

The Line of Fire

How Venezuela came to claim the region's highest murder rate.

BY SHANNON O'NEIL | MAY 27, 2009

THOMAS COEX/AFP/Getty ImagesFacing their crimes: Poor policing, a troubled justice system, and impudent politics have helped Venezuela claim the title, murder capital of the Americas. Mention violence in Latin America today and most people think of Mexico. But if you want to talk about murder, the region's hot spot is somewhere else entirely: Venezuela. After a decade under President Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's homicide rate has increased by about 140 percent, making Venezuela one of the most violent countries in the world. Even in the context of Latin America, where homicide rates hover at three times the global average, Venezuela now holds top rank -- by far the highest in South America, with a violent death rate of 48 per 100,000 -- more than twice that of Mexico. These murders occur mostly at night and spike every two weeks around payday. Young people are increasingly the victims, three times more likely to be killed today than 10 years ago.

Not surprisingly, Venezuelans see crime and public safety as the No. 1 challenge for their country. According to Latinobarometer, a well-regarded regional polling agency, Venezuela is the only Latin American country where crime is cited as both the most important national and personal issue. The violence was a major issue in last November's regional elections, with both Chavistas and opposition leaders blaming their opponents for the scourge. Perhaps unsure who was culpable, voters split their allegiance and the vote was a draw.

It's no surprise that no one has been able to peg blame on any one factor, since Venezuela's violence problem derives from a number of sources -- from an ill-equipped police department to a dysfunctional justice system. And as the Chavez administration has pushed the legal limits of democracy, undermining institutions along the way, cascading impunity has spread through the system. Rule through ill example has helped push what was always a high murder rate through the roof.

Part of the problem reflects the regional context as Venezuela, like many of its neighbors, has been host to the growing cocaine trade. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (which Chávez kicked out of Venezuela in 2005) claims drug shipments passing through the country have increased 10-fold during Chavez's tenure. The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime has also tracked Venezuela's growing role in the drug trade, and believes it is now the major transit country for shipments to Europe. This surely accounts for some of the rise in violence -- but not all.

Other problems are very much internal. Starting with the basics, the Venezuelan police have neither the ability, nor skills, nor an interest in properly investigating crimes. In promotions, loyalty is often prized over capacity. Some also suggest the government has encouraged the selective enforcement of its laws -- for instance, ignoring tire-burning and petty crime in working-class neighborhoods in order to avoid conflict with Chavez's support base, the country's poor. It's a slippery slope; allowing these petty infractions contributes to a climate of lawlessness, opening the door to more-serious and violent crimes, murder among them. And mistrust of the police might actually be enabling more crime: National polls show that the vast majority of citizens believe the police are involved in many of the crimes committed; a full one fourth of respondents claim the police are behind nearly all crimes. As a result, most crimes are not even reported.

The justice system is equally troubled. Only three of every 100 murderers are actually sentenced. Courts are underfunded and politicized, as they often serve the interest of the government over justice. Some experts in fact link a rise in police brutality to a lack of confidence in the judiciary: Police officers are more inclined to take justice into their own hands, knowing the courts will be unable or unwilling to intercede.

But Chavez's particular way of governing also contributes to making Venezuela an increasingly lawless place. During his weekly address, *Alo Presidente*, and other speeches, Chavez frequently incites violence against anti government protesters; justifies law-breaking that advances the socialist revolution; accuses political figures, the media, and others of crimes; and calls on the citizenry to take law enforcement into its own hands. After a decade of Chavez's rule, respect for the rule of law has dwindled. Those who support the president feel they can act with impunity, while those who oppose him often fear even expressing themselves.

Until recently, Venezuela could have done something about all this. It certainly had the fiscal wherewithal to revamp the system. Several years of high oil prices allowed Chavez's government to quadruple spending from \$17 billion in 2003 to more than \$70 billion for 2009. Billions of these dollars went to the *Misiones Bolivarianas*, Chavez's centerpiece redistribution programs to bring healthcare, literacy programs, housing, and subsidized food to Venezuela's citizens.

But, unexpectedly, even as poverty in Venezuela decreased, crime rates skyrocketed. Very little from the oil bonanza trickled down to a basic security system desperately in need of an overhaul, even as Chavez purchased enough submarines, aircrafts, helicopters, and arms -- including more than 100,000 AK-47-type rifles -- from Russia and China to double the defense budget. The president responded to the concern over crime by creating a centralized National Police Force to eventually replace Venezuela's numerous local forces. This solution does nothing to address Venezuela's fundamental problem or strengthen Venezuela's institutions, instead just layering on a new force that lacks skills and is prone to politicization.

And the news gets even more grim. Venezuela's economy is declining in tandem with falling oil prices, so crimes of need are likely to increase. Meanwhile, Chavez has upped his attacks against the opposition: stripping the new opposition mayor of Caracas of much of his authority, accusing the TV station *Globovision* of media terrorism and threatening to close it down, and bringing what may yet prove to be unfounded corruption charges against prominent opposition leaders.

The result of this is to create a feedback loop that exacerbates crime; impunity at the top reverberates through society. As the independence of the electoral commission, the judiciary, the military, and the media is compromised, the legitimacy of other state institutions follows. As attacks on the opposition grow bolder, so too does related violence. As the Venezuelan government moves farther down the path to authoritarian rule, law enforcement institutions are following, bending and breaking the rules as necessary.

Venezuela's institutions are threatened not just by drug traffickers, organized crime, or guerrillas, but also by the decisions of elected officials. It is this challenge the Venezuelans now face, holding in the balance their safety, their prosperity, and increasingly, their very lives.