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The 'Facções' of Fortaleza and 'Colectivos' of Caracas: Two Models of Criminal Governance

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Facções de Fortaleza e coletivos de Caracas: Dois modelos de governança criminal compara a governança criminosa realizada pela facção criminal Guardiões do Estado, em Fortaleza, Brasil, e pelos Coletivos Alexis Vive e La Piedrita, em Caracas, Venezuela. Comparando suas origens, o uso que fazem da violência, sua capacidade de estabelecer normas e punir, as fontes de renda, a forma de obter legitimidade e o tipo de vínculo com o Estado, conclui-se que existem dois modelos diferentes de governança criminal que diferem na forma como os objetivos de lucro econômico e domínio político são priorizados.

Palavras-chave: governança criminal, coletivos, facções, lucro econômico, objetivos políticos

This article compares the criminal governance carried out by the Guardiões do Estado *facção* (faction), in Fortaleza, Brazil, and the Alexis Vive and La Piedrita *colectivos* (collectives) in Caracas, Venezuela. Comparing their origins, their use of violence, their capacity to establish rules and impose punishments, their sources of income, the way they obtain legitimacy and their relations with the state, we conclude that these are two different models of criminal governance, which differ in the way they prioritise the goals of economic profit and political domination.

Keywords: criminal governance, collectives, facções, economic profit, political goals

Introduction

Governance, that ugly word, as Foucault (2004) would call it, refers to the shepherding of people, the *process of rule of* a population located anywhere, and applies to countries, companies or community associations, and thus differs from government as a public institution (BEVIR, 2012; BEVIR and RHODES, 2010). Criminal governance is broadly understood as "the imposition of rules or restriction on behaviour by a criminal organisation" (LESSING, 2021, p.854). It is a *process of rule* by actors distinct to those of the bureaucracy and with rules different to the laws of the formally constituted state. Criminal governance can take various forms according to the characteristics of the groups that practice it and the social and political context in which it is executed. The variety of opportunities to acquire income and capture illicit rents, as well as the type of link they develop with the various instances of the state's coercive apparatus, will determine how "the lives, routines, and activities of those governed are impinged on by rules or codes imposed by a criminal organisation" (*Ibid.*, p. 856).

Such diversity is found in the cases of the criminal groups known as "*facções*" (factions) in Brazil and the "*colectivos*" (collectives) in Caracas. Two different models of exercising this criminal governance are found between them. The Guardiões do Estado (GDE) group from Fortaleza, in the state of Ceará, Brazil, and the Alexis Vive (AV) and La Piedrita (LP) collectives from Caracas, Venezuela, exercise territorial dominance in important areas of the two cities. The GDE operates in the Conjunto Palmeiras and Barra de Ceará neighbourhoods, among other districts and areas in the poor outskirts of Fortaleza; the Alexis Vive and Piedrita de Caracas collectives operate in the parish of 23 de Enero, in Caracas. In both cases, these groupings maintain governance over these territories, but have established such governance in distinct manners, hence our decision to select them for this comparison.

In the Fortaleza faction, the group's main motivation is the pursuit of financial gain. When it establishes territorial dominance, it does so in order to gain political power and social recognition to optimise its profits. In the case of the Caracas collectives, the main motivation is to obtain political power, and territorial control is used to obtain economic benefits to support the political cause that they pursue.

Five dimensions of governance

In order for a group to be able to impose its rules and control the lives of people in a given territory through its criminal governance, a set of conditions is required that previously or concomitantly allow this domination to be permanent and not just an eventuality restricted to the time or space of its application (LESSING, 2021; ARIAS, 2018; BRICEÑO-LEÓN, 2015b). These five conditions are as follows:

The first is that such a group must have sufficient physical strength to establish and defend the boundaries of the territory where they will exercise their control and impose the rules to regulate social life there. This physical strength is expressed in the number of their active members, in their "footprint", and in the firepower of their weaponry, which make them a credible threat and give them the capacity to exercise violence and impose their will on the territory in question and to contain or exclude competing armed groups, be they other criminal gangs or the police (BRICEÑO-LEÓN, 2017).

The second is the group's ability to communicate its norms effectively and to endow them with an imaginary force that ensures them credibility and enforcement. This requires an efficient conveyance of orders, continuous monitoring of compliance and an effective capacity to punish offenders in a swift and forceful manner (BIONDI, 2010; FELTRAN, 2010).

Thirdly, they require a financial basis to support, pay and equip the staff who execute the two previous functions. Therefore, the group must make enough income to cover the expenses and benefits of its members. That income must also be received with sufficient regularity and reliability so as to avoid risking any lack of cash on hand and the consequential inability to make payments to members in a timely manner.

To commence this kind of governance, the group must have a prior financial base, with an original build-up of capital that allows it to start operations and sustain itself while it obtains the new sources of income that will allow it to maintain and grow in personnel and arms (GRILLO, 2008, 2013; MISSE, 2007).

Fourthly, the group must ensure the subjugation of the population under its rule. As Weber (1977) rightly argued, in order to exercise permanent rule, some form of cooperation from the governed population is required, even if it is a passive cooperation, otherwise it could not survive in that space by the continued application of violence alone. In order to attain the subjugation that gives it legitimacy in this domain, the criminal organisation continually take a sweet and sour approach. Such a method of persuasion may, in some cases, begin with the offer of "sweets"—gifts and protection—followed by "sours"—threats and punishments; or the order may be reversed, with sours dealt out first and sweets afterwards (BARREIRA, 2015; LESSING and WILLIS, 2018)

And finally, it is necessary for this organisation to establish some kind of agreement, a *modus vivendi*, with the various agents of the state in the territory. That link must be located somewhere along a gradient ranging from full cooperation or delegated governance—"collaborative governance", as Arias (2018) calls it—to conflict or open warfare. The point on this gradient where the *modus vivendi* is located will allow the group to define the level of violence the criminal group will use against state forces and, consequently, also regulate the expected response of violence or repression by police forces towards them. The gradient represents a factor that defines the types of *conditionality* described by Lessing (2018) by the criminal group towards the state as well as by the state towards them.

One of the difficulties in establishing this gradient of level of conflict or cooperation adequately is that it might be positioned differently depending on the element of the state to which the link refers. On the one hand, there may be a high degree of cooperation between criminal groups and officials at the local level, on the streets, and, on the other hand, a position of conflict with the government at the national level. Or the opposite can happen—conflict at the local level and cooperation at the national level.

These are the five levels investigated in this study and on which a comparison will be made between the forms of criminal governance exercised by the Alexis Vive and La Piedrita collectives in Caracas and the Guardiões do Estado (GDE) in Fortaleza.

The two cities

Caracas and Fortaleza are cities that have experienced rapid rises in crime. From being considered relatively safe in the 20th century, they have both become very violent in the 21st century, ranking among the cities with the highest homicide rates in the world.

According to the *Brazilian Yearbook of Public Security 2021*, published by the Brazilian Forum of Public Security (FBSP, 2021), Fortaleza ranked as Brazil's second most violent capital city, behind only Salvador, in the state of Bahia, amassing 1,303 victims of intentional killings at a rate of 48.5 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. In Caracas, the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence (2020), in its *Annual Violence Report 2020,* estimates that there was a rate of 56.2 violent deaths per hundred thousand inhabitants in the Capital District, making it the fifth federal district in the ranking for violent killings in the country.

The two cities have very similar populations, and their metropolitan areas are of a similar size, however geographically they are very different. Both cities are seats of state or national political power, control an important part of the economy and have a job market dominated by the service sector. Informal urbanisation is important in both cities, but they differ in their urban structure. In Fortaleza, the shanty towns are mainly located in the flat suburban areas, whereas most of the shacks in Caracas have been built on the hillsides or ravines.

Caracas is located in a high valley, 1,000m above sea level, consisting of a central valley and two side valleys, with an area of 784 km^2 and a permanent population of 2.6 million inhabitants, which increases during the day by up to 1 million people, who live in nearby dormitory towns and commute to the city for work. Caracas is made up of five municipalities, one of which is located to the west of the central valley, the municipality of Libertador. This is also the Capital District, where the seat of the national government is located, and therefore the legal capital of the republic. The other four municipalities belong to another geopolitical entity, the state of Miranda, so the name Caracas is ambiguous, as it can refer either to the five municipalities that form its metropolitan area or just to the Capital District. For the purposes of this text we will use Caracas in the limited meaning of the Capital District.

Caracas has been at the centre of political decisions and conflicts in the country. Although it was the scene of the few violent manifestations of urban guerrilla warfare in the 1960s, it maintained a low homicide rate for decades. In 1989, after a period of price controls and shortages of goods in the markets, the city experienced a wave of looting of shops, violence and subsequent military repression. With the "Caracazo", a period of violence broke out across the city and the country. Subsequently, in 1992, Caracas was the site of two violent coup attempts. Both episodes created an institutional crisis that led to a sustained increase in homicides in the following years and favoured the growth of organised crime gangs that are still fighting for control of the city today (BRICEÑO-LEÓN, 2007).

Fortaleza is a flat city of 314 km^2 located on the seafront and surrounded by 34 km of beaches. It is made up of a single municipality that has gradually incorporated previously existing municipalities, such as Parangaba and Messejana, in its growth. It is divided into seven regions, each of which has its own executive secretary. The city has a population density of 8,000 inhabitants per square kilometre, the highest density of any state capital in Brazil. The city has 120 informal settlements and, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 396,000 people live in favelas, which, in the official classification, are called "sub-normal urban agglomerates" and account for 23.5% of the city's housing.

Fortaleza's geographical location in north-eastern Brazil makes it one of the closest cities to Europe and the United States. To take advantage of this geographical location, a major expansion of the national road network and the construction of new ports and airports attracted economic activity to the city, including export activities for legal goods, but also for the trafficking of drugs to foreign markets. Such comparative advantages also led to confrontation between the criminal groups fighting for control of these routes and territory: those coming from southern Brazil, such as the Comando Vermelho (CV) and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), and the local group, the GDE (SÁ and AQUINO, 2018; FACHIN, 2019).

Three types of events can illustrate the difficulties faced in governing the city. The first are the massacres that resulted in 11 deaths in November 2015, 14 deaths in January 2018, and seven executions in May 2018; reflecting clashes between criminal groups. The second is the attacks that criminal groups carried out in 2017 and 2019 against public transport, setting buses on fire or detonating explosives in banks and government offices to force the state government to make changes to prison policies (G1-CE, 2018). And the third type are the two strikes by police officers for better pay and working conditions. These left the city unprotected for several days. The first such strike occurred in December 2011. The second took place in February 2020 and lasted 13 days. It led to a spike in homicides in the city so significant that it made the month of February prior to the start of the pandemic the most violent on record.

Criminal groups

Of the three organisations selected for comparison in this article, La Piedrita de Caracas is the oldest, founded in 1985, and the Guardiões do Estado, the newest, estimated to have been created between 2012 and 2016.

La Piedrita (LP) states on its website that it was founded on 26 December 1985, "under an oppressive capitalist and bourgeois government" (LA PIEDRITA, n.d.). It emerged as a subversive

group that opposed the government and sought to wield national political impact. Some argue that its name derives from a popular expression that something is "more annoying than a pebble (*piedrita*) in your shoe", to point out with the metaphor that an action or person may be small yet cause great disturbances.

In the 1980s, several groups were politically active in the 23 de Enero area. Most of them originated from guerrilla organisations of the armed struggle of the 1960s, which did not accept the pacification proposals offered by the various governments, as had the Communist Party of Venezuela and the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR). La Piedrita emerged, alongside Los Tupamaros, as one of the most important armed groups in the area. During the 1990s, their leaders appeared in public statements with hooded faces, displaying their big guns and advocating armed political struggle (RELEA, 2005). Members of La Piedrita publicly reported that they were persecuted and imprisoned for "having a different way of thinking." They claim that the purpose of their work in the area was to "remove drug trafficking and delinquency from these spaces" and that is why they had to conduct "sporting, cultural, political, social and even military activities"[1].

In 1998, the members of La Piedrita joined the electoral campaign of the then candidate Hugo Chávez and, after his victory to become President of the Republic, they struck up a cooperative relationship with the national government, which afforded them a greater public presence, allowing them to consolidate territorial control and impose their own rules, supported by the economic and military resources at their disposal and the consent of the national government (TELESUR, 2014).

The Alexis Vive Carajo (AV) collective was formed as a "political organisation of cadres"[2] in 2005 and controls the central area of 23 de Enero, which is made up of eight large residential buildings called "superblocks" and their service areas. In the early 21st century, its members were part of the Coordinadora Simón Bolívar, a coalition of 23 de Enero political groups that supported the government of President Chávez. In 2002, during the large-scale opposition protest marches and coup attempt, it engaged in armed clashes between government supporters and opponents that left many dead. In the midst of these urban battles, young Alexis González Reverte of the government's defence group was killed. Subsequently, a group of young political activists and university students decided to create the Alexis Vive Carajo collective, which defines itself as "Marxist-Leninist and influenced by the actions of Guevara", in reference to Ernesto Che Guevara, whom they consider "one of the main references for our struggle."

A few years later, the collective renounced the use of that name and transformed itself into the *Fundación* Alexis Vive (Alexis Vive Foundation) and the *comuna El Panal 2021* (El Panal 2021 Commune), two legal entities that allow it to carry out economic activities and receive financial resources and donations from the national or local government. In the communiqué

they sent to the population to justify this decision, they repudiated the members of the groups who tax the population and who have never sought to establish a productive base of their own. The collective, on the contrary, decided to build its own economic base and, with support from the national government, took over a bakery, set up an organic vegetable garden, a plant nursery, a food distribution centre, a brick factory and a sugar packing plant. It also has a high strength FM radio station that is listened to throughout the city, Radio Arsenal, which was handed over to the collective by the national government after its expropriation from its owners, as happened with the other companies or businesses. The collective also carries out maintenance activities for children's playgrounds, street lighting and sports fields. They acknowledge that this has been made possible by the support of the city's mayor.

The origins of Guardiões do Estado are less obvious and its members have never made public an official history of their group. It is therefore interviews conducted by the authors or reported in the press that have allowed us to establish some versions of how GDE emerged. The most widely publicised account places the group's birth in 2015, in the prison system of the state of Ceará, in the midst of a conflict between local prisoners and members of the CV and the PCC.

The presence of criminal groups from south-eastern Brazil in the state of Ceará dates back to the 1980s and 1990s, when they sent drugs to local distributors in the state. Since the police interventions in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, this situation changed, as some of its members migrated and settled in Ceará and other parts of the country as direct distributors (PAIVA, 2019). The presence of the PCC and the CV in Fortaleza intensified when they sought to take possession of the drug distribution points around the city's football stadium that would host matches in the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup and 2014 FIFA World Cup (SÁ and AQUINO, 2018). Although the PCC was born in São Paulo (FELTRAN, 2018; BIONDI, 2018), it presents itself as a national and decentralised grouping, without any personalised leadership, and with equality among its members. Based on this characteristic that they categorise themselves as a "commando" (MANSO and DIAS, 2018).

However, in the state of Ceará, personal and economic conflicts between members of the faction led to a split. According to some reports, there was a disagreement among the Cearense members of the PCC over the amount of the monthly charge to paid to the PCC, criticised by the locals, who adopted a "nativist" and "anti-colonialist" line of argument. Others stress that the cause of the rupture was the arrogance and authoritarianism that PCC members showed towards the Cearenses. This situation allegedly led to a split among PCC members and the formation of a faction composed exclusively of people born in the state of Ceará, created with the purpose of having their own local control, not depending on external orders and not required to make payments to the national criminal group (SÁ and AQUINO, 2018).

In creating this group, they took the name of a football fan organisation that had existed in the Palmeiras neighbourhood of Fortaleza since 2012 called Guardiões do Estado. These *torcidas* (equivalent to ultras) are violent groups that, in defence of their football team and their territory, confront the *torcidas* of other teams in the stadiums and in the streets. Although they may commit petty crimes, they cannot be considered criminal gangs.

Another interpretation places the emergence of the faction in the prisons, but in January 2016, as an alliance between prisoners to confront threats from members of the CV faction from Rio de Janeiro (LIMA, 2001). Yet some press reports have indicated that the GDE originated outside the prisons and in particular in the Palmeiras neighbourhood. In the *torcida* of the same name, none of the interviewees could confirm this version of events. What is true is that members of this *torcida* became part of the faction, but not that they were its founders. By 2021, the *Delegacia de Repressão às Ações Criminais Organizadas* (Special Police Unit against Organized Crime – Draco) estimated that the GDE had more than 25,000 members (FREITAS, 2021), not counting sympathisers and occasional collaborators scattered throughout the regions of the state of Ceará, who are mainly involved in drug trafficking and robberies of different types of businesses and people.

Methodology

The evidence presented in the text is based on in-depth interviews conducted in Caracas with collective members, neighbours, doctors, priests and police officers between 2020 and 2021. And on interviews conducted in Fortaleza with neighbours, members of the Guardiões do Estado faction and Military Police officers between 2018 and 2021. In both Caracas and Fortaleza, the authors and their research teams have been conducting participant observation for several years, so they have field diaries that have been reviewed to retrieve relevant information.

Secondary information from research conducted by the Laboratorio de Estudos da Violencia (Laboratory for Studies of Violence – LEV) of the Federal University of Ceará in Fortaleza, as well as research conducted by the Laboratorio de Ciencias Sociales (Social Sciences Laboratory – LACSO) and the Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, in Caracas, has also been used. Sources from the local press and graduate studies carried out by students from the Central University of Venezuela and the Federal University of Ceará have also been used[3].

Results: identity and territorial basis of governance

The members of the GDE of Fortaleza are required to be natives of the state of Ceará and to have been accepted by the organisation. Loyalty is closely linked to the organisation and its identity, and is defined as opposed to rival gangs that have come from São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro. In the case of the AV and LP collectives in Caracas, membership is defined by their affiliation with the political ideology of the organisations and by their origin in the area, although the latter is of lesser importance. Identity is also defined by opposition to the enemies of the revolution, those who have sympathy with the country's political opposition or the empire.

Just as GDE members cannot be friends with people linked to the PCC or the CV, in the case of Caracas, friendships or proximity to the political opposition are considered suspicious and may be subject to punishment. In the case of GDE, people are not allowed to wear red, as it is the colour used by the rival gang, the CV. In 23 de Enero, on the other hand, the colours blue and yellow cannot be used, as they are symbols of the political opposition parties, but the colour red is welcome as it is the colour of the governing party.

Both the collectives and the GDE try to exert control over the other rival criminal groups in the area. The GDE clearly sought the expulsion of rival factions from its territory in order to exert control over retail and wholesale drug trafficking. Small-scale drug dealers operating there must be authorised by the GDE to work in that territory, and independent dealers or those affiliated with other factions or gangs are punished. The members of the GDE control the drug dealers and at the same time provide them with security and defence of their market.

In 23 de Enero, the collectives took it upon themselves to expel the drug dealers, as they created conflict and unrest in the area. This won them the sympathy of the population, who recognised their achievement. However, some neighbours believe that this was merely a mechanism to control the larger market and distribution in the city and to charge for these services; others even believe that they control the "plaza", as they call the street drugs market. Information from the area indicates that the collectives restrict street-level drug dealers, but at the same time allow a major drug storage and distribution centre that benefits from their territorial control. The locals' opinion is that the collectives do not own or are not directly involved in this business, but neither do they reject or expel it, as they do the small dealers, because this business is owned or protected by some important civilian or military figure in the government.

In both cities, the collectives and the GDE prohibit robberies of local residents or shopkeepers. On the walls of their territory, they write graffiti clearly explaining the rule: "proibido roubar na favela"[4], and offenders are severely punished.

Homicides in 23 de Enero reduced significantly due to the control of the collectives. They provide security in the area and authorise the use of weapons by their own members, who can carry and display them in an open and intimidating manner. The GDE provides similar control over killings by other armed groups or small criminal organisations, which are prohibited from violent actions. But the killings are used by faction members in an instrumental way and as a means to remove rival gang competitors from their territories.

Access to the 23 de Enero territories in Caracas is controlled by the AV or LP collectives with guarded posts placed at what are considered the borders of the area. They identify and authorise the entry of people and check where they are going. This measure is most strictly enforced at night. Police forces are not allowed to enter the area and are prevented from doing so, as this prohibition has been endorsed by the heads of the different police forces. In cases where police officers have disobeyed the order, they have been attacked by members of the collectives or reported to their superiors as violating an agreement that gives the collectives territorial control (LA OTRA TV, 2016). A closed-circuit television system is installed in the area, which monitors the access roads to the sector and allows the surveillance groups to control and respond in case of the presence of intruders in their territory.

The GDE's territorial control is less ostentatious, but no less efficient. Although the GDE neither displays armed guards, nor has access control stations, nor a closed television system that allows surveillance of the access streets, the population is aware of the presence of those in charge of surveillance and know that, depending on the circumstances, they can provide a response, which may be later than that of the collectives, but equally efficient, as it can be very aggressive and lethal.

Perhaps the differences between the two groups lie in the permissiveness and support from the government, which is enjoyed by the collectives and not by the GDE; and in the importance attributed by the collectives to the reduction of overt violence, focusing on prevention and threat rather than on the direct application of violence (AQUINO and SÁ, 2014). Let us look in detail at some of these differences in the rules, types of punishments, financial base, legitimacy control mechanisms, parties, links with police forces and political projection outside their territories.

The rules of governance

The GDE imposes a set of rules on its territory that regulate the behaviour of the inhabitants and seek to uphold security in the area and ensure symbolic control of the territory. As we have said, people who live or pass through their territory are not allowed to wear red clothes or dye their hair red, as this is interpreted as a provocation, since it is the symbol of their main rival in the area, the CV. Similarly, people may not post on social networks any symbol that refers to their

rival or photograph themselves or any other person with their fingers in a "V" shape, as this is the first letter of the word *vermelho* (red), pertaining to their rivals.

In 23 de Enero, the colour red may be worn and is encouraged by the political organisations, but the colours blue or yellow, symbols of the opposition parties, are banned. At times, it has even been forbidden to wear the Venezuelan flag, as its tricolours and stars were worn on shirts and caps by opposition parties. Locals going on marches or protests in opposition to the government had to carry their T-shirts or caps hidden in their bags and put them on when they reached other parts of the city.

In the territories it controls, the GDE establishes the permitted and prohibited hours of movement and the need for curfews. It determines where the movement of people is allowed, and where it is prohibited. Inhabitants of their territories are not allowed to visit areas controlled by other factions, even family members or lovers, as this is considered suspicious activity. In the streets of the area, they establish the maximum speed of vehicles and the requirement to turn off the headlights and lower the windows in order to be able to circulate at night. In the case of motorcyclists living or riding in the area, it is compulsory to remove their helmets in order to show their faces and be identified. It is forbidden to be explicitly armed on the streets. Also, drug dealers known as *aviões* take drugs, in particular an anxiolytic (clonazepam), during their working hours. If a problem or conflict occurs within families or with a local, it is forbidden to call the police to report the event or request their action in the area. If they were to do so, it would be considered a major offence.

In the areas of the AV and LP collectives, there are two levels of rules: one referring to social behaviour and the other to people's political behaviour. On a social level, the rules aim to reduce petty crime that affects the locals through theft or to reduce factors of social unrest, such as parties where loud music or noise disturbs neighbours. In such cases, the members of the collective carry out duties that should normally be performed by the police: they chase and punish thieves or go to the house of the neighbour who is having the party and force him to lower the volume of the music or to stop the party. The collective substitutes the police and government, and assumes the role of enforcer of the regulations established by law.

The usurpation of police functions is so significant that, in an area of 23 de Enero called La Cañada, the collective forced the government to have a police station there vacated by the officers. The members of the collective occupied the station and took their place, with the symbolic force that this implied. This sent a message to the community that they were the law in that territory. And the community knows that, which is why they do not report or call the police in any event. They know that it is forbidden by the collectives, and they are also certain that the police will not respond to their call, as the police chiefs have prohibited officers from entering these territories.

In the 23 de Enero area, some members of the collectives are also city police officers and have an identification card as such. This formally allows them to perform some policing duties in the

area, but the effectiveness of their action does not lie in their identification as police officers, but as members of the collective. The police card allows them to operate in other areas, and against enemies of the collective, or to stop other police officers from operating in that territory.

The law of silence is forcefully effective in the area, as the locals know that these collectives have direct links to senior government figures and that making a complaint will only bring them negative consequences. The law of silence applies to a wide range of issues, so even if everyone in the area knows about the existence of an upmarket casino in the area, for example, no one dares to mention it publicly.

However, the strictest rules of governance relate to political behaviour. These collectives see themselves as the retaining wall for the defence of the Bolivarian revolution and therefore exercise political dominance in the area (INFOBAE, 2017; FERMÍN, 2014). Political activists of the opposition parties cannot visit the area for meetings or campaigning; they are banned from entering. The local residents are also not allowed to hold political meetings in their homes; they are threatened at their doors or have their furniture damaged if they manage to enter the house. Not to mention political meetings of government critics, that cannot be held in schools or health centres. Political protests are banned on the streets of 23 de Enero. When, despite this, locals have protested by shouting or banging pots from their flats, they have had shots fired at their windows. Making videos that are critical of the material conditions of buildings, schools or health centres and posting them on WhatsApp is also banned. The only videos about the area permitted in the chats are those made and disseminated by the collectives themselves.

Punishments

In their battle for control of Fortaleza's territories, the GDE applies punishments such as torture or death to members of other factions who enter the regions they control. The differentiation between "us" and "them" is not based on political affiliation, but on submission to the rule of one faction or the other. GDE soldiers confiscate mobile phones from residents of the area under their control or in dispute, and carefully check the files of messages sent and received. The faction seeks to identify clues to these individuals' links with the CV, the PCC or the police, or evidence of any critical attitudes that could be detrimental to the GDE's dominance, business dealings or areas of control.

Punishments for those who disrespect the rules imposed by the GDE can be varied. Offenders might be punished by having their hands shot off or their ears or fingers mutilated, which might apply to thieves who steal or those who sell drugs in the area without being authorised or having

paid the appropriate fee. Punishment can go as far as summary executions of the accused, in the event of links with the police or the enemy faction.

Punishments imposed by the GDE, such as misogynistic-driven mutilations and killings with the characteristics of feminicide, have been widely reported in the press. In recent years, punishments such as forced haircuts, wounded or amputated breasts, disfigured faces and atrocious murders of teenagers and young women have been meted out by the GDE simply because the victims are friends, dating or have got married to men from rival factions. The spectacular nature and cruelty of these punishments meant they were widely reported in the local and national media.

A punishment of lesser physical and corporal harm but of great personal and social impact is expulsion from the area and forced eviction of families from their homes when accused of breaking the rules.

In Caracas, in the areas controlled by the 23 de Enero collectives, people are classified into two groups: those who support or are members of the ruling party, PSUV, and those who are opponents. Collectives act by rewarding some and punishing others, according to their political preferences and attitudes.

The government's food support programme, known as Clap, consists of the sale or donation of bags of basic products (rice, corn flour, pasta, oil, beans) to families. The price charged for the bag is minimal, almost symbolic, but it serves an important nutritional function for low-income families because of its low cost and because many of these products are not available on the shop shelves. In the 23 de Enero area, the distribution of these products is in the hands of the collectives and they are the ones who decide to whom they deliver them. Those who are not affiliated to the governing party or have critical attitudes are excluded from the distribution of the Clap bags. The collective acts as an extension and representation of the government, but exercises the discriminatory functions of the party: it does not apply the rules of equality and universality to which the state is bound, but imposes its own political rules as a sub-government in the area.

The financial foundations of governance

Shared in common by the GDE and the AV and LP is the fact that they do not demand a fee or collaboration from the residents of the territories under their control. Unlike other criminal groups, they derive their income from other sources. In all three cases, the groups exercising governance do not extract money or resources from the population, but, on the contrary, give them services or resources to keep them happy.

The difference lies in the fact that the main source of the GDE's income has been arms and drug trafficking (marijuana, cocaine, crack), while the financial basis of the collectives has been donations from the national government. This is no small difference, and is important for explaining the form of criminal governance exercised by one or the other.

However, these are not the only sources of income for the groups, used to finance their activities. The GDE is also involved in assaults and robberies of different types of targets: they can be robberies of trucks carrying cargo, robberies of lottery houses or shops and, less frequently, robberies of banks and/or family residences outside the area. With the laundering of drug money, they have made some legal ventures and investments that provide them with income.

The Alexis Vive collective has a much more diversified economic base, running a bakery, a butcher's shop, a hardware store, a sugar distribution company, vegetable gardens, a clothing factory, etc. Several of these businesses had been expropriated from their rightful owners by the national government. The collective founded a community bank in the area and created a local currency called El Panal, with which it is possible to make purchases at food markets they organise or in local shops.

In order to understand this form of governance, it is important to note that these economic activities have not been geared towards producing profit, but as a means of transferring resources from the national government to the people who form its political constituency. The rationale for action has not been economic, but political; the purpose has not been to make money from these activities, but to spend money. This is a political dynamic that is very characteristic of Venezuela's dominant rentier-based culture and has been repeated in many forms in social policy over several decades.

The source of income for the collectives has been the national government, which for almost two decades has transferred resources to them. The copious supply of resources was significantly reduced from 2016 onwards, as the national government no longer had the abundance of oil revenues it had enjoyed for the first 15 years of this century. This new situation has led to a change in the activities of the collectives, which have shifted to extorting money from traders in order to protect their businesses and allow them to work. They have also engaged in the business of reselling and for-profit resale of products offered by government social programmes and the provision of personal protection services for transferring people using vehicles and bodyguards. These changes have altered the nature of the collectives' financial base and made their actions more similar to those of other criminal groups.

A separate economic activity was the installation on its territory of an clandestine casino, offering slot machines and card games with very small groups. In that casino, bets were placed in US dollar notes during the years when the circulation of the dollar was banned and even the mention of its name in the media was criminalised. The creation of a casino can only be

understood as a lucrative activity offered to high-income sectors of society with funds that they can risk and squander on gambling. It is a recreational attraction for a social sector that does not live in the area, providing them with a quality service: the clients were picked up in a chauffeur-driven car with bodyguards at one of the luxury hotels in the east of the city and taken to the west of the city, where 23 de Enero and the casino are located. After midnight, under the protection of the bodyguards, they would return to the hotels to pick up their private vehicles and go home, with their pockets either full or empty of money, but, in any case, safe.

Legitimacy-building mechanisms

Legitimacy, understood as the social acceptance of the capacity to govern in a territory, such as the voluntary decision or obligation to acknowledge acceptance of its authority (RISSE and STOLLENWERK, 2018), varies notably between the collectives of Caracas and the GDE of Fortaleza.

In Fortaleza, GDE members have earned their legitimacy through two mechanisms. The first has been to show their capacity to displace other criminal groups from these territories, considered as outsiders, either because they are not part of the local social fabric, with their families and networks of friends, or because they are perceived as foreign to the state of Ceará, due to their *Paulista* (São Paulo) or *Carioca* (Rio de Janeiro) accents. Their removal of rival armed groups and their sustained success instil fear and respect among the population. Secondly, their legitimacy has been derived from the effective protection they offer to businesses against robbery and theft, and to families in terms of respecting the social rules of coexistence and respect for women and children. It is possible to argue that, in the case of the GDE, legitimacy and recognition have flowed from the bottom up.

The GDE gained its legitimacy through confrontation with other criminal groups and police forces. In 2017, following the breakdown of a truce between the faction, and the state government's refusal to agree to the separation of GDE and CV members into different prisons, the GDE launched a series of attacks on public transport buses in Fortaleza that shocked public opinion due to the ferocity and efficiency with which they were executed. Thus, they gained the respect and fear of the population, who recognised their power and ability to act in the city (FACHIN, 2019). They also gained legitimacy as a hostile force in the eyes of the local authorities. In the pamphlet they disseminated in the different locations where the attacks took place, they demanded an immediate transfer of the detainees and threatened further attacks on public offices or government officials if "their order" was not obeyed (PIRES, 2018, p. 247). A few days later, the Department of Public Security of Ceará proceeded to relocate the detainees to separate prisons without further explanation.

In Caracas, the collectives achieved legitimacy in the opposite direction: from the top down, from the highest political authority in the country, the president of the Republic. While still alive, Hugo Chávez dedicated one of his television programmes to praise and send greetings to the Alexis Vive collective. The video and audio footage continue to be broadcast continuously on Arsenal TV and Arsenal FM radio, which is controlled by the collective. The community knows that the leaders of the collectives can communicate directly with ministers and police chiefs, and they themselves are responsible for spreading the word and repeating it.

In 2018, the national government decided to carry out military manoeuvres to defend the country from an invasion by the US army, and one of the areas chosen was 23 de Enero. On 25 February 2018, the founding leader of the La Piedrita collective was located on one of the main streets in the area, accompanied by a group of men dressed in black, wearing balaclavas and carrying long range rifles. The leader of the collective wore a bright red jacket and carried an Uzi submachine gun around his neck. The video recorded and disseminated by La Piedrita shows the arrival of the political parade organised by the government and, as the march passes in front of the group of armed men, the mayor of Caracas, the Minister of Information and a general in fatigues leave the march, approaching to greet, kiss and pay obeisance to the leader of the collective (COLECTIVO LA PIEDRITA, 2018).

The collectives also seek legitimacy through the services they provide. Alexis Vive has offered work and low-cost products to the community, while La Piedrita has offered security and health services. In the former case, there is a pragmatic and populist goods distribution model, while in the latter, the service has been more ideologized and is dependent on the government.

La Piedrita has an Integral Diagnostic Centre (CDI) for health, named after the son of its leader, who was killed in a dispute with members of another political group in the area. The CDI Diego Lenin Santana had been abandoned, but, after direct rebukes from the leader of the collective to President Maduro, it was rehabilitated by the national government in 2020. It was inaugurated in 2021 in the presence of the Vice-Minister of Health, who also thanked the Cuban medical mission for its presence in the area. The national government pays for the medical and nursing staff and supplies used, but the centre is listed as a service provided to the community by the La Piedrita collective.

The festivities

The festive parties serve to unite the groups and to publicise their work among the community. In a way, they express what the organisation is and its identity. The GDE does not hold public parties and does not show itself publicly as an organisation, as they maintain a power

based on an imaginary and ubiquitous presence, which in its secrecy is not seen, but the local residents know that it is present and active everywhere. Therefore, the parties they hold are dedicated to their own members and serve internal governance: they are private and in areas relatively distant from their controlled territory, on beaches where they can control security and restrict access by outsiders.

For the collectives, these festivities are a way of relating to the population under their control and expressing their values and bonds. The Alexis Vive collective organises community festivities with which it seeks to portray itself as a benefactor government in the area. On Sunday 18 July 2021, they celebrated Children's Day on a sports field between blocks (buildings) numbers 25 and 26 of 23 de Enero. There they handed out toys to the children and, with the help of an entertainer, played traditional games. The following Saturday, they went to another area, where they performed dances, face painting for the children and handed out hot dogs and popcorn.

La Piedrita also delivers food, especially at Christmas, but the main celebration takes place on 8 October, when they celebrate the Day of the Heroic Guerrilla. It is an activity that represents a strange symbolic mix because, although in many places it may be a subversive celebration, in Venezuela it has been an official celebration, as the national government also commemorates it with events and messages on its official websites on the days of Ernesto Guevara's birth and death.

Links with law enforcement agencies

Both the GDE and the collectives are known to have links with the police forces. There are some relationships that arise from the usual confrontation, but there are other relationships that are established for cooperation, respect or the provision of mutual services. However, there is an important difference in the way this relationship of conflict or cooperation occurs between the two groups.

The GDE's relationships are established with individual police officers or with members of a particular group of police officers, with the base of the police hierarchy pyramid. These relationships are private, secret or discreet. It is an irregular and fragile relationship, as sometimes officers subject traffickers to extortion to allow them operate, and sometimes there is cooperation, as officers sell them weapons and drugs that have been seized from other factions in other areas.

In the case of the collectives, cooperative relationships are established with the highest level of the police hierarchy and are open and widespread: not with officers on the street, but with chiefs of police or politicians. Something different happens between the collectives and lower-ranking police officers, for in this case the relationship is the opposite: confrontational, tense, and perhaps also competitive for resources.

In an interview with an officer from the police kidnapping division in 2018, the officer explained to one of the authors of this article that they could not enter the 23 de Enero area in a normal operation to rescue the victims located there, but had to request permission from the national commander. In his opinion, his boss would never dare to give such authorisation without the minister's endorsement.

Political projection beyond their territories

Although both groups seek to have territorial dominance, impose their rules and extract economic benefits from the privileged position of their governance, their links to formal state policy are completely different. The collectives are heavily involved in local politics and aim to have a direct influence on the formal mechanisms of political power, while the GDE, as far as is known, has not been involved in regional political activities, has not supported or opposed any candidates for councillor or mayor, nor have any of its members run for elected public office.

It has been reported that other criminal groups in the state of Ceará have received money to support or facilitate the campaign of some candidates in regional elections, but in these cases it is a political organisation that hires and uses the criminal group as a tool to support its political struggle, not the criminal group that is trying to position itself and use electoral tools to acquire its own political power. That relationship is not even known to have occurred in the case of the GDE.

One explanation for this situation might be the recent establishment of the GDE. Perhaps it has not yet succeeded in establishing a stable power base that would allow for such intentions; perhaps this is due to the dispersed and somewhat decentralised form of organisation that does not allow for leadership with political intentions. Another explanation could be their social origin and lack of education, which would not have allowed for the ideologization of these groups in the state of Ceará, as was the case in Rio de Janeiro, where common prisoners had contact in the prisons with political prisoners who had come from the armed struggle. (LIMA, 2001; AMORIM, 2011).

In contrast to the GDE, the collectives have been politically active and, with their territorial dominance and rule-making, have sought to gain political benefits, increasing their political power through direct participation in government functions (their members have held high public office as deputy ministers) or as candidates in elections for legislative bodies. The leader of La Piedrita ran for deputy for the National Constituent Assembly in 2017 and leaders of Alexis Vive have run for Caracas city councillors. Although none have been elected, they have shown their desire for political prominence and their link to the governing party.

The collectives also fulfil a function of social and political control of the areas where they operate, and do so for the benefit of the national government, by repressing public protests—and

the ruling party, by preventing or violently repressing the propaganda and political activities of opposition parties. This function is very similar to those that criminal groups in other parts of the world have developed in political elections, albeit with a unique nuance, which is not only the search for political participation to guarantee favours and security in their illicit economic activities on the part of other political leaders, but also with a desire to gain political power of their own.

Conclusions

If one interprets criminal governance in the restricted sense given by Lessing (2021) and cited at the beginning of this text, it is possible to conclude that, in the two cases studied, there is an imposition of rules and regulations that govern people's daily lives and that show the process of rule by the GDE faction in Fortaleza and by the Alexis Vive and La Piedrita collectives in Caracas. Such governance, however, is not total: one cannot argue that these groups exercise complete "sovereignty" in these territories, as they are not fully qualified to discipline, punish and kill with impunity (HANSEN and STEPUTTAT, 2006). Their action is limited by other armed actors and in particular by the presence, albeit unstable, of the coercive forces of the formally constituted state.

It is therefore possible to argue that there is a shared governance that can be interpreted in different ways: in some cases, it has been called a duality of power and, in others, as the construction of hybrid political orders (LAWRENCE, 2017). In hybrid political orders, the criminal group shares territorial dominance with the state, acts in parallel or overlapping ways, and ensures that the rules governing the life of those communities are an aggregation of the laws of that republic and the rules set by the criminal group. Sometimes the two sets of rules may be complementary; in other cases, they may be contradictory. In such cases, criminal regulation is imposed over legal regulation: the criminal group defies formal laws and replaces them with its own. At other times, the criminal group becomes the enforcer of the laws of the Republic and enforces punishments on its offenders. This results in a hybrid system of legality and illegality, determined by opportunities and competing moralities.

If one interprets these two cases of governance with Arias' (2018) proposal for the classification of the dominance exercised by micro-level armed regimes, it is possible to situate the actions of the GDE as criminal disorder, understood as one in which "multiple contending armed groups" seek to control a particular segment of the market, and exercise "limited governance over local activities" (ARIAS, 2019, p. 24). This is where conflicts arise between the criminal group and the state or between the various criminal groups competing for dominance.

A different modality would be represented by collectives, which should be placed in the category of collaborative governance, in which an armed group operates in close collaboration with the state, and in which sometimes the armed group acts as an arm of the state and sometimes the state acts as an arm of the armed group, as they work together to govern a specific territory (ARIAS, 2018, pp. 24-25).

With this characterisation, we would be affirming that in collectives, as a collaborative form of governance, their hybrid character is much more evident than in the case of the GDE. However, both represent sub-national forms of governance that are intertwined with the presence of the state. This is most evident with the 23 de Enero collectives, because in that area, since the 1960s, there has never been complete domination by the national government, due to the presence of the guerrillas and their subsequent political derivations. When Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999, the decision was made to co-opt them. To achieve this, the government used the procedures it knew: it gave them abundant economic resources and offered them power-sharing in the area. Thus, Chávez guaranteed that they would not oppose the national government and, in return, handed over local governance to these collectives.

In Fortaleza, one can observe that the management of the prisons and the concessions made to the GDE to place its members in different prisons to those where members of the other factions were held are indicative of the hybrid governance that exists over the detention centres.

The classification proposed by Arias (2018) makes sense and helps to summarise various aspects of criminal governance. However, when comparing the two forms of governance, that of the GDE and that of the Alexis Vive and La Piedrita collectives, we find many similar traits and a relevant difference that helps to understand the emergence and permanence of their hybrid forms.

From the point of view of territorial dominance, their performance is similar: both seek control and, although they may have different ways of expressing it symbolically, the function they fulfil is the same. Crudely spray-painted graffiti on a wall in Barra de Ceará establishes the borders of the controlled territory with the acronym GDE or with the number 745 (the numerical way of writing GDE by substituting letters for numbers: 7 is G, 4 is D, and 5 is E). The same function is fulfilled in Caracas by a large, artistically decorated and colourful wall with the figures of guerrilla leaders, or a large concrete archway covering the entire width of a street, built at the entrance to the *Comuna El Panal 2021*. These symbols mark the entrance to a territory belonging to La Piedrita or to the Alexis Vive collective in 23 de Enero. All of these examples—the graffiti, the large painting and the arch—send a boundary-setting message.

In both cases, there is a similar effort by the criminal groups to derive some financial benefit from the territorial dominance. In the case of the collectives, this benefit has taken the form of extracting oil revenue obtained by the state. The behaviour of these groups has been one of "rent-

seeking behaviour" (BRICEÑO-LEÓN, 2015a) and only changed when the country's oil revenue collapsed and the contribution they received from the national government dwindled. The groups then moved on to other forms of economic extraction, such as extortion.

In the case of the GDE, the form of economic extraction has always been linked to obtaining various illegal rents, in particular direct involvement in drug trafficking or in charging protection fees for the transit of drugs or weapons through its territory, facilitating money laundering activities, or protecting or charging fees to authorise simple predatory crimes of theft from transport vehicles.

In terms of enforcing rules and punishing rule-breakers in the territories under their control, the way the groups work is similar. The rules are disseminated directly by the leaders. In Fortaleza, they are announced in communiqués or *salves*, which are communicated verbally or transmitted through conversations or *fofoca* (gossip) networks in the communities. In Caracas, they use direct verbal forms, rumour and speeches given at political meetings by their leaders, but also local radio and television, which are run by the collectives.

In neither case are there known to be trial courts, although in the case of the GDE, major decisions, such as lethal executions, are presumed to be taken by the *council* or leaders in the prisons. In the collectives, there is an organisational difference: as far as is known, decisions in Alexis Vive are taken in group meetings, while in La Piedrita decisions are taken directly by the leader, which is consistent with the differences in the organisational and leadership characteristics of each group.

Table 1: Two types of criminal governance

Type	**Main purpose or activity**	→	**Secondary, derivative or support activity for the main activity**
Facções (Factions)	Economic gain	→	Territorial political control to facilitate its operations, exclude rivals and make more profits.
Colectivos (Collectives)	Gaining political power	→	Use or facilitation of territorial domain for illegal activities or rent-seeking that can be used for further political power.

Source: Developed by the authors.

The fundamental difference between the two types of governance resides in how politics is related to the organisation and the way in which the group's identity is constructed. In the case of the GDE, the identity is constructed regionally and in defence of the local people's right to exploit the economic resources and illegal rents of that territory. In that sense, their actions are similar to

"nationalisms" and countries' defences of their markets and natural resources, hence the explanation of their "anti-colonialist" discourse. The difference is that this happens on a regional rather than national scale, which is understandable in a country as large as Brazil.

Identity in the GDE is defined as an "us", those from Ceará, and a "them", the factions that come from other regions of the country. In the case of the collectives, identity is built on a political ideology that is rooted in Marxism-Leninism and that appeals to armed struggle as a means to obtain political power.

In the two collectives studied in Caracas, there is a cult of martyrs, who acquire a political significance that offers identity and cohesion. In the case of Alexis Vive, it is the political leader who gave the group its name: Alexis González Reverte. In the case of La Piedrita, it is the son of the leader and founder of the group, who was killed in a dispute with another armed group in the area. For this reason, La Piedrita is also known as the Diego Santana Collective and, in some of the murals that cover the walls in the area, they draw his hooded face with the expression "¡Vive!" (He is still alive) next to it, to validate a political legacy.

The difference between having a criminal governance like that of the GDE faction and that of the collectives lies in two different models. In the first type of governance, represented by the GDE, the aim of the group is to monopolise criminal activities and derive economic profit, profitability and security for its actions. From time to time this can translate into political power, which would be used to protect their profit-making activities. In the second case, represented by the Caracas collectives, the aim is to have territorial control for the purpose of controlling the population itself, which uses this privileged political position to obtain economic benefits and profitability, either by exchanging favours with the national or local political powers or by "selling" its political services.

In a simple terms, these types of governance differ insofar as, in the factions, the aim is to translate economic dominance into political power, whereas in the collectives, the aim is for their political dominance to generate economic benefits.

This difference in the relationship between the strictly economic and the political that exists between the AV and LP collectives and the GDE faction can be compared to the links between the drug trafficking business and political power in Colombia, in the cases of Pablo Escobar and the FARC and ELN. The involvement of Pablo Escobar's criminal organisation in politics was aimed at local governance that would facilitate the business of drug production and trafficking abroad, as well as money laundering and the legalisation of its profits. The FARC and ELN, on the other hand, emerged as a new wave of an armed struggle that, following the Cuban example, aimed to seize power by inflicting a military defeat on the government. Their progressive involvement in the drugs trade, the protection of crops and processing laboratories, and the support and guarding

of routes were interpreted by both guerrilla organisations as a means to obtain financial resources to fund their activities, pay their soldiers' wages and buy better weapons. These are two different processes that correspond to the two interpretative models of governance that we propose.

In the comparison between Caracas and Fortaleza, one finds that there are differences in the ultimate goals set by each organisation that determine their mode of governance. In the collectives there is a will to power that goes beyond the local sphere and, therefore, not only do they want to exercise governance, but there is a desire to be a government. In the GDE, as in other Brazilian factions, this political will has not manifested itself so far, they have only shown a will to exercise governance that serves to optimise their business interests. However, just as it is not possible to know in advance when a subversive political group might turn into a criminal gang, it is not possible to know whether the factions in Brazil might at some point aspire to greater political power and also wish to become a government.

Notes

[1] Available at: https://colectivolapiedrita.es.tl/Nuestra-Historia.htm

[2] Available at: https://colectivoalexisvive.es.tl/QUIENES-SOMOS.htm

[3] The authors would like to thank Olga Ávila in Caracas and Artur Pires in Fortaleza for their support in updating the information.

[4] Robbery in this neighbourhood is forbidden.

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RESUMEN: El artículo realiza una comparación de la gobernanza criminal realizada por las agrupaciones *Guardiões do Estado de Fortaleza*, Brasil, y de los Colectivos Alexis Vive y La Piedrita en Caracas, Venezuela. Comparando sus orígenes, el uso que hacen de la violencia, su capacidad de establecer normas e imponer castigos, las fuentes de ingresos, el modo de obtener legitimidad y el tipo de vínculo con el Estado, se concluye en la existencia de dos modelos diferentes de gobernanza criminal, que difieren por la forma como dan prioridad las metas de lucro económicas y de dominio político.
Palavras-chave: gobernanza criminal, colectivos, 'facções', lucro económico, metas políticas

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