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“A Civil-Military Alliance”:

The Venezuelan Armed Forces before and during the Chávez era

Iselin Åsedotter Strønen

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Executive summary

When Hugo Chávez (1954–2013) came to power in Venezuela in 1998, the military was bestowed with a new—and controversial—role in society. Being a former career military himself, a central tenant of Chávez’s political philosophy was to craft what was called a “civil-military alliance” (*una alianza cívica-militar*), expanding the military’s role and active involvement in the execution of public policies in the name of national development. This doctrine was underpinned by the political thinking of Simón Bolívar, the country’s national hero from the Wars of Independence. Concurrently, the Armed Forces were also attributed a more politicized role as the custodians of national sovereignty vis-à-vis foreign meddling in the country. Chávez died in April 2013, but the doctrine of a civil-military alliance has been kept alive under the presidency of his successor, Nicholas Maduro.

The aim of this CMI Working Paper is to provide an overview of the ideological and political foundation for the approximation between the civilian politics and the military throughout recent Venezuelan history. The analysis will highlight the historical trajectories facilitating the military’s ideological alignment with “Bolivarianism” as articulated by the Chavez, and later, Maduro government, as well as the national and international *realpolitik* underpinning this approximation. In conclusion, and taking into account that Venezuela is in the midst of significant economic and political turmoil, I will briefly consider the role of the military at the current political juncture.

Key words:

Venezuela
Armed Forces
Civil-Military Relations
Bolivarian Revolution
Hugo Chávez
Nicholas Maduro

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Introduction: A civil-military alliance

It is spring 2011, and I am standing on a basketball field in a shantytown (barrio) hillside in western Caracas. Barrio houses built with yellow-brown bricks, grey cement and sink roofs are hovering over me. From the basketball field, located on the edge of the community, I can see tens of thousands of similar houses merging together into a dense mass across the valley, defying gravity and commanding awe for human creativity and informal construction skills. The area is buzzing with activities as community leaders, neighbors, bureaucrats and military personnel are in the midst of setting up a community project designed to upgrade and repair houses and infrastructures in the area. The project is coordinated between local community groups, the Ministry for Housing and Infrastructure, the Armed Forces and the Bolivarian militia, part of the Venezuelan Bolivarian Armed Forces (FANB). The military officers on the site, easily distinguished by their green uniforms, stand alongside community leaders in jeans and shirts, discussing the logistics and making jokes. This everyday civil-military endeavor, a frequent occurrence in Venezuela's shantytowns, constitutes the practical and ideological core of the Chávez government's push towards bringing the people and the armed forces together in a "civil-military alliance" through national development and defense of la patria.

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The parish of 23 de Enero, Caracas.

In the latter part of the 20th century, the Venezuelan military was relegated to the barracks, constitutionally confined to the role of safeguarding public security and national territory. Military personnel were deprived of the right to vote, and largely isolated from participation in the civic sphere. Under Chávez's rule, enshrined in the new Constitution of 1999, the military was bestowed with the task of taking part in national development. Henceforth, the military became an integral part of Chávez's bid to re-shape Venezuelan social, economic and political structures in line with the government's political direction, which is often referred to as "the Bolivarian Revolution" or the "Bolivarian Process." Chávez also aimed to create closer bonds of trust, cooperation and mutual identification between the civilian population and the military through what is dubbed a civil-military alliance (*una alianza cívica-militar*). This, he believed, was crucial in order to not only guarantee national sovereignty, but also overturn the Venezuelan military's repressive history, above all against political dissidents and the country's poor and colored majority.

Hence, after Chávez's rise to power, the military's role in society was significantly altered. Military figures have since played a crucial role in government offices and public administration, and military personnel have been extensively involved in executing public policies, often in collaboration with grassroots movements. Higher education within military academies has been made available to civilian students, and other previously closed military spaces, such as housing compounds and leisure clubs,¹ have been opened up to the public. The female component in the Armed Forces has increased significantly, now representing 33.5 per cent of the overall personnel according to official numbers.² In 2013 and 2014, the post of minister of defense was for the first time occupied by a woman, Admiral Carmen Meléndez. Military parades and events, bringing together civilian and military actors, are given high public prominence, celebrated as the symbolic unity between *la patria* (the nation), the nation's defenders (the military) and *el pueblo* (the people).

To many people, these changes represent a positive transformation of the military from being a closed and largely oppressive force, into being a more open and civic-minded institution. Indeed, to supporters of the government, the new military is a source of pride and patriotism. They maintain that the military now represents a true sovereign force, as opposed to their seemingly de-ideologized pretense under the US-allied governments throughout the latter part of the 20th century.

However, these changes have also provoked deep concerns amongst critics of the government. They maintain that the new role of the military in Venezuela represents highly problematic collusions between military, political and economic power, and that the military has turned into a potential—and on certain occasions, de facto—repressive force in service of the government. Moreover, the ideological framing of the military as the custodians of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution has evoked concerns about whether the military's loyalty rests with the government or with the nation at large (see Control Ciudadano 2013). All in all, differentiated perceptions of the ideological profile of the military, its role and extent of power, reflect the deep polarization and ideologization of politics at large in Venezuela.

This CMI Working paper is concerned with understanding the development of the Venezuelan Bolivarian Armed Forces (FANB) in a historical perspective, while locating current controversies over the role of the military in contemporary Venezuelan society within a broader domestic and international context. To that end, I will start out with a very brief summary of the main features characterizing Chávez's and Maduro's rule, before I chronicle how the Armed Force's role in society has evolved since 1958 and up till today.³ Subsequently, I will outline some of the controversies surrounding Venezuela's Armed Forces in recent times, before I conclude with a reflection on the role of the military at the current historical juncture.

Venezuela's recent political history

Former Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez gained power in Venezuela in 1998, and served as president until his death in March 2013, having won altogether four⁴ presidential elections with a sound majority. Chávez gained power on the backdrop of two decades of prolonged social, economic and political unrest, ending 40 years of political hegemony sustained by a power-sharing pact between the two dominant political parties, Acción Democrática and COPEI. Advocating a political agenda called the Bolivarian Revolution⁵ and later Socialism for the 21st Century, Chávez was a controversial figure on the national and international scene. He was a vocal critic of the United States' unilateral and interventionist foreign policy, attracting the ire of successive US governments.

Under Chávez's rule, the Venezuelan state expanded its involvement in social policies and in the economic sector, including the vital oil sector, espousing a nationalist, anti-neoliberal and pro-poor political profile. Poverty levels were reduced, and social security nets significantly strengthened. Venezuelan foreign policy under Chávez was focused on promoting Latin American integration in political, economic and social matters, diversifying Venezuela's economic and political alliances, and promoting multipolarity on the international political scene. The means to the two latter ends gained Venezuela extensive international criticism as the country cultivated close relationships to countries such as Russia, Belorussia, Libya, Syria, Iran, Iraq and China. The Chávez government was frequently accused of a lack of respect for human rights and democratic rule, whilst supporters claimed that these allegations to a large extent were based on ideologically and politically motivated attempts to discredit his government.

Chávez's supporters were primarily drawn from the poor sectors of society, and a vibrant and diverse grassroots movement emerged in support of his political project. Opposition to his rule mainly emerged from economic and former political elites, supported by the middle and upper classes. In 2002, Chávez and his supporters reversed an attempted military coup, which consequently left the political opposition discredited and divided. Chávez died of an undisclosed form of cancer in March 2013. On his last public appearance in December 2012, he named Foreign Minister Nicholas Maduro as his successor.

Maduro, who has continued Chávez's political line, gained a marginal victory in the presidential elections in April 2013 against the opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles. In 2014, demonstrations and violent riots—primarily led by middle-class students and hard-line oppositional sectors demanding the government's exit—brought to light the fact that sectors of Venezuelan society considered the government illegitimate. These riots led to the death of 43 people, including protestors, passers-by, government supporters and security personnel. Simultaneously, and partly as a consequence of the global fall in oil prices, the country was thrown into an ongoing economic crisis. This resulted in increasing poverty levels and a strengthened political opposition. As this CMI Working Paper is written, the opposition, which gained a majority in the National Assembly in December 2015— their first significant electoral victory since Chávez came to power in 1999—, has announced that they will remove Nicholas Maduro from power before his presidential term expires in 2019. To that end, they are currently in the process of collecting signatures amongst the electorate in order to organize a recall referendum on Maduro's presidency; a legal venue enshrined in the 1999 constitution.

Venezuela's military exceptionalism

In order to understand why the Venezuelan Armed Forces aligned with the Chavez government's anti-imperial, leftist political position, it is necessary to go back in history. Harnecker (2003) has argued that the Venezuelan military had seven distinct traits that distinguished it from its counterparts in neighboring countries, making it receptive to supporting Chávez. First, it was deeply influenced by the teaching of Simón Bolívar and his ideas about national and popular sovereignty. Second,

the military generation beginning with Chávez was not trained in the US School of the Americas, but in the Venezuelan Military Academy. Third, they had to a very limited extent faced guerilla insurgency, and thereby an indoctrination of Cold War “anti-communist” ideology, as had happened in many other countries. Indeed, by the time the Chávez generation entered the academy in the 1970s, guerilla activity had by and large been rooted out. Fourth, the Venezuelan military was not controlled by an elite military cast, but was rather an inroad for potential social mobility. Fifth, a popular uprising—the so-called Caracazo—in 1989 politicized many of the junior officers, making them sympathetic to leftist-leaning, anti-elite politics. Sixth, the decade prior to the Caracazo, which was characterized by a steep growth in socio-economic inequalities, had already started to radicalize junior officers. And seven, Chávez bid for reshaping the armed forces once elected in 1998 gave them a new purpose and a venue for channeling accumulated frustration throughout the preceding decades (Harnecker 2003, 15–18). In what follows, I will enter more in depth into some of these factors, whilst simultaneously pointing to some key institutional processes within the military, which contributed to their receptiveness towards Chavez’s new political line.

The Armed Forces during “puntofijismo”

Venezuela, unlike most other Latin American countries, had an unbroken line of democratically elected governments from 1958 and onwards. On January 23, 1958, the head of the last Venezuelan military government, Marcos Pérez Jiménez fled the country. The following year, the government of Romulo Betancourt from the Social Democratic party Acción Democrática entered government offices, backed by a power-sharing pact with the other dominant party, the Christian Democratic Party COPEI. The pact, called the Pact of Punto Fijo, committed both parties to cooperate and share political spoils whilst alternating in government offices. Consequently, Acción Democrática and COPEI moved in and out of the presidential office for 40 years until Hugo Chávez won the presidential elections in 1998.

In the first part of the 20th century the military had played a key role in toppling or protecting different regimes, both military and civilian. These shifting attitudes towards military and civilian rule reflected both personal interests amongst high-level military officers, as well as shifting alliances and attitudes in an epoch of intense instability and struggle between different social and economic groups as the country was escaping from centuries of colonialism and later *caudillo* rule.

After the transition from military rule in 1958, civilian institutions crafted their control over the military through a combined strategy of “split and rule” between the different branches and hierarchies within the military, as well as generous endowments in the form of economic and material benefits (Trinkunas 2002, 44). The president was granted the power to control commands as well as military appointments and promotions. However, as civilian political actors gradually assumed that the threat of military coup was over, and that the military was adapted to civilian control, the different branches of the armed forces were allowed a high degree of internal autonomy in bureaucratic affairs and defense policies. By the 1970s, their area of control was predominantly confined to the field of national defense, whilst tasks related to public order were put under the authority of the Guardia Nacional—a militarized police force that was viewed with suspicion by the other branches of the Armed Forces (ibid., 45).

The military and educational pathways

Venezuela’s first military academy was founded in Caracas in 1910. At the time, this constituted a milestone in the gradual formation of a centralized modern state after decades of fractional struggles, caudillo rule and civil wars following the country’s liberation from Spain in 1811.⁶

In 1971, the Venezuelan government implemented what was known as Plan Andrés Bello, which implied expanding the academic focus on military education, translating it into university standards. This reform did not only intellectualize military education, familiarizing students with critical political thinking and leftist writers, but it also expanded their contact with civilian progressive circles. The new educational model put strong emphasis on honor, discipline and self-sacrifice, as well as inciting deep nationalist and patriotic sentiments inspired by the Venezuelan national hero from the Wars of Independence, Simón Bolívar. His teachings were (in comparison with dominant thinking at the time) egalitarian and progressive as well as anti-imperial, adding to the nascent leftist-progressive and nationalist current amongst junior officers—a change that also represented a generational shift within the Armed Forces (*ibid.*, 46–47).

In a country with relatively rigid class structures, the military constituted a potential path for upward mobility through its enrollment programs, allowing lower-class and middle-class citizens to enter military education on special scholarships. Amongst them was Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, the son of two poor rural teachers from the inland state of Barinas. Chávez had entered the military academy on a baseball scholarship and had originally envisioned a future as a baseball player in the United States. However, whilst at the military academy he became increasingly caught up in political activities through his older brother Adán, who was an important figure amongst communist groups. Throughout the 1980s, Chávez gradually became a key figure of a clandestine leftist network within the military, whilst at the same time ascending in military ranks and eventually reaching the degree of Lieutenant Colonel.

A slow collapse

These political-ideological changes deep within military ranks went in parallel with a slowly unfolding political-economic tension in Venezuelan society at large. A major international oil exporter since the late 1920s, Venezuela had enjoyed steady economic growth for several decades, peaking with a major oil boom in the 1970s caused by the Arab oil embargo. Carlos Andrés Pérez from Acción Democrática, the president during this boom, didn't only incite major development projects asserting that Venezuela was on a path to a prosperous First World status, but also borrowed massively from foreign lending institutions mortgaging future oil rents.

Throughout the 1970s, the Venezuelan armed forces had started to search for a new role and mission in Venezuelan society, replacing their focus on the counterinsurgency that had dominated throughout the 1960s as the governments at the time were bent on quelling a small, but insistent guerrilla movement. The new internal military orientation was inspired by a “populist, equity-oriented vision of development” (*ibid.*, 47) that reverberated with the dominant public discourse during the booming 1970s. However, though army officers successfully lobbied congress for formally expanding their involvement in national development as a part of a “soft” national security doctrine, the end result contained no substantial changes. Rather, the rigid political system reduced military involvement to merely ritualistic performances. As a consequence, the military gradually lost its professional focus and rather turned its attention to internal struggles over budgets and promotions (*ibid.*, 46–47).

Due to the oil boom, Venezuelan defense budgets almost doubled in the period between 1967 and 1977, providing military officers with a quality of life that was only superseded by their counterparts in Canada and the United States (*ibid.*, 46). However, this military economic boom also had a side effect. Both high-level military officers and politicians were involved in massive corruption under the guise of rearmament of military equipment, contributing to deepening divisions between high-level officers and more ideologically oriented junior officers. Moreover, the upper echelons of the military pegged themselves politically to the dominant political parties in order to position themselves for

promotions and rewards, creating a climate of fierce internal competition and complacency towards politicians. This politization of promotions dismayed the junior corps, which were couched into upholding high ethical and professional standards with promotions based on merits (ibid., 47–49).

The turning point: El Caracazo

The internal divisions and falling morals within the military would soon receive a series of additional blows. As the international economic crisis swept the continent at the turn of the decade, Venezuela entered into a massive economic bust. In 1983, the government had to devalue the national currency, *bolívar*. From then on, the country plunged into a deep crisis. The crisis wasn't only economic, but also political. The country's elites became the objects of increasing public anger as massive corruption and mismanagement flourished whilst the country at large was on a steady downward slope. This anger also reached deep into the military ranks. Military salaries and benefits declined significantly, and officers were dismayed by rumors and allegations about corruption and malpractice taking place within government ranks.

February 28, 1989 is an all-important day in Venezuelan history. This is the date of a massive popular riot called *El Caracazo*, emerging in response to structural adjustment reforms designed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and implemented by the second government of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989–1993). In hindsight, it is evident that this event would not only spiral Chávez into power ten years later, but it would also have important repercussions for the re-defined perception and mission of the military under his rule.

The protesters were poor people from Caracas's shantytowns, who had experienced a dramatic fall in living standards during the previous years. By 1989, 44 per cent of the population was classified as poor.⁷ Widespread hunger erupted in the Venezuelan shantytowns, and inequality rates were rising rapidly. As angry protesters poured out in the streets, the government suspended constitutional guarantees and sent the military out to quell the riots "at whatever the cost" (Derham 2010, 255). The shantytowns were invaded with military tanks and peppered with machine guns. Somewhere between 300 and 3,000 people were killed—the exact number has never been clarified. Some shantytown areas were under siege for several days and many people were killed in their own homes by machine gun fire from the street. The city ran out of coffins (Coronil and Skurski 2006, 118), and many people were buried in secret in a mass grave, wrapped in plastic bags. The poor were in shock by the government's willingness to use indiscriminate violence against their own citizens, but the riots also added to the unease that had already been simmering in the military for a long time. Many of the lower-level soldiers that were sent out in the streets were from a poor background themselves, and were deeply dismayed by being ordered to kill "their own people."

The Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement – MBR

A fraction within the military had since 1982 been meeting in secret, led by Hugo Chávez. The group called themselves *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200* (MBR-200/Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200) and consisted of military officers, and later also civilians, troubled by the nation's state of affairs. Pledging loyalty to *la patria* and the teachings of Simón Bolívar, they gathered to discuss political philosophy and the future of the nation, and supported each other in the bid for promotions and assignments (Trinkunas 2002, 53–54). Their ideological leaning and influence from Marxism involved strong opposition to neoliberal policies and foreign influence in Venezuelan affairs. In their view, civilian political actors had long ceased to govern constitutionally, in particular with regards to the constitutional pledge to provide justice, development and national sovereignty to the nation.

Senior officers and the Intelligence Unit of the Ministry of Defense (DIM) had been aware of the existence of a clandestine fraction, but caught up in internal budget politics, promotions, assignments and corruption they had failed to realize the deep discontent with military affairs existing within the junior officers' corps and their deep resentment towards the actions of politicians (ibid.). Instead of being expelled from the army, MBR-members had in the mid-1980s rather been relocated and reassigned, as they continued to rise in ranks.

After El Caracazo, more officers joined the group. By 1992, the group allegedly amounted to 10 per cent of all army officers (ibid., 54). In February 1992, the group, led by Hugo Chávez who, by then, controlled an elite airborne battalion in the city of Maracay, carried out a coup attempt against Carlos Andrés Pérez. They justified the coup by arguing that the government had lost its constitutional legitimacy not only because of the massacre on civilians during El Caracazo, but also because of massive corruption and political mismanagement. The goal was to restore democracy and start a new political era in Venezuela based on Bolivarian and nationalist principles of justice, equity and national sovereignty. The coup failed, but gained enormous support in the population. Chávez was imprisoned, but granted a pardon by President Rafael Caldera (COPEI) in 1994. In 1998, Chávez won the presidential elections with more than 50 per cent of the votes.



A woman is holding a portrait of Chávez in military uniform at a political demonstration in Caracas in 2009.

1999 and onwards: The civil-military alliance

Why would more than half of the Venezuelan population vote for a military officer who had led a coup against a democratically elected government? It could be easy to attribute the support shown for Chávez to the well-known stereotype of the Latin American political tradition of *caudillos*—strong men who rule by force. But the picture is more complex than that.

As Chávez was captured after the failed coup, he was allowed to pronounce himself on TV. There, he took the full blame for what had happened, terming it an act carried out by a “Bolivarian military movement” (*movimiento militar bolivariano*), and stating that their objectives had not been reached “just yet” (*por ahora*). From that moment on, many people looked at him as a figure that could represent a new beginning for the country. As one woman told me in 2010: “we were sitting at home watching Chávez on TV when he gave the famous *por ahora* speech. Afterwards, I said: ‘there is our future president’.”

At the time, respect for political parties in Venezuela had reached rock bottom, with 70 per cent of the poor and 84 per cent of the rich indicating through opinion polls that political parties created more problems than solutions (Derham 2010, 258). Discontent was not only found amongst the lower classes. Rather, the legitimacy of the political system based upon the Punto Fijo power-sharing pact, having enjoyed hegemonic consensus since 1958, was failing at large. According to *Latinobarometro*, in 1998 only 35 percent of Venezuelans were satisfied with democracy, and 60 per cent of the Venezuelan population responded positively in polls to the question of whether democracy was preferable to any other form of government.⁸

Street protests and riots continued throughout 1990, often with deadly outcomes (Lopez Maya et.al 2005, 97). The power and efficiency of the military made the civilian government increasingly draw on them for internal security conflicts, which contributed to lowering the junior officers’ faith in their superiors (Trinkunas 2002, 51). Since El Caracazo, they had been troubled by being used as the oppressors of poor people based on the orders of a political cast that was commonly perceived as endemically corrupt. Also, the staggering inflation unmatched by wage adjustments made once comfortable officers descend into lower, middle-class and working-class status (*ibid.*). The country was in economic ruins, public moral and morale were at its lowest, and national pride and dignity seemed to have disappeared under flagrant corruption, political scandals, and economic and political control emerging from Washington through the structural adjustment plans.

In summary, Chávez’s election in 1998 cannot be understood without taking into account this broad and sweeping crisis in Venezuelan society which was not only economic in nature, but also caused a deep sense of loss of morals, political legitimacy and national dignity. These sentiments reached deep into military ranks, making large parts of the military corps receptive towards Chávez’s new ideological and political profile.

A peaceful, but armed revolution

Chávez’s ideas about a re-defined role of the country’s military and an approximation between military and civilian forces were conceived almost two decades earlier, during the formation of MBR-200. These were not Chávez’s ideas alone, but rather a reflection of political and ideological debates within these groups, drawing on political philosophy, the teachings of Bolivar, and readings of Venezuelan and Latin American history. The ideology of a “civil-military” alliance was crafted upon the idea that the military was an intrinsic part of society and nationhood at large, and thus had a key role to play in national development. Moreover, in order to avoid events such as El Caracazo from ever happening again, it was necessary to forge close alliances and bonds of mutual identification between the military and civilian population. Thus, to reach those ends, the ideological framing

and practical mission of the military had to be reformed, converting it into an integrated part of Venezuelan society.

This idea was concretized shortly after Chávez gained office. In March 1999, on the tenth anniversary of El Caracazo, Chávez ordered the roll out of Plan Bolívar 2000; an emergency social program that sent military personnel out across the country to upgrade and repair infrastructure such as schools, hospitals and roads, provide emergency medical relief and clean up streets and ditches. As part of the plan, the armed forces also handed out food to the poor and provided transport for the rural population in the Venezuelan remote outback.

Plan Bolívar 2000 constituted an important display of the new role of the military that Chávez and the circles around him had envisioned ever since the 1980s. As an unclassified cable from the US embassy states:

To jump start his ambitious public works project, President Chávez turned to the only entity that is capable of quickly taking action throughout Venezuela and has the necessary people, equipment, and other resources- the Venezuelan military. The first phas (sic) of "Plan Bolívar 2000" allowed Chávez to meet an important goal: showing his popular support base that he had not forgotten them [...] and engage national, state and local government using the Armed Forces as a supplier of resources and a catalyst."⁹

The cable also notes that "an unexpectedly high number of volunteers turned out to join military effectives in their work."

In spite of its rather improvised nature, Plan Bolívar 2000 contributed to changing people's perception of the military as a potentially oppressive force, and represented a practical manifestation of the ideology of a "civil-military" alliance. It should also be noted that the execution of Plan Bolívar 2000 was followed by extensive civilian-military cooperation in the aftermath of the December 1999 "Tragedy of Vargas," where an unknown number, perhaps as many as 30,000 people, were killed in massive landslides along the coastline. The majority of the victims were poor people who had built their shacks on the unstable soil of the Vargas hillsides. This military's political and symbolical role was fundamentally re-shaped by this event, providing them with a new patina as humanitarian agents and allies of the poor (Fassin and Vasquez 2005).

This alliance would be bolstered even more after the coup attempt against the Chávez government in 2002 (see below), when, from within the Armed Forces, constitutionalists loyal to Chávez eventually managed to turn events around and bring him back to power. This event, in which popular mobilization played an important role in defeating the coup, strengthened the imagery of the military and the government's supporters as allied in a quest to defend the sovereign will of *el pueblo*, and hence, the nation.¹⁰ To illustrate these sentiments, it is worthwhile to cite a song that became extremely popular in the years following the coup. It was recorded by a band with roots in the popular sectors and used as a political jingle. Below are some of the lyrics:

And they came down (referring to the poor coming down from the shantytown hills)
With their flag and their consciousness
They came down
To defend their will
They came down
Against the fascist and the traitor
They came down
And they came down
The Soldier and the People one being
They came down
Armed with their Constitution¹¹

An aborted military coup

On April 11, 2002, a group of military officers enters the presidential palace of Miraflores in Caracas, Venezuela, and demands to see President Hugo Chávez. Behind closed doors, they tell him that he either has to step down as head of state or the palace will be bombed. After a series of negotiations, Chávez agrees to be taken into custody, but refuses to resign as president. He is arrested and taken away to the military headquarters in Caracas. Shortly thereafter, the leader of the national business federation FEDECAMERAS, Pedro Carmona, swears himself in as president. However, the coup soon falls apart, partly because of internal conflicts amongst the coup leaders, and partly because of massive popular protest in favor of Chávez. Moreover, it soon becomes evident that the group of high-level military officers that were involved in planning the coup does not have support from other military high-level commands and lower-ranking officers. Important military figures, shortly thereafter, vow to restore the constitutional order and bring Chávez back into power, and the coup loses momentum. On the morning of April 14, 2002, Chávez is back in the presidential palace.

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The occurrences referred to here are only part of a long series of complex events taking place in Venezuela between 11 and 14 April 2002, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to re-count them in full here. But one feature of this attempt to topple Chávez's government is worth emphasizing. Chávez is the first leftist president in Latin America to be restored to power after an attempted military coup. A series of factors contributed to this, not least disagreements and tactic errors amongst the coup creators themselves (Ellner 2010, 115). However, there is also reason to believe that Chávez's personal military background strongly contributed not only to resisting the coup once it unfolded, but also to maintaining him in office throughout his 14-year-long rule.

Chávez's military background made him capable of managing internal politics and fractional struggles within the military. His personal style and charisma, humble background and capacity to communicate with "common people" enabled him to direct himself to the Armed Forces in a manner which not only provided him with respect and authority amongst higher-ranking officers, but also gained him deep loyalty amongst the lower ranks.¹² Moreover, the re-crafting of the political and ideological role of the Armed Forces as part of a state-building project tapped into a deep vein within internal military sentiments and politics, which throughout the decades had been in a state of flux in keeping with political and economic turbulence in the country at large.

The appointment of military officers as top leaders to key political positions and in the state apparatus has most likely been vital for the Chávez government's survival (Ellner 2010, 147). Latin American history is filled with leftist governments overthrown by military forces, supported and organized by conservative/right-wing political sectors. State formation in the continent after independence from Spain created strong bonds between the military and national economic and political elites, adamant to protect their interests against radical proposals of socio-political change emanating from the left. The fear of Communism in the Cold War environment served as a justification for violent overthrows in countries such as Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, El Salvador and Nicaragua, supported by the United States, which historically has had close bonds to Latin American elites through common economic and ideological interests. The military dictatorships throughout the 1960s and 1970s enjoyed tactic, political and economic support from Washington, including training in "counter-insurgency" and "interrogation tactics" at the Military Academy School of the Americas in Georgia, USA.

Chávez was well aware of this history and the threats to his political survival emerging both from the domestic political right and their international allies. Moreover, the coup against his government in 2002—made possible through an alliance between high-level military officers and the country's

economic and former political elites—evidenced the split within the military towards the government. Additionally, in October 2002, a group of high-level military officers, known as *Los Generales de Plaza Altamira* (The Generals of Plaza Altamira), placed themselves in a famous square in the wealthy area of Altamira in Caracas declaring their opposition to the government. Invoking article 350 of the Venezuelan constitution, which protects the right to rise against an illegitimate government, they pledged to remain in the square until the government stepped down. This protest, which did not gain the momentum that the dissidents evidently had hoped for, eventually died out.

However, as a result of these events, military dissidents were “smoked out” and the military ranks consolidated. A number of Chávez’s military allies from the early years in the MBR-200 continued to play important roles in his government—some still in uniform and others retreating into civilian roles. Army officers were given key roles in public offices under the auspices of forming part of the government’s attempt to re-vamp a notoriously corrupt and inefficient public administration. A number of retired military officers have throughout the years also run as candidates in regional elections on the government ticket.

The Venezuelan military in an international perspective

The Chávez government and its supporters repeatedly stated their preoccupation over the possibility of a US-supported or led intervention on Venezuelan soil. Political leaders in the United States frequently referred to Chávez as the largest threat against US interests in the Western hemisphere. In Caracas, these allegations were taken extremely seriously, not least because the coup against Chávez in 2002 was carried out with tactical and financial support from Washington under the Bush Jr. administration (see Villegas 2012, Golinger 2005). Former president Jimmy Carter later pronounced that “it was likely” that the US was behind the coup.¹³ Important political figures from the US-instigated “fight against communists” in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, such as Otto Reich, were key in the Bush administration’s Latin America policy at the time.

In 2008, the United States activated its Fourth Fleet, which had been dormant since 1950. The fleet, operating under the US Navy out from Florida, patrols the Caribbean and the coast of South America. The decision to reactivate it was by many observers considered a signal to Venezuela. In 2009, The United States closed its military base in Manta, Ecuador, and entered into an agreement with Colombia regarding the installation of seven military bases close to the border of Venezuela.¹⁴

These geo-political strives, ideological differences and Latin American history with respect to overthrows of leftist governments have to be taken into account with regards to the politization of the military. Though the threat of an invasion on Venezuelan territory may be an unlikely scenario, the imaginative power of this scenario forms part of an ongoing ideological and political “cold” (and sometime hot, as in the case of Honduras in 2009) war in Latin America, whereby the United States is seen as continuously struggling to retain its geo-political and economic grip over the continent. Though it is difficult to exactly confirm the veracity of the matters, it should also be noted that both armed foreign mercenaries and Colombian paramilitaries on several occasions have been captured on Venezuelan soil, allegedly to assassinate the president or to carry out terrorist attacks for destabilization purposes.¹⁵ Events such as these contribute to upholding an imagery of enemies both within and outside, bolstered by the memories of the coup in 2002 and other attempts to destabilize the government. Added to this, US funding of civil society groups, including the oppositional student movement (Golinger 2011), and open political support (Weisbrot 2014) to modes of oppositional protest that many Venezuelans see as anti-democratic and violent acts of destabilization, bolster the perception of ongoing external efforts to provoke regime change. Moreover, the relationship between Venezuela and its neighbor Colombia, a major recipient of US military aid, has at times been very strained. In short, the high-profile boosting of the military as a defender of the Bolivarian project, the

government's showcasing of military potency, and the efforts to secure the military's loyalty, should also be read as a deterrence strategy in the face of geo-political conflictive dynamics and historical lessons about how leftist governments come to an abrupt end.

Soldiers' perspectives

The ideological appeal of a civil-military alliance in the officer corps cannot be properly understood without also taking into consideration the changing perceptions of social hierarchies within the Bolivarian ideology at large. A central tenant of Chavez's appeal to the country's lower socio-economic strata was that the historical legacy of class- and race-based social marginalization was challenged (see Wright 1990). State reforms and new educational opportunities provided a venue for social mobility, and a "popularization" of public and political discourse implied that the "humble classes" (*clases humildes*) with more ease could challenge social hierarchies. These transformations also seeped into the Armed Forces. For example, in an interview with a high-ranking naval officer in January 2015, I asked what he liked about being part of the Armed Forces, to which he responded:

The love for the people, the togetherness (of the people and the army), this civic-military union. It wasn't like that before, now we work for the people (*el pueblo*), but before they had forgotten that, it was this hierarchy...and not everyone was able to ascend, now there are more officers from the humble classes, I am from the humble classes, and when I signed up, I was given the chance to enter. And I have a lot of companions from the humble classes; they are not from families with money. Anyone can present themselves, and when they enter into the military academy, they have the possibility to ascend.

Researcher: Do you think that everyone can become a General?

Yes, of course, like me, now I have graduated (from the military academy) and if I behave well, advance, I can rise to General. There is no discrimination, not that I have seen. It depends on the attitude of the person, not [his or hers] social position.



Members of the National Reserve at a military gathering. Caracas, 2009.

In parallel with a reconfiguration of class barriers, the combined effects of the doctrine of a civil-military alliance and de facto increased contact and proximity between the military and the civilian population, broke down social distance between ordinary people and the military. In contrast, the military in yesteryears had to a very limited degree contact with civilian life, spending their time in the barracks and in military-only social circles. There is a high degree of consciousness of the effects of changes within the military. The naval officer above, for example, commented that:

It is my personal impression that people have lost their fear for us, for the military. I speak with my grandfather, he did military service, and he says that before, an officer provoked fear in people, and that now this has disappeared. People look at us differently, like we are part of the people. And that is good, people shouldn't have fear. Now, on the contrary, people come over to us, they strike up a conversation, they ask us for directions, it is like if someone is looking for direction and they see us and a civilian person standing next to each other they will ask us. You know, there are many strange people on the street, and people know that we are educated, that we will not strike out at them.

A similar prospective was presented by a Sergeant Mayor (Sargento Mayor) in the National Guard (Guardia Nacional). He was also of a humble background, still living in the same shantytown where he was born and raised. Through his elder brother he had put in an application in the National Guard Academy 15 years back, and he was accepted. He maintained that their military formation had instilled discipline, obedience and subordination in the force, and that people therefore trusted them. Even if people hauled insults at them when they were doing street patrol (or, as he also referred to, the riots in 2014 when they also fended off Molotov cocktails), they had been taught to stand firm and not fall into provocations. "We feel proud of the discipline that we have, we have learned this from the ideological legacy that Chávez left," he said, though making it clear that he considered himself as a functionary of the constitution (*funcionario de la constitución*), not of a political party.¹⁶

The Bolivarian Militia

Under the governments prior to Chávez, the police and the army frequently went on "fishing trips" to poor shantytowns. Young men who could not document that they were studying or working were rounded up and sent to compulsory military training. This practice, supported by conscription laws as well as a law against vagrancy, was deeply resented as it opened up for extensive abuse against the poor part of the population. These "fishing trips" only occurred in poor areas, and rich people commonly bought themselves out of military service in general. The law against vagrancy was abandoned in 1997. Today, inscription in military registers is compulsory both for men and women reaching the age of 18, whilst carrying out military services is in practice voluntary. The Venezuelan Bolivarian Armed Forces (FANB) now count 140,000 troops (COHA 2009).

In 2008, the government passed a law forming the National Bolivarian Militia, and replacing the former civilian reserve corps (Strønen 2015). Approximately 400,000 people—men and women, young and old—have reportedly received training through the Bolivarian Militia, and the government's pronounced plan is to raise this number to one million.¹⁹ However, some reports indicate that in reality only 15,000–20,000 individuals are actually trained and ready for combat (COHA 2009). The establishment of the Bolivarian Militia has caused significant controversy. Some critics, such as the oppositional NGO Control Ciudadano, have described the militia as Chávez's "praetorian guards,"²⁰ and warned that the force represents a dangerous partisan militarization of society.

Given the political polarization in the country, these concerns are understandable. The government has referred to the militias in heavily ideological terms and Chávez repeatedly described them

as “the people in arms” (*el pueblo en armas*). Formally and legally, however, the militias’ role is to support the Bolivarian Armed Forces as part of the national defense system in case of natural disaster, catastrophes or external threats. Moreover, their legal framework also opens up for performing time-limited duties in safeguarding public safety or electoral processes. Accordingly, the militia has been deployed to participate in street patrols as well as in the military’s safety and logistic assignments during elections—the so-called Plan República—in recent years.²¹ Whilst participation of the national reserve in such activities might be relatively uncontroversial in less politically polarized countries, the politically divided nature of Venezuelan society has resulted in a situation whereby the government’s opponents view any military (or state, for that matter) institution with skepticism.



Soldier posing beneath the banner of the Bolivarian National Militia. Caracas, 2009.

CRITIC AND CONTROVERSIES

To government critics and critical military analysts, the doctrine of a “civil-military alliance” constitutes a euphemism for the militarization of the civilian political sphere (see i.e., Buttó 2013; Jácome 2011; Control Ciudadano 2010–2011, 2013; Trinkunas 2005). Trinkunas (2005) for example, maintains that a deliberate dismantling of civilian control over the military has taken place. Venezuelan analysts have voiced similar concerns (see i.e., Buttó 2013; Jácome 2011; Control Ciudadano 2011, 2013). Jácome writes that “throughout the first decade of the 21st century, an increasing militarization of Venezuelan society took place that didn’t even reflect an alliance between civilians and military, as was established in the official discourse, but rather the predominance of the military over civilians” (2011, 2). She is particularly concerned with the increased incursion of military officials into civilian posts (see text box 2). A related criticism is that in parallel with the politicization of nearly every aspect of Venezuelan public life, the Armed Forces have also been ideologically rebranded. For example, since 2007, the military’s motto has been “*patria, socialismo o muerte, venceremos*” (fatherland, socialism or death, we will win), adopted from the political discourse used by the government and its supporters. Critics have repeatedly alleged that this constitutes a partisan politicization of the Armed Forces, promoting the question of whether the Armed Forces are committed to the defense of the nation or the defense of the government.¹⁷ Similarly, public statements made by high-level political and military figures, pledging that the Armed Forces are committed to safeguard the Bolivarian Revolution have also sparked significant controversies. On these backdrops, there has been speculation regarding whether the Armed Forces would accept an electoral victory for the opposition or not.¹⁸ Countering claims of military partisanship, government supporters have alleged that the politicized slogans and utterances merely reflect the Armed Force’s commitment to support the constitutionally elected government—which for the time being has a socialist branding.

The militia has also had extensive collaboration with grassroots movements in terms of local development projects as well as emergency response training. This has been particularly the case in relation to extensive bottom-up generated development projects—such as housing and infrastructure—in shantytown communities through the so-called communal councils (see Strønen 2014). These are legally constituted, state-funded community organizations that since 2006 have operated in—for the most part—poor neighborhoods.

In interviews conducted with militia members in Caracas in 2014/2015 (Strønen 2015), the interviewees conceptualized their role as dual; specifically, on the one hand, as having a supporting role for the Armed Forces in case of a national emergency—whether a natural disaster or threat to the country's sovereignty—and on the other hand, as being public servants assisting the state institutions and local communities in matters of local development, administration and specific (un-armed) security tasks. What became clear, however, is that the composition of the force reflects the government's main support base; the majority comes from the lower socio-economic strata and adheres ideologically to the doctrine of a civil-military alliance as articulated within the broader notion of "Bolivarianism" as a national legacy.



Soldiers and militia members waiting for Chávez arrival. Military gathering at the Cuartel de La Montaña in the parish of 23 de Enero. Caracas 2009.

THE MILITARY IN POLITICS AND THE ECONOMY

According to the Venezuelan sociologist Eduardo Guzmán Pérez, 1,614 active or retired military officers have occupied positions in public administration in the period between 1999–2013.²² Government critics have repeatedly alleged that this represents a militarization of politics.²³ Supporters of the government, on the other hand, allege that this feature of public policy is in line with article 328 of the Constitution, which attributes an active role in national development to the Armed Forces. Moreover, a much-cited argument is that military officers are thoroughly trained in leadership and upholding professional standards; a needed skill in Venezuelan public administration.²⁴

Few details are known about the exact scope and magnitude of economic interest and control held by the military “behind the scenes.” Allegations about involvement in drug trafficking have been widespread.²⁵ One case was related to the detention of a prominent drug trafficker and well-connected businessman, Walid Makled, in 2008, who in interrogations denounced Venezuelan high-level military officers as key partners in his operations. The same allegations surfaced after the controversies surrounding General Hugo Carvajal’s short-lived detention at the Dutch island of Aruba in July 2014, faced with drug trafficking charges in the United States. More recent is the news that US prosecutors are preparing to charge Nestor Reverol, the head of Venezuela’s National Guard, for his involvement in drug trafficking. The Venezuelan government and other observers have labeled this as part of a US-orchestrated smear campaign against the country, similar to allegations about former head of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello’s role as a drug kingpin.²⁶

Some reports indicate that members of the military have illegitimate interests in the country’s small, but lucrative mining industry.²⁷ Moreover, allegations are rife about corruption involving military officers both inside and outside posts in public administration; “the word on the street” is that this has grown in scope since Chávez’s death. Indeed, the military is attributed a role in fuelling the current economic crisis, as military officers, especially those stationed along the border, are thought to be deeply involved in facilitating the smuggling of consumer goods and currency across the border with Colombia.

More recently, the government announced more direct military involvement in the extractive industries through the formation of the company “Military Company Limited of Mining, Petroleum and Gas Industries” (CAMIMPEG). Framed as security management of the country’s natural resources, the legislative framework of CAMIMPEG provides the military sector with broad powers related to operations in the extractive sector (Mantovani, 2016).

Following the victory of the opposition in the December 2015 elections to the national assembly, Maduro pronounced that the majority of military personnel would be withdrawn from public administration in order to “return to the barracks.” It is not yet clear to what extent this has taken place.

Concluding thoughts

Caracas, 13 April 2009. I am standing just a few meters behind President Hugo Chávez inside El Cuartel de La Montaña, also called El Cuartel Cipriano Castro or Museo Histórico Militar. The site is a large, red and yellow military fortress located on the hill of the popular neighborhood 23 de Enero, historically the most radical neighborhood in Caracas, and indeed Venezuela. From here, you have a direct view of the presidential palace, Miraflores.

The fortress was built between 1900 and 1920 by the governments of Cipriano Castro and Juan Vicente Gómez, and has, throughout the years, served various functions both as a military academy, as ministry headquarters, and, since 1981, as a military museum. In 1992 it served as the command center for the military rebellion led by Hugo Chávez. Twenty-one years later it would become his final resting place. It is here that Chávez's worldly remains, guarded by four guards, currently are, and it is here that his followers can come and mourn him.

But today, five years prior to Chávez's death, El Cuartel de la Montaña is the site for another event. It is the celebration of the anniversary for the popular rebellion against the coup in April 2002—the rebellion that brought Chávez back to power and made him the first leftist president throughout Latin American history to defeat a right-wing military coup. It is also the day when the Bolivarian National Militia will formally be given its name.

I was let into the premises without any problems. This was an open event, and the military officers that screened the bags and let people through into the fortress were friendly and polite. Inside, the Bolivarian militia—both men and women—were standing motionless on the top of the broad fortress walls dressed in green T-shirts, holding their flags high against the pale blue sky. The parade plaza below was still in somewhat of a chaotic state. Chairs were put up in neat rows, but ordinary soldiers, high-level officers,

press people and ordinary people were hanging around or walking around in a disorderly manner. The female minister of indigenous affairs, Nicia Maldonado, arrived dressed in indigenous garments. Shortly afterwards, the then-Foreign Minister, now President Nicholas Maduro, entered whilst chatting loudly with some people. A lower-level soldier asks shyly if I can take a picture of him underneath a banner with Chávez's face on it.

Eventually the program started with the entire ceremonial splendor that such an event calls for. Félix Antonio Velásquez, the then-General Commander of the Milicia Nacional Bolivariana underlined in his speech that the militia represents "the materialization of the civic-military unity." Chávez, dressed in green, with his military red beret, subsequently held a speech about the need to uphold the day-to-day struggle for the social, political, economic and moral revolution. At the end of his speech, he shouted: "¡Patria, Socialismo o Muerte! ¡Venceremos!" And the crowds responded to him with those same words: "¡Patria, Socialismo o Muerte! ¡Venceremos!"



Chávez giving a speech at military gathering at the Cuartel de La Montaña in the parish of 23 de Enero. Caracas 2009.

The scene captures the symbolic and ideological core of the “civil-military alliance”: the unity of “the people,” the state and the military in a shared project of nation building, social justice and national sovereignty. It was an epic and photogenic moment, the humble people guarding the president, the highest powers of the state gathered in 23 de Enero, the most radical neighborhood in Venezuela. Indeed, a long time had passed since 23 de Enero was invaded with military tanks and heavy armament during El Caracazo in 1989; a game-changing moment that would facilitate Chávez’s ascendance to power and the unfolding of “the Bolivarian Revolution” ten years later.

As this CMI Working paper has shown, the redefinition of the Venezuelan military after Chávez’s—and later Maduro’s—ascendance to power has to be understood not only within the political events that took place throughout several decades, but also as a product of the re-configuration of political power in Venezuelan society at large, as well as its entanglement in international *real politik*. However, looking beyond the ideological pathos and political reasoning undergirding this shift, it is also reasonable to presume that the military, at all times, are wary of their own self-interest. The Chávez government brought a new purpose and fresh material and monetary inputs to a morally and economically exhausted military body. In addition to improved living conditions for lower-ranking officials,²⁸ well-placed individuals and sectors within the Armed Forces have undoubtedly also seen both their power base and economic interests expand.

Deeply reflected in the highly divergent views on the military, it is evident that Venezuelan society is characterized by an ideological, political and social schism that seems difficult to transcend. The political polarization in the Venezuelan population—accompanied by diverging perceptions of the nature of democracy, patriotism, citizenship and indeed the legitimacy of the government—has fuelled highly heterogeneous perceptions of whether the military represents the nation or just a partisan portion of it. Significantly, government opponents perceive the closeness between the military and the government as a sign of the governments’ authoritarianism. To them, the ideological pathos and political rhetoric surrounding the Armed Forces is alienating and threatening, and contributes to further dividing the nation body.

For government supporters on the other hand, the ideological and operational overhaul of the Venezuelan military symbolized a new era of national dignity and sovereignty in the spirit of anti-imperialism, as well as a symbol of a state building project bent on breaking down barriers between state power and its citizenry. People who previously feared and loathed the military—that is, above all the socially disadvantaged part of the population who has been the government’s main support base—embraced the new doctrine of a civil-military alliance because it symbolized nation-building, social inclusion and a significant reduction of state violence. At the same time, there is a growing discontentment and concern, reaching deep into in the Chávez and Maduro governments’ original support base, of the military’s accumulation of economic perks and privileges, their opaque presence in civilian politics, and their involvement in acts of corruption.

As this CMI Working Paper is written, it is difficult to make a prediction about the future of Venezuelan politics. The oppositional block in the National Assembly—where they have a majority—has vowed to remove Maduro from power. Through the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution, a recall election on the presidential mandate can be organized either through the collection of signatures amongst the electorate, or through a bid passed by a 3/5 majority in the National Assembly. For the time being, the opposition block does not have this majority, pending investigations into allegations of electoral fraud of the state of Amazonas. Recently, the opposition block has also announced that they want to change the constitution in order to reduce Maduro’s six-year mandate to four years, though the constitutional court has characterized such a retroactive application unconstitutional. For now, it is difficult to tell how these political struggles will turn out, but in the face of continuous economic crisis and diminishing government support, the opposition’s best chance of success may be the work-intensive road of organizing a referendum on the sitting president.

Should this happen and should their move be successful, there are no clear signs in recent history suggesting that the Venezuelan military will not abide to electoral power, in spite of its high-profile ideological rhetoric. In the face of the ongoing intense political struggles between the legislative and executive, the Minister of Defense, General Padrino López, has pronounced that the military's role is to safeguard the constitutional order. That being said, and if history is anything to go by, as the economic crisis lingers and political tables turn, there might be increasing unrest within particular military sectors or amongst individuals who wish to hedge their bets for political changes in the future. The generalized sense, however, is that preference for the electoral game has been well established in most sectors of Venezuelan society; a preference that also appears to prevail within the Venezuelan Armed Forces.

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Endnotes

- 1 See <http://www.cmi.no/news/?1486=civil-military-relations-in-venezuelaby-the-pool>.
- 2 See <http://www.avn.info.ve/contenido/ch%C3%A1vez-inici%C3%B3-hacer-14-a-a%C3%B3s-inclusi%C3%B3n-plena-mujer-fuerza-armada-nacional-bolivariana>.
- 3 The historical account is largely based on Harold Trinkunas (2002), commonly considered a leading authority on Venezuelan military history.
- 4 Presidential elections were held in 1998, in 2000 (new elections were held after the passing of a new constitution in 1999) in 2006, and 2012. All results are available at www.cne.gov.ve.
- 5 The name is derived from Simón Bolívar, the political philosopher and war hero from the Wars of Independence who liberated Venezuelan and six other countries from the Spanish crown.
- 6 See Ewell (1984) for a historical account of Venezuelan state formation.
- 7 Forty-four per cent was the number estimated by the National Statistics Institute (INE) at the time, but there are other calculations that suggest that the number was far higher, reaching almost 70 per cent of the population; see i.e., Chacín (2003:116).
- 8 Latinobarometro 1998 survey. Accessible at <http://www.cartercenter.org/documents/nondatabase/lagospresentation.pdf>
- 9 Cable sent from the US Embassy in Caracas to Secretary of State, Washington, March 1999, available at <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:d3Pvrobbl04J:www.state.gov/documents/organization/143547.pdf+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=no&client=firefox-a>.
- 10 See Harnecker (2003) for interviews with military officers who supported Chávez and the constitutional order during the coup.
- 11 The song was written and performed by the group Lloviznando Canto. The full lyrics in Spanish can be found at <https://www.nicolyrics.com/929938/lloviznando-canto-y-bajaron-lyrics>.
- 12 Indeed, it was a lower-ranking officer placed there to guard him that contributed to turning the tables, when he slipped Chávez a cell phone, using which he notified his daughter about his captivity.
- 13 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2009/09/200992116049879437.html>.
- 14 Colombia is one of the largest recipients in the world of military aid from the United States.
- 15 For example, thirty military officers of various ranks were also investigated for allegedly conspiring against the Maduro government as part of a plan for a regime change during the spring of 2014.
- 16 Aspiring members of the National Guard cannot be members of a political party.
- 17 See i.e., www.controlciudadano.org/documentos/getbindata.php?docid=1926&fieldname=documento.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 See <http://www.mindefensa.gob.ve/index.php/eje-bienestar-social/article-categories/78-ultimas-noticias/322-presidente-maduro-se-reunio-con-la-milicia-nacional-bolivariana-en-el-cuartel-de-la-montana>.
- 20 See <http://www.reportero24.com/2010/10/expertos-armar-a-la-milicia-bolivariana-busca-imponer-miedo-en-la-sociedad/>.
- 21 According to Steve Ellner, a recognized analyst of Venezuelan affairs, "hardliners" within the Chavista movement have earlier argued that the Bolivarian militias should constitute a parallel counter force in case of a coup, as part of the military is still essentially tied to the old elites (Ellner 2010,168).

- 22 http://www.el-nacional.com/politica/militares-ocupado-cargos-gobierno_o_325167554.html. Also, note that president Maduro announced in December 2015 that nearly all military personnel would be withdrawn from public offices in order to return to their duties in the barracks.
- 23 See www.controlciudadano.org.
- 24 http://www.el-nacional.com/politica/militares-ocupado-cargos-gobierno_o_325167554.html.
- 25 There has since long been an allegation circulating of the existence of a drug trafficking network within the Venezuelan Armed Forces called "The Cartel of the Suns" (Cartel de los Soles). However, it should be noted that very little, if any, verified information about the existence of such a network exists. See <http://www.insightcrime.org/groups-venezuela/cartel-de-los-soles>. What is certain is that individuals have been arrested in connection to drug trafficking. One high-profile case was for example when a number of National Guard members were arrested for being involved in cocaine smuggling on an Air France flight from Caracas to Paris. See <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-24308302>.
- 26 See i.e., <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/11175>.
- 27 <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/12/03/us-venezuela-amazon-idUKBRE9B205S20131203>.
- 28 A colloquial Venezuelan expression about the military, too vulgar to reproduce here, hints to the fact that the military is happy as long as they have housing, and a good share of social festivities and sexual entertainment. Though it might be an insult to individuals, it says something about the cultural perceptions of how to keep the military politically acquiescent.

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When Hugo Chávez (1954–2013) came to power in Venezuela in 1998, the military was bestowed with a new—and controversial—role in society. Being a former career military himself, a central tenant of Chávez’s political philosophy was to craft what was called a “civil-military alliance” (una alianza cívica-militar), expanding the military’s role and active involvement in the execution of public policies in the name of national development. This doctrine was underpinned by the political thinking of Simón Bolívar, the country’s national hero from the Wars of Independence. Concurrently, the Armed Forces were also attributed a more politicized role as the custodians of national sovereignty vis-à-vis foreign meddling in the country. Chávez died in April 2013, but the doctrine of a civil-military alliance has been kept alive under the presidency of his successor, Nicholas Maduro.

The aim of this CMI Working Paper is to provide an overview of the ideological and political foundation for the approximation between the civilian politics and the military throughout recent Venezuelan history. The analysis will highlight the historical trajectories facilitating the military’s ideological alignment with “Bolivarianism” as articulated by the Chavez, and later, Maduro government, as well as the national and international realpolitik underpinning this approximation. In conclusion, and taking into account that Venezuela is in the midst of significant economic and political turmoil, I will briefly consider the role of the military at the current political juncture.

Key words: Venezuela, Armed Forces, Civil-Military Relations, Bolivarian Revolution, Hugo Chávez, Nicholas Maduro

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