

“The Government Sponsored Gang of Venezuela”

by

George W. Knox, Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION

It's a street gang. It's a revolutionary organization. It's an undeclared arm of one South American government. The Tupamaro gang of Venezuela is all these things and more. Connected where it really counts, the Tupamaro's favorite "home boy" is former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Today it is a gang supported by the successor of Chavez - - - Nicholas Maduro.

And its fortunes are arguably tied to those of the president. As this gang threat analysis goes to print, Chavez was licking his wounds after the defeat of a referendum to widen his already considerable political powers. He was replaced by Nicholas Maduro by means of support from the government of Cuba. A gang that loses its political protection is a gang that in a democratic society - - - a hope for Venezuela - - - might be less of a threat to public safety.

The gang's formal name is *el Movimiento Tupamaro de Venezuela*. The gang has the common earmarks of criminal activity found in modern gangs in any other part of the world, but less typically, it has consciously adopted the model of urban guerrilla warfare. The gang intentionally identifies with and uses the same name as the Tupamaros urban guerrilla terrorist organization having its origin in Uruguay. The Venezuela Tupas — as they are called in the short form --- are a hybrid gang using the name Tupamaros. What is most troubling about this kind of gang is that apparent ease of its transition from political extremist street gang to a state-sponsored gang.

WHY IS IT A STREET GANG AND NOT A FOREIGN TERRORIST ORGANIZATION?

Given the group's overt identification with the guerrilla group in Uruguay, the question must be asked: why is it a street gang and not solely a foreign terrorist organization? Well, the Tupas are not considered as a domestic terrorist group by the Venezuelan government. The Tupas

are considered “overzealous youth” by the government. These youths, usually at the direction of their adult leaders, have committed numerous acts of violence over the years in support of their collective identity. The recurrent illegal activity makes it a street gang. The level of violence and the political sophistication of the gang make it something else indeed.

When asked, the Tupas do not describe themselves to be a gang or a state sponsored terrorist organization. They would probably consider themselves freedom fighters. Of course, many large and powerful urban gangs in America operate the same way: denying their destructive impact, and using public relations to try and give the impression they are “helping the oppressed peoples”. (Although the rhetoric is different, this ploy is identical to Al Capone offering free soup to Chicago’s poor.)

It’s interesting for a gang/political organization to declare itself a group of freedom fighters, when the fact is, some of the top leaders of the Tupas today work for the government of Venezuela.. Can you argue this gang is just part of the “status quo” — but again, it is just not that simple, as will be seen.

Criminal justice officials in Venezuela have recognized the Tupas as a violent gang controlling the streets of what is called “January 23” or “el 23” a large area in Caracas. It is an area famous for its tall buildings taken over by local peasants almost half a century ago. Make no mistake about it today, if you want to safely walk or travel in “el 23”, then you need the protection of the Tupas. This same designation as an armed group of thugs, a kind of Venezuelan mafia, a gang has been made by other observers as well. But in Venezuela, street gangs are not called “street gangs”, they are more likely to be called “bands” that sell illegal drugs. (Note: The American terminology of “street gang” is not commonly used in Venezuela, despite the fact that one can readily find “SUR 13” gang graffiti all over the country, especially in its correctional facilities.)

Close observers of Venezuela, writers who have followed the situation there, have also regarded the Tupamaros as a “vigilante/criminal Caracas gang” (Dudley and Gunson, 2004). Similarly, a former Mayor of Caracas, Alfredo Pena, not only described the Tupamaros specifically as a “street gang”, but one that was in a patron/client relationship with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez (Sanchez, 2002). In the mix of politics and violence, it is not unusual that in this part of the world the Tupamaros have also been recently regarded as a “Death Squad” (Noriega, 2006) because of their military organization and their use of vigilante justice over the years.

Indeed, Noriega (2006) contributes to the case that the Tupamaros could be a state-sponsored gang, specifically functioning as a “Death Squad”. The Tupamaros, Noriega points out, have a long history of “extra legal violence” and there have been numerous and recurrent examples of armed members of the Tupamaros targeting anyone who could be construed as a political enemy of Chavez. Thus, today the Tupamaros are also called a “vigilante police force” operating under the color of law (Johnson, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

Most of the information analyzed here comes from publicly available sources. This includes the area of print and electronic journalism. Other sources include government reports, testimony transcripts, the previous literature, and the Internet. These secondary sources were

supplemented with primary data in the form of anonymous interview debriefings of tourists and others who had cause to travel to Latin American countries where they may have had experiences that would provide insights that shed light on the issues being studied. Historical analysis including the use of the case study is also used as an analytical technique for the research reported here. Some insights were gained through anonymous sources who had worked in Caracas, Venezuela.

ORIGINS OF THE TUPAMAROS STREET GANG

The gang has its origin in the city of Caracas, Venezuela. Today, its primary center of operations is concentrated in an area of turf located on the west side of Caracas. This is a decidedly political gang, indeed one that identifies with a kind of Robin Hood mythology that surrounds how peasants and the urban poor in Uruguay and elsewhere romanticize the exploits of the original Tupamaros based in Uruguay.

When the real Uruguay Tupamaros were being targeted for extermination in Uruguay, some fled to countries like Venezuela. Some landed in a “ghetto area” of Caracas called “el 23 de Enero”. The Venezuela Tupas are basically a hybrid gang that borrowed their name from the Tupas of Uruguay. Most of the ideological views in the Uruguay Tupas (affinity towards Marxist-Leninism and Maoism) are found in the Tupas found today in Venezuela.

It is clear that some of the founding members of the Tupamaro gang resided in “el 23” during the 1970s. It is true as well that they all had and continue to have a connection of sorts — this will be explained — to a famous piece of property called the “23 de Enero”. The 23 de Enero is a famous apartment block, which once housed wealthier government officials during the dictatorship of General Marcos Perez Jimenez (what is called the Third Republic in Venezuelan history). On January 23, 1958 a new type of government was founded at the same time peasants and the urban poor seized the apartments at 23 de Enero. This uprising of the urban poor marked the birth of the Fourth Republic. If anyone wanted to “get in touch” with the Tupamaros, a lot of them still reside at this important location. Residents since 1958 have laid their claims to the property and it has remained a hotbed of radicalism now going on half a century. Growing up in this environment of radicalism is believed to account for the birthplace of the Tupamaros.

It was in the 1970's that the Tupamaros in Uruguay were crushed by the government of that nation. Apparently some of the sympathizers or relatives of the original Tupamaros were forced into exile and took refuge at the now famous “23 de Enero”. Like the Crips in Los Angeles who once the gang name was publically recognized, various “sets” or factions evolved for the Tupas, and like the Crips it was based on residential propinquity — where they lived in a barrio that determined what “set” or faction they would become attached to.

Claims that the Tupa gang emerged in 1970's are unfounded. Another unfounded claim is that the gang started in 1984. It got a boost and motivation to finally emerge as an organizational identity in the 1980's, through the violence that ran rampant at the time.

There is much disagreement among sources about when, exactly, the Venezuelan Tupas first began to operate as a group or organization by the name of the identity they hold today. We believe that some of the seemingly inconsistent claims can be integrated into a larger and more accurate truth.

First, some of the self-serving legends of the rise of the Tupas claim the gang's genesis

dates to the 1970's. The truth, though, is that they had not surfaced in Venezuela by that identity as a functioning or cohesive group. But in the 1970s there was a mixing of cultural and socialization influences. As already mentioned, real Tupamaro guerrillas were fleeing from Uruguay, some settled in "el 23" — a free place to live, it has been known as a community that is a hot bed of radicalism since 1958. The people that live there share a resistance mentality because they are all squatters. Which is why there is much deterioration of the infrastructure of the buildings on the property in this area.

The reader must understand that "el 23" is a large ghetto or barrio, one of the most well known in the world for political activists. Today nearly 300,000 people live in el 23. Bizarrely, but perhaps inevitably, El 23 is also branded "Area 23" and is marketed as a political sightseeing destination for American leftist tours organized to visit Venezuela ("Sight Seeing: You Can Videotape the Revolution" is the common theme of these political tourist trips to Caracas).

Although the Tupas group doesn't date to the 1970s, some current members came of age in that decade, and emerged from the cauldron of "resistance sentiments" found in the "el 23" community. And their antipathy towards larger society was tipped to the boiling point in the 1980's when violence became a way of life among the urban poor. Drug gangs in particular began to wreak havoc there as they did in many other parts of the world including the United States. Certainly there were remnants of what today are the Tupas who were engaged in guerrilla activities in the late 1980's, and so they could say, in all honesty, that they have been in the business for about 20 years, but it is more accurate to place their actual emergence in the year 1992.

Some accounts date the birth of the Venezuelan Tupamaros to 1984. The attribution is based on the observation that vigilante attacks against drug dealers began about this same time in 1984. But inside the "el-23" there is a long history of hanging certain types of criminals in acts of "street justice" by a hastily formed group of vigilantes. The people in "el-23" have always felt "defensive" and "insecure". And while there may have been elements of what would later become the Tupas, they were not attracting any attention that we could document in 1984 by the name of "Tupamaros". It might be more reasonable to conclude that in 1984, the Tupas were in their embryonic state — about to emerge officially in 1992.

But it was 1992 that gives the clear evidentiary connection to the Tupas, their emergence and function by that name, as an organizational entity. And it was also in 1992 that saw the opportunity for the Tupas, in prison, to be placed into closer contact with the person known today as President Hugo Chavez.

Chavez was elected in 1998 as president of Venezuela. Thus, some reports erroneously attribute the emergence of the Tupas in 1998 as well. The Tupas worked hard in 1998 getting Chavez elected. They were up and running before 1998.

But in 1992, Chavez was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Venezuelan Army and he tried, unsuccessfully, to take over the government in a failed *coup d' etat*. When the coup failed, Chavez went to prison for two years. While doing time, he met the Tupas. Chavez needed the protection that the Tupa gang could offer, and the Tupas needed the resources and opportunities that Chavez could offer. They have worked well together ever since then in a *quid pro quo* relationship. Chavez was released from prison on March 26, 1994 and went on to be elected as president four years later (1998).

FACTIONS OF THE TUPAMARO GANG

The “original gangster” of the Tupamaros identity is probably the faction calling itself the “Revolutionary Tupamaro Movement” (MRT), headed by Jose Pinto. Jose Pinto holds the rank of General Secretary of the MRT. Oswaldo Kanica is the MRT president.

Another faction in another neighborhood is called the “Tupamaro Popular Resistance Front”, and is headed up by Lisandro Perez.

These are the two main factions of the Tupas. And the MRT constitutes the vast majority of actual Tupa members in Venezuela. This analysis is primarily concerned with the MRT faction.

THE BIPOLAR POLITICAL IDENTITY: REBEL FIGHTERS, AND DEFENDERS OF STATUS QUO

A kind of dynamic tension exists in the structure and function of the Tupamaros street gang in Venezuela. Call it a political bipolar disorder, if you will, drawing the gang into what seems a kind of dialectical contradiction. The thesis is they are “revolutionaries”, the anti-thesis is that they work for and try to strengthen the existing government of “Chavez”, perhaps the synthesis will be that they will prosper in the new “quid pro quo” relationship and become what they have fought against.

It is a curious identity that we find in the Tupamaro street gang. On the one hand it identifies most specifically with being a guerilla warfare organization, dedicated to fighting the powers that be and seeking to implement its own type of revolution. On the other hand, it functions as a kind of armed paramilitary group that fervently defends and supports the controversial president of Venezuela — Hugo Chavez.

The contradiction here is that the identity of freedom fighter or urban guerilla organization is typically “at odds with” or antagonistic to the status quo. Here, in the case of the Tupamaros street gang of Venezuela, we find they have laid claim to the cloak of freedom fighter, but apparently with a new twist: they do not want a new revolution, they like who they have now — Chavez.

How useful is it to have a group like the Tupamaros if you are President Chavez?
Absolutely essential.

Whenever any organized protest is about to unfold against the current President Hugo Chavez, the Tupamaros can always be counted on to quickly mobilize and materialize as the “loyal opposition”. The Tupamaros will be there as counter-protesters whose banners and protest signs will read “Viva Chavez”. The Tupamaros are the dependable cheerleaders of the Chavez regime. They are his muscle, his street cred, his street theater, his propaganda artists.

The portion of their identity that is “guerilla fighter” is reserved for fighting against police, judges, and others who they need to intimidate. And, as will be shown, this is a gang totally capable of some well-organized, military scale violence.

Normally, a true dyed in the wool guerilla fighter such as the “original Tupamaros” urban guerilla fighting organization from Uruguay, would fight against the existing leader of the regime. The anomaly here is that rather than seeking a violent revolution against Chavez, the Tupamaros of Caracas (the knock off version of the Tupamaros), engage in political violence, but mostly in

defense of the regime leader. They are not regime-change oriented, they are defenders of the status quo. Which is quite an intellectual contradiction as revolutionary posturing goes.

The fact that the gang has never protested against President Hugo Chavez, but has always acted as the armed defender of Chavez, reinforces the common belief that the Tupamaros gang is state-sponsored. This is the only theory that accounts for all of the inconsistent tendencies of the gang.

The gang is cultivated and subsidized to support a political incumbent. The social organization of Venezuela is becoming one that is difficult to distinguish from say a country like Cuba. In Cuba, the government achieves somewhat the same thing by means of the “C.D.R.” (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution). These are like Cuban block clubs, that become the eyes and the ears for the government. The same development now characterizes Venezuela, where they are called “Community Councils” which become organized into cooperatives. In Venezuela, there are social welfare incentives (food, housing, health care, etc) that get added to the decision-making for why a lot of people join into these collectives. Chavez reportedly uses funds from the nation’s oil revenue to fund misiones for the poorest citizens.

A push for the development of something equivalent to Cuba’s CDR’s is coming from President Chavez. CDR’s are needed in Venezuela because there exists such an explosive potential for civil war. Some of the extremist groups in Venezuela want a civil war. Some, like the Tupamaros, expect a civil war. The Tupamaros gang is capable of provoking a civil war to achieve some of the violent goals they have espoused over the years.

There is a connection between Cuba and the Tupamaros. Juan Contreras has been a life long member of the Tupas and has been a key organizer for the Coordinator Simon Bolivar (CSB). The CSB is just like the CDR. The CSB is the political front group of the Tupamaros and recognized as such by the citizens of Venezuela. It is the single most important community organization in “el 23”. From the two massive roof towers at “el 23” the flags flying show the colors of the CSB ---- which says “this property administered by the Tupamaros”.

Juan Contreras therefore is a major leader inside the Tupamaro gang. He is also Cuban trained. Before 1992, the Tupas operated entirely underground. After the 1992 failed coup, Venezuelan police were rounding up leftists — and the heat was on. So Contreras along with 29 other leftists from “el 23” fled to Cuba and returned shortly thereafter to Caracas. On or about August of 1993, the Tupas created the CSB. In Cuba, he would have quickly learned about the CDR — you cannot walk anywhere in Havana without being in someone’s CDR “human radar”. It was probably one of the first lessons Contreras learned from Cuba — how to protect a neighborhood.

IDENTIFIERS OF THE TUPAMARO GANG

One of the long standing “identifiers” of the Tupa gang is that they have historically worn a “hood” to hide their face and conceal their identity. These “hoods” are nothing more than dark, black or brown or blue in color, knit face masks that also roll up as a “hat”. They were a part of the Tupa uniform though from their beginning all the way up until recently. A Tupa will today have one in their possessions, they just may not use it as much.

In 2003, after enjoying the benefits of being accepted into the electoral process in Venezuela, through their work for President Chavez, the Tupas for the first time were able to stop

wearing their “hoods”. By this time, this new openness mirrored the Tupas’ successful transition into a state-sponsored gang.

THE AUGUST 2002 ARMED ATTACKS DESIGNED TO INTIMIDATE THE SUPREME COURT

In early August of 2002, the Tupas wanted to send a message to the Supreme Court of Venezuela. The message was this: “rule our way, or there will be mucho violence”. It was an outright attempt at judicial intimidation of the highest order. How could a street gang try to strong arm the highest court in Venezuela? The answer to that question is what makes the Tupas a unique gang. We will briefly review the historical context, the nature of the attacks, and the major actors involved.

In August of 2002, the Supreme Court of Venezuela was in the process of making and announcing an important decision: whether four nationally renowned military leaders should or should not face criminal charges for rebellion. The same four high ranking military officials were involved in a thwarted *coup* attempt that lasted two days (April 12-14, 2002).

During April 12-14, 2002, President Hugo Chavez was ousted for less than a two day period during the attempted military led coup. Then several months later, in August of 2002, President Chavez wanted to put pressure on the Supreme Court. President Chavez was clearly trying to sway the opinion of the Supreme Court before it made a ruling, and President Chavez made it abundantly clear that he wanted the military officers to stand trial on charges of open rebellion. Thus, in the August of 2002, Chavez amped up his rhetoric in tone and intensity, as he specifically and unequivocally tried to increase the public opinion pressure on the Supreme Court. The Tupas’ assignment in the wake of what followed was obvious: raise hell, get major attention, shut down vital parts of the city, and send the thuggish message that unless the Supreme Court ruled in favor of President Chavez that there would be even greater violence.

The organized violence that occurred in August of 2002 has been described as that carried out by highly trained “shock troops”, and it was clear as well that the major players in this violence were the Tupamaro gang members. According to many sources at the time, the Tupas armed with high-caliber weapons, ambushed a police convoy that was patrolling in a slum area. One policeman and four civilians were injured in the attack, and one additional police officer would die when his riot control unit came under attack from the rioters.

This armed attack was directed against Caracas police officers. The Mayor of Caracas, Alfredo Pena immediately condemned the attack as the work of the Tupamaros gang. The mayor specifically blamed the Tupamaros street gang by name for the attack. The mayor courageously also pointed out that the Tupamaros gang was working for President Chavez.

Additional rioting followed the attack against police officers. In other parts of the city, Tupamaro gang members blocked roadways with immobilized vehicles, threw Molotov cocktails at police vehicles, forced the closure of subway stations, and fought with firearms against riot control police. In other words, the Tupamaros were fulfilling their stated mission — they were engaging in urban guerilla warfare tactics, keeping the intensity level low enough not to justify martial law, using hit and run techniques.

The police chief of Caracas, Henry Vivas, reported that the series of attacks and planned rioting by the Tupas was a highly organized and orchestrated type of violence. The subtext was

that the Tupamaros gang had friends in high places. This of course explains why no Tupamaros were arrested or tried as a result of the attacks during August 2002.

As a postscript, President Chavez wanted to ensure there would be no dissent from his platform in the future, and in 2004 he appointed a dozen new members to the Supreme Court, all of whom swore loyalty to Chavez.

THE APRIL 2006 ATTACK ON U.S. AMBASSADOR BROWNFIELD

In early April, 2006, William Brownfield, the U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela, was attacked by the Tupamaros street gang. Brownfield was returning from an event at the baseball stadium when his motorcade was attacked. The attackers rode motorcycles and took advantage of the fact that the U.S. embassy vehicles were snagged in a traffic jam.

While traffic stood at a standstill, the Tupamaros on motorcycles began their assault — couching it as a “democratic protest”. Highly trained in such urban protest-assault tactics, typically one member acts as a news media representative, videotaping the scene in case they are able to provoke American drivers into over-reacting. In unison, some of the others begin shouting pre-arranged “chants” and protest slogans, some wield banners, but almost all begin launching stones, bricks, eggs, tomatoes, whatever they can muster at the Ambassador’s car.

Although alarming, such actions are typical of a low intensity conflict designed to send a message to the U.S. officials. The Tupas could have just as easily opened fire with armor piercing ammunition using fully automatic weapons. But they did not. Rather, they repeatedly, over time, waged these kind of street protest attacks against the embassy officials.

In this type of attack, firearms are not used. But the next level up, the strategy used is to escalate the attack by immobilizing the target vehicle. They cut, spike, or puncture the tires. At some point, expect someone to torch the vehicle. The gang has specific training for the members who go on this type of mission. The members learn how to burn a car by quickly setting its tires on fire. Once the tire is on fire, often the vehicle is going to be a total loss.

In the April 2006 attack on the U.S. Ambassador’s vehicle, the gang did not get a chance to set the car ablaze. The embassy vehicles quickly ran the blockade and escaped. The motorcycles followed for a short time, but then broke off their attack when they were deprived of the opportunity to surround the target vehicle.

The American embassy did communicate with officials in the Foreign Office and Vice President’s office in Venezuela. While several attacks of this nature had occurred, and while it was obvious that the safety and security of embassy officials was a matter of urgent concern, the Venezuelan government has never done anything about these or other attacks involving the Tupamaros street gang. The Tupamaros street gang regularly gets away with murder and more.

EVIDENCE OF MATERIAL ASSISTANCE FROM THE VENEZUELAN GOVERNMENT

This is, of course, the smoking gun that could bring about a serious reaction. But there does exist some evidence to that effect.

The Tupamaros gang has been able to basically control some types of government buildings to use these as its base of operations. One example of this would be the facility known as the “Cultural House”.

The Cultural House is a government subsidized property ostensibly used for community meetings, community events and celebrations, and as a kind of resource center — a place where others working in government, the social service industry, etc, can make their outreach to the local residents. The Cultural House located in the La Pastora parish in the western section of Caracas is known to be controlled and dominated by the Tupamaros.

The Tupamaros gang openly flies its flag at this location, signaling to the world that this is a Tupamaro facility. The Tupas have displaced other community activists at the facility. The Venezuelan government openly allows the Tupas to continue to display the Tupamaro flag in public outside this government owned and government subsidized property.

When other local community groups have complained to the government and to the prosecutors about the adverse influence the Tupas have in what should be an “open forum”, these complaints have been met with a standard silence. No action is ever taken against the Tupas by the Chavez administration.

There is much public housing in certain parts of Caracas, government subsidized properties, and the Tupas are known to control entire housing estates in the west side of Caracas. This is a kind of honorarium for “services rendered” given to the Tupas by the Venezuelan government.

Then there are the professional cadres of political protesters on the government payroll, known as the “Bolivarian Circles”, or the Círculos Bolivarianos. These are professional political activists loyal to Chavez who specialize in public protests. They are like cheerleaders and a marching band all rolled into one: boosters for the regime of Chavez. Any group or organization that would oppose the Chavez regime would be subject to the public protest wrath of the Bolivarian Circles. They are like militias acting under the protection of law. It is widely believed in Venezuela that the Bolivarian Circles are under the immediate protection of the 3rd Infantry Division, which is the hand-picked unit loyal to President Chavez. The Tupamaros and the Carapaica frequently operate joint missions with the Bolivarian Circles to intimidate and attack any designated political opposition.

One Tupamaro gang member named Alberto Carias joined Chavez when in February of 1992, Chavez attempted his own coup against the nation of Venezuela. With the election of Chavez, Carias was promoted and currently works in the Bolivarian Circles.

There have been reports that Chavez is known to have “supplied the Tupas (MRT) with military grade weaponry”. Few details have surfaced about this type of clandestine activity involving state sponsorship of the Tupas gang.

HOW THE TUPAMAROS GANG RECRUITS NEW MEMBERS

The Tupas gang recruits new members primarily from the neighborhood. They grow up together and see each other, often sharing extended family relationships, in their ties to “el 23” and other shared experiences (e.g., jail or prison terms).

The Tupas gang offers more power or “juice” than any other gang of its kind in Venezuela. Some people join the gang for the financial or economic benefits: they are almost guaranteed a job of some kind, today often a government subsidized job. If they personally or have a family member that resides in the “el 23” barrio, then they can live “rent free”. Everyone in “el 23” is a squatter, but the Tupas gang will extort rent payments for anyone living there who is not in alliance to their gang.

And, like in gangs elsewhere, sometimes the member joins the gang just for the “kicks”. Here is an example from one of the leftist extremist groups based in the U.S. who make it their business to get involved in the “revolution” in Venezuela. It is known as the “Red & Anarchist Action Network (RAAN)”. According to one published RAAN document:

“Undoubtedly, many young gangsters joined (the MRT) simply because it would mean they could have a gun”.

There is a lot of bloodshed in Caracas. Having a gun in the ghetto might afford greater protection against threat and harm. And, it is known that the Tupas gang has plenty of weapons, and is eager to enlist new fighters.

It is believed that the Tupas own some of the hundreds of FAL 7.62mm assault rifles stolen from the government during the failed coup attempts in 1992 (February and November). Those military weapons just disappeared into the illegal firearms market of Venezuela and have not been recovered.

The Tupas also are gifted at systematically recruiting new youths into their sphere of influence. The Tupas employ their own youth outreach workers who are savvy to the hip-hop generation. In July of 2005, the Tupas organized a large scale free music concert for youths featuring hip hop revolutionary music near “el-23”.

TRAITS OF THE TUPAMARO GANG MEMBERS

From a behavioral science profile, there are certain traits that seem to emerge in the threat analysis of the Tupamaro gang.

One trait of the Tupas is they tend to exhibit the “accentuation effect”. They feel a need to stand out, to escalate, to take things to extremes, they are fanatical in certain regards. A common method of execution used by the Tupas is to simply hang the victim. The Tupas are known to be armed, have access to military grade weapons, and they make firearms available free to youthful members of the gang.

Another trait that makes their behavior predictable is that if given the opportunity to “extort” or “shake down” or “collect tribute” or “taxes” (e.g., on drug sales, human smuggling, vice crimes, etc), they will do it almost reflexively. It’s as if they are trained to “prove” the power of their gang and to constantly test the waters. They actively seek out situations where someone might be foolish enough to try and resist showing “proper respect” for the gang. The gang would show its wrath against anyone who did not cooperate with their extortionate schemes.

Another trait of the Tupas gang member is that there is no real loyalty to outsiders. Members of the Tupas gang are fervently parasitic and when it comes to “payoffs”, that works up to a point, but is never a guarantee that the gang will not still further victimize those outside of the gang whom it is supposed to protect. Sometimes this takes on a unexpected and undue amount of unnecessary harm to victims. In other words, the Tupas may not just bite the hand that feeds, they are capable of chopping it off entirely.

Another trait of the Tupas gang member is a militaristic sense of entitlement. It is truly an article of faith for the gang that because they are poor or represent the poor, society owes them something. They really believe that anyone with more money than they have must necessarily pay a fair share to the Tupas. This almost psychotic dimension of feeling entitled to special treatment by society, by the government, and by outsiders derives from being raised since childhood in a

“squatters neighborhood” or barrio (“el 23”). To illustrate their level of welfare dependency, even if they could afford their own medical prescriptions, perhaps if they did have a job or a subsidy from the government, and many Tupa members today work for the Chavez government — if a local program was offering assistance to the needy and poor, Tupa members would be first in line seeking any additional handout they can get.

One way that the Tupas gang member resembles other gang members worldwide is some key demographics. A typical Tupas gang member is a male, 20 to 33 years of age, who has permanent ink gang tattoos on his arms from a prison or jail experience. He will most likely exhibit an educational achievement lag, express an exaggerated pride in his gang connection, and respond with irrational violence to any perceived threat to their cult-like identity.

NOTE: This author is unaware of any study extant of the religious practices or lack thereof of the Tupas gang members. The possibility exists that a given gang member could be practicing Santeria. Santeria is widely practiced in 23 de enero homes. The locals there hold Santeria parties for visitors to this barrio or flava. Thus, it is possible that members could mix their political beliefs with Santeria in as much as it enjoys such pronounced popularity in “el 23”, the home of the Tupamaros.

ALLIES OF THE TUPAS

One of the closest and strongest allies of the Tupamaros is the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV). The PCV has a kind of patron-client relationship with the Tupas. But by far the lions’ share of support for the Tupas comes from the group with a similar name: the Movimiento Quinta Republic (MVR), basically the political party of Hugo Chavez.

Outside of Venezuela, one Tupa ally is the Movement Revolutionary Tupac Amaru of Peru. They share the umbrella identifying with the Inka rebel (Tupac Amaru). It was Jose Gabriel Condorcanqui aka “Tupac Amaru II” who led a Peruvian peasant revolt in 1780 against Spanish troops. As mentioned earlier, the gang does have some ties to Cuba. In fact, Caracas has the highest percentage of Cuban exiles outside of Miami.

ENEMIES OF THE TUPAS

Making them similar on the surface at least with American gangs, the single largest enemy of the Tupas is the local police department, known as the “PM” — the Metropolitan Police (PM) of Caracas, Venezuela. But unlike their American street gang counterparts, the Tupas do not hate police because they symbolize the government, the Tupas hate the PM because they symbolize a local politician who feuds with Hugo Chavez. The PM are under the authority of the Mayor of Caracas. And this popular mayor--Alfredo Pena-- is the single largest democratically elected rival to Hugo Chavez.

One measure of the level of popular support that Mayor Alfredo Pena has is found in the vote tally. Pena earned more votes in his run for mayoral office than Chavez gained in the same city when Chavez was running for presidential office. Pena is isolated in his role of a government official willing to take a public stand against the Tupas.

A place as unique as “el 23” where the Tupas dominate is a natural for attracting a host of other radical groups. Some of these outside radical groups have found the local Tupas to be intolerant of competing ideological conceptions. There are a variety of leftist organizations

worldwide that sponsor and organize trips or “cultural exchanges” to Caracas to interface with the Tupas and other revolutionary forces or groups in the region. One of the largest of these “fellow traveler” organizations provided the account as follows about an example where the Tupas will make enemies also within the large variety of leftist organizations:

“The anarchists in CRA — who have a bit of bad blood with the (Tupas) since they (Tupas) disallow the distribution of *El Libertario* in El 23 — see them (Tupas) as no better than a mafia performing paramilitary functions for Chavez. “

Probable enemies of the Tupas today include other political activists in Caracas such as the “Red Flag” and Accion Democracia (AD). The Tupas brought a libel action lawsuit against those two political groups when both groups accused the Tupas of being an armed vigilante terrorist organization. Like Chavez, the Tupas want only positive press coverage.

POTENTIAL COMPETITORS AND ALLIANCES: THE CARAPAICAS

The Carapaica gang exists separately and apart from the Tupas. It also identifies itself as an armed leftist guerrilla organization. It functions similarly outside of the law, as a vigilante organization.

A place to gauge the “winds of change” and who knows who in the political landscape of Venezuela, is to just go to the Caracas version of the “political soap box park”. Caracas has its “soap box park” in the form of what is known as the park “Plaza Bolivar”. You will find Tupa sympathizers, Tupa rivals, and a dozen varieties of leftists such as: Trotskyites, Maoists, Marxist-Lenists, Guevarists (followers of Che Guevara), Stalinists, and many permutations therein. The Tupas lean towards Marxism and Guevarism.

The Carapaica are formally known as the “Group Revolutionary Carapaica (GRC)”. The GRC is also, like the Tupas, a Marxist revolutionary organization. They, too, trace their political ancestry to when Venezuelans were fighting against Spanish rule.

INCOME SOURCES FOR THE TUPAMARO GANG

The Tupamaro gang leaders are accumulating significant wealth and they function like a local ghetto group who collects “tribute” for King Chavez. Extorting goods, service, and street taxes or protection money is a main ongoing source of income for the Tupamaro gang. This takes many forms, we will illustrate a simple version of it.

If a journalist enters the “el 23” barrio, with an expensive camera, it may very well be that a number of the “street soldiers” of the Tupas gang will try and extort the equipment from the journalist: for example, particularly the younger gang members will use a pitch like this “hey comrade, don’t you think you should support the revolution by donating that camera?”

There is enormous room for graft and “tribute money”. Drugs and prostitution and gambling can be found throughout the barrios of Caracas. The drug dealers, prostitutes, and vice operators are going to be paying the Tupas gang for protection if they want to stay alive.

The MRT faction of the Tupamaro gang is also known to collect “rent money” from the squatters in “el 23”. It is not known what percentage of the population of squatters are forced to pay rent. It is reasonable to assume that any family having a member in the ranks of the Tupas will probably enjoy the benefit of living rent free in this unique community. It is likely one of the perks of local gang membership.

But there are numerous reports that the Tupamaros make some of the squatters pay rent in the form of a tribute to the gang. Remember, there are nearly 300,000 residents in this housing complex controlled entirely by one gang — the MRT tupas.

It is not documented who or what criminal organizations are controlling the “sicariato” (hit men) and the kidnap-ransom crimes in Venezuela, but it would be reasonable to assume the Tupas have some role in these as well. In 2006 there were 70 known assassinations, a kind of crime that gets committed by a violent organization, and apparently these are crime patterns that are not yet subdued. Then there are the kidnap-ransoms, which now occur all over the country, each ransom amount averaging nearly a quarter of a million dollars. But while these two types of crime have dramatically risen in recent years in Venezuela, whoever is doing it is clearly getting away with it for now at least. Because prosecution of these kind of crimes has been conspicuously missing from the criminal justice system of Venezuela, almost as if these were crimes carried out by a kind of “organized crime group” enjoying government protection.

RESPONSES TO STATE-SPONSORED GANG ACTIVITY INSIDE AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES: A Case Study of Viet Nam

This is a recent historical example of what happens when a massive and wide spread state-sponsored gang activity gets out of control. This example comes from the Peoples Republic of Vietnam. We will briefly review this as a case study in terms of potential future scenarios in Venezuela. It will be shown the cases have some factors in common.

In the summer of 2002, a major crime and public corruption scandal rocked the entire government of Viet Nam involving a notorious criminal gang. Basically, over 100 government officials were found to have links to Viet Nams most infamous criminal gang. When this information appeared in the Vietnamese government-controlled media, it created a furor.

Among the officials involved with the gang were high-ranking members of the Communist Party. The police, some prosecutors, even a journalist were snared in the investigation. The evidence showed these officials would take bribes or favors while the gang led by Truong Van Cam (aka “Nam Cam”) carried out gambling and organized vice operations with impunity — basically under the protection of these corrupt government officials. Maybe the gang would have never been discovered by the media to have such key players in government, had it not been for the backlash that accrues when a violent gang leader kills and engages in systematic violence that captures the public’s attention, and generates a growing public fear.

Here are the parallels to the Tupamaros. Both gangs involved political operatives in high places. Both gangs benefitted from some level of state-sponsorship, at least a tacit quid pro quo existed that afforded state-sponsored protection for the gangs. Both also operated in socialist or communist societies. Both gangs operated to some extent in the patron-client relationship. Both gangs gained much public notoriety for their symbolic acts of violence. In short, the two cases have much in common.

So what happened in the Viet Nam case study? Basically a quiet purge and a hasty re-organization solved all problems. After the initial news coverage, government officials in Ho Chi Minh City ordered the state run print and electronic media to “limit coverage” of the gang and public corruption story.

The issue disappeared from the public imagination, and a couple officials who were

probably due for a change also disappeared, or at least lost their privileges in the party, and some officials were replaced and new blood stepped forward in the gang work. Thus, organized crime and the government basically continued a little smarter for the lesson of being publicly humiliated, but gambling and vice did not disappear from the Vietnamese landscape.

So how does this case study inform us about the future scenarios in Venezuela? First, and most foremost, the public relations approach works well in an authoritarian regime. You can control what message gets out. A positive message makes for positive perceptions. The leader can declare “ain’t it awful” tell the media the problem is now under control, replace some of the more exposed and now less valuable operatives, and like in Viet Nam — continue with “business as usual”. That is, unfortunately, a very likely scenario for Venezuela.

It is more reasonable to assume that some elements of the extra-legal function provided by the Tupamaro gang will be systematized and routinized into a formal organization within government. For now, at least the gang is an asset to the president of Venezuela who has achieved the objective of coopting the gang with lures of status, fame and fortune. For the future, we all know that a gang might have a different agenda, and it is more difficult to say if the gang will be a help or hindrance to such a president in the years ahead.

A COMPARISON WITH THE KLAN-RUN GOVERNMENT OF INDIANA IN THE 1920'S

For a comparison within the United States, consider the case of the Klan-run state government of Indiana in the 1920's. In 1922, the ambitious D.C. Stephenson became Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, and also controlled a secret division within the KKK called the Military Machine. The onetime salesman, Stephenson, is quoted as stating at one point, “I am the law in Indiana.”

By many measures, this statement would be correct. By 1924, the Klan gained control of the Hoosier State's government by helping elect pro-Klan or closet Klan sympathizers. Those rising to power under Klan patronage included Gov. Ed Jackson and numerous state legislators. Stephenson remained a well-paid power behind the scenes, with dreams of running for high elected office.

However, the Klan grasp on Hoosier government unravelled in the wake of the scandal surrounding Stephenson's violent sexual assault upon Madge Oberholtzer, a statehouse secretary. Oberholtzer was abducted, bitten and raped several times in Stephenson's railcar. After she took poison to frighten her attacker into releasing her, Stephenson took her back to Indianapolis, where she died a month later, a death attributed to serious physical injuries sustained in the attack and the poison. In 1925, after being charged and convicted for her death, Stephenson initially waited patiently for his Klan pal Gov. Jackson to pardon him. But when that pardon failed to arrive, he turned jailhouse snitch to the Indianapolis Times, and the shockwave reached throughout the State Legislature, and into the Governor's mansion.

For a time, what existed in Indiana then was a mutually-beneficial relationship between the KKK and the official, elected government. But to maintain power, both the Republican party leaders and the KKK needed to polish their images as standing up for “what was right” in a time of Jazz Age excess. This veneer of respectability proved impossible to maintain in the wake of the lurid revelations of the vicious attack on the defenseless Madge Oberholtzer. Further

revelations about Klan ties to government graft and racketeering continued to drive the KKK back into the shadows and out of the statehouse.

THE TRANSITION INTO STATE SPONSORSHIP

Thrasher (1927) was the first to recognize that almost any kind of group could become a gang and that a gang could become a political organization having legitimate powers. This analysis by Thrasher is found in the famous etiological sequence he outlined graphically as his Figure #4 inside the original 1927 book, which Thrasher called the “Natural History of the Gang”. Thrasher (2000, p. 24) had a unique sociological vision to offer gang analysts, he showed that a gang could become something other than a street gang, it could become many things, depending on its natural history. One of the things it could become is a political machine, and Thrasher was the first to suggest this, but without completely spelling out the transition hypothesis of how a gang could get political power.

Thrasher certainly anticipated some of the gang formations we have seen in places like Haiti and now in the case of the Tupas in Venezuela. The Tupa gang is in many respects a part of the Chavez government today. And it is able to exercise all the power and authority it had as a gang, plus the new power it has as an political operative of the Chavez government or what is called the “Fifth Republic”. Thus, even Thrasher was able to postulate how a gang could become under special circumstances something other than a gang. The Tupas clearly illustrate this transition into state sponsorship, where a gang becomes subsidized and merged by alliance into a government structure.

What Thrasher did not anticipate in his natural history of a gang is what happens when the state sponsorship fades away? Does the gang now a part of government readily surrender the gang identity and go straight and work for higher moral development, or does it “drift back into deviance, delinquency and crime”. This is the analytical debate, but the factual reality is that the gang keeps active in both worlds, it has both high legitimate integration and high illegitimate or subcultural integration — that is, after all, its special ability — to operate in both worlds simultaneously.

The interruption of state sponsorship may shock the gang back into its elementary social form — the gang. This clearly happened in the case of some of the gangs operating in the country of Haiti and the gang violence got so out of control that currently the United Nations has to provide an international peace keeping force to help the country move towards the feasibility of hold democratic elections. What happened in Haiti is that local gangs were elevated by state sponsorship of elected officials, but when another political party won the election, the gang was left without its sponsor. The gangs left without sponsorship reverted to their more destructive capabilities by terrorizing their local citizens, businesses, and churches.

What happened in Haiti was not a “natural history” in the true sociological meaning of the word. Corrupt government officials in Haiti saw the advantage of coopting local gangs. The gangs could be put on the payroll, thus during times when the corrupt officials held office, the gangs had a kind of legitimate connection to the world and they had a legitimate subsidy from corrupt officials who would secure paid positions in government for them. That is cooptation of a gang, or social engineering at its worst. The exploitation of a violent entity, group or organization by a government probably has many forms, but it is anything but a natural history of the gang. We

need to call it what it is: a kind of “super charged gang”. A super-charged gang is one that while pursuing its regular illicit goals also enjoys support or a subsidy from government officials. There are, of course, different levels of threat in this regard as there are different levels of “government assistance to the gang”. It is, though, reasonable to assume that the higher the level of governmental assistance to the gang, the more likely it is that the gang will become institutionalized and achieve a kind of social permanency that a gang without such corrupt influences would not enjoy. A gang without such corrupt power might, as Thrasher illustrated, just fade away over time.

In places like Haiti, the supercharged gangs are not fading away. Now that the Tupas have been supercharged, they will not fade away either. They would like to be the “Sixth Republic”: the country of Venezuela’s sixth “modern regime”. But most of all we probably need to be very careful in the interpretation of Thrasher’s model for a gang’s natural history. Thrasher did not say a gang could become a political machine, he said “one or more gangs may function in a political machine”. Functioning in a political machine gives the gang its “super charge”, a dose of power and the ability to float in and out of both worlds: legitimate society as well as the underworld of gang life and crime.

So, the real issue is basically “how long” a gang like the Tupamaros can function in a larger political machine such as that of the 5th Republic, and the answer here has already been provided: when the sponsor leaves office, the Tupas leave power as well, and would re-emerge in gang life is the prediction offered here.

As a critique of Thrasher, political violence was rampant during the period of 1923-1926 the period of his research, as was corruption which is a primary factor in its etiology. That a corrupt government might want to “coopt” a gang is not covered in Thrasher’s analysis either. And it seems more accurate, today at least, to describe the Tupamaros not as a gang that has made a transition from “thugs” to prosocial good guys, but to rather regard them as a modern Death Squad — a state sponsored gang, a supercharged gang.

THE TRANSITION IS NOT FROM GANG TO “GOING STRAIGHT”: THE TRANSITION IS FROM GANG TO DEATH SQUAD

We need to point out here, for fear of being misinterpreted, that in our analysis we have not concluded that the Tupamaros have made some magical transition from gang to “going straight” and that they are now, after enjoying political power under Chavez, some kind of prosocial organization. Rather, the evidence points to something not conceived of by Thrasher: that a gang could become, through state-sponsorship, a “death squad”. Here we will review just one recent case involving what appears by all standards to be state-sponsored gang violence.

In February, 2003 three dissident military officers and a 14-year-old girl were tortured and murdered for protesting against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Angel Salas, a naval officer, was one of those tortured and executed. The brother of Angel Salas, Edwin Salas, reported on February 20, 2003 the distinct possibility that this example of vigilante mass murder could be attributed to the Tupamaros. Edwin Salas reported that the Tupamaros had threatened violence prior to the torture and killing (Johnson, 2003).

Since becoming a part of the Chavez government, the Tupamaros have increasingly been regarded as a “vigilante police force”, and importantly, one with political connections. The

Tupamaros are insulated against investigation and arrest. They could not be prosecuted in the current government because of the quid pro quo relationship the Tupamaros have with President Hugo Chavez.

CONCLUSION

The Tupamaro gang is of interest to gang analysts and others because it illustrates a type of gang organization that has made a transition into state-sponsorship. For gang specialist police officers it is the ultimate example of a gang gone wild: a gang that specializes in extra-legal vigilante-style violence develops over time into a gang subsidized and directed by the government — indeed, major leaders in the Tupa gang today hold positions of enormous “police power” in Venezuela. And as stated, the primary sponsor of the Tupas is Hugo Chavez, the controversial president of Venezuela.

For now at least the Tupamaros enjoy direct aid and assistance, both material and political, from their government. This position negates most of the definition of what we typically mean as a “street gang”, unless we recognize it as a street gang that has been coopted by a government. For the future, of course, if that aid and support disappear, it is reasonable to assume the Tupamaros will revert to a former stage of development. That is to say, when their “sponsorship” fades, the gang will again don their face masks and revert to business as usual.

And inevitably, any successor to Chavez who wants real reform for the nation of Venezuela and safety for all its citizens will have to deal with the Tupamaros-- for this gang is, in a real sense, one of Chavez’ legacies.

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