual identity would continue to inform representations and self-representations of colectivos in the ensuing years, oscillating between an emphasis on their militant, armed actions and their local activist work, almost exclusively centered in the 23 de enero neighborhood (International Crisis Group, 2011).[5] Quoted in the Spanish newspaper El Pais in 2009, La Piedrita's Valentín Santana stated: "We are a group that performs social activities, but –as expressed by our Commander Hugo Chávez– we are also armed and willing to defend this revolution by the use of weapons" (Fischer-Bollin and Knirsch, 2011). Santana's comments to a Spanish outlet illustrated an increasingly higher profile for groups like La Piedrita and Alexis Vive. Later that year, a highly public attack by La Piedrita on the headquarters of then-opposition TV station Globovision signaled the most prominent mise-en-scene of colectivos nationally and abroad to date, as reflected in a 2009 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report which stressed its "extreme concern" about "violent groups known as Movimiento Tupamaro, Colectivo La Piedrita, Colectivo Alexis Vive, Unidad Popular Venezolana, and Grupo Carapaica [which] have been acting with the encouragement and acquiescence of the Venezuelan State" (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2009).

Other accounts of colectivo actions like those against Globovision framed them as part of a battle over depictions of Venezuela's revolution more broadly, which had increasingly become branded in mainstream English language news outlets as authoritarian and violent insofar as Chávez deployed laws and sanctions targeting opposition-aligned print and audiovisual media. In this sense, colectivos emerged as microcosms of larger conflicts over representation and self-representation. Surveying street art and murals in the 23 de enero by area colectivos, one 2009 report observed: "A prominent topic involves the techniques employed by reactionary television and media companies to spread anti-Chávez propaganda. And numerous paintings emphasize the benefits of community radio. These small stations have sprung up in several barrios of Caracas and receive financial support from the government" (Graden, 2009). Among these, the Coordinadora Simón Bolívar in the La Cañada sector of the 23 de enero had staged a takeover of the Metropolitan Police sub-station in the heart of their sector and over time, in collaboration with a chavista mayor of Caracas, turned it into a community center and, crucially, radio station. At stake then were debates over definition and self-definition that would more and more mark the primary feature of colectivo representation.

At the heart of those debates lay an ever more complicated relationship between colectivos and the government. La Piedrita's 2009 attack on Globovision, for instance, led to an arrest warrant against Santana, who fled to Cuba before returning to Venezuela a year later. (It was not the first time La Piedrita had clashed with the government it ostensibly defended. In 2002 Chávez himself had called La Piedrita and other armed groups in el 23 "anarchic" and demanded they surrender their weapons (Velasco, 2011:

4 This article in part draws on quotes and information provided by Alejandro Velasco to the Times, based on fieldwork conducted in 2004-2005.

5 The other early hotspot associated with colectivos was the in the capital of the Andean state of Merida, linked to the longstanding group Tupamaros whose origins dated to the early 1980s.

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)) Yet the following year, on his weekly TV show, Chávez publicly praised Alexis Vive as a "fighting, brave, revolutionary colectivo to the marrow… our greetings and commitment to you, your struggles, your battles… Like her there will be more, thousands and thousands more. New cadres in the barrios, and not just of the PSUV, but now from the communes, the social battle rooms, the colectivos, Alexis Vive is a consolidated colectivo, that fights and does battle" (Chávez, 2010). Such simultaneous embrace and rejection made it difficult to capture neatly the role that colectivos played in and for chavismo. Where the ICG, for example, had since first reporting on colectivos in 2007 largely broad brushed them, by 2011 it began to nuance its views: "The groups defy simple definition. While all profess loyalty to the president and that they would defend him by force against his opponents, many are highly critical of the government and have an adversarial relationship with the government party, which they criticise for an alleged lack of true revolutionary spirit" (International Crisis Group, 2011: 17).

By 2012, against the backdrop of presidential elections laced with uncertainty due to Chávez's reported and visible –and ultimately terminal– cancer, colectivos had come to be understood as a key chavista constituency, their influence clear yet difficult to pinpoint precisely because of their shifting relationship with the government. Reuters called them a "wild card" (Wallis, 2012) while the Heritage Foundation billed them as the linchpin of a chavista plan to steal the vote (Walser, 2012). In fact, Chávez sailed to victory on the back of a still-booming economy and massive personal charisma, however his death several months later in March 2013, followed by snap elections pitting a strengthened opposition and Maduro as a relative unknown yet hand-picked by Chávez as his successor, unleashed a wave of concern from and about colectivos. For Maduro, wrote France 24, his challenge would be "marshalling support from Chavez's diverse coalition, which includes leftist ideologues, business leaders and radical armed groups called 'colectivos'" (France 24, 2013). But for colectivos, at stake was a more existential question. In the 23 de enero, one colectivo member stated flatly: "'If [Capriles] wins, he will go after all of the colectivos and cut the social programs. That would be terrible.... We will not let the police come into 23 de Enero and we will risk our lives to defend this area" (Markovitz and Rueda, 2013). Yet colectivos' challenge turned out not to be Capriles, but Maduro, who proved to be a wild card of his own for groups whose relationship with the government had proven tense and unstable, at best, and whose primary (if not blind) loyalties had explicitly laid with Chávez rather than the state that Maduro now inherited.

Upon winning by a razor thin margin, Maduro moved to make tackling crime –which had skyrocketed under Chávez– his primary way to build popular support, especially among urban barrio communities where insecurity claimed most lives. A key part of that effort involved reining in weapons and asserting control over guns and policing by the state. Months after taking office, Maduro announced a nationwide disarmament plan, and he made the 23 de enero its showcase. In a televised event from the neighborhood, Maduro collected 100 firearms "voluntarily" given up by dozens of area colectivos, adding: "The militia and the national military should have the guns, not the people" (Alba Ciudad, 2013). Months later, Maduro would expand his anti-crime push further, inviting and meeting with opposition leader Henrique Capriles Radonski – whom he had narrowly beaten to win the presidency– to organize an unprecedented joint effort to combat insecurity.

Among those Maduro hailed for his leadership in the disarmament effort was Juan Montoya. Like Valentín Santana, Montoya had formed part of the armed groups in the *23 de enero* who staged violent sieges against opposition targets in 2009, in particular pipe-

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bombing the Chamber of Commerce headquarters. Unlike Santana, however, Montoya had spent two years in jail for his part in those attacks, another example of state/colectivo tensions. His participation in the disarmament campaign was thus especially noteworthy; while he claimed to harbor no ill will toward La Piedrita and Alexis Vive, he had stated his work now focused on ideological training and community activism. Yet on 12 February 2014, during anti-government protests that would later explode into four months of tensions seeking Maduro's ouster, Montoya was shot dead in downtown Caracas while reportedly monitoring the protests alongside several colectivos. And while Maduro and other officials blamed the opposition for his death, they also invited speculation about a possible vendetta against Montoya by other colectivos who rejected disarmament when Maduro railed: "those who carry a rifle and think they're revolutionaries are wrong" (Pardo, 2014).

Against this backdrop, what the data suggest is that prior to the protest cycle of 2014, "colectivo" had certainly grown more common a term to mean armed irregular groups since first appearing in 2007, however its usage also reflected 1) differences regarding the relationship between colectivos and the government, 2) variation in terms of their primarily violent or non-violent nature, and 3) groups mainly rooted in defined geographic areas, in particular the 23 de enero neighborhood in Caracas, and who claimed defense of space and the revolution as their primary driver. The protest cycle of 2014 would introduce qualitative differences that grew to become salient in the representation and self-representation of colectivos; in particular, their universalization and flattening as primarily violent groups beholden to the state for reasons of ideological affinity.

Consider for instance Human Rights Watch. In a 2014 report in the wake of four months of anti-government protests that left over forty dead, and in which media and opposition activists widely denounced colectivos as a primary source of repression against protestors, the organization noted: "Armed pro-government gangs that carry out these attacks are often referred as colectivos, a term also used in Venezuela to refer to a wide range of social organizations that support and, in some cases, help to implement the government's policies. These include environmental, feminist, labor, and educational groups. The vast majority of these groups have not engaged in violent behavior. For this reason, this report uses the term 'armed pro-government gangs' to refer to groups that carry out violent attacks that appear to be motivated by loyalty to the government" (Human Rights Watch, 2014). A subsequent 2016 report included the same language but in a footnote (Human Rights Watch, 2016). By 2017, reporting on a new and deadlier round of months-long anti-government protests, HRW had dropped the language altogether, leaving colectivo to stand in for armed pro-government groups working in tandem with state security forces (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Partly, changing representations reflected changing realities on the ground. Anti-government protests in 2014 had indeed introduced a new dynamic of colectivo action in a context where, as had become apparent following Chávez's death, colectivos understood that at stake was their survival. Maduro's growing weakness as the country's economy began to collapse following years of mismanagement, overspending, and the collapse of oil prices in 2014, coupled with growing opposition strength and popularity, made ever more likely the possibility that the government might fall, not only ending social and political programs that Chávez and colectivos had championed in their respective spaces, but also making these groups targets for elimination. In this context, Maduro had called for a "civic-military union" to defend the revolution in the context of anti-government protests (Vidal,

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2015). Yet for colectivos at stake was less support for Maduro than self-preservation. As with the disarmament campaign in 2013, however, colectivos' dependence on the government made them instrumentally useful in ways that simultaneously reinforced their significance, and also increased their vulnerability, in a recursive loop.

This tense mutual dependence became violently apparent in late 2014, when Venezuela's CICPC –its federal investigative police– engaged in a standoff with the *Colectivo 5 de Marzo* in downtown Caracas. The *Colectivo 5 de Marzo* had formed in 2010 in the Cotiza sector of Caracas; like other groups, it engaged in community organizing and vigilantism, yet lacking a longer history of mobilizing in the neighborhood, were far more linked ideologically to Chávez as their primary motivator, and eventually moved their headquarters to downtown Caracas where they sought to liaise with state institutions to provide housing for families in need. Like other organizations, members of the *Colectivo 5 de Marzo* also had open investigations for murder, among other crimes, but their enforcement was sporadic at best, further making their relationship with the state one that the government could alter at any moment, from partnership in moments of need to toleration to repression as necessary. In October 2014, months after anti-government protests had dissipated and Maduro reasserted control, the CICPC moved against the *Colectivo 5 de Marzo*, and following a standoff, police shot four of its members dead. Survivors and friends called the action "murder" and a "massacre," demanding the resignation of Maduro's interior minister who had called on colectivos to surrender their weapons, or else break with the government and call on other such groups to do likewise (Delgado, 2014; NTN 24, 2014). And, in fact, Maduro did fire Minister Rodriguez Torres shortly thereafter, suggesting on the one hand colectivos' power and influence but on the other, important splits within the ruling coalition regarding their role in the state.

Those splits, and their strategic uses by both the government and colectivos themselves, would continue and indeed deepen over time as Maduro's hold on power grew more precarious and came to rely increasingly on outright repression to assert control. In turn, these splits reflected variable deployment of repressive forces acting in concert out of self-preservation in moments of high tension, but otherwise jockeying to assert supremacy when those moments had passed. For instance in April 2015, commemorating the anniversary of the 2002 coup against Chávez, First Lady Cilia Flores identified colectivos as a key to what she called the "civic-military union" that eventually restored Chávez to power, thus anachronistically re-signifying the coup in a manner that retroactive meaning and import to colectivos long before they had assumed such a role (MINCI, 2015). Later that year, Maduro launched the *Operación de Liberación del Pueblo* (OLP), his latest initiative to combat violent crime in Caracas's sprawling barrios by deploying heavily armed commandos in lighting operations with major leeway –and impunity– to arrest (and often kill) suspected criminals at will (Smilde, 2016). Yet the OLPs quickly clashed with colectivos who claimed territorial control over and security operations in their neighborhoods, leading to several violent clashes between OLPs and colectivos in the 23 de enero in particular who also called for the resignation of the police chief while sowing fear among residents forced to take shelter amid the uncertainty (Analítica, 2016; Moreno Losada, 2016; Marra, 2016a). Instead, OLPs agreed to coordinate with colectivos whenever an action was slated to take place near their areas of operation, effectively recognizing colectivo autonomy and territorial control (Marra, 2016b).

In late 2016, then-Vice President Aristóbulo Istúriz publicly warned that "iron knights" –an oblique reference to colectivos on motorcycles– to defend the Presidential

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Palace ahead of a planned opposition march, one of the highest profile acknowledgements to that point of some government sectors' direct relationship with colectivos, now imbued with enough symbolic power to be deployed effectively as a warning or threat. That threat has even entered popular culture. In 2018, reports surfaced of a telephone scam in which callers claiming to be members of a colectivo –La Piedrita or Alexis Vive, mainly, as the best known– demanded extortion money or else suffer the consequences (La Patilla, 2018).

But even as some civilian sectors of the government and others in the security apparatus like OLPs (and later FAES) pacted with colectivos, granting them legitimacy and territorial control, military sectors have balked in increasingly strident terms. In 2018, Defense Minister General Vladimir Padrino López publicly condemned colectivos – and by extensión, their supporters in the government – after a video surfaced of Valentin Santana, high ranking Maduro officials, and several military officers in the 23 de enero pledging to defend Maduro voters in upcoming presidential elections. *"The Bolivarian Revolution does not need armed groups outside of the law,"* wrote Padrino López in a statement. *"The Bolivarian Revolution, the state, and the Venezuelan people have and can rely on armed forces fulfilling their constitutional tasks,"* adding, as Maduro had done years earlier, that armed groups distorted chavismo's message, and it was not through weapons that they would defend "the social conquests of the people" (Infoenlace, 2018). Yet with increasing frequency and growing tactical and strategic importance, the revolution did and does need colectivos, and vice versa, for survival if not for ideological affinity.

## Conclusions

The impact of "colectivos" is exaggerated in the discourse and in the imaginary of the opposition and its echoes abroad. One opposition leader called the National Guard "colectivos," while a statistic circulated in a major international press outlet in 2017 indicating that these groups "control" 10% of the country. Beyond questions about how one arrives at this number, about how control –territorial, demographic, operational– is defined, what this sort of analysis points to is a homogenous subject that does not exist in reality. Although colectivos share certain characteristics –among them the most significant one of course is the use of weapons in a para-state role– the reality is that there is a wide variety of groups that call themselves "colectivos." The majority identifies with the government, but their level of support and their motives vary greatly, especially in moments of open conflict like the ones Venezuela has faced especially since 2014.

In very general terms, we can identify three types of colectivos: one group is long-standing, with origins preceding Chavismo. In terms of revolutionary ideology and tactical discipline they are well organized, and trace their roots and inspiration to the guerrilla movements of the 1960s. They also carry out important social work in their communities, in addition to vigilance against local criminal gangs in the spaces in which they operate, which gives them legitimacy – with exceptions. These groups have clashed with the Chavista state, even with Chávez in his time, as they criticize the lack of ideological commitment against rampant corruption within the governmental elite. They are autonomous from the hierarchy of the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV) and control their own weapons, which Chávez called on them to hand over to the Armed Forces, unsuccessfully. In fact, while other components of the repressive state apparatus have close ties with colectivos, the armed forces generally see them negatively. This helps explain the dynamic that causes them to take action in times of high conflict: not

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so much in support of Maduro but in the defense of what they understand to be a military campaign without quarter to neutralize them in the context of transition.

Another group formed between 2007 and 2012, at the height of Chavismo. They use the aforementioned group as their model, and developed certain similar functions of defense and social work in limited spaces. Their ideology is much more committed to "21st century socialism;" or, more loyal to Chavismo, and therefore less autonomous. Many are comprised of much younger people than in the first colectivos, with less of a history of social struggle in their communities, but willing to forge that experience during the resource bonanza of those years. As these resources have become scarcer under Maduro, and because they lack a strong and independent ideological base, some have turned to criminal activities, making use or their government contacts, their weapons, and control of specific spaces.

Finally there are what we might call "disguised" colectivos. They arose during the implementation of the OLP. In the context of these OLPs, police precincts have had contact with colectivos in spaces where they operate – in principle to avoid confrontations. But in this case the police have also appropriated some of the collective's tactics of vigilantism, with clearly repressive ends, especially as they turn to intimidation and shock tactics among opposition-controlled areas. In doing so, they confirm the sense that all colectivos are a latent monster under the bed. We begin to see these groups in the protest cycle of 2014, properly part of the government but who act in name and tactics like armed civil groups, dressed as civilians and riding in motorcycle groups.

Confusion about who or what is truly a colectivo suggests that the armed forces – who have tumultuous relationships with these groups, whom they see as usurpers of their functions – will have ample room to maneuver under the pretext of neutralizing anything considered a collective. In turn, this tends to deepen the sense of an existential defense by colectivos who are otherwise critical of the Chavista hierarchy, whether for corruption or for lack of revolutionary commitment.

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