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Understanding the Structure and Resilience of Venezuela's Cartel de los Soles

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Editor's Note: This policy brief is Part II of an Orion Policy Institute (OPI) Transnational Crime Project (OPI-TCP) series and culminating report examining Venezuela's transnational criminal networks, their regional security implications, and the evolving U.S. policy response.

In November 2025, the United States designated the Cartel de los Soles (CDS) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, setting the stage for an escalating military campaign against Venezuelan narco-trafficking. This designation helped justify Operation Southern Spear, which targeted alleged drug trafficking vessels in the Pacific and Caribbean, ultimately culminating in the capture of Nicolás Maduro on January 3, 2026. The Trump administration declared these operations as decisive blows against Venezuela's illicit economies. However, understanding whether these interventions can meaningfully disrupt state-embedded criminality requires examining what CDS actually is. CDS serves as a case study of how systems of corruption embedded within state institutions differ from traditional criminal organizations, and why they often prove resistant to being dismantled. This op-ed argues that CDS is best understood not as an organized criminal network, but as a state-embedded system of corruption and criminal governance that is resistant to traditional counter-cartel strategies.

Analyzing state-embedded criminality in Venezuela requires clarifying how networks like CDS differ from the non-state criminal actors they facilitate. State-embedded criminality, exemplified in Venezuela by CDS, functions as a diffuse network and culture of corruption embedded in state institutions rather than as a structured criminal organization. These officials typically act as facilitators of criminality from a distance, profiting through revenue-sharing

arrangements with non-state actors. In contrast, non-state armed and criminal networks like the National Liberation Army (ELN), FARC dissidents, and Tren de Aragua, typically have more hierarchical, formalized structures. These groups often handle the logistical and operational organization of illicit activities and find it strategically advantageous to co-opt or form alliances with corrupt state officials. This relationship allows non-state actors to conduct their operations with relative impunity, while state officials are afforded an alternative revenue stream. The result is a layered criminal ecosystem where state and non-state criminal actors reinforce each other's activities.

What is Cartel de los Soles?

The name 'Cartel de los Soles' was a term coined by the Venezuelan media in the 1990s to describe Venezuelan military officials engaged in illicit activities. The 'los Soles' refers to the sun depicted on Venezuelan military generals' uniforms, and the name became a convenient, somewhat mocking term used to reference corrupt state-officials. This system of corruption existed long before it was labeled a cartel.

The system's label as a cartel has led to inaccurate understandings of its structure and function. With no real hierarchy, specialized units, and kingpins, CDS operates as a network of corruption and patronage system, with its 'members' being made up of officials in the Venezuelan government, particularly its security institutions. Corrupt officials who are part of this informal network often have little knowledge of the activities of other members. Leveraging their positions and influence, political elites and high-ranking military and intelligence officials engage in corruption by facilitating and profiting from various illicit economies. Rather than getting involved in lower-level operations in these illicit trades, CDS members typically generate revenue through implicit alliances with and affording protection to non-state criminal actors. Strategic alliances with non-state groups like the ELN and Tren de Aragua, where government officials turn a blind-eye to illicit activity in exchange for profit shares, are common. CDS members might grant non-state networks protection or material support in exchange for revenue. These fragmented, informal arrangements reflect CDS's nature as a system of opportunistic corruption rather than a coordinated criminal network.

Maduro facilitated and exploited this culture of corruption as a coup-proofing mechanism. Through prioritizing loyalty over competence in the state's security institutions, Maduro created a military leadership that profited from, and was often reliant on, revenue generated through illicit means. This created a dynamic in which these corrupted security officials depended on the regime for financial stability. Further, should the regime fall and state-embedded corruption be rooted out, the CDS network could face legal ramifications. Maduro's coup-proofing proved successful in ensuring security officials remained loyal to the regime in the 2024 elections.

Ultimately, CDS is more accurately described as a system of corruption rather than the organized criminal network it was labeled by the U.S. This structure also points to CDS not having a traditional leader or single kingpin. Unlike the Sinaloa Cartel, for example, where the arrest of leaders like El Mayo sparked major turf wars and internal power struggles within the cartel, Maduro acted as an enabler that benefited from illicit operations, but did not control them from all levels. Initially labeling this system as a formal organization, with Maduro serving as its head, to justify boat strikes and the capture of Maduro, the U.S. Justice Department recently walked back these specific allegations, now more accurately recognizing CDS as an informal system of corruption.

The Challenge of Dismantling Cartel de los Soles

Despite Maduro's capture, the network of corruption that has been labeled CDS is likely to persist, demonstrating the difficulty in dismantling state-embedded criminality. While Maduro is gone, President Trump has left his regime largely intact, allowing many of the officials who facilitated and profited from these criminal economies to remain in positions of power where they continue to rely on illicit revenue streams. Much of the illicit infrastructure is likely to remain intact, as will the relationships between corrupt officials and non-state criminal actors who operate these networks. More importantly, the culture of corruption that enabled CDS to flourish persists within Venezuelan institutions, where patronage systems and informal profit-sharing arrangements have become deeply normalized. Under the Delcy Rodriguez government, opportunities for corruption may even expand, particularly through potential oil ventures could create new avenues for rent-seeking and resources being misappropriated.

Without addressing these systemic conditions, the removal of one individual is unlikely to disrupt the underlying system. Traditional U.S. strategies to combat cartels, such as kingpin strategies, extraditions, or limited strikes on infrastructure targets, are therefore unlikely to prove very effective in countering state-embedded criminal systems like CDS.

Genuinely dismantling CDS would require a near-total overhaul of Venezuela's corrupt institutions. This is an enormously expensive and politically risky task. The scale of this challenge is driven in large part by the degree to which this corruption structure is embedded in the state. Decades of loyalty-based appointments have cultivated security institutions where hundreds of military, intelligence, and law enforcement officials are implicated. Conducting vetting processes, building new oversight mechanisms, and sourcing technical expertise needed to guide reform all demand substantial financial resources. Such efforts would also risk isolating or antagonizing large portions of the security apparatus, potentially destabilizing the institutions needed to maintain order during a transition.

Finally, the political will to pursue such a task is essential. As a key player in Maduro's repressive authoritarian regime, Rodriguez's government has not signaled a meaningful commitment to pursuing reforms that could help dismantle this culture of corruption. Despite this, the current moment may present a rare window of opportunity for the U.S. The Rodriguez government's performance thus far has exceeded many experts' expectations, pointing to a degree of pragmatism that Washington can work with.

The Trump administration has the leverage to push the regime toward more transparency by going after corrupt actors inside the military. Pursuing regime transparency and accountability as part of the U.S.' own stabilization goals could represent the most viable short-term strategy for combating the cultures of corruption CDS represents.

**image credit:* AA.

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