

## **Special Report: Why the military still stands by Venezuela's beleaguered president**

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CARACAS (Reuters) - One of the central mysteries of Venezuela's slow-motion collapse: Why does the military continue to support Nicolas Maduro, the president who has led the once-prosperous South American country into poverty and chaos?

The answer, according to people familiar with Venezuela's military structure, starts with Maduro's late predecessor, Hugo Chavez, the charismatic caudillo who cemented strongman socialist rule in the nation of about 30 million people.

In a series of actions that began in 1999, the former lieutenant colonel and one-time coup leader began taming the military by bloating it, buying it off, politicizing it, intimidating the rank and file, and fragmenting the overall command.

Once he took office in 2013, Maduro handed key segments of the country's increasingly ravaged economy to the armed forces. Select military officers took control of the distribution of food and key raw materials. A National Guard general and military deputies now manage the all-important national oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela SA, or PDVSA [PDVSA.UL].

The two leaders also embedded intelligence agents, with the help of Cuba's security services, within barracks, former officers say, instilling paranoia and defusing most dissent before it happens. Intelligence agents have arrested and jailed scores of perceived troublemakers, including several high-profile officers, even for minor infractions.

The overhaul, former military officials say, created a jumbled and partisan chain of command. Top officers, grateful for perks and fearful of retribution, are often more preoccupied with pleasing Socialist Party chiefs than with national defense. Instead of drills and war games, some generals find themselves fielding calls to plant vegetables or clear garbage.

Many lower-ranking soldiers, destitute and desperate like most of Venezuela's working class, have deserted the military in recent years, joining at least 4 million other fellow emigres seeking a better life elsewhere. But few senior officers have heeded the opposition's call for rebellion, leaving the armed forces top-heavy, unwieldy and still standing by Maduro.

"The chain of command has been lost," said Cliver Alcala, a former general who retired in 2013 and now supports the opposition from Colombia. "There is no way to know who is in charge of operations, who is in charge of administration and who is in charge of policy."

Some commanders, like Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino, a four-star general, are nearly as much a face of the administration as Maduro. Padrino is sanctioned by the United States for ensuring Maduro's "hold on the military and the government while the Venezuelan people suffer," according to the U.S. Treasury Department.

Reuters was unable to reach Padrino or other senior officers mentioned in this article. Venezuela's defense ministry didn't reply to email or telephone inquiries. The country's information ministry, responsible for government communications including those of the president, didn't reply to Reuters either.

Padrino is hardly alone.

Consider the sheer number of officers awarded flag rank in Venezuela.

The country's roughly 150,000 Army, Navy, Air Force and National Guard troops are a fraction of the more than 1 million who make up the U.S. armed forces. Yet Venezuela, with as many as 2,000 admirals and generals, now boasts as much as twice the top brass as the U.S. military – more than 10 times as many flag officers as existed when Chavez became president.

The estimate is according to calculations by former Venezuelan officers and the U.S. military.

The result, government opponents say, is a bureaucratic and operational mess, even at the very top.

Padrino, for instance, is both a general and defense minister. But he can't officially mobilize troops without the consent of Remigio Ceballos, an admiral who also reports directly to Maduro and heads the Strategic Operations Command, an agency created by Chavez to oversee deployments.

"You have a general in chief and an admiral in chief," said Hebert Garcia, a retired general who once served under Maduro but now supports the opposition from Washington. "Which one are you supposed to obey?"

The armed forces could still turn on Maduro, particularly if popular outrage boils over and makes military support for the president untenable. Still, calls by opposition leader Juan Guaido, who in late April unsuccessfully sought to rally the troops against Maduro, thus far remain unheeded.

Guaido in May told reporters his efforts to convert troops are thwarted by the military's fragmented structure and intimidation within its ranks. "What is preventing the break?" he asked. "The ability to speak openly, directly with each of the sectors. It has to do with the persecution inside the Socialist Party, inside the armed forces."

To better understand the pressures and policies keeping the troops in Maduro's camp, Reuters interviewed dozens of current and former officers, soldiers, military scholars and people familiar with Venezuelan security. In their assessment, the military has evolved into a torpid bureaucracy with few leaders capable of engineering the type of mass mutiny that Maduro's opponents long for.

## "REAL POWER"

Venezuela's "Bolivarian Revolution," as Chavez dubbed his remaking of the country, itself has roots in military rebellion. Six years before he was elected president in 1998, Chavez led a failed coup against Carlos Andres Perez, a deeply unpopular president who Congress eventually forced from office.

Once in power, Chavez immediately took steps to enlist the military in his vision for a paternalistic, state-led economy that would share abundant oil wealth with long-neglected segments of Venezuela's population.

With a new constitution in December 1999, Chavez stripped Congress of its oversight of promotion of senior officers. That gave the president ultimate authority to assign flag ranks and empower allied officers.

Because many state and local governments at the time were still controlled by rivals, Chavez also saw the military as a tool that could show his administration hard at work. A new program, "Plan Bolivar 2000," ordered troops to fill potholes, clean highways, refurbish schools and carry out other public works.

The \$114 million effort put sizeable sums at the discretion of commanders, giving officers a taste for a new kind of influence. "What Plan Bolivar 2000 taught officers was that real power doesn't lie in commanding troops, but rather in controlling money," said one retired general. The general, who served under Chavez and Maduro, spoke on condition of anonymity.

Soon, some of the funds began to disappear.

Miguel Morffe, a retired major, once worked as a captain in the remote northwestern region of La Guajira. He recalls receiving a request from superiors to provide materials for an unspecified schoolhouse. When Morffe told a lieutenant colonel that he didn't understand where the supplies would be going, the superior told him: "I need those materials for something else."

FILE PHOTO: Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro speaks to soldiers while he attends a military exercise in Turiamo, Venezuela February 3, 2019. Miraflores Palace/Handout via REUTERS/File Photo

"The school didn't exist," Morffe concluded.

Military officials didn't reply to questions about the alleged incident.

By 2001, a raft of corruption allegations plagued the Plan Bolivar program.

Chavez fired General Victor Cruz, the Army's commander in charge of the program. Cruz denied wrongdoing and wasn't charged with any crime at the time. Venezuelan authorities arrested him last year when press reports linked him to funds in an offshore account. A Caracas court in May ordered him to stand trial on charges of illicit enrichment.

Reuters couldn't reach Cruz for comment or identify his legal counsel.

In 2002, Chavez said he would wind down Plan Bolivar 2000.

Regional elections, he told Chilean sociologist and political activist Marta Harnecker in an interview, had put more allies in mayoral and state offices, where they could now work in unison with the national government. The military, he said, would return to its normal business.

That April, however, a small group of top officers emboldened Chavez to further remake the armed forces. Encouraged by conservative leaders and wealthy elites unhappy with his leftist agenda, the officers staged a coup and briefly arrested Chavez.

But the coup unraveled. Within two days, Chavez was back in power.

He purged the top ranks. More importantly, he reined in several powerful offices, including the Defense Ministry. Henceforth, the ministry would manage military budgets and weapons procurement, but no longer control troops themselves. Chavez created the Strategic Operations Command, the agency that manages deployments.

The move, former officers say, jumbled the chain of command.

He also rethought overall strategy.

Increasingly concerned that Venezuela's oil wealth and leftist policies would make it a target for invasion, particularly by the United States, Chavez pushed for the military to integrate further with the government and society itself.

"We're transforming the armed forces for a war of resistance, for the anti-imperialist popular war, for the integral defense of the nation," he said at a 2004 National Guard ceremony.

Military leaders soon had to pledge their allegiance to Chavez and his Bolivarian project, not just the nation itself. Despite resistance from some commanders, the

ruling party slogan, “Fatherland, Socialism or Death,” began echoing through barracks and across parade grounds.

As of 2005, another factor helped Chavez tighten his hold on power. Oil prices, years before fracking would boost global supply, soared along with the notion the planet’s reserves were dwindling. For most of the rest of his time in power, the windfall would enable Chavez to accelerate spending and ensure popular support.

Oil money also helped him strengthen relationships with like-minded countries, especially those seeking to counterbalance the United States. Venezuela purchased billions of dollars in arms and equipment from Russia and China. It secured medical and educational support through doctors, teachers and other advisors arriving from Cuba, the closest ally of all.

Cubans came with military know-how, too.

A “cooperation agreement” forged between Chavez and Fidel Castro years earlier had by now blossomed into an alliance on security matters, according to two former officers. Around 2008, Venezuelan officers say they began noticing Cuban officials working within various parts of the armed forces.

General Antonio Rivero, who the previous five years had managed Venezuela’s civil protection authority, says he returned to military activities that year to find Cuban advisors leading training of soldiers and suggesting operational and administrative changes.

The Cubans, he told Reuters, advised Chavez to rework the ranks, once built around strategic centers, into more of a territorial system, spreading the military’s presence further around the country. Rivero was stunned at one training session on military engineering. A Cuban colonel leading the session told attendees the meeting and its contents should be considered a state secret.

“What’s happening here?” Rivero said he asked himself. “How is a foreign military force going to possess a state secret?”

Rivero left Venezuela for the United States in 2014.

Cuban officials didn’t respond to requests from Reuters for comment.

The island’s influence soon would become apparent in day-to-day operations.

In Cuba, the military is involved in everything from public works to telecommunications to tourism. In Venezuela, too, ruling party officials increasingly began ordering officers to take part in activities that had little to do with military preparedness. Soldiers increasingly became cheap labor for governors and mayors.

In 2010, a former general working in the Andes, a western region on the Colombian border, was overseeing a complex mobilization of 5,000 troops for a month of combat training. The general spoke on condition that he not be named.

Another general, from a nearby command, called and asked him to halt the exercises. The state governor, the other officer told the general, wanted to reroute the troops - to install energy-efficient light bulbs in homes.

When the general refused, Army Commander Euclides Campos issued a formal order to scrap the training. "This would sound shocking to any military professional, but it's exactly how the Venezuelan armed forces work," the former general said.

Reuters was unable to reach Campos for comment.

"TRAITORS NEVER!"

Chavez, stricken by cancer, died in 2013. Maduro, his vice president and hand-picked replacement as the Socialist party candidate for president, won the election to succeed him.

The new president continued naming new flag officers and appointed even more military officials to helm agencies. By 2017, active and former military figures had held as many as half of Maduro's 32 cabinet posts, according to Citizen Control, a Venezuelan non-profit that studies the armed forces.

In 2014, just as a collapse in oil prices torpedoed Venezuela's economy, Maduro further fragmented the military structure.

Following the advice of the Cubans, former military officers say, Maduro created new command centers nationwide. He appointed senior officers to run new commands in each of the 23 states and Caracas, the capital, as well as eight regional commands above those. His public speeches are now increasingly peppered with terms like ZODI and REDI, acronyms for the new commands.

Near military facilities, new brass abounded.

"Before, seeing a general was like seeing a bishop or an archbishop, he was an important figure," recalls Morffe, the retired major. "Not long ago, I saw one in an airport. He walked past a group of soldiers and they didn't even salute."

Flag officers now oversee some areas that were once slivers of larger commands, in areas so remote that they have few human inhabitants. The largest landmass in the Western Maritime and Insular Command, overseen by an admiral, is a rocky archipelago with little vegetation and no permanent residents.

The officer, Vice Admiral Rodolfo Sanchez, didn't respond to a Reuters phone call to his office.

The lopsided, partisan structure has led to mission creep, former officers say.

In the Andes command, which oversees three states, six generals once oversaw roughly 13,000 troops, according to officers familiar with the region. Today, at least 20 generals are now managing ranks that have dwindled to as few as 3,000 soldiers, according to officers familiar with the region.

Last August, three of the generals, including the regional commander, met with municipal officials in the state of Tachira, a hotbed of protests against Maduro in recent years. Days earlier, the government had said explosives used in a drone attack on a military parade in Caracas had been smuggled through Tachira from Colombia.

"All of us together can solve this problem," Major General Manuel Bernal told the assembled officers and a group of onlookers, including a Reuters reporter.

Bernal wasn't talking about the drones, however. Or even national security, once a major issue in the Andean region, where Colombia's guerrilla war long posed a threat. Instead, the generals had gathered to talk about trash overflowing at a landfill. They deployed soldiers to clear garbage and put out a fire there.

A communications official for the Andes command didn't respond to a Reuters request to speak with Bernal about the episode.

Military bosses show few signs of shying away from such directives. In the weeks since Guaido's failed call to arms, senior officers have reiterated their commitment to Maduro.

"We will continue fulfilling our constitutional duties, fulfilling duties under your command," Defense Minister Padrino told Maduro alongside troops gathered in Caracas in early May.

"Loyal always!" Padrino shouted.

The troops responded in unison: "Traitors never!"

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