

**State-Mobilized Contention in Bolivarian Venezuela:
Regime and State Context and Evolution of State-Mobilized Organizations**

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Hugo Chávez and his Movimiento Quinta República came to power in 1999 promising to refound the Venezuelan state and restructure the polity in ways that would build “popular power” through the promotion of grassroots participation, organization, and mobilization. Once in office, the Bolivarian forces launched a series of initiatives to sponsor organization and mobilization among supporters, which ranged widely in their scope, institutional configuration, and strategic purpose. This chapter examines major initiatives in this regard and the roles these Bolivarian organizations have played (or not played) in contentious politics and the management of the protest arena. Two analytic points receive emphasis. First, the chapter highlights two contextual conditions –a “very competitive” authoritarian regime and a weak state - that gave state-mobilized contention a distinctive character in Venezuela, especially in comparison to other autocratic cases examined in this volume. The extremely competitive nature of the autocratic regime during the Fifth Republic created great incentives for engaging in state-mobilized contention for the purposes of “counter-mobilization” to thwart the political opposition and exert influence over a contested public sphere, rather than more subtle goals such as drumming up public support for policy initiatives or international signaling. In turn, state weakness not only incentivized the Bolivarian Movement to utilize non-state vehicles to mobilize support but has also made it particularly difficult to control these state-mobilized groups, often with adverse and unpredictable consequences.

The second emphasis of the chapter is to develop a set of theoretical propositions for understanding the logic behind the iterated changes in the government’s approach to state-mobilized contention that have occurred over time. State-mobilized organizations in Venezuela are usefully seen as operating in three different arenas of politics: the local governance arena, the electoral arena, and the protest arena. From an ideological standpoint, the Bolivarian Movement

has been centrally concerned with sponsoring organizations that could operate in the first of these arenas, helping realize Chávez's vision of constructing a "protagonistic democracy" by establishing vehicles for citizen participation in local governance. Because the Bolivarian government has been so polarizing, however, its initiatives in social mobilization have also been geared toward creating organizations that could play roles in the electoral and protest arenas, defending "the revolution" against opposition threats. The evolution of state-mobilized groups in Venezuela, and the ebbs and flows of their respective emphases on contentious politics, has followed a relatively simple logic captured in two claims. First, the degree to which state-mobilized groups have focused on the local governance arena, vis-à-vis the protest or electoral arenas, has been inversely related to the seriousness of the threat posed by the opposition. Second, the government has focused on sponsoring organizations best suited to operate in whichever of these latter two arenas – that of protests or elections – has corresponded to the focus of opposition strategies during particular time periods.

To illustrate the logic of this evolution, the paper breaks the Fifth Republic into four periods, distinguished by their degree of opposition threat and the primary opposition strategies for contesting power. In a first phase (1999-2000), the opposition to Chavismo was in chaos and presented very little threat whatsoever, in either the protest or electoral arenas. The government felt little pressure to launch substantial initiatives in state mobilization of civil society during this period. In a second phase (roughly from 2001-2004), the opposition regrouped and presented a serious threat to destabilize or remove Chávez through street mobilization and other non-electoral means. The government's response during this period took the form of the Bolivarian Circle (BC) program, which sponsored the formation of loose groups of supporters, some of which were armed, that played roles in local governance but which also serving as "shock troops"

to be mobilized into the streets (particularly in central Caracas) to counter opposition protest activity.

In a third phase of the Bolivarian project (roughly from 2005-2012), a relatively weak opposition renewed its commitment to electoral contestation while placing less emphasis on street mobilization and non-electoral channels for ousting the regime. The major Bolivarian initiative during this period was the Communal Council (CC) program, an extremely ambitious endeavor in local governance that was also highly involved in the electoral arena, with the CCs becoming the informal grassroots organizational base of the new Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV). A fourth phase (roughly from 2013-) has been marked by the death of Chávez, a severe economic collapse, and very serious opposition threats in both the protest arena and the electoral arena. The government's response has been to reinvigorate a group of "colectivos" that descend from the Bolivarian Circles and which are particularly active in counter-protest and repression while also sponsoring the formation of a new kind of overtly partisan electoral organization, the Unidades de Batalla Bolívar Chávez (UBCh), with much more structured linkages to the PSUV.

A first section of the paper discusses some background and then advances the notion that regime (highly competitive) and state (very weak) characteristics are critical for understanding the particular logic and dynamics of state-mobilized contention in Venezuela. A second section elaborates on the three arenas of politics and summarizes the theory regarding how major Bolivarian initiatives have moved across these three arenas in response to different levels and types of opposition threats. The bulk of the paper then examines the last three of the phases just described and their associated initiatives in state mobilization of societal organizations.

Background and Key Contextual Conditions

Bolivarian Venezuela possessed two important contextual conditions – a highly competitive autocratic regime and a very weak state - that differentiate the case from others such as China and which greatly influenced the nature of state-mobilized contention. This section first offers some background information on Venezuela before the rise to power of the Bolivarian Movement. It then explicitly discusses these two contextual conditions and advances two hypotheses regarding how they shaped state mobilized contention in Bolivarian Venezuela vis-à-vis patterns in other autocracies: First, put within the conceptual terminology developed in this volume's introduction, the highly competitive nature of the autocratic regime created great incentives for the government to use state-mobilized contention for the purposes of "counter-mobilization." Other strategies, such as mobilized contention in support of policy goals or for international signaling, were less important in a context in which the need to defeat opposition threats dominated. Second, the weakness of the Venezuelan state both incentivized a reliance on state-mobilized contention while making it very difficult for the Bolivarian government to fully control state-mobilized groups.

Background. Venezuela possessed one of Latin America's longest standing democracies prior to the Bolivarian era. This earlier democratic regime was established in 1958 after a broad opposition movement successfully overthrew the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. As democracy collapsed South America in the 1960s and 1970s, Venezuela's "Punto Fijo" democracy (so named after the location at which its founding pact was agreed upon) proved remarkably resilient and stable. During the 1970s and early 1980s, scholars frequently invoked an idea of "Venezuelan exceptionalism," referring to an island of democratic rule and

relatively political stability amid a sea of military regimes or, as in neighboring Colombia, seemingly intractable civil conflicts (Ellner and Tinker Salas 2005).

Punto Fijo democracy was also beset by several severe pathologies, which eventually fostered great citizen alienation and discontent. The pacted nature of the 1958 transition put into place an exclusionary two-party system. Acción Democrática (AD) and the Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI) acted as a virtual electoral duopoly, shaping electoral rules and using their patronage power to marginalize other parties, especially those on the left. AD and COPEI also dominated civil society, fostering a pattern of “partyarchy” in which alternative channels of political representation and interest articulation were very weak (Coppedge 1994). Perhaps most consequentially, Punto Fijo democracy was erected on a very weak state, in which corruption and patrimonialism were widespread. While the oil economy boomed in the 1970s, such issues were easy to sweep under the rug. When oil prices crashed and the country experienced other economic challenges in the 1980s, these longstanding problems with corruption increased in salience. The last decades of the 20th century therefore saw Venezuela mired in a deep “state crisis,” a situation in which the state proves highly ineffective in the delivery of basic goods and services and venal and partial in its treatment of citizens, leading to widespread discontent with basic institutions (Handlin 2017).

The Bolivarian Movement led by Hugo Chávez emerged in this context, promising to refound the Venezuelan state and create a “protagonistic democracy” that would open up new avenues for popular participation and claim making. From its origins, the ideology of the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR-200) reflected a strange cocktail of militaristic nationalism and radical leftism. The latter involved not only critiques of neoliberal economics but also the idea that democracy had to be deepened and radicalized through the

mobilization of popular subjects, ideas that became fairly common among the Latin American left during the 1980s (Roberts 1998). From its inception, then, the Bolivarian Movement had framed its project as centered on the mobilization of popular subjects and the creation of a “protagonistic democracy” through innovations in state-society relations that would facilitate citizen participation and collective action (López Maya 2004; López Maya and Lander 2011).

These ideas were already developed in many of the programmatic documents that Chávez and other conspirators drew up to present to the public before launching a coup against the Venezuelan government in 1992. While the coup failed, Chávez and other leaders of the MBR-200 elicited great sympathy from a highly anti-systemic public fed up with the country’s political class. Therefore, Chávez and the MBR-200 were able to garner a pardon and contest the 1998 elections, running on a program centered on the convocation of a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution, refound the Venezuelan state, and implement a more participatory form of government that would address the deficits of representation and social citizenship in the Punto Fijo system.

A Highly Competitive Autocracy. After winning power, Chávez and the Bolivarian forces utilized the constituent process not just to write a new constitution but also to remove opponents from the state and neuter institutions of horizontal accountability (Coppedge 2002; Corrales and Penfold 2011). Domination over the state subsequently allowed the Bolivarian forces to tilt the playing field against opponents, emerge victorious from several years of bare-knuckle conflict with the opposition, and established a competitive authoritarian regime in which competition was “real but unfair” (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). Since at least 2004, the government has systematically violated the fairness (if not the freedom) of elections and significantly curbed civil liberties, such that the regime cannot be considered democratic.

Even among the class of competitive authoritarian regimes, however, the Venezuelan regime might be considered a “very competitive” autocracy. Given that the regime emerged through a process of erosion, the successor to a highly established democracy, the government has been extremely hesitant to unduly limit dissent and opposition. Throughout the Fifth Republic, Venezuelans have expressed very high levels of support for democracy, at least in regional perspective, according to cross-regional surveys such as the Latinobarometro or LAPOP. They may be willing to vote for a government that systematically violates certain tenets of procedural democracy, but they have shown an unwillingness to condone the complete muzzling of its citizens or, more pertinently, very high levels of government repression of protesters. While the government may use selective repression and intimidation, and has accelerated the use of these strategies in recent years, these actions can be double-edged, potentially turning public opinion against the government. As such, a more nuanced “management” of the protest arena has often been particularly critical to regime strategies (Robertson 2010).

Table 1: Major Elections and Referenda during the Fifth Republic by Year

Year	Election	Margin
1999	Constituent Assembly	+44 (Semi-Boycotted)
2000	Presidential	+22 (Semi-Boycotted)
2001	None	
2002	None	
2003	None	
2004	Recall referendum	+16
2005	Legislative	Boycotted
2006	Presidential	+26
2007	Constitutional Referendum	-1
2008	Gubernatorial	+12
2009	Constitutional Referendum	+10
2010	Legislative	+1
2011	None	
2012	Presidential	+11
2013	Presidential	+2
2014	None	
2015	Legislative	-15

Since roughly 2006, the electoral arena in Venezuela has also been unusually competitive, particularly when compared to other cases of competitive authoritarianism in the region and beyond. From 1999 thru 2005, only one election was held to which the opposition wholeheartedly committed. From 2006 onward, highly contested elections or referendum were held nearly every year, due to renewed opposition commitment to electoral strategies, the non-concurrent electoral calendar, and the plebiscitarian nature of the Bolivarian Revolution, which led to major referenda being held in years without scheduled elections. There are two major implications for this chapter. As we will see below, the significant shift over time in the relative importance of the electoral arena as a site of contestation had great implications for the strategies of the Bolivarian government with respect to state mobilization.

More pertinently for the current discussion, the highly competitive nature of the authoritarian regime in Venezuela can be seen as an important contextual condition shaping the government's approach to state-mobilized contention. In the terms set forward by the introduction to this volume, we can hypothesize that a more competitive and liberalized autocracy will lead incumbents to rely relatively heavily on "counter-mobilization" (and perhaps to some degree "preemptive mobilization") as a strategy of state-mobilized contention. When opposition forces present a real threat to take power through electoral or non-electoral channels, governments have incentives to use state-mobilized contention to confront those forces, contest the streets, and contain opposition influence on the public sphere: This is open political warfare and state-mobilized groups become the shock troops thrown into the fray. In contrast, in non-competitive autocracies – either ones that do not hold elections or in which the pro-regime forces are truly hegemonic in the electoral arena – we might expect governments to face significantly

less pressure to engage in counter-mobilization, which would instead be one strategy within a broader repertoire that, per the introduction to this volume, might also include mobilizing contention for the purposes of supporting policy initiatives, international signaling, or other uses. Instead of state-mobilized groups being called upon as troops in open political warfare with the opposition, they are utilized in more nuanced and often covert ways, more akin to agents of espionage.¹

As the discussion in the rest of the chapter makes clear, the Venezuelan government relied heavily on counter-mobilization throughout the Fifth Republic. State-mobilized groups also engaged in other kinds of activities, particularly in the local governance arena, but their primary activities during many periods also involved electoral mobilization and street response in response to opposition threats. More nuanced and covert forms of state-mobilized contention, in contrast, have been relatively rare. I suggest that this pattern reflects the regime context as hypothesized above, as the need to openly confront and control opposition forces has been the overriding imperative for government officials attempting to hang onto power in the face of serious threats to their rule.

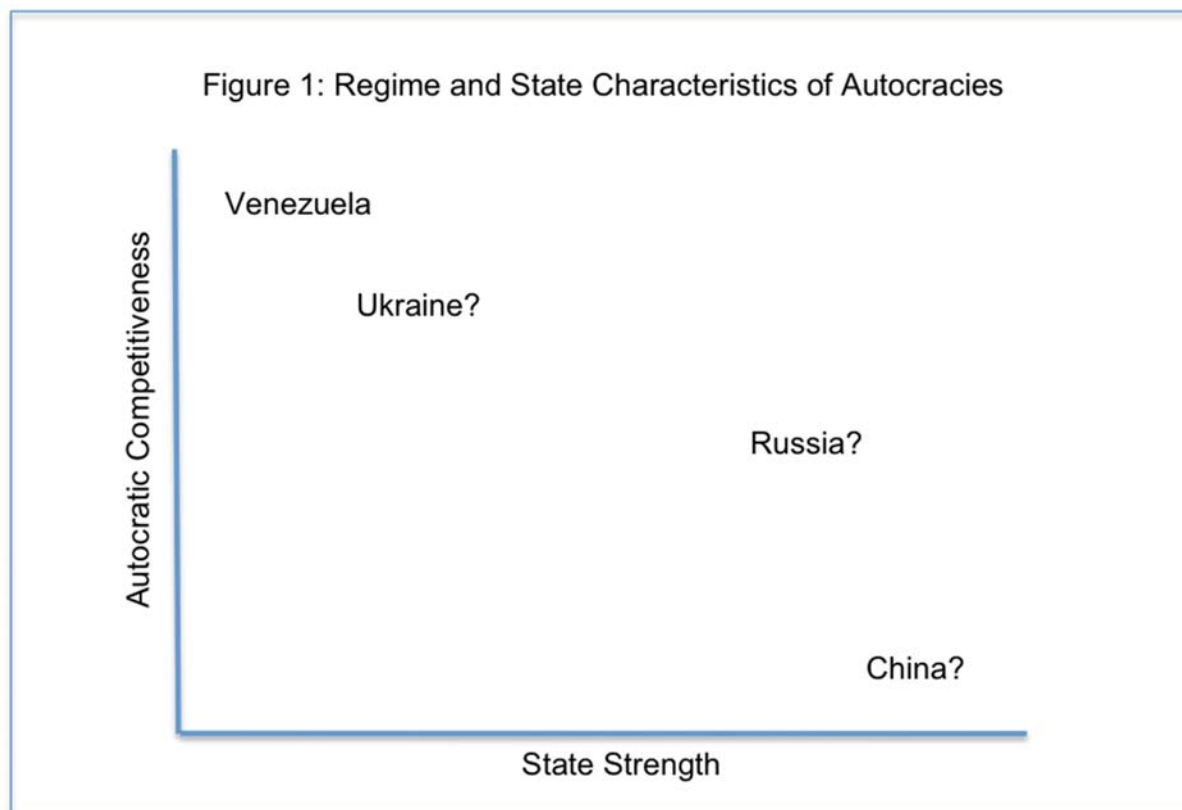
State Weakness. After rising to prominence and power through critiques of the Venezuelan state crisis and the political status quo that owned it, the Bolivarian Movement inherited this weak state in office (Handlin 2017). State weakness shaped the nature of state-mobilized contention in Bolivarian Venezuela in several ways. For one, the weak state further fueled reliance on state-mobilized contention in general. At the head of a weak state that had

¹ These propositions pertain to autocracies of various stripes but should not be extended to regimes in general. By definition, democratic regimes have extreme values on the “competitiveness” dimension. But we should not necessarily assume that they would be extremely reliant on counter-mobilization. In democratic circumstances, the existence of open opposition and the inevitability of electoral turnover are broadly accepted as facts of political life. Incumbents therefore face less incentive, and more limited levers, to engage in the particular form of “open political warfare” that state-sponsored counter-mobilization generally involves.

proven highly corrupt and frequently incapable of delivering services and providing public goods, Chavez's options for using established state structures to mobilize support were limited: It is no surprise, for example, that his first major initiative in social policy – Plan Bolivar 2000 – was implemented mainly through the military, the one wing of the state apparatus in which he placed real confidence. As we will see, the subsequent reliance on state-mobilized contention and the formation of para-statal entities like the Communal Councils to mobilize support and achieve local governance objectives reflects a similar logic. While the Bolivarian Movement had an ideological commitment to such notions, necessity – in this case, a weak state apparatus incapable of accomplishing such tasks – was also the mother of invention.

This chapter suggests that state weakness is also likely to place substantial limitations on the ability of governments to control state-mobilized groups. Principle-agent problems are inherent to situations in which states mobilize parts of society to do their bidding and accomplish particular goals. Those societal groups, once formed and mobilized, may operate according to their own incentives and goals, which may not fully align with those actors within the state who supported and pushed their mobilization. Following analyses of principle-agent dynamics from many other settings, we might conclude that the ability of states to monitor the activities of state-mobilized groups and to credibly sanction them for bad behavior will be critical to limiting principle-agent problems that might arise. Weak states are likely to have less capacity for both monitoring and sanctioning. Entities tasked with liaising with state-mobilized groups – whether relevant bureaucratic agencies or, in some cases, security services – are likely to have less potent tools for covert surveillance, less capacity for organizing and maintaining records related to the activities of state-mobilized groups, and less ability to decisively act to punish state-mobilized groups that pursue non-sanctioned activities or otherwise jeopardize the agenda of state actors.

As we will see below, a recurrent dynamic during the Fifth Republic, observable even in its earliest years and particularly notable more recently, has involved state-mobilized groups affiliated with the Bolivarian Movement engaging in activities that compromised or complicated the broader goals of the government. In particular, certain state-mobilized groups (a subset of Bolivarian Circles in the early years, a subset of Colectivos more recently) have often engaged in violence and criminality. The Venezuelan government has supported at least some of this violence, using state-mobilized groups as vehicles for sowing fear among the opposition. But the activities of these groups have also seemed beyond the control of the government at times. And the government's association with them has tended to be viewed very negatively by the Venezuelan public, leading to losses of support. To a less spectacular degree, the principle-agent problem can also be seen as relevant to the government's attempt to use certain state-mobilized groups as vehicles for electoral mobilization. One of the constant challenges the government has faced has involved creating groups that would work cooperatively with ruling parties, rather than following their own whims and political agendas.



Putting these two contextual conditions together, we can imagine a two-dimensional space reflecting autocratic regime (the degree of competitiveness) and state (a continuum of strength or capacity) characteristics, as displayed in Figure 1. The case of Bolivarian Venezuela can be located somewhere in the top left quadrant, defined by highly competitive autocracies and weak states and, per the hypotheses just advanced, therefore marked by a government mainly reliant on using state-mobilized contention for counter-mobilization and which also faces great difficulties in controlling such groups. A case such as China that receives emphasis in this volume would be located instead in the lower right: With a very low level of competitiveness, we might expect the government to have the ability to use state-mobilized contention in a variety of more nuanced ways rather than the overriding imperative of simply countering the mobilizational

activities of an open opposition. And with a strong state apparatus to call upon, we also might expect the government to face relatively few problems controlling state-mobilized groups. Other autocratic cases examined in the volume – for example Russia and Ukraine – might be seen as falling at various intermediate positions in this two dimensional space.²

State Mobilized Movements, Arenas of Action, and Regime Threats

The chapter now turns to an explanation of change over time within the Venezuelan case in terms of the activities of state-mobilized groups and, specifically, their engagement in contentious politics vis-à-vis other activities. The focus therefore is not so much to test the propositions established above regarding state and regime context but to analyze how and why - with this context largely taken as a given - the Venezuelan government's approach to mobilization changed over time.

State-mobilized organizations serve many functions and often operate in multiple arenas of politics in authoritarian contexts. This volume is focused on state-mobilized groups and movements engaging in contentious activity. Yet the logic animating state decisions to create or cultivate these organizations (and to create or cultivate particular types of organizations in particular situations) can involve calculations that take into account political action occurring across multiple arenas. One part of this calculation may involve activities in the protest arena, the engagement of state-mobilized organizations in contention and counter-mobilization to support the government or, more darkly, in violence against opposition protesters. But the calculation may also involve the activities of state-mobilized organizations in the electoral arena,

² It should be noted that there need not be any correlation between state strength and autocratic competitiveness. The four cases displayed in Figure 1 happen to be arrayed in a way that suggests a quasi-linear relationship, but this is merely coincidental.

such as getting out the vote on behalf of pro-regime parties and politicians, or action in the realm of local governance. To best understand the shifting landscape of state-mobilized organizations engaging in contentious politics over time in Bolivarian Venezuela (and perhaps elsewhere), we have to appreciate this broader strategic landscape composed of multiple arenas.

In considering the Venezuelan case, it is heuristically useful to think of three arenas of action – the protest arena, the electoral arena, and the protest arena – and to locate the major Bolivarian initiatives in state-mobilized organizations with respect to their respective emphases in these arenas. Figure 1 displays this notion graphically. It should be emphasized that this is a heuristic and that the locations in this space are not absolutely fixed: For example, Communal Councils (CCs) have engaged in activity in the protest arena, but it has not been an emphasis for that group of organizations. Therefore, they are located in the figure only at the intersection of the electoral and local governance arenas. The numbers in parentheses refer to the phases of the Fifth Republic in which each organization was created or, in the case of the colectivos, increased in prominence.

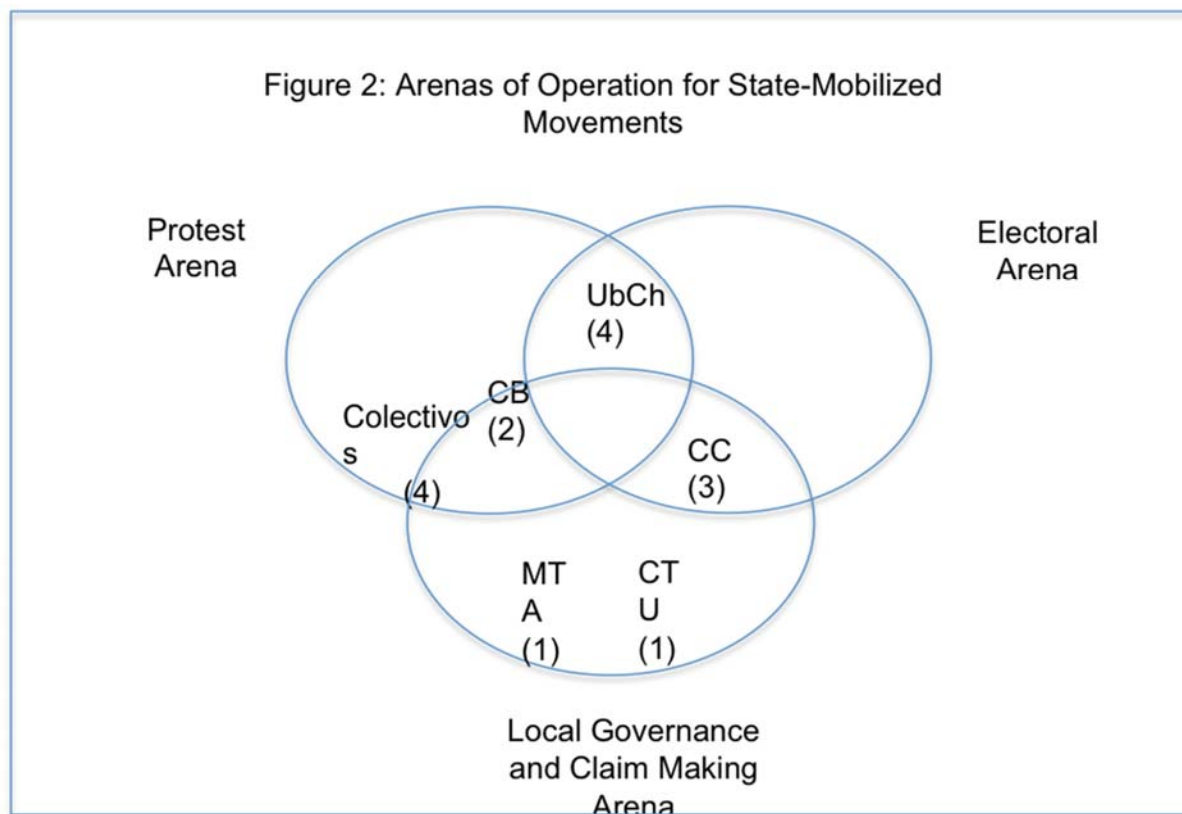


Figure 2, when supplemented by the additional information provided in Table 2, helps us better consider the logic of temporal change among state-mobilized organizations in Venezuela. We can see two broad trends. First, the emphasis of state-mobilized movements on local governance has risen and fallen with the threat level of the opposition. In the first few years of the Chávez era, with the opposition in total disarray, initiatives almost exclusively focused on stimulating citizen participation and organization in local governance and development. This focus dropped off somewhat as the opposition threat swelled in 2001-2004, was greatly accentuated again as the opposition threat level diminished in 2005-2012, and then dropped off again in the current period, when the opposition threat has been at its highest.

Second, to the extent that state-mobilized organizations have been geared toward countering opposition threats, their relative emphasis on the protest or electoral arena has

mirrored the nature of the gravest threat. When the opposition was contesting power in the streets during the 2001-2004 period, the government launched the Bolivarian Circle program to meet that challenge. As the opposition returned to the electoral arena from 2005-2012, the government launched the Communal Council program. And with the opposition now presenting grave threats in the streets and at the ballot box from 2013 onward, the government has emphasized groups like the Colectivos and UbCh that are explicitly politicized and together can operate in both spheres. Less well conveyed, but discussed further below, is that these groups are not just active in the protest arena but have shifted increasingly toward repression rather than simple counter-protest.

Table 2: Opposition Threats and State Mobilization Responses Across Four Phases

Phase	Rough Dates	Key Organizations	Opposition Threat Level and Arena
1	1999-2000	Urban Land Committees (CTU), Water Tables (MTA)	Very low, None
2	2001-2004	Bolivarian Circles (BC)	High, Protest Arena
3	2005-2012	Communal Councils (CC)	Moderate, Electoral Arena
4	2013-	Colectivos, Electoral Battle Units Bolivar- (UBCh)	High, Both Arenas

The following sections focus on the logic of government activity in Phases 2-4 of the program. I skip the initial phase because it did not involve serious opposition threats, in either the protest or electoral realm, and because the state-mobilized initiatives launched during that time were relatively small scale and not politically central.

Strong Opposition Threats in the Protest Arena, 2001-2004

While the rise of the Bolivarian Movement initially left the political opposition routed and feckless, by 2001 these opposing forces had regrouped enough to pose a real challenge to the

Chávez government. This year inaugurated an extremely polarizing period in which the opposition attempted to oust Chávez through a variety of non-electoral means and during which the ability to mobilize supporters into the streets and control the public sphere was critical for both sides in the conflict. This period therefore presented the first indication that, in the context of relatively liberalized and competitive autocracy, counter-mobilization would become the dominant use of state-mobilized contention.

Opposition protest mobilizations occurred frequently throughout 2001 but increased at notably at the end of the year, after the Chávez administration controversially used an enabling law to implement a sweeping package of new economic policies by decree. As opposition protests became more regular and swelled in size, they were increasingly met by loyalist counter-protests. Each side was putting tens of thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands, of people onto the streets of Caracas on an almost weekly basis. This increasingly tense atmosphere reached a crescendo in April 2002 when the opposition launched a complex coup attempt, which began with a massive march on Miraflores Palace that was met by a large loyalist mobilization, a clash that left several people dead, violence used as a pretext for a military takeover. While the opposition plotters succeeded in removing Chávez from Miraflores and taking him to a remote island military base, the coup broke down after disagreements emerged among the key players and after loyalist forces mobilized thousands of Venezuelans into the streets in protest.

Even after the failure of the April 2002 coup, opposition protest activity and attempts to oust Chávez remained ongoing. The opposition continued to mobilize into the streets on a semi-regular basis throughout the rest of the year and then launched a massive general strike, including a shutdown of the oil industry, spanning December 2002-February 2003. It was not until the disastrous failure of this strike, which had dire economic consequences and greatly

discredited the opposition in the minds of the Venezuelan public, that the opposition moved away from contentious strategies and began to focus on the electoral arena. They did so through activating a clause in the Bolivarian constitution allowing for referenda to be convened to recall elected officials. Ultimately, after considerably delays, a referendum to recall Chávez failed in August 2004. This sequence of events augured the dawning of a new phase in Venezuelan politics, taken up in the next section, marked by a substantial decrease in protest on both sides and contestation largely occurring at the ballot box.

The Bolivarian Circles. While Chávez and the MVR had long made the sponsorship of social organization a central part of their program, initiatives in this regard were relatively small in scale in the initial years of the Bolivarian era. As protest activity by the opposition picked up, the government launched a much more ambitious effort to sponsor organization and collective action among loyalists, calling for the formation of Bolivarian Circles by supporters around the country (Arenas and Gómez Calcaño 2005). Chávez had first mentioned the possibility of forming the Circles in mid-2000, but the initiative really picked up steam in late 2001, with the president conducting a massive rally that December to swear-in members, publicize the initiative, and galvanize support. Estimates of the total number of Circles have varied widely, but there is little doubt that this was a very large – if relatively short lived – initiative.³ The program was relatively informal, particularly compared to later initiatives. It established a set of coordinating structures and a formal registry of Circles, enabling some degree of contacting and joint action. But these structures were poorly institutionalized, many Circles appear to have been formed and then quickly gone defunct, and the program was supported with very few resources (Hansen and Hawkins 2006).

³ Coordinators of the Bolivarian Circle program at times claimed as many as 200,000, numbers that seem unrealistic. In contrast, Hawkins and Hansen (2006) estimate that the true number is more likely between 9,500 – 11,000 active circles at the height of the program.

The Circles played roles in local governance but also were clearly oriented toward activity in the protest arena, organizations capable of mobilizing supporters and other community members into the streets on short notice in defense of the Bolivarian Revolution. Scholars have commonly seen the Circles as playing particularly important roles in the counter-mobilizations that became increasingly frequent, particularly in Caracas, during the extremely tense months of late 2001 and early 2002 (García-Guadilla 2004). At times, the Circles also engaged in contentious activity for other strategic purposes, beyond simply providing a counter-balance to opposition protests. For example, in one episode, Circles led a major protest alleging unfair treatment of the government in *El Nacional*, one of Venezuela's leading newspapers, which succeeded in shutting down the newspaper for a day (Inter Press Service 2002). Nevertheless, counter-mobilization was clearly the dominant purpose of Circle activity in the protest arena.

The Bolivarian Circles became best known for the roles they played in the events of the 2002 coup. The days leading up to the coup had been filled with tension, with both sides suspecting that a breaking point was nearing. In this context, Chávez and close advisors discussed plans for having armed Circles surround Miraflores palace in case of an opposition attempt to besiege the house of government (Nelson 2009). When the opposition did begin its massive march on Miraflores, the Circles were central actors in rallying the pro-government counter-mobilization. More ominously, members of Circles were responsible for at least some of the deadly violence when the two marches clashed, with footage capturing a known Circle leader firing a gun at the opposition from an overpass. After the coup occurred, and Chavez was taken by force out of Miraflores, Circles are also widely credited with helping lead the massive popular protest that surrounded Miraflores and demanded the return of the president (Roberts 2006). After the coup, the Circles continued to be important actors during the remainder of this

period of intense polarization. During the extremely tense 10-week general strike of late 2002 and early 2003, the Circles were also active in community provisioning and leading counter-protests denouncing the general strike.

When the opposition renounced attempts to remove Chávez by extra-constitutional means and shifted its strategic focus toward the electoral arena, however, several drawbacks and strategic limitations of the Circle program became particularly pronounced. First, the Circle program revealed a dynamic that would recur repeatedly in later years. The Bolivarian government relied heavily on state-mobilized groups as allies and actors in the political struggle, but had difficulty controlling the actions of these groups, with adverse consequences for its larger campaign to win public opinion. Due to the activities of some groups during the 2002-2003 struggle, the Circles acquired a reputation as violent and repressive. The opposition certainly influenced this negative portrayal, taking every opportunity to denounce them as thugs and which probably unfairly exaggerated the centrality of violence and intimidation (versus more benign community work) to their activities. Nevertheless, surveys showed that a substantial majority of Venezuelans disapproved of the Circles. They were one of the least popular political actors in all of Venezuela – on either the pro-government or pro-opposition side – during the 2002-2004 period.

The limited ability of the government to control, monitor, and direct the activities of the Circles also manifested itself in their limited use in the electoral arena. The Circles participated heavily in the campaign to defeat the recall referendum in 2004 (Hawkins and Hansen 2006). As poorly financed and largely informal groups that operated with a substantial degree of independence, and which were often very skeptical of the MVR, the Circles were not well designed to be mobilizers of electoral support. In sum, the Circle program revealed some

problems that would not go away – a basic limitation in the ability of the government to monitor and control such groups – but also possessed some specific drawbacks related to the informal and uninstitutionalized way the program had developed. In this latter respect, they were a poor fit for the next phase of the Fifth Republic, when contestation returned to the electoral arena.

Moderate Opposition Threats in the Electoral Arena, 2005-2012

The aftermath of the recall referendum saw Venezuela move into a new phase in which the opposition gave up trying to oust Chávez through non-constitutional channels and committed to the electoral arena. This strategic reorientation did not occur immediately and did not receive universal support. The opposition ended up strategically boycotting the 2005 legislative elections at the last minute. While leaders cited concerns regarding fraud as their rationale, the fact that polls predicted a massive defeat – partly a product of a lack of opposition unity and continued sectors bent on electoral abstention – probably also played into their calculus. From the presidential elections of 2006 onward, however, the opposition launched a committed effort in every subsequent major election and referendum in the country, and did so increasingly unified as the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) front. These elections were not just fully contested but also, as Table 1 earlier in the paper indicated, very frequent. From 2005 through 2012, a major election or referendum occurred every year except 2011.

Opposition activity in the protest arena did not cease completely during this period. The opposition still took to the streets during campaign season and to protest particularly egregious actions by the government. The most notable protest cycle occurred in 2007, when a wave of student-led protests occurred in response to the government's closing of RCTV, an unabashedly

pro-opposition broadcaster (Brading 2012). Some of the same student groups that led these protests then continued to mobilize actively in late 2007 in opposition to the government's referendum of that year on planned changes to the constitution. In the big picture, however, this period marked a sea change in activity within the protest arena. Contentious action by the opposition was less frequent and no longer posed an existential threat to the Chávez government – rather than hundreds of thousands of protesters, thousands or maybe ten thousand might take to the streets of Caracas. And rather than street mobilizations being led by an opposition bent on removing the government through any means possible (such as coups or massive strikes), this protest activity occurred in a context in which the opposition had renounced such strategies and was grimly determined to contest power at the ballot box.

During late 2004, coming off the victory in the recall referendum, a high level meeting of Bolivarian officials took place in which Chávez and a close coterie of advisors proposed what was termed a “New Strategic Map” for navigating a new era in which they had emerged triumphant, would have much more leeway to implement their policy agenda, and expected the opposition to keep trying to take power through elections, not the streets. This document laid out a great variety of policy and strategy proposals, most of which are irrelevant for present concerns. Two particularly pertinent features were a call to rethink and reinvigorate Bolivarian political parties – an idea that eventually led to the dismantlement of the MVR and the creation of a new party, the PSUV, with a much stronger emphasis on grassroots organization – and an emphasis on reinvigorating commitments and programs to enhance citizen participation and organization in local governance.

The Communal Councils. In early 2006, the government launched the Communal Council program, an initiative of unprecedented scope and ambition geared toward building

popular power through state-sponsored community organizations (García-Guadilla 2007; Machado 2008). Unlike the Bolivarian Circle initiative, the Communal Council program was implemented through the legislature, with the passing of the Ley de Consejos Comunales, which established a very detailed set of procedures by which small communities of about 200 households (fewer in rural areas) could join together and form a state-sanctioned neighborhood organization that would assume a variety of local governance functions. Requirements in this process included the conducting of a local census, advertising the planned formation of the Council, holding votes for a variety of council offices and leadership positions, and filing substantial paperwork with government officials. The program was supported and pushed forward by multiple entities of the Venezuelan government. At the national level, the agency Fundacomunal was repurposed and tasked with helping implement the Communal Council program, holding workshops and events to publicize the program, meeting with communities to help them navigate the process, handling the formal registration, and also disbursing a great deal of funding. But many municipal and state governments also became involved with the administration and support of the program in various ways. By early 2008, over 18,000 Councils had been formally registered with the government. Later estimates would place that number over 30,000.

While overtly cast as organizations tasked with local governance functions, the Communal Councils also became *de facto* grassroots organizations of the PSUV, heavily involved in electoral mobilization (Handlin 2013, 2016a). PSUV leaders referred to the Councils openly as the “base units” of the new party. The Councils played important roles in the process of building the party, particularly in signing up party members and helping recruit people into party activism. Perhaps most notably, the Councils also engaged in various forms of electoral

mobilization in the elections and campaigns held from 2006 onward, holding joint events with PSUV politicians in communities, helping mobilize people to campaign rallies, serving as channels for the distribution of patronage, and urging voters to the polls. To the extent that the Communal Councils operated outside the local governance arena, then, their primary function was clearly to support the Bolivarian Movement and PSUV in the electoral arena during a time in which the opposition made contestation at the ballot box the focus of its efforts.

In contrast, the Communal Councils played only relatively minor roles in the protest arena. They often engaged in discrete forms of local claim making, which in some instances might escalate into small-scale contentious activity (for example, organizing a group of people to march on city hall in a provincial city and demand better water and sanitation services). But the Communal Councils were not major actors in organizing larger-scale counter-protests or otherwise managing the protest arena. For one, the opposition did not make contentious activity in the protest arena a central thrust of its own strategy during this time, so the need to use state-sponsored groups like the Communal Councils as vehicles for regularly mobilizing regime supporters into the streets was far less acute than in the 2001-2004 period.

Moreover, to the extent that the opposition did engage in major protest activity during the 2005-2012 period, the student movement tended to be the protagonist. Just as the Putin government in Russia learned from the Color Revolutions and sponsored the pro-Kremlin student group Nashi to counter student opposition, the Chávez government reacted to the upsurge in student activism and mobilization by creating its own pro-government student groups. These Chavista student organizations engaged in regularized activities on campuses. But they were also engaged in selective counter-protests to show the country that part of the younger generation was aligned with the Bolivarian Project. The specific form of opposition protest activity during

this period therefore called for a more specific form of state-mobilized contention for which the Communal Councils, in which older community leaders and activists tended to be most involved, were a poor demographic fit.

Very Serious Opposition Threats in Both Arenas, 2013-

Two shocks massively altered the political environment in Venezuela after 2012, with great implications for the strategies and threat level of the opposition and, in consequence, for the government's approach to state mobilization of loyalist groups. First, Chávez died in early 2013 after a long battle with cancer, the details of which had been mainly kept hidden from the public. The death of personalistic leaders is famously difficult for autocratic regimes, often setting off messy succession conflicts. Chávez ameliorated this problem to some degree by naming Maduro as a designated successor, but fissures within the Bolivarian coalition still became much more pronounced, especially divides between a radical leftist sector (which Maduro headed) and a more cynical, non-ideological sector with backgrounds in the military and security forces (exemplified by Cabello). Just as importantly, Chávez had great charisma and had developed very personalized forms of linkage with many followers. It was never likely that another politician, particularly one as inept as Maduro, would be able to replicate this appeal.

The strength of Chavismo after Chávez was soon put to the test, since the Venezuelan constitution mandated that a new election be held, since Chavez had died before being able to begin his new presidential term. Whereas Chávez had won the 2012 presidential election by about 11 percentage points against Henrique Capriles, Maduro won an election six months later against the same opponent by only 2 percentage points. Chavismo did not fall apart without

Chávez, but the nine-point swing was significant. Just as importantly, the razor thin victory did nothing to quell uncertainties regarding whether Maduro would be able to hold together the Bolivarian coalition at the elite and mass levels, particularly in times of difficulty. The death of Chávez, the close margin of the 2013 election, and allegations of fraud in that election emboldened a more hard line wing of the opposition to launch an extended cycle of protests in early 2014. While the protests subsided over time, they would return on a grand scale in 2016, substantially in response to the government's blocking opposition attempts to trigger a referendum to recall Maduro from office. These cycles of protest, which involved massive mobilizations and semi-permanent roadblocks, represented the biggest threat to the Bolivarian government in the protest arena since the 2001-2003 period.

The government's troubles were greatly accentuated by a subsequent economic collapse, stemming from both long-term macroeconomic and fiscal mismanagement and a steep fall in global oil prices that began in the middle of 2014. Despite the opposition's reinvigorated contentious activity, the Maduro government maintained decent approval ratings up through mid 2014 and looked to have successfully stalemated the new wave of protest. The collapse of global oil prices plunged Venezuela into a massive recession, also marked by growing scarcities of basic goods, which turned public opinion sharply against the government and drove the opposition to a historic rout in the 2015 legislative elections. In the following year, the economy further collapsed in tragic ways, leading to hyperinflation, widespread hunger, and unprecedented deprivation. Meanwhile, political tensions ratcheted up, as the Maduro government effectively acted as if the legislature possessed no power while using its hold over the Supreme Court to thwart opposition attempts to trigger a constitutional provision to hold a

referendum on recalling the president. In sum, the government has been under very high levels of threat – truly unprecedented levels – in both the protest and electoral arenas during this period.

Colectivos and UBCh. The government’s response in terms of state mobilization during this period was to reinvigorate or create new groups composed of extreme loyalists that had little to do with local governance and were explicitly geared toward action in the protest and electoral arenas. After the formation of the PSUV, the government had begun to experiment with the creation of formal local party organizations to augment the more informally affiliated, albeit very numerous and well-resourced, Communal Councils. In 2009, assemblies were held across the country to begin the process of forming “Socialist Patrols,” local groups of activists that would be individually matched to every voting center in the country and responsible for electoral mobilization within that territory. While active in certain elections, however, these Socialist Patrols had never been fully institutionalized within the party and many had become defunct.

After the death of Chávez in early 2013 and with a new presidential election now scheduled, the PSUV launched a major initiative to restructure and reinvigorate its formal local party organization through the creation of “Unidades de Batalla Hugo Chávez ” (UBCh), which would become the new base organizational unit of the party. The push to create UBCh was clearly motivated by the death of Chávez and the realization among leaders of the Bolivarian Movement that the opposition threat in the electoral arena would be heightened. But the UBCh were not just another temporary iteration of local party organization like the Socialist Patrols. Rather, they were intended to be a “permanent element of propaganda and mobilization” that would “strengthen and expand the vanguard” of the Bolivarian Revolution every day” and which should assume some ill-defined responsibilities in local governance in their communities. In effect, the UBCh were designed to be highly politicized organizations that would be agents of

electoral mobilization but also capable of acting the protest arena and establishing permanent positions within communities. This put them into potential conflict with Communal Councils operating in the same neighborhoods. In the Bolivarian mediascape, substantial debate surrounded the question of what the relationship between the Councils and UBCh should be and whether the UBCh were undermining the “popular power” exercised by the Councils.

The second consequential form of state mobilization in recent years has been the activation, or reactivation, of a more informal set of organizations, many of which are rooted in the Bolivarian Circle initiative, known colloquially as *colectivos*. These *colectivos* are informal, highly revolutionary neighborhood-based organizations that view themselves as defenders of the Bolivarian Revolution, although they may maintain critical postures toward the government. Generalizing further about the *colectivos* is difficult. As with the Bolivarian Circles, the activities of a set of high profile *colectivos* may not be representative of the activities of the broader population of *colectivos*. Many *colectivos* do not engage in violence and are simply groups of militant revolutionary leftists who view themselves as defenders of their communities and the vanguard of the Bolivarian revolution. Nevertheless, a subset of armed *colectivos* has come to play a salient and controversial role in Venezuelan politics in the last few years.

Both the UBCh and *colectivos* have been actively involved in standard forms of counter-mobilization, organizing demonstrations and pouring into the streets in response to opposition protest cycles and as ways to rally support for a beleaguered government. For example, in its darkest recent hours, the Maduro government used the UBCh and *colectivos* as key grassroots mobilizational actors for massive national-scale events in late 2016 labeled the “Anti-Coup March” and the “Venezuela, Indestructible Heart Campaign,” which both sought to cast opposition attempts to remove Maduro as undemocratic, to blame the opposition for launching a

financial war that was destroying the Venezuelan economy, and to rally the government's dwindling support more generally. Similar types of counter-mobilizational events were also held in previous years during this period of elevated opposition threats.

The armed colectivos, and some portion of the UBCh, have also been centrally involved in the Venezuelan government's heightened attempts to control and manage the protest arena through repression and intimidation. When massive protests first broke out in February 2014, PSUV leader Francisco Ameliach tweeted, "UBCh prepare yourselves for an immediate counter-attack. Diosdado will give the order." The following months were marked by numerous notorious instances in which armed colectivos and UBCh violently clashed with protesters. More recently, when the opposition announced plans for a massive mobilization to protest the government's blocking of the recall referendum, Vice President Aristóbulo Istúriz responded by saying that the government would fill the streets of Caracas with colectivos and their "iron horses," a reference to the motorcycles that armed colectivos have often used when making a show of force on the streets (Infobae 2016). An extensive report from Human Rights Watch (2014) documents high degrees of collaboration between armed Bolivarian civilian groups – colectivos and UBChs – and government security forces. This collaborative activity has taken different forms. In some instances, security forces policing a protest have suddenly disappeared and colectivos or UBCh descended soon after to beat up protesters. In other instances, armed civilian groups and security forces have operated side-by-side in forcefully detaining, and even opening fire upon, protesters.

Empowering a subset of colectivos and UBCh in this way has had doubled-edged consequences for the Maduro government. The armed civilian groups allowed the government to exert a higher degree of repression on opposition protesters, therefore helping stalemate the

initial wave of protests in 2014, while minimizing the degree to which security forces were directly implicated in the violence. While serious investigations of the violence would still conclude that the government was responsible for substantial repression, either directly or because they empowered the armed civilian groups, this more nuanced perspective is not necessarily dominant among Venezuelans or international audiences. In this sense, the use of state-mobilized groups to repressively manage the protest arena can be seen within a larger pattern in which autocratic regimes like Venezuela and Russia often engage in disinformation campaigns or other deliberate attempts to “muddy the water” in ways that allow them to get away with certain types of behavior without facing the full consequences in terms of domestic or international opinion.

On the other hand, the colectivos and – to a lesser degree – UBCh have proven difficult to control, much like the Bolivarian Circles of a decade beforehand, creating various unintended consequences and forms of blowback. While it is hard to know whether any given instance of colectivo repression is sanctioned or not, it seems likely that the government tried to curtail their repressive activities yet was not fully able to fully stop the violence, hurting them in the court of public opinion. Part of the issue seems to be the limited ability, or willingness, of the Venezuelan security services to fully control these groups, with which they otherwise may act in concert at times.

Some colectivos also likely function as criminal organizations involved in the drug trade and racketeering, activities that may bring them into cooperation, conflict, or both with parts of the Venezuelan security forces. The murkiness of these connections was put on display in a sequence of events in October 2014. First, Robert Serra, a young rising star within the PSUV known to be heavily linked to colectivos – he had also been a central figure in organizing youth

counter-protests in the 2007 protest cycle – was found mysteriously murdered in his Caracas home. Several days afterward, an armed standoff occurred in Caracas between security forces and a major colectivo, which left five colectivo leaders dead, including one very closely linked to Serra. In response, this colectivo went public with demands that Interior Minister Miguel Rodríguez Torres, long associated with close relationships with armed Bolivarian Circles and Colectivos, resign for his role in the murders, and not long afterward the minister was shuffled to a new post. While the true relationship between all these events remains unknown, they underscore the murky territory created when the government empowers and mobilizes armed civilian groups, which may not only play roles in the protest arena but which may clash with state forces or become pawns in power struggles between competing government factions.

Many reports suggest that the ability of Bolivarian governmental forces to control at least some of the colectivos has further deteriorated in 2016 (Stratfor 2016). As the economic collapse took on truly dire dimensions, marked by widespread shortages and hunger, many colectivos increased their criminal activity while growing increasingly disenchanted with the Maduro government, which they increasingly viewed as corrupt (Casey 2016). Many colectivos exert de facto control over neighborhoods in major cities, sometimes in cooperation with security forces but often in open defiance of them. While some residents may see the local colectivo as a source of aid and provisioning, others may view them as exploitative criminals empowered by the Bolivarian government. At the very least, this fracturing of control over state-mobilized groups in Venezuela has further complicated and undermined the Maduro government's already tenuous ability to exert social and political control over the country.

In sum, the recent period is one in which unprecedented threats in both the protest and electoral arenas led the Bolivarian government to emphasize the mobilization of a new set of

highly loyal and politicized organizations, much more explicitly geared toward political action rather than local governance, and, most ominously, much more willing to engage in repression and violence as a means to counteract opposition activity in the protest arena. While the *colectivos* and UBCh have proven useful in some ways, helping the government stave off the opposition for the moment, they also have created other troubles. State weakness in Venezuela has meant that government bureaucrats and security services have had great difficulty controlling state-mobilized groups once these entities had been called into life through the Bolivarian revolution. The dramatic and tragic economic collapse of the country has greatly exacerbated this dynamic, leading to an increasing fracturing of authority and control.

Conclusion

This paper examined state-mobilized contention in Bolivarian Venezuela, focusing on two analytic objectives. First, the chapter proposed that two characteristics of the Venezuelan case help explain important aspects of how the Bolivarian government approached state-mobilized contention and why this approach has differed from that observed in many other autocracies. The extremely competitive nature of the Venezuelan regime created great incentives for the government to use state-mobilized groups mainly for the purposes of counter-mobilization, as a means to counter opposition threats and prevent those opponents from openly dominating the streets, especially in the critical capital city of Caracas. The weak Venezuelan state, in turn, has meant that the government has faced great difficulties in controlling state-mobilized groups, as bureaucracies and security services did not have substantial capacity to monitor their activities and credibly punish those groups for non-sanctioned behavior.

With these general points established, the bulk of the chapter then focused on explaining the evolution of state-mobilized groups in Venezuela. A foundational point was that state-mobilized organizations have operated in multiple arenas of politics. To understand the logic of state-mobilized contention, it is useful to locate these activities within a broader strategic landscape. Doing so helps illuminate why and how state-mobilized organizations were created in Venezuela, why the nature of state-mobilized organizations has shifted over time, and why the engagement of these groups in contention or other actions within the protest arena (such as repression) has ebbed and flowed. Most centrally, the relative emphasis that state-mobilized groups have placed on the protest arena has been a reflection of the degree and type of threat posed by the opposition at any particular juncture.

It is unclear whether this would be a useful framework for understand the logic of state-mobilized contention in other authoritarian contexts. Most such state-mobilized groups will tend to operate in multiple arenas of politics or serve multiple functions for incumbents within the state. Yet the relevant arenas and the nature of these functions may differ from case to case. For one, while electoral authoritarianism has become the modal form of autocracy around the world, the electoral arena is still largely irrelevant in closed regimes, a category that includes some major cases like China. While the importance of local governance issues, and therefore the broad logic of mobilizing groups to operate in this arena, may be relatively common, the emphasis that the Venezuelan government placed on this kind of activity is also fairly unusual, rooted in the Bolivarian Movement's longstanding ideological commitment to the idea of building popular power. Nevertheless, it may be useful to consider whether this framework of multiple arenas of politics, and state-mobilized contention as a strategic response to certain types

of threats arising in a particular arena, might be useful for illuminating the dynamics of the phenomenon more broadly.

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