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## Servants of the nation, defenders of *la patria*: The Bolivarian Militia in Venezuela

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The Bolivarian Militia in Venezuela**

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## Executive summary

In 2008, the government of now-deceased President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela passed a law creating what is known as the Bolivarian militia (*Milicia Bolivariana*), a reserve force composed by civilian volunteers supplementing the ordinary branches of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (*Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana-FANB*). The formation of the Bolivarian militia has sparked significant controversy in Venezuela and beyond, reflecting the polarization in the country between supporters and opponents of the governments of Chávez and his predecessor, Nicholas Maduro. Drawing on ethnographic research and interviews<sup>i</sup> with militia members, this CMI Working Paper will analyze the ideological and political profile of the Bolivarian militia. Highlighting how class, gender, and political identities are cornerstones of the militia members' allegiance to the force, this analysis helps enhance our understanding of why many ordinary citizens have voluntarily signed up for service. The Working Paper concludes that the Bolivarian militia must be understood in tandem with an analysis of broader political and cultural aspects of Venezuelan society in recent years, not least the accentuation of political polarization taking place during the past decades.<sup>ii</sup>

**Keywords:**

Venezuela, Bolivarian militia, civil-military relations, gender, class

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Servants of the nation...

Her nails are painted bright red, and she giggles shyly while waiting for the interview to start. We are sitting by a kitchen table high up in one of the shantytown hills in western Caracas. She is well above 50 years old, a slim, beautiful, dark-skinned woman, born and raised in poverty, now slightly better off but still living in a so-called *barrio* (shantytown). Seven children she has fostered, six of them are now adults, one of them was killed. Since it is Sunday, her day off, she does not wear a uniform. But Marta<sup>iii</sup> is in fact a soldier, or to be more precise, a member of the Bolivarian Militia in Venezuela. She holds the rank of a second corporal (*cabo segundo*), and is planning to try to qualify for first corporal soon. Marta has been part of the militia since 2008, she tells me. She has always wanted to join the army, but of course, this was never an option for her previously. But when Chávez announced the formation of the militia in 2008, she signed up at the military headquarter of Fuerte Tiuna in Caracas. Since then, she has served in the militia standing guard in hospitals, metro stations, and now at a refugee center for people who escaped the landslides in 2010 and who are now waiting for new homes. “I am very content,” she says. “I am fulfilling my mission, serving the nation and the fatherland. It feels great,” she adds softly. “And I am preparing myself for the future,” she states, referring to her additional nighttime studies in journalism (*comunicación social*) in one of the government’s educational missions.

## 1.2 ...and defenders of the patria

A few days earlier I had interviewed another member of the militia, this time a first lieutenant (*primer teniente*). Pedro was a divorced man in his late 40s, and also, coincidentally, a student in journalism. He had an ordinary bureaucratic job, but he was also the leader of the militia battalion in his neighborhood. His local troop was currently in the process of remodeling an old building that they wanted to develop into a meeting space and local headquarter. Pedro had a good mixture of men and women underneath him in rank; some meeting almost on a daily basis and others just showing up for practice. Whilst he was very keen to underline that an important part of the militia’s duty was to help provide public services to the population, he was not shy in pointing out that it also had a different function. In case of a crisis, whether a natural disaster or an armed conflict, the militia was prepared to mobilize and support the conventional armed forces. When he spoke of “armed conflict,” he was referring to external incursions, and he used the conflict with Colombia a couple of years back as an example. Then, there had been saber rattling between Venezuela and Colombia because of the latter’s incursion into Ecuadorian territory to kill one of the top leaders of FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia/Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). At the time, then-president Chávez mobilized a large number of troops to the Colombian borders. “But imagine,” Pedro said, “if something happened here in Caracas whilst all the troops were fighting in the interior. That is our role, to step in and support the army in times of an emergency.”

He also pointed out that the militia would serve a very particular function in case of an invasion; this time implicitly referring to a hypothetical invasion by the United States. In such a situation, the militia would be activated to engage in unconventional or asymmetric warfare. “We could not outnumber the US troops,” Pedro said:

*...but we are prepared, with people who know every inch of their community. In every parish in the country, there is a battalion of the militia. Some are larger and better trained than others, but there is one everywhere. This is a peaceful revolution but we are prepared to fight for the fatherland if necessary.*



### 1.3 The Bolivarian militias

These snapshots from the interviews with Marta and Pedro serve as a quick introduction to the different ideological and operational dimensions of the Bolivarian militia in Venezuela. On the one hand, they have a symbolic role in public events, and some militia members do serve as un-armed guards in public spaces. Most of those who perform these duties are senior citizens such as Marta, and many, if not most of them, are from the lower socio-economic strata in Venezuela. On the other hand, the militia is also trained to act in times of emergency such as a national disaster or a foreign invasion.

This CMI Working Paper will seek to address how these different features characterizing the Bolivarian militia may be best understood if viewed in the broader context of not only Venezuelan politics at large, but also of identity politics amongst pro-government sectors evolving under the Chávez and, now, Maduro government. To that end, this Working Paper, first, briefly reviews the broader political context in Venezuela, before proceeding with an overview of the history and organization of the Bolivarian militia. It then continues with a brief overview of conflicts and controversies related to the militia, before offering an analysis of the forces' main internal ideological and political features. Finally, it concludes with a brief explanation of how to best capture the formation and role of the militia in contemporary Venezuela.

### 1.4 Venezuela under Chávez in brief

As indicated above, the Bolivarian militia was created under the government of now-deceased Hugo Chávez, a former Lieutenant Colonel in the Venezuelan Air Forces. He gained power in Venezuela in 1998, and served as President until his death in March 2013, having won altogether four<sup>iv</sup> 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 (Democratic Action) and COPEI (Partido Socialcristiano/Social Christian Party). Advocating a political agenda called the Bolivarian Revolution<sup>v</sup> and later Socialism for the 21st Century, Chávez was a controversial figure on the national and international scene. Under Chávez's rule, the Venezuelan state expanded its involvement in social policies and the economic sector, including the vital oil sector, espousing a nationalist, anti-neoliberal and pro-poor political profile. Key to Venezuelan foreign policy under Chávez was three interrelated elements: 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 substantial international criticism as the country cultivated close relationships to countries such as Cuba, 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, but supporters claimed that these allegations to a large extent were based on ideologically and politically motivated attempts to discredit his government.<sup>vi</sup> Chávez's supporters were primarily drawn from the poor sectors of society, though he also enjoyed support from the middle classes. He died of an undisclosed form of cancer in March 2013. During his last public appearance in December 2012, he designated Foreign Minister Nicholas Maduro as his successor. Maduro won a narrow majority in the presidential elections in April 2013.

During Chávez's time in power, and continuing under Maduro, the military took on a new and more prominent role in Venezuelan politics (see Strønen, forthcoming b.). These transformations, including the formation of the Bolivarian militia, are closely related to a key dimension of the government's political-military doctrine that is conceptualized as the need to form a "civil-military alliance." The core of this doctrine rests on the forging of strong bonds of mutual identification and collaboration between the civilian population and the military (the rationale being that this proximity may prevent

excessive human rights abuses as seen in the past<sup>vii</sup>), whilst also expanding the military's role into being a key player in affairs concerning national and social development. The idea of a civil-military alliance has been concretely manifested through the military's close involvement in the execution of public policies and local development projects since the year 2000. Efforts have been particularly directed towards the poor parts of the population, and the Venezuelan military has been involved in a range of outreach programs and collaborative community efforts in both rural and urban areas. In particular, the conventional military, as well as the militia, frequently collaborates with the so-called communal councils. These are neighborhood groups primarily concerned with local social policy and infrastructure issues which, since the passing of the Law for Communal Councils in 2006, have been the main hub for local mobilization in low-income communities (Strønen 2012, 2014).<sup>viii</sup>



*Milicia* members helping out at an open-air food fair in January 2014. Photo: Iselin Åsedotter Strønen.

## 1.5 From reserve to militia

The Bolivarian militia (*Milicia Nacional Bolivariana*) came into being through a reform of the Organic Law for the National Armed Forces in 2008.<sup>ix</sup> The militia then replaced the former civilian reserve force known as the Territorial Reserve and National Mobilization (*Reserva Territorial e de la Mobilización Nacional*). According to government figures, the Militia currently consists of approximately 400,000 men and women above the age of 18. According to the government, the goal is to have one million reserves by 2019.<sup>x</sup> Some reports, however, indicate that in reality only 15 000-20 000 individuals are actually trained and ready for combat (COHA 2009)



The Bolivarian Militia is composed by two entities, the territorial militia (*la milicia territorial*) and the combat corps (*los cuerpos combatientes*). The territorial militias are territory-based defense units, organized at the parish level. The combat corps, on the other hand, consists of groups of volunteers working in public and private institutions, educational facilities or enterprises that are trained to “assure the integrity and operationality of the institution that they belong to” (Art. 50 of the Organic Law for the Armed Forces) in case of an emergency. Anyone can volunteer to participate in the militia, regardless of whether they previously served in any basic military unit. Training is carried out during the weekends, and it is non-remunerated. Whilst most members have ordinary day jobs, those who perform public services, such as standing guard, follow a work schedule and receive a minor compensation for their labor. The participants are only allowed to carry uniforms (and, depending on the activity, arms) whilst training, during assignments or during particular formal public events, such as military parades. Weapons are kept on the military base, and not in the individual members’ homes.

The formation of the National Bolivarian militia has its constitutional backing in Article 326 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, which states that: “National security is based on shared responsibility between the State and civil society.” The Bolivarian Militia is attributed a complimentary function to that of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB) “in the Integrated Defence of the nation, contributing to guarantee its independence and sovereignty” (Art. 43). The FANB, comprised by four operational military components (Art. 29), which are the Army, the Navy, the Air Force and the National Guard,<sup>xi</sup> is currently headed by General Valdimir Padrino López.<sup>xii</sup>

The operational authority over the Bolivarian Militia rests with the President of the Republic through the Strategic Operational Command (*Comando Estratégico Operacional*). The president is also the Commander-in-Chief for the Armed Forces at large, including the Bolivarian Militia. The administrative responsibility lies with the Ministry of Popular Power for Defense. The Militia is organized based on a hierarchical chain of command, headed by a Central Command (*Comando General de la Milicia Bolivariana*), which has its headquarters in the main military base of Fuerte Tiuna in Caracas.

## 1.6 Criticism and concerns

Whilst supporters of the government view the militia as a necessary component of the re-structuring of the Venezuelan armed forces, as well as an integrated part of national security, critics allege that the militia amounts to a partisan military force and a militarization of society in an already polarized country. Indeed, government critics have previously called the militia Chávez’s “praetorian guards” (Lares Martiz 2011).

These concerns form part of a broader field of criticism about how the armed forces have developed in Venezuela since the turn of the millennium (see i.e., Control Ciudadano 2011; Jácome 2011). 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 has used the motto “*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 maintain that this constitutes a partisan politicization of the Armed Forces, questioning whether the Armed Forces are committed to the defense of the nation or the defense of the government (Control Ciudadano 2011). However, government supporters argue that the motto reflects that the role of the military is to support the constitutionally elected government, and if the current government supports socialism, so should the military.<sup>xiii</sup> Similarly, public statements made by high-level political and military figures, pledging that the Armed Forces are committed to safeguarding the Bolivarian Revolution, have also sparked significant controversies (see Control Ciudadano 2013). Whilst critics of the government interpret these statements in terms of the Armed Forces not accepting an electoral victory for the opposition, government supporters allege that these comments merely refer to the Armed Forces’ commitment to

support the incumbent constitutionally elected government, which for the time being has a socialist branding.

Critics are also concerned about the use of the militia for public security purposes as well as about its role in safeguarding electoral processes. Whilst participation of the national reserve in such activities might pass relatively unnoticed 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) presence with skepticism. Although the militia is unarmed in its everyday activities, critics nevertheless seem to perceive it more as a partisan, intimidating presence than as part of public security.

## 2. Being in the militia

But how do the militia member themselves reflect upon their role and function in Venezuelan society? In the following section, I will focus on some key social, political and ideological issues that may enhance our knowledge of this particular aspect. The issues highlighted here also reflect broader political dynamics in Venezuela, again illustrating the polarized political context within which the Bolivarian militia is situated. Let us return to the field, this time to a slightly chaotic Wednesday afternoon in Plaza Bolivar, in the city center of Caracas.

*It is January 21, 2015, and I have spent most of the day in the city center with my friend Manuela and a colleague of hers. They are both public employees working with community organization in the shantytowns. The blocks around the National Assembly and Plaza Bolivar have been closed off to traffic since midday, as people wait for President Maduro who is scheduled to deliver his state-of-the-nation speech at five o' clock. Soldiers from the National Guard (Guardia Nacional) are standing at the entrance to the area, watching people through the temporary gates set up for the occasion. Manuela, her colleague and I are hanging out at a corner when a militia battalion comes towards us in a somewhat disorderly fashion. They are dressed in their grey uniforms, with red neck scarves and red T-shirts underneath. Most of them are well beyond their youth, and most of them are probably grandparents. The milicianos have a combination of seriousness and pride in their face, but very soon they start to relax a bit and talk in small groups, apparently awaiting orders to get in line and march through the gates and to Plaza Bolivar where other battalions are already gathered. I start to chat with one of them, an elderly man who must be at least 60 years old, and he tells me that they are from Petare, an enormous shantytown in eastern Caracas. He says there are nine members in his battalion, but that there are many more in Petare. After a while, a woman with a stern expression on her face also gets involved in the conversation. She tells me that she has been part of the militia for four years. All kinds of people from the community are participating, she says, and more people are joining. She had wanted to join the military ever since she was young, she confides. Even if she never becomes an ordinary soldier, she is now proud of being part of the militia. She also introduces me to some of her female companions. Both men and women get the same instructions, they say, and go on to list all the different training components they have participated in. But their main task is to stand guard in public spaces like hospitals and supermarkets, and to participate in events like this.*

*After a while, their commander tells them to get back in line. The milicianos line up uncertainly in what wants to be an orderly line, before they march towards the plaza. Manuela, her friend and I pass through the fence where the National Guard are letting people in. Plaza Bolivar is filling up with people; many of them militia members from different parts of Caracas. I strike up a conversation with several of them, and they all speak warmly of how*

*fulfilling it is to be in the force, and how men and women, old and young, are all treated as equals.*



*Militia*-members at Plaza Bolívar in Caracas awaiting the arrival of President Nicholas Maduro.  
Photo: Iselin Åsedotter Strønen

## 2.1 Women in the militia

Members of the militia are generally referred to as *milicianos y milicianas*, which points to the fact that the members are both male (-os) and female (-as). Both the government and its supporters take great pride in the high number of female soldiers both in the regular armed forces and in the militia. Indeed, increased gender equality in military institutions is part of a process towards increased gender equality on many arenas since the turn of the millennium (Strønen 2013).

Everyone interviewed for this study, including the men, were eager to point out how the militias included women and men in the same way. One woman holding the rank of *cabo primero* (corporal), emphasized that women today have a particularly important role because they carry out the duties of both women *and* men; i.e., they are both wives and mothers, as well as workers and military officers. Another woman, 49 years old, holding the rank of *cabo segundo* (lance corporal), commented that:

*I always wanted to be part of the military, but it was always for men. Women didn't study, their role was to attend to the husband and children. Now you can see that we are capable of defending the country. There are even more women than men inside the militia.*

These comments reflect quite stereotypical Latin American gender roles—that the place of the woman is at home—and also highlight the fact that the military has served as one out of many venues to challenge these gender roles. The woman cited above had to pay a price though. She confided that she had eventually gotten divorced from her husband because of her participation in the militia. “My husband didn’t like that I joined the militia even if I left everything ready for him at home,” - meaning dinner and so forth. “So I left him, I wanted to move forward.”

Rosa, a General, also indicated that women in the militia clearly challenged cultural norms: “Some say that we are just a bunch of crazy and hysterical women who cannot stand their husbands and join the militia to let out steam.” She herself, who had a high-status professional career alongside serving as a General, recalled when the military came to her school as a fifth grader and invited everyone to enlist. “But it was a thing that women simply didn’t do.” This had changed however, “with the way in which Chávez dignified women, talking about how their participation in the development of the country was just as important as that of the men, starting with his own cabinet.”

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss further the militia as part of a process towards greater gender equality in Venezuela. However, it is important to emphasize this feature, because it undoubtedly plays a role in women’s motivation to partake in the troops, and for identity formation both individually and collectively. The increased incursion of women into the public sphere in Venezuela has been notable during the past decades, and the imagery of the female social activist (*luchadora social*) had a very liberating effect for many women, constituting a collective redefinition of gender roles (Strønen 2013; Fernandes 2007). This imagery of the female activist has also been molded through the ethos of “serving the fatherland”; an ethos that holds great sway over Bolivarian ideology. For women, and not least elderly women who were previously subjected to more limited gender norms than the current young generation, the militia may provide an additional arena for self-realization late in life; it is a venue where they can exercise a public role and be part of the political and civic community.

## 2.2 Defending la patria

The notion of “defending the fatherland” is a key tenant in any military doctrine in any country. However, in Venezuela, the phrase also has a more acute ideological and political, as well as military, meaning. As the excerpt of the interview with first lieutenant Pedro at the outset of the paper makes clear, the militias are training themselves to be able to confront external military aggressions against the country. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the realism in this scenario, it is important to capture the political reasoning behind it in order to understand how this scenario is shaping political identities within the militia.

The ascendance of Chávez to power brought with it a reorganization of power within Venezuela, but also a reorganization of Venezuela’s position within the Pan-American landscape. From being a staunch US ally—the US army even had its own office within the Venezuelan military headquarter of Fuerte Tiuna—Venezuela ended up on the other side of the spectrum as Washington’s most notable opponent. However, this antagonism was not so much about Chávez’s confrontational and controversial public figure, as it was about *real politik*. Venezuela became the first country at the turn of the century to turn away from the US power sphere at a time when North-Americans thought their post-Cold War power was consolidated. Shortly thereafter, more countries followed, whilst Venezuela continued to spearhead south-south alliances that greatly reduced Washington’s power in the hemisphere. Moreover, as a steady supplier of cheap oil for decades, Venezuela was a very important country for the United States, prompting Washington to invest considerable economic and political efforts into undermining Chávez’s and, later, Maduro’s government. The exact means and ends to this aim are not a topic of this paper; accounts of both US involvements in the 2002 coup as well as financial and political support to the domestic opposition can be found elsewhere (Weissbrot 2014;

Villegas 2012; Golinger 2011, 2005; Al Jazeera 2009). What is important for the purpose of this section, however, is to capture that from the point of view of the government and its supporters, Venezuela is engaged in a prolonged conflict with Washington, which as its ultimate consequence can potentially involve military aggression either from the United States or—as its proxy—Colombia. The role of the militias in such a scenario would be both to assist the regular army, and, ultimately, to engage in asymmetric warfare. The latter is also the reason for why the militias are organized around territorial units both in urban areas (as parish-based territorial combat units) and in the countryside (as peasant militia). Viewed in this perspective, the militia and its form of military preparation may also be directly interpreted as a deterrence strategy vis-à-vis Washington.

For the members of the militia interviewed for this CMI Working Paper, the prospect of engaging in such belligerent action was part of the militia's rationale. They had all been trained accordingly. However, on an everyday basis, this was not the focus of their activities. First lieutenant Pedro, however, who was introduced earlier in the paper, had a key role in developing plans for this scenario. He explained that the militias were designed as an auxiliary force in order to ensure that the Geneva Convention covered the militia members, in case of a de facto armed conflict, as formal combatants. "There was a need to create a legal framework," he explained. He then went on to say:

*After 9/11, they (the US) started to treat everyone as terrorists, like in Afghanistan; they did not treat them as prisoners of war. Chávez had the vision of integrating in the constitution that defense was the co-responsibility (corresponsabilidad) of everyone. Within this scenario is the militia, who in their norms and structure are adapted to fit into the Geneva Convention, no matter how much this may annoy them (duela quien duela)...we will not have the same thing happening here as what happened to Gadhafi.*

In the case of a conflict, everyone would serve a role; as combatants, nurses, helpers. "Those who think that they can come here and find us asleep must think again. This is a peaceful revolution, but we are not willing to hand over the fatherland (*echar la patria*).” Rosa, the female captain, also cited the potential of having to resist external aggression as one of the reasons for her joining the militia:

*Chávez said that the defense of the nation belonged to everyone, not only the armed forces, but every Venezuelan and those who live in the country, regardless of gender, age and nationality, we all have to stand up for the security and defense of the fatherland.*

In short, many draw a line between, on the one hand, past year invasions in the name of War on Terror as well as Washington's continuous, though more covert, interference in Latin American politics, and, on the other hand, the experience of being entangled in an ongoing geo-political conflict with deep historical and political ramifications. This prospective threat has undoubtedly served to prop up patriotic and nationalist sentiments amongst parts of the Venezuelan population—both inside and outside the Bolivarian militia—which also have inspired many to join the militia.

### 2.3 Class, race and the militia

As in other Latin American countries, class and race have historically been highly ubiquitous, yet under-communicated issues in Venezuela (Strønen 2014; Wright 1990). Because of the country's colonial legacy, and in spite of racial miscegenation, class and race have been highly connected. Indeed, even today, in the case of Venezuela's capital, those living in the middle- and upper-class parts of the city, east of Sabana Grande, are notably whiter and more European looking than those living in western Caracas. Likewise, in the region's cities and in the countryside, color and class are intrinsically bound. Although the division is far from absolute, the majority of the supporters of the Chávez and, now, Maduro governments have been drawn from the poorer and more colored parts of the population.



Military service in Venezuela was compulsory during the governments prior to Chávez through the Law for Conscription and Military Enlistment of 1978.<sup>xiv</sup> However, wealthier youths commonly bought their way out of the military service, whilst their poor peers were forced to join. Backed by vagrancy laws, the military frequently carried out raids in poor neighborhoods where they rounded up young men of a suitable age who could not produce evidence of work or studies and shipped them off to the barracks. Higher-ranking positions within the military were occupied by those who were politically well connected and of higher socio-economic standing, creating a military hierarchy that was infused by both racial and class-based differentiations.

Identity politics revolving around class and race have been a key feature of social identities within pro-government sectors starting with Chávez's electoral victory—Chávez being of mixed race himself—in 1999. Indeed, not only did this political shift bring to the surface how Venezuelan society was saturated with structurally embedded class and race prejudices, but it also created a new paradigm of identity politics and the projection of people of color and low economic standing into the public sphere. These shifts have also been observed within the military, which underwent major changes in leadership the years following Chávez's victory. Because of the military coup in 2002, a number of the high-ranking military officials emerging from military elites in the pre-Chávez era were "outed" as disloyal to the government and replaced. Moreover, the Armed Forces at large also underwent major changes, such as opening civic education to the general public as well as actively seeking to attract men and women of color and with lower socio-economic backgrounds. In effect, the Armed Forces changed both its internal and external imagery as well as its elitist composition. First lieutenant Pedro put it this way:

*Before, the military was racist and classist. Those of higher rank were daddy's and mammy's boys from los Palos Grandes (an upper-middle class neighborhood), now those attending the (military) academy are from Catia and Petare (working-class and shantytown neighborhoods).*

With this shift, the status and treatment of lower-level soldiers had also changed, several maintained. Beatrice, one of the women interviewed for this study, stated that:

*Before, in the military, and I saw this through my brothers (who served), the recruits were brought in (by force), mistreated, many of them died, and the officers said that they had committed suicide. Now there are still rules and regulations, but the doors have been opened.*

Seen together, these changes are key features of the idea of a civil-military alliance as the government's military doctrine espouses. This openness between "the people" and the Armed Forces is also central to militia members' self-perception as representing an institution that was radically changed and demystified in the recent past. The female captain introduced above explained that:

*Before, the military was a small elite over there, and the only contact they had with society was with their family, and the only contact that civilians had with the military was if they had someone in their family there.*

This "opening up" is also reflected in the fact that many formerly closed military spaces such as the military compound of Fuerte Tiuna, the recreational clubs of the Armed Forces, as well as the military hospital (*Hospital Militar de Caracas*), have been opened up to the general public.<sup>xv</sup> In short, from the militia members' point of view, the armed forces are perceived as a democratized arena in comparison with the closed off, elitist organization that they were before.



*Hanging out at Plaza Bolívar in Caracas. Photo: Iselin Åsedotter Strønen*

## 2.4 Loyalty and discipline

Upon being asked about what she thought was the essence of the Bolivarian militia, a female first lieutenant answered: “Being alert and prepared,<sup>xvi</sup> loyalty, respect, discipline, work, civic-military union, being united.” Indeed, the notion of being taught discipline and respect—a key feature of any military education in any country—was a recurring theme in all the interviews. However, within the militia, this notion took on an additional meaning given that many of those interviewed performed public service, such as guarding public sites and actively interacting with local communities, on a regular basis. As part of that task, many of them viewed themselves as “educators” in the sense of providing a good example to the rest of the population. Marta, the female lieutenant, for example, recounted that she had for a long time served as a facilitator and guard at a refugee center. The center was accommodating people who had lost their homes in the 2010 torrential rains and who were waiting to be assigned a new home through the government’s public housing program, *Gran Misión Vivivenda Venezuela*. She said:

*It makes me feel good. I have been around the refugees, and one tries to set a standard, because sometimes you interact with people who are not (well-behaved)... we are trying to*

*teach them about respect, perspective, perseverance...above all respect, that is what we are trying to instill in people. Teaching them to be respectable people (gente) because sometimes they arrive behaving badly. We learn about these things through listening to our superiors, learning not to fall into provocations caused by people who behave badly.*

Maria's choice of wording coincides with a broader discourse in Venezuelan society, which denounces how people have lost their manners and sense of respect towards each other and society (Strønen 2014). This is an "everyday discourse" which is corroborated in people's minds by low levels of social trust and high levels of crime and intrapersonal conflicts. Maria and several of the other interviewees underscored not only how joining the militia had made them better people, but also that the militia had gained people's respect through living up to higher standards in their public performances. Hence, being part of the militia was also embedded in moral discourse, as an arena where ordinary people could become better people, setting a new standard for others in the process. A neighbor of an elderly female militia member, for example, told me how her neighbor had previously just been hanging out in her home all day, chain smoking, and bad-mouthing others. Now, she had joined the militia, taken up studies in spite of her advanced age, and was spending most of her time performing public services. She had become a new person, the neighbor confided, setting an example for the whole neighborhood. In that regard, it is also important to underscore that many non-militia members alleged that in their public appearances, militia members have a very courteous and self-sacrificing behavior, making them well respected amongst large parts of the population.

## 2.5 The militia, Chávez and the fatherland

The important symbolic role of the late Hugo Chávez in Venezuelan politics is indisputable; though it is frequently also over-accentuated to the expense of understanding the porousness of formal political power as well as popular agency (Strønen 2014, Ciccariello-Maher 2013). Whilst alive, Chávez frequently displayed his military rank through leading military ceremonies wearing military uniform. His capacity to engage with, lead and control the Armed Forces with all likelihood was central to the stability of his government after 2002.

An analysis of how Chávez was talked of amongst those *milicianos* and *milicianas* interviewed for this research, reveals that they looked to him as an inspirational force much the same as people who said how he inspired them to participate in social and political activism (Strønen 2014). Several of those interviewed said that when Chávez called for people to join the militia, they felt inspired to sign up. The female general cited above said that:

*When Chávez invited people to join the militia, many people, who just like me had never served in the military, signed up. Chávez said that the defense of the nation was not only a responsibility of the armed forces, but of all Venezuelans and of everyone who lives in Venezuela, regardless of gender, age, nationality. Everyone has to watch over the security and defense of the fatherland.*

One woman, a second lieutenant, said that: *"El Comandante was my leader. He was a great communicator, a socialist, revolutionary, a very beautiful legacy."*

Along with citing Chávez as a major source of inspiration, those interviewed also underscored how the love for the fatherland compelled them to serve in the militia. One woman, a second lieutenant, said that "it feels like one is supporting the fatherland, as if one is the daughter of Bolívar,<sup>xvii</sup> as if I am doing something for my country, for my *tierra*,<sup>xviii</sup> and it feels powerful." Asked what she likes the most about being in the militia, the general cited above said:

*I like everything about it, I cannot say that I like one thing over the other. If someone does not like it, then they leave. Because it is a lot of responsibility. Everyone likes to rest at home, to go to the beach. But if you have to be on duty, you go. For the love of your fatherland. That is what motivates one the most. I guess everyone has the potential for this feeling inside, but Chávez managed to wake it up. He made people conscious of who they are.*



Hugo Chávez (in front with back towards the camera) in 2009 at a ceremony in the military fort and museum *Cuartel de la Montaña* in the popular neighborhood of 23 de Enero. This fort is also where his remains are now guarded. Visitors may pass by his coffin, which is guarded by four soldiers. Photo: Iselin Åsedotter Strønen

## 2.6 Political polarization

A concern amongst critics is that the militia is in effect a partisan force with the potential to act repressively in the case of a domestic conflict.<sup>xix</sup> The government has vehemently denied these allegations, arguing that the militia is a national reserve force bound by its constitutional mandate. However, it is important to recognize that Venezuela's high and long-lasting levels of political polarization and political instability have created a situation whereby many of those opposed to the government are deeply distrustful of all its institutions. Moreover, the police force in particular, and to a lesser extent the military, have a record of human rights abuses. Additionally, corruption is



widespread in both forces. To this researcher's knowledge, there have not been cases whereby the militia has been accused of any such actions, but their association with the government's security apparatus at large automatically provokes distrust amongst part of the population.

At the same time, the government's supporters are deeply distrustful of elements of the opposition that have both demonstrated in the past, or are ambivalent about, their willingness to dispose of the government with un-constitutional means if necessary. In view of this complex socio-political scenario, it may be understandable both that sectors of society distrust the militia, and that the militia has become politicized.

In interviews with militia members, the politically divergent views on the Armed Forces and the militia came up several times. One woman, a second lieutenant, said that: "For me, this love for the fatherland that I feel (through being part of the militia) is something powerful, something that the *esqualidos* (opposition supporters) don't understand."

Another woman, a first lieutenant, upon being asked what the population thought about the militia, answered:

*There are always people of the opposition that are more skeptical, who are always looking for the negative side of things, they bad-mouth us, say that we are a bunch of loonies, but there are also some who appreciate what we do and try to approach you and spend time with us.*

When asked about how they viewed their role vis-à-vis the political opposition, all of those interviewed stated that their task was to defend the fatherland and the population at large, independently of their political stance. "When the bombs fall, they fall over everyone alike, *chavistas* or *esqualidos*," Pedro said. One of the women interviewed confided that she had at first thought it annoying that they had to prepare to protect the *esqualidos*, given that they criticize and dislike the militia so much. However, then she had participated in a "talk in order to broaden our consciousness," and she had realized that the militia's task was defending everyone, regardless of political position. She also confided that on another occasion:

*...we were talking about how to help out in a case of a civil war, and at first it seemed strange to me, I became very egoistic, but then we had a workshop about how to protect them (the opposition) as well.*

It is beyond the scope of this CMI Working Paper to venture further into an analysis of how politically contentious notions of constitutionalism, patriotism, nationalism and partisanship are conceptualized and reconciled within the militia's discourse and practice. However, this research material indicates that whilst the militia members are undoubtedly by and large drawn mainly, if not solely, from pro-government ranks, or at least not from pro-opposition sectors, focus on public service and national defense against external aggression is a far more central ideological tenant than accentuating existing political polarization. That being said, more research is undoubtedly needed in order to gain further knowledge into political, ideological and operational training of the militia, as well as further analysis of the current ideological formations taking place within the Armed Forces at large.



### 3. Concluding thoughts

*A quick ride on the back of the motorcycle, and Pedro and I stop in front of an open door next to a church in western Caracas. He has taken me to visit the house that he and his fellow comrades in the local militia force are remodeling in order to have a meeting space in their community. The emblem of the local militia troop is painted outside on the pink concrete wall. We step into a room where the five or six people present engage in some form of activity and converse somewhat jokingly. They are all well above 40 years old, wearing a uniform. They greet me with a firm handshake as Pedro introduces me as a student (no matter how old I get and how I introduce myself, people in Venezuela still label me a student) wanting to learn more about the militia. The room is obviously in the middle of being redone; there are sand, pieces of furniture and construction material everywhere. Two female officers are sitting behind two desks, typing. Some rifles made from wood are hanging from the wall.*

*Pedro shows me around; there are two rooms and a little kitchenette. “We are doing the remodeling slowly. We receive no money and it is all done on a voluntary basis, so we are dependent on what we can muster ourselves with support from the community.” I sit down with one of the women and ask if we can do an interview. She agrees, and someone brings me a coffee. She is a lieutenant in the militia and chirurgical nurse in her everyday life. She is a bit shy at first, but as she starts talking, she warms up. She speaks warmly of the militia, of how much it has meant for elderly people—“before they were like furniture in their home” she adds—about how much it has meant for women, for herself. “It is wonderful to be in socialism,” she says, almost passionate at one point. After a lengthy conversation, I need to leave, but before I do so, I ask to take a photo of them. They all line up in front of the wall next to the entrance door where three photos hang in a frame next to each other: Hugo Chávez, Simon Bolivar, and Nicholas Maduro. Afterwards they want to take pictures with me—Venezuelans love their smart phones. As I leave, they all greet me cheerfully before Pedro takes me down again to the city center.*

The Bolivarian Militia in Venezuela is surrounded by a high degree of controversy and speculation. At the same time, little is known about the internal dynamics of the force. This CMI Working Paper has contributed to enhancing our understanding of the political and ideological profile of the force through inquiring into who the militia members are and how they interpret the role of force. The Bolivarian militia seems to perceive its *raison d’être* as being dual: to serve as un-armed public servants concretely manifesting the idea of a civil-military alliance—or as “the transition between the people and the army,” as one woman put it—and to have the potential to act as an auxiliary force to the Armed Forces in a crisis.

Evidently, as this CMI Working Paper is more concerned with the ideological profile of the force and how it should be interpreted within a broader political, social and cultural terrain in Venezuela, the exact operational training of the force is a subject for future research. It is worthwhile mentioning however, that there is reason to believe that the actual belligerent capacity of the force is far less than the official estimates of its size (COHA 2009). “Anecdotal evidence” suggests that the operational training is often patchy, superficial and varies greatly from area to area, and that the bulk of enlisted *milicianos* and *milicianas*—a great number of them more advanced in age—are in effect limited to participating either in social work or at symbolic events. However, this is also an area that requires further research.



*Militia members lined up and ready to go. Photo: Iselin Åsedotter Strønen*

Another tentative conclusion is that the lengthy and deep-seated polarization in Venezuela, which in its essence has created radically different narratives about the nature of Venezuelan democracy, patriotism, nationalism and indeed the legitimacy of the Venezuelan state, has created a politicization of the Armed Forces at large. At the same time, there is reason to believe that the constitutionalist and nationalist heritage, (as well as de facto heterodoxy of political viewpoints inside the Armed Forces<sup>xx</sup>) counteracts a potential accentuation of social antagonisms from within the force.

Finally, it is important to perceive of the Venezuelan Armed Forces, including the Bolivarian Militia, as an arena that is deeply interlinked with other social arenas that have become both transformed and ideologized in the Chávez era. The public reformulation of identity politics related to class and race that has taken place in Venezuela is, perhaps with few exceptions,<sup>xxi</sup> unprecedented in Latin America. This has also greatly reformed all institutions within the ambit of the state, including the way that the Armed Forces is organized, its composition, its active and ideological role, and the image it projects to the public. Concurrently, as we can draw from the analysis above, people of color and of low socio-economic background take great pride in being part of the militia because it means a redefined form of active—and inclusive—citizenship to them.

In conclusion then, and recognizing that Venezuela is currently in rough political and economic waters, how the size and operational capacity of the Bolivarian militia will develop remains to be seen. Nevertheless, what is certain is that the force cannot be analyzed separately from an intimate understanding of how it is linked to cultural politics, socio-economic stratification, international geopolitics, and *real politik* in broader Venezuelan society.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The analysis is based on academic engagement with Venezuela over a period of ten years, in addition to ethnographic fieldwork specifically on civil-military relations in Venezuela in December 2014 and January 2015. In addition to participant observation and document studies, research material on the militia includes five lengthy, taped interviews with militia members from different battalions and ranks in Caracas, as well as informal conversations with approximately a dozen others.

<sup>ii</sup> Special thanks go to Nefissa Naguib for inviting me to join the Everyday Maneuvres-project and for valuable feedback on my project contributions. I am also grateful for my patient and generous interlocutors in Venezuela, as well as Keyler Monzon, Zulay Rodriguez and Maykeli Urbina for help in the field.

<sup>iii</sup> All names of those interviewed have been changed. None of those who appears on the photos are cited in the text.

<sup>iv</sup> In 1998, in the year 2000 (new elections were held after the passing of a new constitution in 1999), in 2006, and 2012.

<sup>v</sup> The Chávez government's political philosophy was deeply inspired by the life and thoughts of Simon Bolivar, the national hero from the Wars of Independence who liberated Venezuela and other countries from Spanish rule.

<sup>vi</sup> 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. Since Maduro's electoral victory, Venezuela has lived through a series of political and economic hardships and conflicts. The global fall in oil prices in combination with domestic inflation and scarcity of basic goods have put the country's economy under heavy pressure. In early 2014, the country was rocked by a series of student protests against the government that quickly developed into violent protests and riots by middle-class youth; a mode of protest in Venezuela often referred to as *guarimbas*. Altogether, 42 people died in the weeks that followed; about half of them were anti-government protestors, and the rest government supporters, random passers-by, and security personnel (see i.e., Robertson 2014). A number of security personnel were subsequently charged for human rights abuses. Leopoldo Lopez, founder and leader of the oppositional political party, Un Nuevo Tiempo, was charged, and later convicted of inciting to lethal violent protests with the purpose of toppling the government. The trial and later conviction has been surrounded with significant controversy. As this CMI Working Paper comes to completion, Venezuela is preparing for elections to the National Assembly in December 2015. Over the past months, there has been a build-up of tensions and fear that the elections will incite further political unrest.

<sup>vii</sup> In particular, the popular uprising in 1989 called *el Caracazo*, whereby the army massacred hundreds, maybe thousands of poor protestors, was central for breaking down the internal moral of the Armed Forces. This event is also central to the idea of a civil-military alliance, with the rationale that an army that is intimately intertwined with "the people" heightens the threshold for carrying out gross human rights violations.

<sup>viii</sup> In recent years, there has been a growing concern in the population, including pro-government sectors, that the military has become too central a player in domestic economic affairs, and in the process has also become a major source of corruption.

<sup>ix</sup> The militia was given its current name in an additional reform in 2009.

<sup>x</sup> <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>

<sup>xi</sup> An additional branch is the Presidential Guard of Honor, but this branch does not form part of the operational branch of FANB.



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<sup>xii</sup> Prior to General López, the head of the Armed Forces was a woman, Admiral Carmen Meléndez Rivas (2013-2014).

<sup>xiii</sup> [http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2007/05/12/actualidad/1178920801\\_850215.html](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2007/05/12/actualidad/1178920801_850215.html)

<sup>xiv</sup> A new law for military enrollment was passed in 2009. Under this law, registering for military service is compulsory for both men and women, but there are a number of conditions (i.e., academic status, medical conditions, role within the family) that exempt potential recruits from service. Forced conscription is not practiced.

<sup>xv</sup> See <http://www.cmi.no/news/?1486=civil-military-relations-in-venezuelaby-the-pool>

<sup>xvi</sup> I have here translated the expression *rodilla en tierra* to “alert and prepared,” although the expression’s literal meaning is “knees on the ground.” However, as the expression is derived from the visual imagery of a soldier kneeling for a better aim, its implicit meaning is to be “alert and prepared” for combat.

<sup>xvii</sup> Bolívar here refers to Simón Bolívar, the Venezuelan-born liberation hero from the Wars of Independence.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Tierra*, which literally means “earth, soil, ground,” is here used as an emotive expression referring to one’s country.

<sup>xix</sup> Part of the reason for the militia being referred to as “a paramilitary force” is because, allegedly, many of the members of the so-called *colectivos* have also enlisted. The term *colectivos* (literally meaning “a collective”) is a very ambiguous term in Venezuela. In its original, strict sense, it may refer to popular, territorial-based organizations, some of them armed (as is many others in the Venezuelan population). Historically, they have their roots in the combative neighborhood of 23 *de Enero* in western Caracas, where they emerged as a response to state violence and the emergence of organized, drug-related crime in the 1980s (Strønen 2014, Ciccariello-Maher 2013). Historically, they have had a leftist political grounding. Many of them still do, but there are also newer groups that call themselves *colectivos* but which have nothing to do with their original, political, localized roots. Hence, in its wider sense, *colectivo* is just a way to denote (or self-identify) any kind of group that may deal with any kind of cultural, social, community-based etc. activity. Having a popular base, many of the politically oriented *colectivos* played a central role in defeating the 2002 coup, and some of them have also come out strongly in favor of the Bolivarian revolution—even though their loyalty to the government as such may be overstated and requires a more refined analysis (Strønen 2014, Ciccariello-Maher 2013). There have also been incidents of political violence conducted by *colectivo* members such as an attack on Globovision in 2009, which was repudiated by Chávez. The *colectivos* also hold ambivalent roles in their own communities, because they tend to monopolize territorial control (Strønen 2014). As Duno-Gottberg (2009) as well as Ciccariello-Maher (2014) have suggested, the idea of the *colectivos* is a powerful imagery in Venezuela for the middle and upper classes, evoking associations of a violent, faceless, savage horde. Drawing on this imagery, the *colectivos* have on occasion been accused, sometimes without evidence or substantiation, of terrorizing political opponents, such as during the opposition-led riots in 2014, when masked men on motorcycles terrorized middle-class neighborhoods at nighttime. Local oppositional media and oppositional social media accounts quickly reported (and this was picked up by international media) that the *colectivos* (or the Bolivarian circles, which is another form of popular organization that in reality has seized to exist) were behind it. The *colectivos* that stood accused vehemently denied being involved. The identity of the perpetrators was never known, and my own inquiries also fail to substantiate the claim that the *colectivos* were involved. Hence, the riders could as well be either some random group of people acting on their own or planned *provocateurs*. However, to sum up, the imagery of the *colectivos* evoke a very particular form of political semiotics in Venezuela, and through being linked with these, this imagery plays into the characterization of the militia as a paramilitary force. That being said, it is very likely that there are people who are both part of a

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colectivo of some sort as well as the militia, though there is so far no evidence that the militia has been used as a paramilitary force in any way.

<sup>xx</sup> It is important to realize that in spite of the high level of politicization and usage of political symbolism in state institutions, including the Armed Forces, not everyone working within those institutions is ideologically committed on a personal level. Rather, in addition to those who may have an ideological leaning, the institutions are filled with careerists, pragmatists and opportunists (Strønen forthcoming a), Strønen 2014). In that regard, it is important to be aware that “state culture,” in terms of party membership, alliances, perks and promotions, has always been politicized in Venezuela ever since the days of Acción Democrática and COPEI (Strønen 2014). This was also historically the case for the Armed Forces (Trinkunas 2002).

<sup>xxi</sup> I am here thinking of the cultural and political transformations that have been taking place in Bolivia and Ecuador in roughly the same time period.

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**INDEXING TERMS**

Venezuela, Bolivarian militia,  
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**PHOTO:**

Iselin Åsedotter Strønen

In 2008, the government of now-deceased President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela passed a law creating what is known as the Bolivarian militia (Milicia Bolivariana), a reserve force composed by civilian volunteers supplementing the ordinary branches of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana-FANB). The formation of the Bolivarian militia has sparked significant controversy in Venezuela and beyond, reflecting the polarization in the country between supporters and opponents of the governments of Chávez and his predecessor, Nicholas Maduro. Drawing on ethnographic research and interviews with militia members, this CMI Working Paper will analyze the ideological and political profile of the Bolivarian militia. Highlighting how class, gender, and political identities are cornerstones of the militia members' allegiance to the force, this analysis helps enhance our understanding of why many ordinary citizens have voluntarily signed up for service. The Working Paper concludes that the Bolivarian militia must be understood in tandem with an analysis of broader political and cultural aspects of Venezuelan society in recent years, not least the accentuation of political polarization taking place during the past decades.