Criminal Decapitation Is Not the End of the Problem: It Leads to Fragmentation

Why the fall of criminal leadership can generate more violence than it resolves

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There is a dominant narrative in Latin America that celebrates the capture of criminal leaders as definitive victories. It is a narrative inherited from the 1980s, forged during the fight against the major Colombian cartels: undeniably appealing, politically useful, and highly attractive for media narratives and television series. Each time a kingpin, a high-profile drug trafficker, or a corrupt leader falls, the same hopeful but always aspirational script is reactivated: the state regains ground, justice advances, crime retreats.

However, empirical evidence tells a very different story. What is often presented as the end of a problem is, in reality, the beginning of a reconfiguration—more violent, more fragmented, and in many cases more difficult to contain. The initial consequences, as almost always happens, fall most heavily on the most abandoned and vulnerable communities; but over time, this criminal disorder expands, permeates society as a whole, and ends up shaping a transactional democracy, sustained by a flexible and adaptable rule of law, capable of coexisting with—rather than confronting—the logics of organized crime.

The recent arrest of Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores in Venezuela clearly illustrates this paradox. Far from signaling the collapse of Venezuelan organized crime, this event instead marks the end of a centralized protection of a criminal model and the likely beginning of an accelerated criminal atomization. This applies not only to visible criminal structures, but also to the powerful political-military criminal holding that, over decades, consolidated itself within the Venezuelan elite and was later wrapped in functional and appealing labels—such as the so-called “Cartel of the Suns”—which in reality is a far more complex and tenuous phenomenon than a simple name suggests.

When a captured state loses its ultimate guarantor—or the figure believed to perform that role—illicit economies do not disappear, nor do the territorial networks that sustain them dissolve. What happens is far more complex and dangerous: informal balances break down, local leaderships are freed from centralized control, and violent disputes spring up over territory, routes, and the extraction of illicit economies. These disputes can unfold with or without an ideological undergirding and most are, at best ideologically agnostic. We have seen this before, in the fragmentation of the FARC, the shattering of the Medellín Cartel with the death of Pablo Escobar, and in the chaotic succession that followed the arrest of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán.

This history shows the fragmentation process that will likely occur in Venezuela is neither unique nor unforeseeable. It is a recurring dynamic throughout the region, observable wherever institutional fragility, profitable illicit economies, and socially vulnerable territories converge. The decapitation of criminal structures in post-Calderón Mexico, Colombia after Pablo Escobar, Brazil following police and military interventions in the favelas did not lead to a sustained weakening of organized crime. On the

contrary, competitive pressure refined the ecosystem, favoring the most violent, organized, and adaptive actors.

The logic is brutal but consistent. When a visible leader is removed or captured without dismantling the structures that support him, a Darwinian competition is unleashed among the surviving groups. Those who prevail are not necessarily the most ideological or the most loyal to a political project; they are the most effective in the use of violence, the best connected to transnational networks, and the most capable of providing criminal governance where the state is absent.

In the Venezuelan case, the risk is amplified by three structural factors. First, the existence of armed *colectivos* or civilian mobs that for years functioned as operational arms of the regime, but which today may redefine their loyalties and prioritize territorial survival. Second, a penitentiary system that since 2004 has functioned under logic of self-governance, turning prisons into criminal command centers capable of projecting violence outward. Third, the uncontrolled circulation of weapons, exacerbated by military collapse and civilian rearmament policies with no accountability.

These three elements will not remain confined within Venezuelan borders. They spread, are exchanged, and integrate into regional illegal markets. Organizations such as *Tren de Aragua* did not wait for Maduro's collapse to expand: they already operate as transnational criminal franchises, with documented presence in at least ten countries. The current crisis does not weaken them; it frees them from any residual arbitration that might have limited their operational autonomy.

For countries in the region, this scenario poses a challenge that goes far beyond migration policy or border security. It is not only about controlling the flow of people, but about anticipating the importation of unresolved conflicts, carriers of codes of violence and models of territorial control that have already proven effective in other contexts.

Present day organized crime is not just delinquency. In many areas, it's structures govern, communicate, and embeds themselves socially. Most troubling of all, in many cases they do so with the acceptance—if not the support—of communities that the state abandoned decades ago. Once that threshold of community legitimacy is crossed, traditional policing proves insufficient; military responses often end up serving the ends of criminal structures; and state responses all too often degrade into pacts of corruption or informal pacts that consolidate the problem rather than resolve it.

The main strategic lesson is uncomfortable but necessary: organized crime does not depend solely on visible leaders. It depends on structures, illicit economies, and governance vacuums. Cutting off the head without intervening in the body only accelerates mutation. And in a context of fragmentation, the groups that survive emerge more violent, more cohesive, and better adapted to new conditions.

Are we facing an opportunity or a greater risk? Both. It is an opportunity to anticipate, strengthen criminal intelligence, and build effective regional cooperation. But if the response comes late or is limited exclusively to the use of force, the risk is that organized crime will learn faster than the state. And when that happens, today's fragmentation becomes tomorrow's criminal consolidation.

The fall of Maduro is not the end of a cycle. It is, most likely, the beginning of a more complex one in which his removal will be the high point. The question is not whether there will be consequences, but whether we will be prepared to manage them before it is too late.