

CUBA'S SECRET INTERFERENCE IN VENEZUELA

After the revolutionary victory of 1959, Cuba became the socialist stronghold of the Americas, inspiring similar revolutionary movements in several neighboring countries. One of them, Venezuela, is without a doubt today its greatest ally and main source of support. However, given the recent events of August 2024, what would happen if Venezuela were to adopt a political stance unfavorable to Cuba?

On July 28, 2024, presidential elections were held in Venezuela to elect the next president of the republic for a six-year term. The results, published the following day, left no one indifferent. Two versions emerged: the one released by the National Electoral Council, which proclaimed Nicolás Maduro as the elected president with more than 50% of the votes, and the opposition's version, which claimed that Edmundo González (Democratic Unitary Platform) had won with more than 65%. The international community largely questioned the results, demanding the release of the voting records, amid accusations of fraud and/or hacking of the servers. This was compounded by brutal repression and persecution of the opposition—acknowledged even by the official government—targeting public or political figures who expressed dissent. Among the countries that recognized the official results were mainly Russia, Iran, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Turkey, Pakistan, and many others¹. But one of those states is especially relevant for our analysis: Cuba. The Caribbean country has long been, and still is, one of the most powerful allies of Chavista Venezuela in the region, alongside other left-leaning states such as Nicaragua (governed by Daniel Ortega) and Bolivia (under President Luis Arce). Despite international sanctions, growing opposition from many global actors, and even skepticism from some regional allies (such as Colombia and Brazil), the Venezuelan government insists on holding power, relying not only on its armed forces, but above all, on the support of its ally in Havana.

So, what is Cuba's involvement in the Venezuelan government? What are Cuba's interests in Venezuela? How does this role affect Caracas's geopolitical position?

Fidel Castro's interest in Venezuela dates back long before Hugo Chávez's rise to the Miraflores Palace in 1999. Just one month after the revolutionary victory in Cuba

¹ Full list includes: Abkhazia and South Ossetia (separatist territories in Georgia), Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cambodia, China, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Honduras, Laos, Madagascar, Mali, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, São Tomé and Príncipe, Serbia, Syria, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

(January 8, 1959), Castro visited Venezuela. At that time, the country was one of the wealthiest in the continent, overflowing with oil and boasting a standard of living envied across the region. In 1994, the future Venezuelan president visited Havana (to deliver a conference on Simón Bolívar) and met with the former guerrilla leader. That trip was organized with the help of Alí Rodríguez Araque (a former Castroite guerrilla and future Venezuelan energy minister) and Nicolás Maduro himself, who had previously received political-military training in Cuba under the nom de guerre “Verde.” After Chávez’s death and Cuba’s promotion of his successor Nicolás Maduro in 2013, the country doubled down on its anti-U.S. rhetoric (despite being a petroleum supplier to Washington) and developed a troubling relationship with opposition forces and civil critics—from the perspective of human rights and even international law.

Cuban influence in Venezuela:

- Consolidation of political power through military support: Venezuela’s armed forces have a long and troubled history of uprisings against the government. After Chávez’s defeat in the 2007 elections, Castro’s advice was to secure the military’s loyalty. With control over the armed forces, Chávez could ensure the support of the only institution truly capable of ousting him—assuming elections would become mere symbolic, non-binding acts of public relations.
- Reform and training of intelligence and military services: In 2004, Venezuela began a major overhaul of its armed forces, backed and promoted by Cuba. This consisted of three components: weaponry, doctrine, and structure. Regarding weapons, much of Venezuela’s NATO-standard equipment was replaced with rifles and ammunition from the former Soviet bloc, allowing for closer industrial-military cooperation between both countries. In terms of doctrine, the main conflict scenario for Venezuela at the time had been a conventional war with Colombia over border disputes. Under Cuba’s new doctrine, however, the Venezuelan military was trained for asymmetric warfare—emphasizing guerrilla tactics and hybrid war strategies against a far more powerful enemy, rather than conventional engagements between national armies. As for structure, the use of military reserves as internal security forces was encouraged, helping to guarantee the civilian government's hold on power.

Additionally, with Cuban support, the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) was created in 2011 to ensure military loyalty and to

purge potentially rebellious or counter-revolutionary elements from within the ranks. Venezuela's intelligence services were redesigned and retrained in Havana, with a strong emphasis on domestic surveillance—a structure reminiscent of Soviet political commissars. As a result of intelligence officer training in Cuba, the GRUCE (Coordination and Liaison Group of the Republic of Cuba) was also established to allow Cuban agents to inspect Venezuelan military units and train personnel.

- Cuban control of ministries and natural resources in Venezuela: According to author Diego Maldonado² in his book *The Consented Invasion*, Cuba possesses exact schematics of Venezuela's national electric grid, mineral deposits, airports, civil ID systems, and public administration infrastructure. A significant portion of Venezuela's high-level public administration (national ministries and secretariats) is publicly managed by Cuban citizens. In 2020, Nicolás Maduro even proposed that the Cuban ambassador to Caracas join the Venezuelan Council of Ministers.

Cuban interests in Venezuela:

- Oil and bi-national integration: Cuba lost its main crude oil supplier in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet bloc. That same year, it began promoting Chávez as a political figure. Soon after Chávez came to power, Caracas signed the Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement with Havana in October 2000, guaranteeing Cuba a preferential and heavily subsidized supply of oil. The deal also laid the legal groundwork for deeper future integration between the two countries, including Cuban provisions of technical professionals to Venezuela. In 2007, Chávez officially declared that the two nations were “*a single people and a single government*.”³ Later, this statement would be echoed by then-new Cuban President Raúl Castro, who affirmed: “Cuba and Venezuela are the same thing.” In 2004, the Venezuelan Congress ratified a mutual legal assistance agreement, granting the Cuban government jurisdiction over Cuban citizens residing in Venezuela—a move interpreted as an attempt to control potential defectors. After Chávez's death in 2013 and Maduro's rise to power, the 2014 oil price collapse plunged Venezuela into a harsh recession, triggering widespread protests that were heavily suppressed. According to data from Cuba's Ministry of Planning and Economy, the island received \$765 million from reselling Venezuelan oil. Since the early 2000s, Venezuela's crude oil shipments to Cuba have grown so much that Cuba's top export is no longer sugarcane—but hydrocarbons.

² Maldonado, D. (2021). *La Invasión Consentida*. Editorial Debate.

³ Ibid.

- Employment of skilled labor: As part of the oil deal, a massive number of professionals—known as “professional exports”—were sent from Cuba to Venezuela starting in 2000. No fewer than 200,000 Cuban technical professionals (mostly doctors, teachers, military personnel, and engineers) were deployed. This serves a Cuban interest: absorbing surplus professionals who obtain degrees on the island but face limited job opportunities. Cuba has one of the world’s highest numbers of doctors per capita, but the supply far exceeds domestic demand.

- Maintaining regional peace: During the 2023 Essequibo crisis⁴, Cuba led peace efforts between Venezuela and Guyana, who had come to the brink of war. Cuba's mediating role was requested by both the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and Guyanese President Irfaan Ali, reflecting the weight of Havana’s influence on Venezuelan foreign policy.

It's important to recall that during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, Havana was the main regional training center for guerrilla movements across Latin America—much like Lebanon or Libya in the Middle East for groups like the PLO, PFLP, and even European outfits such as the German Red Army Faction (Baader-Meinhof), Italy’s Red Brigades, and others. In Latin America, Cuban-trained groups included Argentina’s Montoneros and *Ejército Popular de Liberación*, Uruguay’s *Tupamaros*, Colombia’s FARC, Noriega’s Panama, and more—all of whom received weapons, training, and official Soviet and Czechoslovakian diplomatic support (e.g., documents, safe conduct passes).⁵

How would Cuba be affected if Venezuela adopted a democratic regime?

Argentine author Juan Bautista “Tata” Yofre⁶ is blunt in his recently published book *It Was Cuba*: “*If Venezuela falls into democracy, Cuba could collapse.*” Potential Cuban sponsors—namely Russia, Iran, and China—do not contribute enough to keep the Castro regime afloat. The evidence linking Cuba’s dependence on Venezuelan oil is substantial, and the democratic transition of a major Caribbean oil power would set a powerful precedent that could weaken the military grip in Havana.

Even within the Americas, political support for the Venezuelan government has waned—not because of right-wing criticism, but from Maduro’s own former

⁴ See article: <https://iari.site/2023/12/02/leterna-questione-di-essequibo-orizzonti-di-conflitto-armato-in-sudamerica/>

⁵ Yofre, J.B. (2024). *Fue Cuba*. Editorial Sudamericana. Buenos Aires, Argentina.

⁶ Juan Bautista Yofre, Argentine writer and journalist, was a diplomat in Panama (1990–1992) and head of Argentina’s intelligence agency (SIDE) from 1989 to 1990. He currently serves as director of the National Intelligence School of Argentina.

sympathizers. Chilean President Gabriel Boric, himself a socialist, publicly labeled the recent Venezuelan elections a fraud⁷. Brazil and Colombia likewise⁸ and ⁹ called for the release of electoral records, questioning the official claim that Maduro had won. Furthermore, Cuba is heavily indebted to Venezuela due to the latter's oil subsidies. As of now, Cuba owes \$2.5 billion, making it one of Caracas's major debtors. A change in government might bring a shift in policy on that debt—one likely unfavorable to Havana. Additionally, Cuba and Venezuela co-lead ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America), an integration initiative that emerged as an alternative to the U.S.-backed FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas). Currently, only Havana and Caracas remain official members of the alliance.

In conclusion, it is vital for Cuba that Venezuela's current government remains in power. Given Venezuela's extreme political polarization, a pro-Western transition would likely disrupt bilateral relations with Cuba, potentially leading to the expulsion of Cuban military and civilian personnel, calls for debt repayment, and even the reduction or termination of oil exports to the island. Thanks to Venezuelan oil, Cuba was able to delay certain economic liberalization measures—such as restricting licenses for small entrepreneurs, tightening fiscal control over state companies, or removing the U.S. dollar from circulation. Without that oil, the Cuban government would likely have to yield to internal pressure, re-liberalizing parts of the economy and opening up to foreign financing.

However, when it comes to Cuban interference in Venezuela, Havana officially denies any influence over Venezuelan intelligence, civil, or military systems. These accusations were made not only by former U.S. President Donald Trump—a known adversary of both governments—but also by the Organization of American States (OAS) and several European public and private institutions. Ultimately, beyond ideology and speculation, we must recognize that international relations are always driven by interests. And both Cuba and Venezuela have multiple explicit (and objective) reasons to support one another. The nature of that interference—whether public or covert—is left to the reader's judgment.

⁷ Laborde, A. (2024). "El rotundo rechazo de Boric a la 'dictadura' de Maduro no hace eco en el Partido Comunista." *El País*. Available at: <https://elpais.com/chile/2024-08-27/el-rotundo-rechazo-de-boric-a-la-dictadura-de-maduro-no-hace-eco-en-el-partido-comunista.html>

⁸ France24 editorial note (2024). "Ni Maduro ni la oposición: Lula da Silva afirma que no reconoce las elecciones de Venezuela." *France24*. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20240830-ni-maduro-ni-la-oposici%C3%B3n-lula-da-silva-afirma-que-no-reconoce-las-elecciones-de-venezuela>

⁹ Mejía, M. (2024). "Colombia no reconocerá la victoria de Maduro en las elecciones de Venezuela 'hasta que no se demuestre con actas debidamente publicadas', aseguró el embajador ante la OEA." *Infobae*. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2024/08/01/colombia-en-la-oea-sin-reconocimiento-para-maduro-hasta-que-haya-pruebas-electorales/>