

# VENEZUELAN MILITARY CULTURE

By Brian Fonseca, John Polga-Hecimovich and Harold A. Trinkunas

May 2016



**FIU**

Steven J. Green  
School of International  
& Public Affairs



## The FIU-USSOUTHCOM Academic Partnership Military Culture Series

Florida International University's Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy (FIU-JGI) and FIU's Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (FIU-LACC), in collaboration with the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), have formed the FIU-SOUTHCOM Academic Partnership. Through this partnership, FIU provides research-based knowledge to further USSOUTHCOM's understanding of the political, strategic, and cultural dimensions that shape military behavior in Latin America and the Caribbean. This goal is accomplished by employing an approach that focuses on military culture. The initial phase of this project on military culture consisted of a year-long program that focused on developing a standard analytical framework to identify and assess military culture that was initially applied in three country case studies: Cuba, Honduras, and Venezuela.

The overarching purpose of the project is two-fold: to generate a rich and dynamic base of knowledge pertaining to political, social, and strategic factors that influence military behavior; and to contribute to USSOUTHCOM's Socio-Cultural Analysis (SCA) Program. Utilizing the concept of military culture, USSOUTHCOM has commissioned FIU-JGI to conduct country-studies in order to explain how Latin American militaries will behave in the context of interactions and engagements with the U.S. military.

The FIU research team defines military culture as "the internal and external factors—historical, cultural, social, political, economic—that shape the dominant values, attitudes, and behaviors of the military institution, that inform how the military views itself and its place and society, and shapes how the military may interact with other institutions, entities, and governments." FIU identifies and expands upon the cultural factors that inform the perceptions and behavior of select militaries by analyzing their historical evolution, their sources of identity and sources of pride, and their role in society.

To meet the project's objectives, FIU's JGI and LACC hosted academic workshops in Miami that brought subject matter experts together from throughout the U.S. and Latin America and the Caribbean, to explore and discuss the sources of military behavior. When possible, FIU-JGI researchers conduct field research in select countries to examine these factors through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and/or surveys. At the conclusion of each workshop and research trip, FIU publishes a findings report which is then presented at USSOUTHCOM.

The following Venezuelan Military Culture Findings Report, authored by Brian Fonseca, John Polga-Hecimovich, and Harold A. Trinkunas, is the product of a working group held in Miami in 2016 which included seven U.S. and Venezuelan academic experts who have conducted research and written on Venezuelan military history and culture.

The views expressed in this findings report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. government, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Southern Command, FIU-JGI, Florida International University, or the institutions to which the individual participants and report authors are affiliated.

On behalf of FIU-JGI and FIU-LACC, we wish to acknowledge and thank all of the participants for their contributions to making the Venezuelan Military Culture workshop a notable success.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Historical Evolution of the FANB</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<i>History's Impact on the Venezuelan Military's View of Itself</i> .....	7
<i>The Impact of the Bolivarian Movement on Military Culture</i> .....	8
<b>Sources of FANB Identity</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<i>Dominant Norms and Values of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces</i> .....	11
<i>Divisions in the FANB</i> .....	13
<i>Implications of the Changing Demographics of the FANB</i> .....	17
<b>The FANB and Venezuelan Society</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<i>Role in Society: Missions</i> .....	18
<i>Role in Politics</i> .....	19
<i>Role in Economy</i> .....	20
<i>Society's Attitudes towards the FANB</i> .....	21
<i>Factors Shaping Public Perception</i> .....	26
<i>FANB Perception of Chavismo and the Political Opposition</i> .....	28
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>About the Authors</b> .....	<b>31</b>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Venezuela has a longstanding tradition of military participation in internal politics.

- The military, directly or indirectly, held political power in Venezuela through most of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.
- The Venezuelan military has not fought an interstate conflict since its independence in 1830. The absence of inter-state conflict throughout Venezuelan history has contributed to a military orientation that favors internal stability over external security.
- In 1971, military education reform (known as the Plan Andrés Bello) introduced a university-level education for military cadets and emphasized leadership training, professional development, and combat readiness, focused on the military's role in politics, society, and economic development. The first class of cadets under the plan, which included Hugo Chávez, embraced the role of the military as a tool for modernizing Venezuela and implementing social change.
- The role of the *Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana* (FANB) in politics, economics, and society is intimately tied to its historical experience, the many failures of civilian governments in the 1980s and 1990s, and its recent evolution under former President Hugo Chávez.
- Under President Chávez, active-duty and retired military officers assumed political and bureaucratic positions, occupying up to a third of cabinet portfolios, with the FANB becoming one of the principal facilitators of government programs and policy, clearly moving from a restricted domestic role to an active one.
- As of 2016, approximately 200 ideologically committed military officers are in control of the armed forces' most sensitive positions. A politically-controlled promotions process produces FANB senior officers that tend to view the governing *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV) favorably and the opposition *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (Movement of Democratic Unity, MUD) coalition unfavorably.
- Despite its affiliation with the PSUV, the FANB is unwilling to repress civilians on a large-scale. The FANB values social peace and internal cohesion, and it will likely seek to avoid situations where it may be called on to repress civilians.

FANB sources of identity are grounded in the legacies of Simón Bolívar, of Venezuela's democratic opening during the latter part of the twentieth century, and the rise of President Hugo Chávez.

- The FANB sees itself as the institution that has inherited the legacy of Simón Bolívar and his liberation of five nations in South America between 1810 and 1825. Thus, a core identity for the FANB is as liberators, as captured in the army's motto, "*Forjador de Libertades*" (forger of liberties).
- The armed forces increasingly identified with democratic values following the 1958 transition to democracy through their experience of guaranteeing the integrity and security of elections.
- President Hugo Chávez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro, have attempted to link traditional sources of military identity to the ideological precepts of the governing party. Chávez posited a new way of thinking for the FANB, asserting that the role of the armed forces as the forgers of liberties should emphasize the defense of social liberties, the poor, and the marginalized.
- The military has become directly linked to the defense of the governing party's political project: Bolivarianism. This is exemplified by the adoption in 2008 of the motto "*¡Patria, socialismo o muerte! ¡Venceremos!*" (Fatherland, socialism, or death. We will prevail!) that accompanies military salutes, and the 2008 renaming of the National Armed Force to the National Bolivarian Armed Force. Chávez also introduced the use of the singular 'force' instead of 'forces' in reference to the military to emphasize unity.

Despite a preference for institutional cohesion, numerous socioeconomic and political fault lines exist within the FANB today.

- Inter-service rivalries and political and economic divisions persist. In addition to differences in their respective constitutional roles, norms, and values, different branches of the FANB are also rivals in illicit activities, such as narcotics trafficking.
- In recent years, politicians have shown preferential treatment to the Army in terms of political appointments and access to resources. Of the 15 Ministers of Defense Chávez or Maduro appointed since 1999, 11 have come from the Army and three from the Navy (one, José Vicente Rangel, was a civilian).
- In terms of rank, senior officers are selected for being loyal followers of Hugo Chávez, the PSUV, and the governing Bolivarian ideology, while mid-grade officers reflect a broad mix of those who identify as Chavistas as well as those more critical of government policy. Junior officers have received an increasingly ideologically-based military education in recent years.
- The shifting demographics of the Venezuelan Armed Forces also create potential cleavages within the officer corps. Hugo Chávez emphasized the enrollment of traditionally excluded groups of citizens into the military, particularly the officer corps. These minority groups have a stake in the success of the Bolivarian revolution and the military that it has created. They are unlikely to cooperate with any attempts to roll back the reforms that made new professional and social opportunities available to them.

Venezuelan society's views of the military are complex and divided along socioeconomic lines.

- The FANB has long been viewed mostly favorably by Venezuelan society. However, as the military becomes increasingly associated with the survival of the Chavista regime and the execution of its policies, as well as FANB connections to corruption become increasingly publicized, societal views of the FANB are declining, particularly among regime opponents.
- Under Chavismo, the government has used the FANB in antipoverty, social inclusion, and relief efforts, especially in the government's celebrated Bolivarian *misiones sociales* (social missions).
- Notwithstanding the FANB's large and contested role in civilian affairs in Venezuela, most Venezuelans today believe the military should continue to play a role in society. In particular, most Venezuelans believe that the military should play a larger role in combating crime and violence in the country.

## HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE FANB

The Venezuelan Armed Forces, known today as the *Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana* (National Bolivarian Armed Force, FANB), have been key actors in Venezuelan politics and state building. The origin of the military in Venezuela dates back to the colonial militia organized by Spain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in what was then the *Capitanía General de Venezuela*. The wars of independence (1810-1823) produced a proud military tradition. Beginning with the presidency of José Antonio Páez (1830-1835), armed men directly or indirectly held political power in Venezuela through most of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.

Venezuela has a longstanding tradition of military participation in politics. Until Julián Castro's military dictatorship in 1858, most post-independence leaders in the nineteenth century were ex-military officers who represented the Liberal and Conservative political parties. Alternation between active and retired military officers holding political power ended definitively with the *Revolución Liberal Restauradora* (Liberal Restoration Revolution), the 1899 coup d'état and civil war perpetrated by Cipriano Castro and other armed men from Venezuela's Táchira State. Between 1899 and 1945, a succession of military officers from Táchira ruled the country under a military dictatorship: Castro (1899-1908); Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935); Eleazar López Contreras (1935-1941); and Isaías Medina Angarita (1941-1945). During this period, the military transformed itself, becoming a professional institution with the founding of a modern military academy in 1910 under the tutelage of German-influenced Chilean military instructors. It became one of the most important state institutions, with military officers respected and admired by society.<sup>1</sup> With political power and in the absence of interstate conflict, the armed forces saw themselves as the key institution in fostering internal development and modernization.

Upon Venezuela's return to democracy in 1958, the military reluctantly returned to the barracks.<sup>2</sup> After the Marcos Pérez Jiménez dictatorship (1952-1958), political leaders signed a formal agreement known as the Pact of Punto Fijo, which called for mutual acceptance of the results of the 1958 presidential elections and the preservation of the rising democratic regime. The military's role in the state changed dramatically during this period: its focus remained inward, but its role shifted from modernization and governance to combatting left-wing insurgencies during the 1960s, namely the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria*, (Revolutionary Left Movement, MIR) and the *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional* (Armed Forces of National Liberation, FALN). Although it remained largely subordinate to civilian

---

<sup>1</sup> Gene E. Bigler, "The Armed Forces and Patterns of Civil-Military Relations," in *Venezuela: The Democratic Experience*, ed. J. D. Martz and D. J. Myers (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Manuel Bravo Abreu, *Militarismo y política en Venezuela 1945-1958* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial de la Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador, 1999).

control in the subsequent decades, the military increased its participation in development once again in the mid-1970s under a new national security doctrine that called for the integration of development and security.<sup>3</sup>

Conditions changed again at the end of the 1980s. Buffeted by low prices for its principal export—oil and its derivatives—and rising interest rates on its international debt, the Venezuelan government struggled financially. The *Caracazo*, a wave of protests, riots, and looting on February 27, 1989, followed the implementation of President Carlos Andrés Pérez’s neoliberal economic reforms, and the government called on the military to contain the riots. The resulting loss of civilian lives divided junior and senior officers. The radical left-wing conspiracy *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200* (Revolutionary Bolivarian 200 Movement, MBR-200) within the Army, led by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez, accelerated its planning for a coup d’état, which it attempted in February 1992. This coup attempt was unsuccessful, but it marked the beginning of the end of the democracy consolidated under the aegis of the Pact of Punto Fijo. A deep institutional crisis followed during the 1990s with the impeachment of President Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1993 and a major financial and economic crisis during the Rafael Caldera administration (1994-1999).

The most important factor influencing the changing role of the Venezuelan military during this period was the emergence of Hugo Chávez as a political figure. He was a military officer, a charismatic outsider and a radical populist leader. His brief televised appearance at the end of the February 1992 coup, where he stated that he was laying down arms “*por ahora*” (for now), galvanized political support among traditionally excluded and marginalized sectors of the population, particularly poor and working class Venezuelans. He won the presidency via electoral means in the December 1998 elections and remained in office until his death in 2013. As the rest of this report discusses, the military’s influence over Venezuelan society increased throughout this period as Chávez encouraged a “civil-military union” that promoted and formalized the FANB’s role in politics and society.

### *History’s Impact on the Venezuelan Military’s View of Itself*

The FANB’s view of itself and its role in politics and society are intimately connected to its historical position, its recent evolution, and the many failures of civilian governments in the 1980s and 1990s. Armed men have played a leadership role in politics and a modernizing role in society since the nineteenth century. Military dictators such as Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935) and Marcos Pérez

---

<sup>3</sup> Harold A. Trinkunas, *Crafting Civilian Control of the Military in Venezuela: A Comparative Perspective* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

Jiménez (1948-1958) professionalized the military during their rule while promoting public order and national modernization through infrastructure development. In fact, the late transition to democracy in Venezuela (1958) means that for much of its history, the military was not subordinate to civilian power nor did it view itself as having to be.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the FANB believed—and continues to believe—in the superiority of its members’ education, technical training, and discipline vis-à-vis other state institutions.

One of the most important shifts shaping the FANB’s self-perception and role in society occurred in 1971. Until that time, military cadets received a technical education rather than a university degree.<sup>5</sup> In 1971, the Venezuelan Military Academy adopted a new education approach, the Plan Andrés Bello, which emphasized a university-level education, leadership training and professional development, and combat readiness.<sup>6</sup> The plan included a much more significant emphasis on understanding politics, society, and economic development. The first class of students under the plan, which included Hugo Chávez, began to embrace the role of the military as a tool for modernizing Venezuela and implementing social change. This new understanding of what the armed forces was capable of contributing to society was formalized through the *Ley Orgánica de Seguridad y Defensa* (Defense and Security Organizing Law) in 1976, which gave the institution a developmental role in Venezuelan society.

### *The Impact of the Bolivarian Movement on Military Culture*

The formal and informal role of the armed forces changed again with the election of Hugo Chávez in December 1998 and the promulgation of a new political constitution in 1999. Article 328 of the 1999 Constitution broadened the military’s mission. It states: “The National Armed Force constitutes an essentially professional institution, without political militancy, organized by the State to guarantee the independence and sovereignty of the Nation and ensure the integrity of the geographic space through military defense, cooperation in the maintenance of internal order, and the active participation in national development, in accordance with this Constitution and the law.”<sup>7</sup>

Hugo Chávez appointed active-duty and retired military officers to political and bureaucratic positions throughout the civilian ministries and agencies of the state. Officers occupied up to a third of cabinet portfolios, with the military becoming one of the principal executors of government programs and policy, clearly moving from a restricted domestic role to an active one.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, Article 330 gave

---

<sup>4</sup> Domingo Irwin, *Relaciones Civiles-Militares en el Siglo XX* (Caracas: El Centauro Ediciones, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Marta Harnecker, *Militares Junto al Pueblo* (Caracas: Vadell Hermanos, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Harold A. Trinkunas, “The Crisis in Venezuelan Civil-Military Relations: From Punto Fijo to the Fifth Republic,” *Latin American Research Review* 37 no. 1 (2002): 41-76.

<sup>7</sup> *Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*, 1999. Translation by authors.

<sup>8</sup> Haydée Ochoa Henríquez and Isabel Rodríguez Colmenares, “Las Fuerzas Armadas en la Política Social de Venezuela,” *Política y Cultura* 20 no. 3 (2003): 117-135; Harold A. Trinkunas, “The Military: From Marginalization to Center Stage” in

military personnel the right to vote—something that had been prohibited throughout the democratic period of the Fourth Republic in an effort to minimize partisanship in the armed forces.

The military's role in politics, economics, and society became more entrenched after the failed coup against Chávez in April 2002. Its function was formalized in a number of ways. On November 28, 2002, the National Assembly passed the *Ley Orgánica de Seguridad de la Nación* (Organic Law of National Security), introducing the idea of “*seguridad y defensa integral*” (security and integral defense). This law reaffirmed the military's salient role in society and deepened the institution's commitment to development and security. In 2005, the Assembly passed the Organic Law of the National Armed Forces (*Ley Orgánica de la Fuerza Armada Nacional*), reiterating the participation of the military in development tasks and the maintenance of internal order.

The government has also attempted to indoctrinate and dictate the political beliefs of the officer corps, and to a lesser extent, non-officers. A 2007 reform adopted the use of the motto “*¡Patria, socialismo o muerte! ¡Venceremos!*” (Fatherland, socialism, or death. We will prevail!) as part of military salutes. This is a clear example of privileging ideology over nonpartisanship. In addition, the 2008 *Ley Orgánica de la Fuerza Armada Bolivariana*, (Organic Law of the Bolivarian Armed Forces, LOFANB) changed the formal title of the military from the National Armed Forces (FAN) to the “Bolivarian” National Armed Forces (FANB), directly implying the defense of a specific political project—that of Bolivarianism—rather than the nation as a whole. This law and subsequent reforms reinforced Chávez's tendency to create a military structure that would respond directly to him and his political-ideological project rather than remain apolitical, as called for in the constitution.<sup>9</sup>

## SOURCES OF MILITARY IDENTITY

The Venezuelan FANB draws on three legacies to shape its identity. The first is that of Venezuela's liberator and founding father, Simón Bolívar. His battlefield exploits and political accomplishments during Venezuela's war of independence from Spain are the cornerstone of Venezuelan military identity. The second draws on Venezuela's democratic traditions, particularly from the 1958-1998 period. The third more contemporary source of Venezuelan military identity lies in the legacy of late President Hugo Chávez and his efforts to build *socialismo del siglo XXI* (21<sup>st</sup> century socialism) in Venezuela. Although these three identities are not always compatible, Hugo Chávez and his successors have gone to

---

*The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela*, ed. Jennifer L. McCoy and David J. Myers (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Francine Jácome, “Fuerza armada, estado y sociedad civil en Venezuela,” Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales, Caracas, Venezuela, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Cristián Garay Vera and Froilán Ramos, “Las relaciones civiles-militares y el proyecto ideológico Bolivariano en Venezuela (1999-2014),” *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad* 11 no. 1 (2016): 263-286.

extraordinary lengths to connect a modern ideologically centered military identity with an organic and historically based traditional identity. Every member of the Venezuelan military must confront the contradictions posed by these identities, as they are present to a different degree in every soldier.

Simón Bolívar, whose legacy includes the liberation of five nations in South America between 1810 and 1825, is exalted within traditional Venezuelan military values. The armed forces see themselves as the institution that bears the legacy of this incomparable—in their view—achievement, unmatched by the founding fathers of any other South American state (although perhaps the Argentines might dispute that given the accomplishments of their own General José de San Martín). Therefore, a core identity for the Venezuelan Armed Forces is as liberators, captured in the army's motto, "*Forjador de Libertades*" (forger of liberties).<sup>10</sup>

Also drawn from the wars of independence is the notion of resistance against great odds and at all costs, in this case the Spanish Empire. It is worth noting that Simón Bolívar went to extremes during Venezuela's independence war, declaring "*guerra a muerte*" (war to the death) against the Spanish, recognizing no limits to the violence that could be employed in the defense of the nation.

Another influence on Venezuelan military identity drawn from this period is of the armed forces as the founders of the nation and defenders of territorial and popular sovereignty. It is important to remember that Venezuela had an army before it had a state, with the military taking a proprietary interest in political, economic, and social outcomes in Venezuela. It sees itself as the ultimate guarantor of Venezuela's independence.<sup>11</sup>

Subsequently, during the democratic period that began in 1958, the armed forces increasingly prided themselves on being nonpartisan and professional. This was a period of great transformation of the armed forces with the acquisition of modern equipment, the development of new doctrine, the expansion of the military education system including the development of a national defense university, *Instituto de Altos Estudios de la Defensa Nacional* (National Defense Advanced Studies Institute, IAEDEN), the development of advanced military medical facilities and other support elements, and the incorporation of the officer corps into the Venezuelan middle class. In particular, the armed forces became integrated into the democratic system through their periodic role in guaranteeing the integrity and security of Venezuelan elections. Although this was initially a measure adopted to ensure the physical security of voters and

---

<sup>10</sup> Domingo Irwin and Luis Alberto Buttó, "«Bolivarianismos» y Fuerza Armada en Venezuela. Los Bolivarianismos en la Mirada de las Ciencias Sociales," *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, January 18, 2006, <https://nuevomundo.revues.org/1320?lang=es>.

<sup>11</sup> José Gregorio Petit Primera, "El Militarismo en la Historia Política de Venezuela," *Frónesis* 22, no. 1 (2015): 88-106.

electoral officials during the 1960s insurgency, the armed forces developed great pride in becoming the guarantors of free and fair elections in Venezuela.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, under President Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro, there have been attempts to link traditional sources of military identity to the ideological precepts of the governing party. Specifically, Chávez posited the need for a new way of thinking for the Venezuelan military.<sup>13</sup> The role of the armed forces as the forgers of liberties was reinterpreted to emphasize the defense of social liberties, the poor, and the marginalized. The experience of Venezuela's wars of independence was reinterpreted to emphasize the role of indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan resistance to Spanish imperialism. Chávez made comparisons between modern experiences of prolonged popular war (China, Cuba, Vietnam, and Nicaragua) and Venezuela's long war of independence (1810-1823). Chávez also drew an analogy between Spanish imperialism and U.S. imperialism, emphasizing prolonged popular war integrating civilian and military combatants as the only way to defeat a technologically and economically superior adversary. From his view, this necessitated a "civil-military" union that transformed the entire population into a source of resistance to the enemy. These views were incorporated into Venezuelan military thinking through the four service academies, eventually integrated under the aegis of the *Universidad Militar Bolivariana de Venezuela* (Venezuelan Bolivarian Military University) in 2010.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Dominant Norms and Values of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces*

Although the FANB share many values with armed forces around the world, a more recent layer of values emphasizes the socialist dimension of Hugo Chávez's thinking and its implications for the armed forces. However, the Venezuelan military is also a pragmatic institution that prizes unity above all else, and it will attempt to avoid roles or engage in operations that would put its internal cohesion at risk. Even in times of extreme crisis, such as the 1958 and 2002 coup attempts or the 1989 urban uprising known as the *Caracazo*, the officer corps rapidly resolved differences and rallied around their corporate military identity. The officer corps prefers to support constitutional continuity above all, and it will go to some lengths to avoid being placed in situations that would lead it to order the use of force against other elements of the Venezuelan military or against the people.

---

<sup>12</sup> Harold A. Trinkunas, *Crafting Civilian Control of the Military in Venezuela: A Comparative Perspective* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Alberto Müller Rojas, "Nuevo pensamiento militar venezolano," *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales* 12 (2006): 133-136.

<sup>14</sup> Cristián Garay Vera and Froilán Ramos, "Las Relaciones Civiles-Militares y el Proyecto Ideológico Bolivariano (1999-2014)," *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad* 11, no. 1 (2016): 263-286. See also Marialsira González Rivas and Victor Córdova Cañas, "Universidad Militar Bolivariana de Venezuela y su Contribución al Pensamiento Militar Venezolano," *Columnata* 3 (September 2011): 115-124, [http://www.umbv.edu.ve/Documento/COLUMNATA\\_web.pdf](http://www.umbv.edu.ve/Documento/COLUMNATA_web.pdf).

The Venezuelan military education system is a foundation for transmitting norms and values to officers. During the Chávez period, the military educational system emphasized the following values for members of the National Bolivarian Armed Force<sup>15</sup>:

- Love of country;
- Honor;
- Discipline;
- Obedience and subordination;
- Leadership by example;
- Loyalty;
- Justice;
- Moderation; and
- Heroism.

Chávez's Plan for Bolivarian Socialist Management for 2013-2019 added an emphasis on Bolivarian ideals, integrated defense of the nation executed on all battlefronts, and civil-military union—every citizen a soldier and every soldier a citizen.<sup>16</sup> This has been translated concretely into the expansion of military reserves, the creation of a national Bolivarian militia (at times termed the territorial guard), and the creation of committees on integrated security and defense within the Communal Councils that constitute the basic neighborhood based building blocks of local governance.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to an emphasis on socialist values, Hugo Chávez and his successors sought to erode a traditional military emphasis on non-partisanship to lead the armed forces to identify with the Bolivarian revolution. This included the change of the name of the institution from the National Armed Forces to the National Bolivarian Armed Force. Military personnel were increasingly expected to be members of the governing PSUV and many senior military officers, active and retired, held high-ranking political positions in government.

Yet beyond these values, the Venezuelan military prizes social peace and internal cohesion above all. It avoids being placed in situations where it might be called on to repress civilians. One of the factors underpinning initial officer consent for the 2002 military uprising (later withdrawn over the unconstitutional actions of the transitional government of Pedro Carmona) were orders by Hugo Chávez

---

<sup>15</sup> Menry Fernández Pereira, "Filosofía de la Universidad Militar Bolivariana de Venezuela," *Columnata* 3 (September 2011): 125-136, [http://www.umbv.edu.ve/Documento/COLUMNATA\\_web.pdf](http://www.umbv.edu.ve/Documento/COLUMNATA_web.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> "Propuesta de Candidato de la Patria Comandante Hugo Chávez Para la Gestión Bolivariana Socialista 2013-2019," 12 June 2012, Caracas, Venezuela, 18, <http://blog.chavez.org.ve/Programa-Patria-2013-2019.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Marcela Donadio and María de la Paz Tibiletti, *Atlas Comparativo de la Defensa en América Latina y Caribe, Edición 2012* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: RESDAL, 2012), 267; Francine Jácome, "Fuerza armada, estado y sociedad civil en Venezuela," Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales, Caracas, Venezuela, 2011; Adolfo Vargas, "La praxis de Consejos Comunales y la Visión de las Élités sobre la Democracia Participativa," Centro de Investigación y Estudios de Sociología (CIES) Working Papers 95, Lisbon, Portugal, 2010.

to the military to implement Plan Ávila in the face of mass civilian demonstrations. The armed forces knew that this would lead to repression on a large scale, and they refused to obey. Some senior officers who were not yet loyal to President Hugo Chávez took advantage of this reluctance to organize a “coup within a coup” against the president. Similarly, during the 2003 general strike against the government, Hugo Chávez was careful to employ mainly National Guard and military police units (i.e. those trained to deal with civilian demonstrations) to contain civil unrest.<sup>18</sup> Even during the 2014 urban violence that began in February 2014 in the western city of San Cristóbal, the government preferred to use the National Guard and national police forces rather than regular army units.<sup>19</sup> Above all, the military prefers to avoid open conflict within the institution. To do so, it prefers to support the prevailing constitutional order as it is interpreted by the civilian leadership in charge of the main power centers in the state, particularly the presidency.

### *Divisions in the FANB*

Despite a preference for institutional unity, numerous fault lines are present within the Venezuelan military that make maintaining cohesion difficult. In addition to inter-service rivalries, political, and economic divisions exist as well. Different branches of the FANB are also rivals in illicit activities, such as drug trafficking. Fault lines also exist across ranks. Senior officers tend to be selected through the promotion process for their loyalty to Hugo Chávez, the governing PSUV party, and Bolivarian Socialism. Mid-grade officers reflect a broad mix of those who identify as Chavistas as well as those more critical of government policy. The most junior officers have received a more highly ideological education in the military academies, particularly since the founding of the Venezuelan Bolivarian Military University.<sup>20</sup>

Most armed forces around the world experience some form of inter-service rivalry, and within limits, this can be healthy in promoting greater attention to professional standards; the Venezuelan Armed Forces have taken this a step further. As far back as the Venezuelan transition to democracy in 1958, inter-service rivalry has been encouraged by civilian leaders as an insurance policy against coups. If the services did not trust each other, politicians believed, they would not cooperate to overthrow the regime. Officers would be deterred from conspiring for fear of facing armed opposition in the event of a coup attempt. Despite some initial attempts to foster greater cohesiveness, Hugo Chávez eventually relied on similar

---

<sup>18</sup> Harold A. Trinkunas, *Crafting Civilian Control of the Military in Venezuela: A Comparative Perspective* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> “Venezuela: Tipping Point,” *Latin America Policy Brief No. 30*, International Crisis Group, May 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Though constitutionally apolitical, the FANB is highly politicized in practice.

mechanisms, to which he added a further counter-balance to the military with the creation of a national Bolivarian militia under a separate command structure.

The five service branches in the FANB are: the Army (*Fuerzas Terrestres, Ejército*), the largest branch; the Navy (*Fuerzas Navales, Armada Bolivariana*) and Marines (*Infantería de Marina*); the Air Force (*Fuerzas Aérea, Aviación Militar*), which is significantly smaller than the first two branches; the National Guard (*Fuerzas Armadas de Cooperación, Guardia Nacional*); and the National Militia (*Milicia Bolivariana*), an autonomous and auxiliary force. This division manifests itself in at least two ways: 1) the preferential treatment politicians show the Army, and 2) rivalries among branches to control and perpetuate illegal activities.

The Army generally considers itself the most privileged force. This is not an opinion shared by the Air Force and Navy, which see themselves as more technically and professionally proficient. The National Guard, a militarized national gendarmerie, is comparable in size to the Army and staffed by professional officers and enlisted personnel, unlike the Army that relies on conscripts. However, the other services look down on the *Guardia* as being particularly corrupt.<sup>21</sup> As with most militaries, there is also a division between those officers selected to lead combat units and the rest of the officer corps.

Since 1999, politicians have favored the Army in terms of political appointments and access to resources. As an ex-Army officer, Chávez exhibited a predilection for appointing politicians from that branch, initially favoring his co-conspirators from the military academy, the revolutionary MBR-200 movement, and his supporters during the failed 1992 coup d'état against President Carlos Andrés Pérez.<sup>22</sup> Senior army officers have occupied key positions in the government, and have controlled the Ministry of Defense almost uninterrupted since Chávez assumed power. As Table 1 shows, of the 15 Ministers of Defense Chávez or Maduro appointed since 1999, 11 have come from the Army and three from the Navy (one, José Vicente Rangel, was a civilian). Meanwhile, no Minister of Defense has come from the Air Force, National Guard, or National Militia.

---

<sup>21</sup> Harold A. Trinkunas, *Crafting Civilian Control of the Military in Venezuela: A Comparative Perspective* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Margarita López Maya, "Venezuela: Hugo Chávez y el Bolivarianismo," *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales* 14, no. 3 (2008): 55-82.

**Table 1:** List of Venezuelan Ministers of Defense (1999-2016)

<b>Title and Name</b>	<b>Last Name</b>	<b>Start</b>	<b>End</b>	<b>Branch</b>
Gral. Raúl	Salazar Rodríguez	2/2/99	2/2/00	Army
Gral. Ismael Eliézer	Hurtado Soucre	2/2/00	2/15/01	Army
José Vicente	Rangel Vale	2/15/01	5/6/02	<i>(civilian)</i>
Gral. Lucas Enrique	Rincón Romero	5/6/02	7/3/02	Army
Gral. José Luis	Prieto	7/3/02	1/19/04	Army
Gral. Jorge Luis	García Carneiro	1/19/04	7/12/05	Army
Alm. Ramón Orlando	Maniglia Ferreira	7/12/05	7/14/06	<i>Navy</i>
Gen. Raúl Isafas	Baduel	7/14/06	7/18/07	Army
Gral. Div. Gustavo Reyes	Rangel Briceño	7/18/07	3/3/09	Army
Col. (ret) Ramón Alonso	Carrizales Rengifo	3/3/09	1/27/10	Army
Gral. Carlos José	Mata Figueroa	1/27/10	1/10/12	Army
Gral. Henry de Jesús	Rangel Silva	1/10/12	10/29/12	Army
Alm. Diego Alfredo	Molero Bellavia	10/29/12	7/5/13	<i>Navy</i>
Alm. Carmen Teresa	Meléndez Rivas	7/5/13	10/25/14	<i>Navy</i>
Gen. Vladimir	Padrino López	10/25/14	Present	Army

Source: Authors

High-level ex-military politicians also tend to overwhelmingly originate from the Army. As shown in Table 2 on page 19, 11 of the 23 current state governors are ex-military officers, and 18 of the 46 since 2008. Of the 14 former officers who have served as governor during this period, an overwhelming 11 of them come from the Army, while only two are ex-Naval officers (Wilmar Castro Soteldo and Julio León Heredia) and one from the Air Force (Ramón Rodríguez Chacín). Senior posts within the ministries controlled by former military officers similarly favor the Army.

The rivalries between branches also go beyond normal service divisions and often involve control of illicit activities. The fiercest of these is probably between the National Guard and the Army, and to a lesser extent the Air Force. This is illustrated by the so-called “*Cartel de los Soles*” (Cartel of Suns).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The term “*Cartel de los Soles*” is a reference to the sun insignias worn by Venezuelan Army generals (the General in Chief wears four suns; a Major General wears three suns; a Division General wears two suns; a Brigade General wears one sun).

The Cartel de los Soles has a number of cells within all branches of the FANB. They are controlled by high- to mid-ranking military officers that facilitate or engage in drug trafficking. These officers use their autonomy, relative legal immunity, and access to major airports, road checkpoints, and ports to purchase, store, move, and sell cocaine.<sup>24</sup> However, rather than coordinating actions, different cells compete for drugs, turf, and infrastructure. The two largest groups (often mischaracterized as “cartels”) likely belong to the Army and the National Guard, and compete for control of the movement of cocaine shipments over transit routes to and from Colombia and the Caribbean.<sup>25</sup>

The second major division in the FANB is the hierarchical cleavage between senior officers (generals, major generals, brigadier generals, and sometimes colonels) and mid-grade and junior officers (lieutenant colonels, majors, captains, and lieutenants). In addition to tactics that include officer purges, rotations, and loyalty pledges to deter coup attempts, Chávez and Maduro have removed or sidelined members of the high command that are seen as disloyal.<sup>26</sup> Senior officials are selected because they speak in the language of the government’s Bolivarian Revolution and 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism, thus professing an ideological allegiance. However, this is less common moving down the military hierarchy. Beyond differences in responsibility and mission, this means that senior officers tend to be uniformly (and vocally) pro-government—they are Chavista, socialist, and Bolivarian—while the composition of mid ranking officers is more likely to mirror the ideological make up of society as a whole.

This division has major implications for Venezuelan democracy and the persistence of the Maduro government. As Naunihal Singh shows in his comprehensive analysis of coups d’états around the world, the probability of coup success as well as the level of bloodshed in a coup is tied to the ranks of the perpetrators: insurrections led by senior officers are the most successful (68 percent success rate globally) and most likely to be bloodless; those by junior officers are less successful (48 percent) and more likely to provoke bloodshed; and those perpetrated by non-commissioned officers and enlisted men are not often successful (32 percent) and almost always result in the loss of many lives.<sup>27</sup> In other words, even if the Maduro government is able to maintain the loyalty of senior officers through promotions, pay raises, and occasional purges, the division between senior and junior officers means that the government is still susceptible to military insurrection. Worse, that intervention is more likely to result in the loss of life.

---

<sup>24</sup> “Cartel de los Soles,” *InsightCrime*, last modified 2015, <http://www.insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/cartel-de-los-soles-profile>.

<sup>25</sup> Marcel Ventura, “Venezuela’s Agony: Weak President, Strong Generals, Riots and Cocaine,” *The Daily Beast*, last modified April 14, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/04/14/venezuela-s-agony-weak-president-strong-generals-riots-and-cocaine.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Eric R. Rittinger and Matthew R. Cleary, “Confronting Coup Risk in the Latin American Left,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 48 no. 4 (2013): 403-431.

<sup>27</sup> Naunihal Singh, *Seizing Power: The Strategic Logic of Military Coups* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

The third fundamental cleavage is between those officers that supported Hugo Chávez in the 1992 coup attempts and the rest. The original coup plotters and their protégés have a privileged status in the armed forces, and this has been reinforced by their selection for political positions such as ministers, governors, and heads of state-owned enterprises. More broadly, officers selected to serve in civilian ministries and agencies of government generally have higher pay and more access to corruption, creating an additional internal cleavage in the military. Drug trafficking has made major in-roads into the officer corps, creating an additional division between the honest and the complicit. Yet there are also those, perhaps a minority, who are true believers in the Bolivarian Revolution. They are divided from those who pay the Revolution lip service, or remain quiet for fear of being denounced to intelligence officials and ideological enforcers.<sup>28</sup>

### *Implications of the Changing Demographics of the FANB*

Adding to the internal divisions within the National Bolivarian Armed Force are generational cleavages and the incorporation of traditionally excluded elements of society within the officer corps. A key generational difference with the officer corps lies with the officers that graduated after the reform of military curricula during the 2000s. As early as 2006, but fully implemented with the class of 2010, graduates from Venezuela's military academy received a more ideologically based education than their predecessors. As of 2016, these officers are now captains and senior lieutenants.

The shifting demographics of the Venezuelan Armed Forces also create potential cleavages within the officer corps. Hugo Chávez emphasized the enrollment of traditionally excluded groups of citizens into the military, particularly the officer corps. Women, once a small minority of military personnel, grew to become almost 20 percent of the uniformed contingent by 2012. In 2013, an active-duty female flag officer, Admiral Carmen Meléndez, became Minister of Defense.<sup>29</sup> In addition, more officers were drawn from poor and working class backgrounds. The military's warrant officers were elevated to the status of technical officers with ranks and pay equivalent to those of the regular officer corps. These traditionally excluded minorities all have a stake in the success of the Bolivarian Revolution and the military that it has created. They are unlikely to cooperate with any attempts to roll back the reforms that made new professional and social opportunities available to them.

---

<sup>28</sup> Francine Jácome, "El papel de la Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana en el nuevo contexto político venezolano: Implicaciones para la seguridad regional (2013)," *Perspectivas* no. 5 (2014): 5-8.

<sup>29</sup> Marcela Donadio and María de la Paz Tibiletti, *Atlas Comparativo de la Defensa en América Latina y Caribe, Edición 2012* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: RESDAL, 2012).

## THE FANB AND VENEZUELAN SOCIETY

The FANB plays an extensive role in Venezuelan society, politics, and economics. Using Harold Trinkunas' theoretical framework for understanding civilian control of the military through an examination of the military's jurisdictional boundaries—external defense, internal security, public policy, and leadership selection—it is clear that the FANB is publicly active in the first three jurisdictions, and possibly even aspects of leadership selection.<sup>30</sup> This is the product of a politically engaged officer class that came of age under the Plan Andrés Bello, the 1999 Political Constitution that formalized the FANB's large role in the state and encouraged a civil-military union, and subsequent legal changes to fortify the military's role in society.<sup>31</sup> Since 1999, the armed forces have been a protagonist in policy implementation and politics and played an increasingly large role in society.

### *Role in Society: Missions*

Under Chavismo, the government has used the FANB in antipoverty distributions and relief efforts, especially in the government's Bolivarian *misiones sociales*. Its participation began during Chávez's first months in office. On February 27, 1999, following massive landslides in Vargas and the deaths of up to 50,000 people in Vargas and Miranda states, Chávez created Plan Bolívar 2000. The policy involved more than 40,000 soldiers engaged in door-to-door anti-poverty activities, including mass vaccinations, food distribution, construction, and education. The program also transported thousands of poor and ill Venezuelans using military vehicles to seek employment and medical care.<sup>32</sup>

Plan Bolívar 2000 represented the first step by the Chavista government to incorporate the armed forces into domestic political and economic affairs. Following this project, which was essentially scrapped by 2001, Chávez involved the FANB in a plethora of other social missions. Members of the military played different roles according to the mission: sometimes as direct implementers (*Vuelvan Caras, Barrio Adentro, Robinson*) and more often controlling one phase or component of the project, such as administering the distribution of goods to build houses (*Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela*). In all cases, military personnel interacted directly with citizens on the ground in these overwhelmingly poor and underserved areas.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Harold A. Trinkunas, *Crafting Civilian Control of the Military in Venezuela: A Comparative Perspective* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 232.

<sup>31</sup> Haydée Ochoa Hernández and Isabel Rodríguez Colmenares, "Las Fuerzas Armadas en la Política Social de Venezuela," *Política y Cultura* 20 no. 3 (2003): 117-35.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Penfold-Becerra, "Clientelism and Social Funds: Evidence from Chávez's Misiones," *Latin American Politics & Society* 49, no. 4 (2007): 63-84.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Role in Politics*

Military officials have had an increasingly prominent role in civilian politics since 1999, a definitive break with the 1958-1998 period. Since Chávez took power, a strikingly high number of government leaders/ministers have been current or ex-military officials. Dozens of military and ex-military officials have been elected governors, served as legislators or mayors, and held cabinet portfolios, and hundreds more populate the upper echelons of government ministries (e.g. the president of the national airline, Conviasa, is a brigadier general). Current or ex-senior military officers hold the portfolios not only of the Ministry of Defense, but the Ministries of Finance, Infrastructure, the Interior and Justice, Planning and Development, Health, Food, and the Office of the President. The ministries that tend to “belong” to the military—the Ministries of Water and Air Transport, Finance, Food, Industry, Electric Energy, Justice, and Defense—are all generally controlled by ex-senior officers, and military colleagues occupy other senior positions in these ministries.<sup>34</sup>

Military participation is not limited to appointed positions. As shown in Table 2, as of 2016, 11 of the 23 state governors are ex-military officers who have run for office, up from seven in the previous 2008-2012 term. Of these, four of them are ex-Ministers of Defense: Ramón Carrizales, Carlos Mata Figueroa, Henry Rángel Silva, and Jorge García Carneiro. Therefore, it is clear that the FANB and ex-officers are involved in nearly all levels of contemporary Venezuelan politics.

**Table 2.** State Governors’ Military Affiliations (2008-2012; 2012-2016)

<b>State</b>	<b>2008-2012</b>	<b>2012-2016</b>
Amazonas	Liborio Guarulla (MUD)	
Anzoátegui	Tarek William Saab (PSUV)	Aristóbulo Istúriz (PSUV)
Apure	Jesús Aguilarte (PSUV)	Ramón Carrizales (PSUV)
Aragua	Rafael Isea (PSUV)	Tareck El Aissami (PSUV)
Barinas	Adán Chávez (PSUV)	
Bolívar	Francisco Rangel Gómez (PSUV)	
Carabobo	Henrique Salas Feo (MUD)	Francisco Ameliach (PSUV)
Cojedes	Teodoro Bolívar (PSUV)	Érika Farías (PSUV)
Delta Amacuro	Lizeta Hernández (PSUV)	
Distrito Capital	Antonio Ledezma (MUD)	

<sup>34</sup> John Polga-Hecimovich, “Bureaucratic Circumvention: Explaining Policy Delegation Strategies and Implementation Success in Low Capacity Bureaucracies, with Evidence from Latin America” (paper presented at annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, August 29-September 1, 2013).

Falcón	Stella Lugo (PSUV)	
Guárico	Luis Enrique Gallardo (PSUV)	Ramón Rodríguez Chacín (PSUV)*
Lara	Henri Falcón (MUD)	
Mérida	Marcos Díaz Orellana (PSUV)	Alexis Ramírez (PSUV)
Miranda	Henrique Capriles Radonski (MUD)	
Monagas	José Gregorio Briceño (PSUV)	Yelitza Santaella (PSUV)
Nueva Esparta	Morel Rodríguez Ávila (MUD)	Carlos Mata Figueroa (PSUV)
Portuguesa	Wilmar Castro Soteldo (PSUV)**	
Sucre	Enrique Maestre (PSUV)	Luis Acuña (PSUV)
Táchira	César Pérez Vivas (MUD)	José Gregorio Vielma Mora (PSUV)
Trujillo	Hugo Cabezas (PSUV)	Henry Rangel Silva (PSUV)
Vargas	Jorge Luís García Carneiro (PSUV)	
Yaracuy	Julio León Heredia (PSUV)**	
Zulia	Pablo Pérez Álvarez (MUD)	Francisco Arias Cárdenas (PSUV)

\* Ex-Air Force Officer; \*\*Ex-Navy Officer; All others marked in grey are ex-Army

Source: Created by authors

### *Role in Economy*

As with social and political affairs, the FANB is intimately involved in Venezuelan economic life. Some active duty military officials have been involved in running expropriated and state-owned businesses as well as sectors of the state-owned oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)*.<sup>35</sup> However, none of these directly benefit the military nor, outside of PDVSA, are they profitable. On February 10, 2016, President Maduro potentially increased the FANB's participation in this vital sector through Executive Decree 2231 with the creation of Camimpeg (*Compañía Anónima Militar de Industrias Mineras, Petrolíferas y de Gas*), a state-owned oil company run by the military and the Ministry of Defense.<sup>36</sup> Simultaneously, since early 2016 the government has promoted the so-called "Production Committees for the Military Industrial Engine" (*Mesas de Producción del Motor Industria Militar*), which are mixed public-private enterprises run in part by the military on the Fuerte Tiuna military complex in

<sup>35</sup> Richard K. Obuchi M., Anabella Abadí and Bárbara Lira, *Gestión en Rojo: Evaluación de Desempeño de 16 Empresas Estatales y Resultados Generales del Modelo Productivo Socialista* (Caracas, Venezuela: Ediciones IESA, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> "Crean Compañía Militar minera, petrolífera y de gas," *El Universal*, 15 February, 2016, <http://www.eluniversal.com/?url=/economia/160215/crean-compania-militar-minera-petrolifera-y-de-gas>.

Caracas.<sup>37</sup> The goal of these enterprises is to produce uniforms and other goods for the armed forces, and in some cases, for the general public. However, it does not appear to be a profit-driven enterprise.

Beyond the formal institutional role of the armed forces in the Venezuelan economy, individual military officers are influential through their managerial role in state owned enterprises. This role is not well documented because it is rarely publicized. However, the increasing expansion of state control of the economy under Hugo Chávez diverted a significant number of military officers into roles administering newly nationalized enterprises.<sup>38</sup> In addition, as Venezuela's economic crisis intensifies, the military has become a more important part of the national distribution network, particularly for food and other necessities. In an effort to monitor the destination of government-subsidized products such as food and to combat scarcity, the armed forces, particularly the National Guard, have an important role in auditing the transportation and distribution of goods.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the armed forces also play a significant role in controlling the border with Colombia, where smuggling of subsidized products is significant due to the great price difference of goods between the two countries. Both of these roles place the Venezuelan military in a central role in the national economy but also provide opportunities for illicit enrichment to members of the Venezuelan military.<sup>40</sup>

### *Society's Attitudes towards the FANB*

In light of the FANB's unprecedented involvement in civilian affairs and outsized influence in politics, it is important to understand how this has influenced societal support for the new roles and missions of the armed forces. Public opinion polling data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University show that about two-thirds of Venezuelans reject direct military intervention in politics.<sup>41</sup> Many (but not all) Venezuelans have low confidence and a negative perception of the FANB, perhaps due to widespread allegations of corruption within the institution, the military's

---

<sup>37</sup> "FANB instala Mesas Productivas del Motor Industria Militar," *Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Defensa*, Caracas, Venezuela, <http://www.mindefensa.gob.ve/index.php/en/eje-bienestar-social/article-categories/78-ultimas-noticias/852-fanb-instala-mesas-productivas-del-motor-industria-militar>.

<sup>38</sup> "El papel de los militares en la Venezuela después de Chávez," *BBC Mundo*, March 8, 2013, [http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2013/03/130307\\_papel\\_militares\\_venezuela\\_cch](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2013/03/130307_papel_militares_venezuela_cch).

<sup>39</sup> "Maduro expropia plantas de distribución de alimentos," *La Gaceta* (Argentina), July 31, 2015, <http://www.lagaceta.com.ar/nota/647951/mundo/maduro-expropia-plantas-distribucion-alimentos.html>; Pedro Pablo Peñaloza, "El petróleo y la economía venezolana en manos de militares enciende las alarmas," *Diario Las Américas*, March 2, 2016, [http://www.diariolasamericas.com/4848\\_venezuela/3659833\\_venezuela-economia-manos-militares-genera-sospechas.html](http://www.diariolasamericas.com/4848_venezuela/3659833_venezuela-economia-manos-militares-genera-sospechas.html).

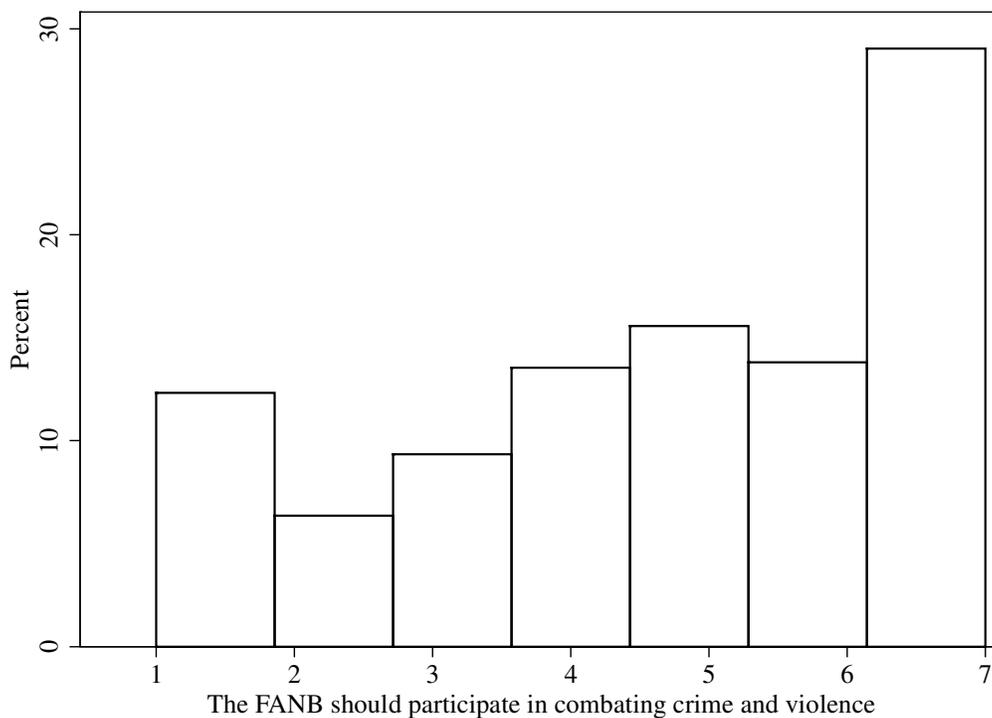
<sup>40</sup> Harold Trinkunas, "Re-examining Rivalry, Trade, and Conflict in Latin America: The Colombia-Venezuela Case," in *Borders and Borderlands in the Americas: Conflicts and Harmonies*, ed. Maiah Jaskoski, Arturo Sotomayor, and Harold Trinkunas (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Data sourced from the AmericasBarometer produced by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), March 18, 2016, <http://www.lapopsurveys.org>.

role in supporting an unpopular government, and a perception of ineffectiveness. In fact, perceptions of the armed forces vary considerably if we examine different segments of society, and they are strongly correlated to each individual’s view of the government’s performance.

Although a majority of Venezuelans rejected the possibility of a coup d’état, the 2014 LAPOP survey showed that 28 percent of respondents (396 of 1,418) believed military intervention via coup would be justified in a context of high criminality, while 34 percent (483 of 1,417) felt that it would be justified in a context of high levels of corruption. An even larger percentage of the population supports the FANB’s efforts to combat internal criminality and violence. Figure 2 shows that when asked about the FANB’s role, a strong plurality of respondents “highly agreed” (a value of 7 on a 7-point scale) that it should assume a larger role in combating crime and violence. In other words, many Venezuelans seem to accept the FANB’s place in some aspects of politics and society and even seem comfortable with the institution increasing this function.

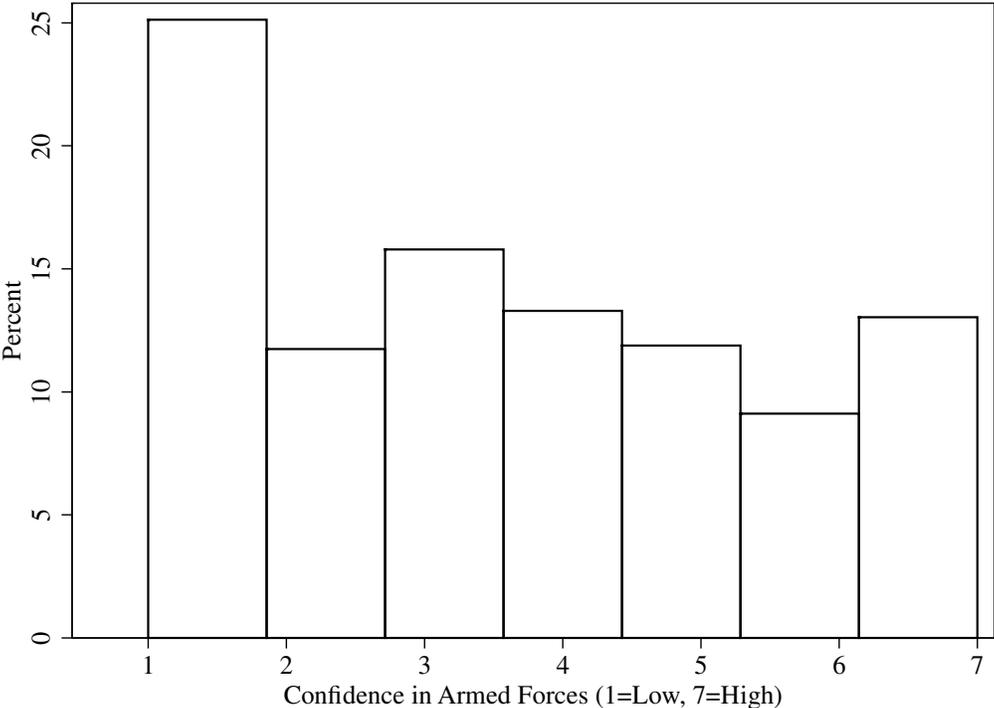
**Figure 2.** Role of the FANB in Combating Crime and Violence



**Source:** Created by authors with survey data from LAPOP 2014

There are marked differences across society in perceptions of the military and its role. This is not surprising that given the polarized nature of Venezuelan politics. In essence, society’s perception of the military depends on each person’s political ideology and relationship to the government. A large plurality of respondents to the 2014 LAPOP survey (25.12 percent) manifested extremely low confidence in the institution (a value of 1 on a 7-point scale; see histogram in Figure 3), while nearly 53 percent of Venezuelans had low (3) to extremely low (1) confidence in it. Thus, while respondents tend to believe that the FANB should play a larger role in combating crime and violence, they still do not necessarily trust the institution—perhaps indicative of the lack of other viable solutions to curb problems of insecurity and delinquency.

**Figure 3.** Confidence in the FANB

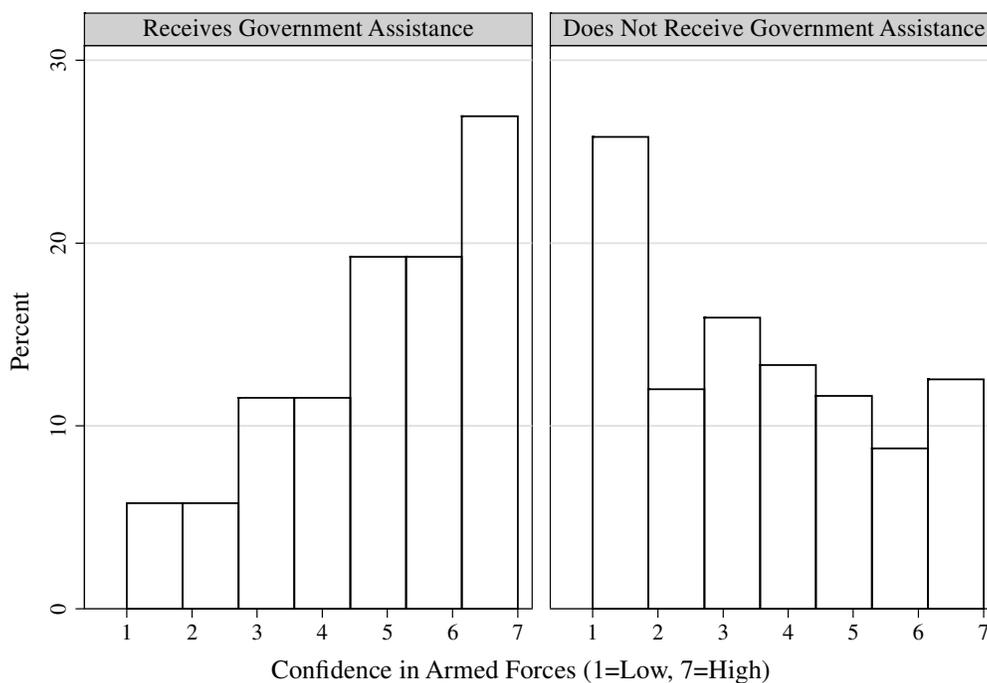


**Source:** Created by authors with survey data from LAPOP 2014

A trend emerges when taking political preference into account. Citizens who receive government assistance (left histogram in Figure 4 on page 24) display preferences that are the inverse of the general trend, with respondents tending to have very high levels of confidence in the FANB, while citizens who do not receive assistance (right histogram in Figure 4) show a more pronounced trend mirroring the aggregate findings. The same pattern holds for those respondents who voted for current president Nicolás

Maduro in the 2013 elections and those who did not (Figure 5 on page 25), with the former tending to trust the military, while the latter tend not to. This suggests that Venezuelans' attitudes towards the military are influenced by their attitudes towards the government, with pro-government Venezuelans inclined to trust the military, and anti-Chavista Venezuelans likely to distrust it.

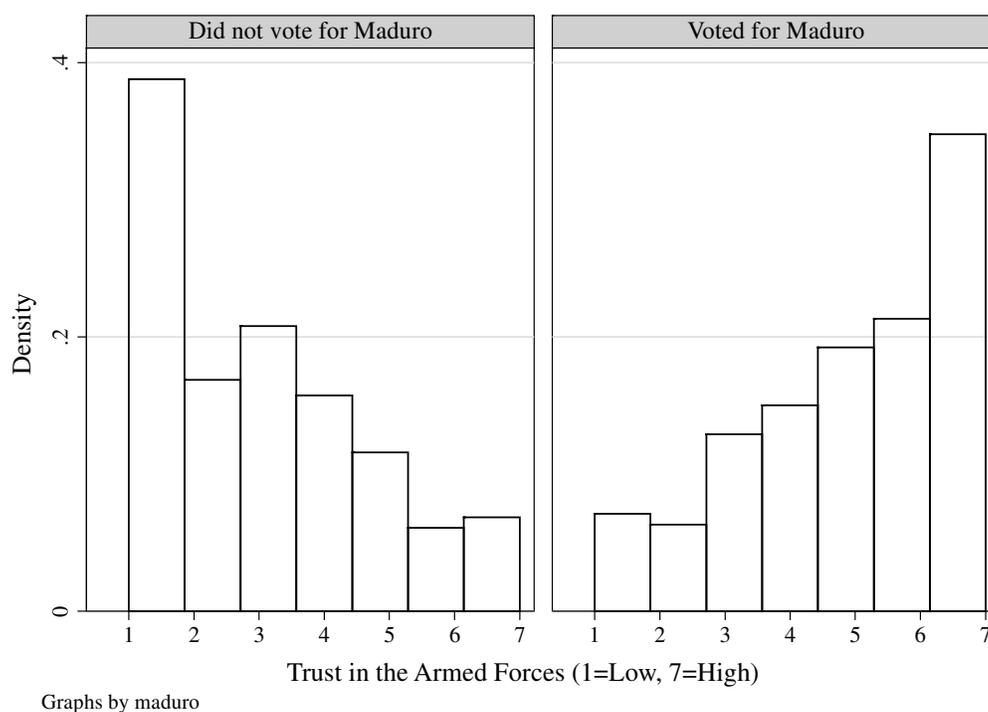
**Figure 4. Government Assistance and Confidence in the FANB**



Graphs by Recibe asistencia del gobierno

**Source:** Created by authors with survey data from LAPOP 2014

**Figure 5.** Voter Presidential Choice and Confidence in the FANB



**Source:** Created by authors with survey data from LAPOP 2014

Controlling for a number of demographic and geographic factors through regression analysis corroborates the descriptive statistics. Basic demographic factors like sex, geography, and education do not exercise a statistically significant effect on confidence in the armed forces, meaning that being a man or woman, an urban or rural dweller, and possessing low or high education has no bearing on respondents' attitudes towards the FANB. Specific geographic regions—not merely rural or urban—play some role in dictating Venezuelans' attitudes towards the military, insofar as people from Zulia State and around Caracas tend to have less confidence in the FANB than the median Venezuelan.

Other variables are even more robust. The wealthier citizens are, the less likely they are to trust the military. Conversely, poorer citizens are more likely to have higher confidence in the institution. Similarly, people who receive government assistance are more likely to have a higher opinion of the armed forces than those that do not receive that assistance. The most robust statistical relationship, however, is between support for Maduro and confidence in the military and support for the PSUV and confidence in the military. Specifically, as a respondent's income increases, his or her confidence in the military decreases.

### *Factors Shaping Public Perception*

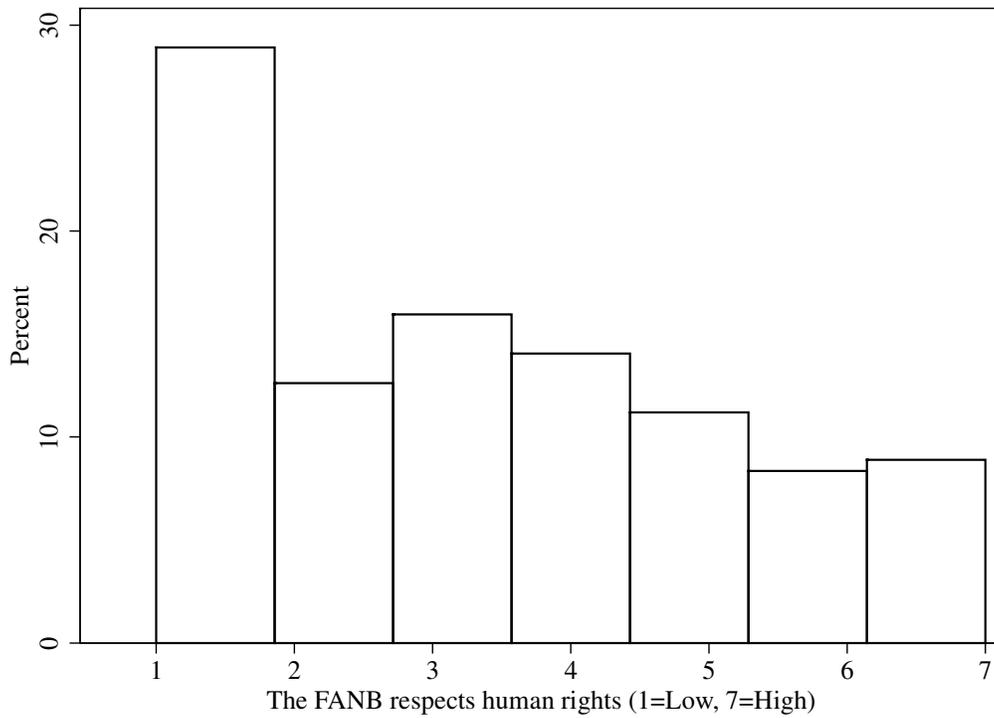
One explanation for the divergence in Venezuelans' attitudes towards the FANB is that attitudes toward the military are highly correlated to respondents' connection to the government—either via assistance, identification with the president, or identification with the president's party. This may reflect the close relationship between the FANB, Maduro, and the PSUV, as well as the high degree of politicization of the armed forces. Venezuelans that view Chavismo favorably tend to equate their trust in the party to trust in the FANB. Similarly, citizens not aligned with Chavismo are warier of the military.

A second explanation is that citizens' attitudes are driven by their own experiences with members of the armed forces. Poorer citizens, for example, are those most likely to benefit from government assistance—and thus, to identify with the governing president and party. Since the predominant form of government assistance since 1999 has been social missions involving the direct participation of the FANB, it follows that poorer Venezuelans are more likely to associate the FANB with helping to provide social services. What is more, these Venezuelans are much less likely to have been involved in anti-government protests that resulted in military suppression, such as the February 2014 demonstrations that occurred largely in opposition-dominated areas (e.g. Táchira State, wealthier eastern Caracas) and spared more pro-government areas (e.g. Bolívar State, the Llanos, and Petare).

On the other hand, the wealthy receive less (or no) government assistance in the form of social missions, and are therefore less likely to interact with the military in a context designed to positively influence their opinion of the institution. Furthermore, it is the middle-and upper-middle classes that led the aforementioned 2014 protests that the National Guard and other security forces eventually suppressed. In other words: the poor, who are generally more pro-government, enjoyed the positive contributions of the military while being spared its repression, while the wealthy, who are anti-government, suffered the repression and did not see benefits. In short, while it is possible that people's attitudes towards the military are an extension of their ideology and attitudes towards the government, it is also possible that these attitudes are based on respondents' direct experiences with the military.

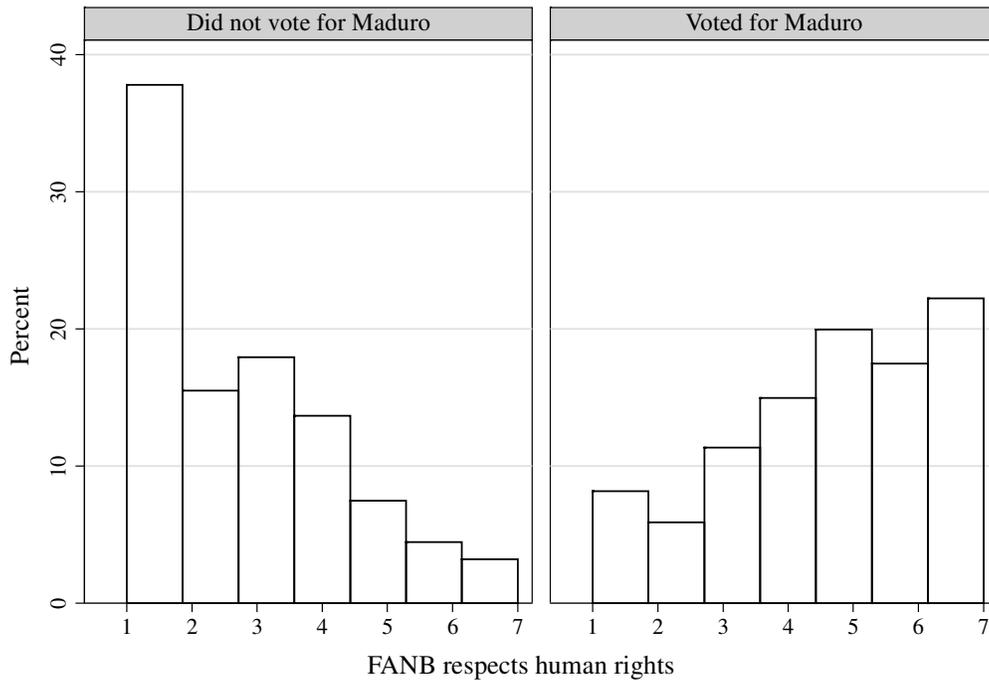
This division is also reflected in Venezuelans' opinions about the FANB's human rights record. As shown in Figure 6, in the aggregate, Venezuelans largely do not think that the FANB greatly respects human rights. Still, as Figure 7 shows, this perception is also shaped by support for the government: nearly 40 percent of respondents who did not vote for Maduro rated the FANB's human rights record at the lowest possible value, while less than 10 percent of Maduro voters did the same. The two histograms are once again roughly symmetrical in the patterns of support they show.

**Figure 6.** Public Perception of FANB’s Respect for Human Rights



**Source:** Created by authors with survey data from LAPOP 2014

**Figure 7.** Public Perception of FANB’s Respect for Human Rights, by Voter Choice



Graphs by maduro

**Source:** Created by authors with survey data from LAPOP 2014

In sum, Venezuelan attitudes towards the armed forces appear to be a function of their perception and support of the government and/or their direct interactions with military personnel rather than an objective evaluation of the military's record. Despite evidence of extensive corruption in the armed forces, including widespread participation of high-ranking military members in the drug trade, graft through involvement in government projects (especially the social missions), and currency arbitrage, as well as small-scale repression during anti-government protests just months before these surveys were conducted, most pro-government respondents tend to view the FANB much more favorably than their wealthier counterparts.

### *The FANB's Perception of Chavismo and the Political Opposition*

Although constitutionally bound to be apolitical, the military is nonetheless highly politicized and often functions as a *de facto* branch of Chavismo. The politicization process began shortly after Chávez assumed power in 1999. However, it increased substantially after the 2002 coup d'état that temporarily removed Chávez from power and led him to identify and penalize coup supporters. The fallout from the coup led the Chávez administration to tighten its circle of trusted supporters; it also meant that many influential government positions or lucrative contract opportunities were given to loyalists within the military. In 2016, around 200 hardcore Chavista military officers are in control of the armed forces' most sensitive positions.<sup>42</sup> The officer selection and promotion process produces senior officers that tend to view the PSUV favorably and the MUD coalition unfavorably.

Accordingly, the country's top political leadership is intolerant of opposition voices within the officer ranks. Since 2002, the government has punished any perceived support for the political opposition from the senior officer ranks, removing them from office.<sup>43</sup> Significant purges have continued ever since that time, even against officers who had been prominent PSUV allies, suggesting that Chávez and now Maduro remain preoccupied about the loyalty of the high command. In one striking example in 2007, Chávez denounced retired general Raúl Isaías Baduel, a one-time supporter who had helped the president regain power in 2002. However, Baduel publicly opposed Chávez's proposed constitutional reforms, leading the president to accuse Baduel of abuse of power, misappropriation of funds, and violation of the military code while he was an officer. Baduel was sentenced to nearly 8 years in prison.<sup>44</sup> By rooting out

---

<sup>42</sup> Drawn from material compiled by *Asociación Civil Control Ciudadano*, a Venezuelan-based NGO that monitors the Bolivarian Venezuelan Armed Forces. Accessed at <http://controlciudadano.org/>.

<sup>43</sup> Simon Romero, "Chávez Seeks Tighter Grip on Military," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/30/world/americas/30venez.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Mery Mogollon and Chris Kraul, "Chávez critic convicted in Venezuela," *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 2010,

critics from the military, and through frequent turnovers within the officer corps, Chávez and Maduro have minimized the danger that military leadership might pose to the presidency, while politicizing the military high command and empowering officers who can also be counted on to protect the president from rivals.

## CONCLUSION

Venezuelan military culture should be understood as consisting of multiple layers. The deepest layer draws on the mythos of the war of independence and the Army's role in liberating Venezuela and four other countries. The historical role of the armed forces and of military presidents in Venezuela's first 150 years of independence reinforces the military's self-perception as essential to the survival of Venezuela as a nation-state and as a defender of the Venezuelan people. Layered on top of this is the role of the Venezuelan military as a professional institution, as an apolitical guarantor of democracy, and as a contributor to national development during the democratic period that began in 1958. In addition, the Chavista regime has added an ideological dimension that commits the armed forces to a partisan defense of 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism and the legacy of former President Hugo Chávez.

The Chavista regime has actively tried to influence Venezuelan military culture to accept an ideological commitment to Bolivarianism through use of carrots and sticks. The incentives to comply include an outsized role in state policy, great increases in material resources, and access to corruption and participation in the illicit economy, particularly drug trafficking. This has produced a generation of military officers that have only known the rule of Chavismo. Many are complicit with the regime, both in its (now dwindling) achievements and in its crimes. For the rest, the threat of being denounced to the intelligence services and dismissed enforces at least lip service to Bolivarian ideals.

The distribution of particular elements of Venezuelan military culture is uneven across services, generations, and social origins. Those closest to Hugo Chávez, those who participated in the 1992 coups, and those who have served in senior leadership position in the Chavista regime have gained greatly and have the most to lose from a change in the status quo. The Army and the National Guard have gained the most under Chavismo, and they have the most to lose if an opposition government takes power. The most junior generation of officers has been the most highly ideologized by the military education system and more likely to contain at least some true believers. Senior officers are selected for their ideological support for the Revolution rather than on merit. Yet there are also many officers who understand that the system

is in crisis, that current policies are untenable, and for whom the traditional ideals associated with Venezuela's military history and its democracy are more salient.

Venezuelan society's views of the military are complex. There has long been a positive view of the military in Venezuelan society. However, societal views are changing as the military has become increasingly associated with the survival of the Chavista regime and the execution of its policies. Those most closely associated with the opposition and those who benefit least from the present regime are most likely to view the armed forces skeptically. In addition, the growing evidence of military complicity with corruption and with the illicit economy further erodes social trust in the armed forces. Yet even for broader society, the bedrock role of the armed forces in Venezuela's independence and in its democracy is likely to be an enduring legacy, available to future generations if they choose to restructure the civil-military compact.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Brian Fonseca, Director, Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy**

Brian Fonseca serves as the Director of Florida International University's Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy and has been an adjunct professor with FIU's Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) and the Department of Politics and International Relations since 2010. Brian joined the Gordon Institute in 2015 after serving as Director of Operations at FIU's Applied Research Center, and as the Senior Research Manager for Socio-Cultural Analysis (SCA) at the United States Southern Command. Mr. Fonseca holds a Master's Degree in International Business and a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from Florida International University in Miami, Florida. He has attended Sichuan University in China, National Defense University in Washington DC, and is currently working towards his Ph.D. at the University of Miami. He has authored numerous publications on security and defense in Latin America and the Caribbean. From 1997 to 2004, he served in the United States Marine Corps and facilitated the training of foreign military forces in both hostile theaters and during peace time operations.

### **John Polga-Hecimovich, Visiting Assistant Professor, College of William and Mary**

John Polga-Hecimovich is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Government Department at the College of William and Mary. His research is broadly focused on the effects of political institutions on democratic stability, policymaking, and governance, especially in Latin America. He has published widely in academic journals in both English and Spanish, and is currently at work turning his doctoral dissertation on the use of executive power in Latin America into a book. Dr. Polga-Hecimovich holds a B.A. in Government and Spanish from Dartmouth College, a Master's Degree in Latin American Studies from the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (Ecuador), and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Pittsburgh. He has also taught at Wake Forest University and FLACSO-Ecuador, and he has conducted academic fieldwork in Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, and Colombia. He will be joining the U.S. Naval Academy as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science in July 2016.

### **Harold A. Trinkunas, Director, Latin America Initiative, The Brookings Institution**

Harold Trinkunas is the Charles W. Robinson Chair and Senior Fellow and Director of the Latin America Initiative in the Foreign Policy program. His research focuses on Latin American politics, particularly on issues related to foreign policy, governance, and security. Dr. Trinkunas co-authored *Aspirational Power: Brazil's Long Road to Global Influence* (Brookings Institution Press, 2016) and authored *Crafting Civilian Control of the Military in Venezuela* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005). He co-edited and contributed to *American Crossings: Border Politics in the Western Hemisphere* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty* (Stanford University Press, 2010), *Global Politics of Defense Reform* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), and *Terrorism Financing and State Responses* (Stanford University Press, 2007). Dr. Trinkunas previously served as an associate professor and chair of the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. He has been a visiting professor at the Center of International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University and at the Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies at the University of California San Diego. He received his doctorate in political science from Stanford University in 1999, and a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Science from the University of Pennsylvania in 1991. He was born in Maracaibo and raised in Caracas, Venezuela.



**Steven J. Green**  
School of International  
& Public Affairs

**Jack D. Gordon Institute**  
for Public Policy

**Kimberly Green**  
Latin American and  
Caribbean Center