

## Maduro detained - Petro exposed

Sovereignty, democratic legitimacy, and criminal networks  
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### Summary

*This analysis explores the political and historical ties between Venezuelans-Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro, and Diosdado Cabello—and Colombian leftist movements, with a focus on President Gustavo Petro's rise. Evidence spanning several decades points to financial, logistical, and political connections, including engagement with criminal groups such as FARC dissidents and the ELN.*

*Under Petro, Colombia has maintained unusually close engagement with Maduro's narco-regime, raising pressing questions about external influence, institutional integrity, and possible convergence in criminal practices. At the same time, international recognition of Maduro by actors including the UN highlights the complex global dynamics surrounding contested regimes.*

*The report examines historical networks, recent political developments, and regional security implications, while emphasizing the tension between de facto control and legally recognized authority. It underscores the critical importance of democratic legitimacy, constitutional norms, and the resilience of institutions in shaping the region's political trajectory.*

### Background and Historical Context

Political engagement between Colombian and Venezuelan [far] leftist movements dates back decades. In 1994, Chávez visited Colombia at the invitation of Gustavo Petro with money from Foundations linked to him.

This visit marked the start of a lasting political relationship, and from 1999 onward, multiple sources—including Hugo “El Pollo” Carvajal, Chávez's former military intelligence chief—have alleged that Chávez, Maduro, and Diosdado Cabello provided political and financial support to Petro's rise. Carvajal even testified before a U.S. court that Maduro personally supplied funds to him.

In addition, both FARC [dissidents] and the ELN actively supported Chávez, Maduro and Petro [*Picota Prison Pact 2022*], providing political and logistical backing that reinforced ties between Colombian and Venezuelan criminal groups and [far] leftist leaders.

These connections reveal a long-standing, coordinated network that has shaped regional politics for decades [*criminal populism*]<sup>1</sup>, linking criminal organizations to political movements and consolidating their influence across the region.

### Developments Under the Petro Administration

Since taking office amid a disputed presidency, Petro has paid at least six official visits to Caracas, consistently recognizing Maduro as the legitimate president of Venezuela.

During one such visit, Colombian media reported the disappearance of a suitcase containing U.S. dollars from the residence of Petro's then-chief of staff, now Colombia's Ambassador to the United Kingdom.

Around the same time, Petro's head of security—who was reportedly preparing testimony concerning financial transfers between Petro and Maduro—was found dead; Petro unilaterally declared the death a suicide, a conclusion authorities repeated two days later, sending a clear alarm through Petro's inner circle and his broader *Pacto Histórico* coalition.

Petro's government has used executive actions and violent pro-government rallies to counter U.S. involvement in Venezuela. Critics say these moves bypass Congress, weaken judicial oversight, and mirror Maduro's authoritarian tactics.

### Electoral and Security Implications

As Colombia approaches the 2026 elections, these dynamics raise concerns about institutional resilience and electoral integrity. Observers point to potential risks including external political influence, clientelist networks, and interaction with non-state actors such as organized crime and illegal armed groups from Colombia and

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<sup>1</sup> Populism does not stand on its own—it survives by embedding itself in coercive power networks. In the cases of Maduro and

Petro, that survival has depended on alliances with illegal armed groups and organized crime.

Venezuela<sup>2</sup>—some of which are nominally addressed under Petro's "Total Peace" initiative.

At the regional level, the Maduro narco-regime has been consistently linked to transnational criminal networks, including the Cartel de los Soles and Tren de Aragua, operating in coordination with FARC dissidents, the ELN, Clan del Golfo, and extremist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas.

Analysts warn that if Maduro or senior Venezuelan officials were to disclose details of these arrangements in U.S. judicial proceedings, the revelations could expose the depth of Venezuelan interference in the political processes of Colombia under President Petro and Spain under Prime Minister Sánchez—potentially triggering severe domestic and regional security repercussions.

### International Context

The positions adopted by certain international actors further complicate this environment. Notably, UN Special Rapporteur Ben Saul's public defense of "*Nicolás Maduro as Venezuela's leader*" underscores the deeply contested nature of international engagement with the regime.

In parallel, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres "*has condemned U.S. intervention, stating that he is deeply concerned that the rules of international law—including the UN Charter's provisions on the use of force and respect for state sovereignty—may not have been respected during the operation*".

The positions adopted by these international officials and other international actors omit, at minimum, two central issues from the perspective of contemporary public international law, contributing to a legally incomplete reading of the Venezuelan situation.

First, Nicolás Maduro lacks democratic and constitutional legitimacy to exercise the headship of the Venezuelan State. According to the prevailing doctrine on government recognition, international legitimacy does not derive *exclusively* from effective territorial control, but from the democratic origin of power and its exercise in

accordance with the constitutional order and human rights (Franck, 1992; Crawford, 2006).

Contemporary practice by States and international organizations has consolidated the distinction between *de facto* and *legitimate* governments, recognizing that the mere coercive possession of power does not, by itself, generate a sufficient legal title for representing the State [at the international level] (Dugard, 2013).

Second, the invocation of Venezuelan sovereignty in absolute terms is legally problematic. While Article 2.1 of the United Nations Charter enshrines the principle of sovereign equality of *States*, sovereignty in contemporary international law cannot be conceived as a purely territorial prerogative nor as detached from the legitimacy of power exercised. As James Crawford notes, "*sovereignty implies not only effective authority, but also legitimate authority exercised in accordance with international law*" (Crawford, 2019).

Similarly, doctrine has observed that sovereignty has evolved from a formalistic notion to a functional and conditional concept, linked to the fulfillment of fundamental international obligations, particularly in human rights (Koskeniemi, 2011).

*From this perspective, the territorial control exercised by a de facto narco-regime sustained through systematic collaboration with non-state armed groups and organized crime networks does not satisfy the normative requirements of state sovereignty.*

The literature on failed States and illegitimate authorities emphasizes that the exercise of power through criminal structures erodes the legal character of state authority and weakens its capacity to legitimately invoke the protection of the principles of non-intervention and the prohibition of the use of force (Clapham, 2006; Cassese, 2005).

Consequently, the automatic appeal to the prohibition of the use of force provided for in Article 2.4 of the UN Charter, without a prior analysis of the legitimacy of the government

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<sup>2</sup> Colombian media have reported that, following the U.S. intervention, illegal armed groups and organized crime

networks headquartered in Venezuela began crossing into Colombia on January 3, 2026.

invoking it, oversimplifies an inherently complex legal scenario.

Such an approach disregards the evolution of international law toward a conception of sovereignty conditioned by democratic legitimacy, the effective protection of the civilian population, and respect for the rule of law.

As Thomas Franck warns, *"international legality loses normative force when it is systematically divorced from justice and the legitimacy of the political power it seeks to uphold"* (Franck, 1990).

Similar forms of external legitimization are actively distorting Colombia's political narrative, driven in part by [far] left-aligned figures such as Senator Iván Cepeda, a long-standing ally of Chavismo, Maduro and Diosdado Cabello.

Repeatedly, President Petro and Senator Cepeda have reproduced—often word for word—the rhetoric of Maduro and Cabello within Colombia. This is not coincidence but the product of more than two decades of political intimacy, ideological loyalty, and deliberate complicity.

### **Retaliation**

In the period immediately preceding—and with heightened intensity following—the U.S. intervention in Venezuela, armed violence in Colombia escalated significantly. The ELN, FARC dissident factions, and other narco-criminal organizations aligned with the Maduro regime expanded their operations across the country.

These groups, which the Colombian government has recognized as counterparts under President Petro's and Senator Iván Cepeda "Total Peace" framework, carried out attacks in at least 13 of Colombia's 26 departments, resulting in civilian casualties, losses among the armed forces and important civilian displacements.

Concurrently, and although not necessarily as part of a coordinated strategy, the political response from the Colombian executive branch intensified domestic polarization.

President Petro and his senior cabinet officials have openly threatened to "take up arms again," publicly accused Colombia's highest courts of collusion with drug traffickers, and initiated formal prosecutions against opposition figures for supporting U.S. intervention in Venezuela.

These actions strike at the very foundations of Colombia's institutions, undermining the rule of law and weaponizing the security apparatus for political ends. Equally alarming, UN Human Rights Special Rapporteur Ben Saul and UN Secretary-General António Guterres have remained silent, offering no response to a rapidly escalating human rights and governance crisis.

### **Recommendation**

Policymakers and international observers should treat Petro's administration with scrutiny regarding both internal governance and foreign alignments.

Strengthening institutional oversight, enforcing electoral transparency, and monitoring illicit networks are essential. International actors must differentiate between de facto control and legitimate authority, emphasizing democratic legitimacy and rule-of-law principles in diplomatic engagement with Venezuela and Colombia.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence suggests a deeply entrenched network linking Venezuelan authorities, Colombian leftist leaders, and organized crime, creating risks for regional stability and democratic governance. Petro's alignment with Maduro raises red flags about external influence and erosion of institutional norms.

Legally and politically, sovereignty and legitimacy must be measured not by territorial control alone but by adherence to democratic principles and lawful authority.

Vigilant oversight and principled international engagement are critical to safeguarding Colombia's democracy and limiting the regional reach of criminalized political networks.

Bogotá, Colombia, 6 December 2026.