

Shadow Regimes

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Colombian criminal groups (the ELN, FARC dissident factions, and the Gulf Clan) and Venezuelan organizations (the Cartel of the Suns and the Tren de Aragua), among others, have consolidated into transnational criminal networks that dominate drug trafficking, illegal mining, human trafficking, deforestation, and the predatory exploitation of natural resources. Sustained by terror and extortion, their control turned the Amazon and energy regions into criminal enclaves: a mutation that exchanged Colombia's dependence on hydrocarbons for a thriving crime industry.

In Colombia, and increasingly across the continent, these organizations have also extended their influence into politics through the so-called *voto pistola* ("gunpoint voting"): a strategy of electoral coercion based on intimidation and territorial control. Various allegations and estimates claim that this mechanism may have influenced nearly one million votes in the 2022 presidential election and could have expanded to as many as four million votes by 2026, strengthening organized crime's ability to influence democracy and political competition, allegedly benefiting President Petro, Iván Cepeda, and the Historic Pact (Pacto Histórico).

For nearly two decades, the Venezuelan regime has provided refuge, logistical support, and political protection to transnational organized crime throughout the Americas. Since Petro's election in 2022, this model has reportedly evolved, according to multiple investigations, into a strategic alliance between Caracas and Bogotá aimed at strengthening the region's most dangerous criminal networks.

According to these investigations, the Venezuelan regime invested billions of dollars in promoting a narrative that portrays criminal organizations as agents of social justice rather than violent criminal enterprises—a political strategy that Petro's government has also adopted.

The investigative reports further contend that proceeds from organized crime have been used to strengthen the political projects of both governments while financing networks that extend beyond Latin America. Among the organizations that, according to these investigations, have benefited from this environment are Colombian criminal groups, Mexican drug cartels, and organizations internationally designated as terrorist groups, including Hezbollah and Hamas.

It is also alleged that these criminal networks finance NGOs, political mobilization, and coordinated episodes of civil unrest. According to these investigations, both during Petro's years in the opposition and throughout his presidency, seemingly spontaneous protests were systematically financed with illicit funds¹.

The alliance between Caracas and Bogotá has facilitated the expansion of illegal armed groups and organized crime throughout the continent. Its critics argue that the Petro-Cepeda Total Peace (*Paz Total*) policy—preceded by the electoral agreements known as the La Picota Pact (*Pacto de La Picota*)—granted criminal organizations an unprecedented level of government protection under Petro, allowing them to expand rapidly, increase their territorial control, and amass significant financial and operational power².

The murders of Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio and Colombian senator and presidential candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay have been linked by investigators to the Segunda Marquetalia, a Colombian criminal organization based in Venezuela and aligned with the Petro-Cepeda peace project.

In the case of Miguel Uribe Turbay, investigators identified what they described as a particularly troubling element: the mastermind, Zarco Aldinever³, was operating under a government-issued safe-conduct pass authorized by President Petro, which allowed him to travel between Venezuela and Colombia while coordinating the attack before returning across the border.

The same operational model has allegedly appeared in other countries across the region. Colombia's 2021 unrest, Chile's violent protests in 2019, and rising violence in Peru and Ecuador have all been linked to networks involving criminal groups operating from Venezuela (the Cartel of the Suns and the Tren de Aragua) as well as from Colombian territory. Evidence collected by Colombia's Office of the Attorney General and later made public pointed to the key role played by the ELN, which is considered a major actor within Petro-Cepeda's Total Peace strategy.

Despite this evidence, some international organizations and think tanks critical of the Trump administration continue to portray regional instability primarily as a democratic response to right-wing [new] governments⁴.

This interpretation largely overlooks the documented role that criminal groups based in Venezuela and Colombia have played in weakening democratic institutions, expanding illicit economies, and undermining regional security.

The result is an increasingly influential narrative that minimizes the geopolitical impact of organized crime in the region while portraying left-wing—or more radical left-wing—governments in a more favorable light, despite the growing number of allegations regarding the convergence between that political spectrum, criminal organizations, and transnational illicit financing networks.

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¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xq5TDv3NL7w>

² The battle is no longer just over votes, but over legitimacy. Following elections shaped by armed coercion (2022 and 2026), the Petro-Cepeda machine has turned to an expensive global public relations campaign aimed at redefining, in the eyes of the international community, a political mandate that is deeply contested.

³ Aldinever never played any other role in the "Total Peace" deal.

⁴ *El Tiempo*, 20 June 2026: "Why have Kast, Paz, and Orsi had complicated starts to their terms in office?" p. 1. 14.