

Kingmakers: Venezuela's armed forces and the national crisis

[Content preview – Subscribe to **Jane's Defence Weekly** for full article]

With Venezuela in a deep, complex, and increasingly urgent crisis since January, aggravated by external tensions with regional neighbours and the United States, the armed forces are likely to play a central role in the country's future. *Jim Dorschner* reports

When Venezuela emerges from its current political crisis the country will face outcomes ranging from a relatively peaceful, negotiated transition with real prospects for political stability and economic recovery – considered unlikely by most regional experts – to variations on the status quo maintaining for the foreseeable future.

Worst-case scenarios, meanwhile, include violent civil war, possibly imitating Libya after Moammar Ghadaffi was deposed and characterised by years of internal, multifactional violence fuelled by major arms stocks and high-value extra-legal trade, mostly focused on drug production and export.



Soldiers take part in a military parade on National Bolivarian Militia Day at Los Proceres in Caracas, Venezuela, on 14 April this year. The country's armed forces have enjoyed considerable popular support and consistent influence in government, the economy, and society. (Lokman Ilhan/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

1748722

Although Venezuela has not faced an external military conflict since the Spanish-American independence struggles wound down in the early 1800s, the National Bolivarian Armed Forces (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana: FANB) have enjoyed considerable popular support and consistent influence in government, the economy, and society. This persisted even as military involvement in national affairs within the rest of South America declined over the past few decades.

According to the benchmark 2016 study 'Venezuelan Military Culture' by the Jack D Gordon Institute for Public Policy (JGI), "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."

The report argued that the military "sees itself as the ultimate guarantor of Venezuela's independence": a view resting on the fact that, "directly or indirectly, [it] held political power in Venezuela through most of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries".

During the democratic period that began in 1958 the FANB increasingly focused on non-partisan professionalism, acquiring modern equipment, developing new doctrines, expanding military education, and incorporating the officer corps into the 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," JGI said. The pendulum swung back in 1989 as the government struggled to address crippling financial problems that triggered "a wave of protests, riots, and looting that led to the neoliberal economic reforms of President Carlos Andrés Pérez", whose second term ran between February 1989 and May 1993.

When the government ordered the military to contain the riots, the resulting loss of civilian life divided junior and senior officers, prompting the emergence of the radical left-wing Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200 (Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200) within the National Army of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (Ejército Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela: ENRBV), led by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez, who launched a failed military coup in 1992.

However, when Chávez was ultimately elected president in February 1999, active and retired military officers came to occupy key government positions, including in cabinet-level ministries. According to JGI, this meant the FANB became a chief facilitator of government programmes and policy "moving from a restricted domestic role to an active one".

A follow-up to the JGI study from earlier this year by US Naval Academy professor John Polga-Hecimovich, one of the original co-authors, said, "Chávez appointed hundreds of active-duty and retired military officers to high-level government positions, ranging from cabinet portfolios to the upper echelons of government ministries and state-owned enterprises." He added that before the 2018 elections 11 of 23 state governors were retired military officers: up from seven in the period before.

After Chávez's death in office in March 2013 his political disciple Nicolás Maduro assumed the presidency before being elected in his own right that April by a mere 1.5% of the total vote over his opponent, Henrique Capriles.

In July 2016 Maduro appointed Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino López as head of national food distribution and a co-ordinating chief of staff. Polga-Hecimovich said this made the military "the linchpin of one of the country's most strategic sectors". Maduro returned to office in May 2018 in a controversial election boycotted by the political opposition.

Highlighting the military's more expansive role in the Maduro government, the Venezuelan economy collapsed from 2014, propelled by a major decline in world oil prices, an increasingly dysfunctional state-owned oil industry, and widespread corruption. This led to hyperinflation. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the Venezuelan economy shrank by 30% through to 2017, which was followed by a fall in real GDP of 18% in 2018. By early 2019 the three-month inflation rate exceeded 1,200,000%: akin to Germany's in the 1920s.

The resulting economic stresses, particularly food availability and affordability, have harmed all strata of Venezuelan society, fuelling widespread dissatisfaction with the government for all but the most ardent supporters of 'Chavismo': the ideology promoted by Chávez. The past few years have thus resulted in the emigration of over three million Venezuelans, with over one million refugees settling in neighbouring Colombia.

On 23 January the head of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, declared himself acting president with backing from President Donald Trump's administration in the United States, citing Articles 233 and 333 of the Venezuelan constitution. Although more than 50 countries have joined the US in recognising Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate acting head of state, Russia and China continue to recognise the Maduro government.

[Continued in full version...]

(835 of 4503 words)

For the full version and more content:

Jane's Defence Industry and Markets Intelligence Centre

This analysis is taken from [Jane's Defence Industry & Markets Intelligence Centre](#), which provides world-leading analysis of commercial, industrial and technological defence developments, budget and programme forecasts, and insight into new and emerging defence markets around the world.

*Jane's defence industry and markets news and analysis is also available within **Jane's Defence Weekly**. To learn more and to subscribe to **Jane's Defence Weekly** online, offline or print visit <http://magazines.ihs.com/>*

For advertising solutions visit [Jane's Advertising](#)