

# Behind the Che Bandannas, Shades of Potential Militias

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), June 17 — Visitors to the Alexis Vive Collective, one of the most radical of the pro-Chávez groups that thrive in the hillside slums of this city's western fringe, can see the writing on the wall — quite literally — as they approach. The group's headquarters are just past the murals of Jesus with an assault rifle and Che Guevara puffing on a cigar.

The collective, led mainly by university students in their 20s, leapt into the Venezuelan consciousness in recent weeks after its members were videotaped defacing the headquarters of Globovisión, the country's only remaining opposition television network, amid an intensifying debate here over freedom of expression.

"We're Marxist-Leninists," Robert Longa, 30, the group's chief spokesman, said nonchalantly in a recent interview, as if the Berlin Wall had never come down. "The counterrevolutionaries at Globovisión sprayed their own graffiti on the consciousness of the Venezuelan people. We felt we had to react to them."

The collective is among the most prominent of more than 40 groups, many of them armed and organized around various schools of leftist thought, that function throughout 23 de Enero, a sprawling housing complex interspersed with makeshift hovels, said Alejandro Velasco, a historian at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., who specializes in Venezuelan leftist movements.

The decaying modernist rectangular apartment blocks, a Le Corbusier-inspired project built in the 1950s, have long been a breeding ground for subversion and are now considered a leading bastion of support for President [Hugo Chávez](#).

The police classified all the armed leftist groups in 23 de Enero as criminals until Mr. Chávez's election as president in 1998, mainly

because of their ideology. But these organizations are now largely embraced by Venezuela's socialist-inspired political establishment.

Critics of Mr. Chávez say he has allowed these groups to operate unfettered — none of Alexis Vive's members was arrested for the assault on the television network, for instance. And that has led to worries that the president is effectively creating the possible beginnings of a paramilitary support system for his government in case of crisis.

“These groups are encouraged, not just tolerated,” said Alberto Garrido, a political analyst here. “Senior military strategists believe a confrontation with the United States is inevitable, during which they envision a fusion between the armed forces and civilian militias along the lines of what we see in Iraq.”

Despite deteriorating political ties, United States officials have repeatedly said they have no plans to take military action against Venezuela. Still, after the Bush administration's indirect support for a coup that briefly ousted him in 2002, Mr. Chávez regularly says Washington is trying to destabilize his government.

He has insisted, for example, that the United States is behind the huge student protests that have convulsed the country in recent weeks since his unpopular decision to effectively take RCTV, the country's largest private television network and a fierce critic, off the air.

Alexis Vive, which openly supports the president's talk that has rattled Venezuela's well-to-do citizens, stands in contrast to that largely middle-class protest movement and points to the resilience of Mr. Chávez's base even as his approval ratings decline, partly as a result of his RCTV decision.

On the eve of RCTV's final broadcasts last month, the collective's members, riding motorcycles and wearing bandannas to hide their identities, painted the walls outside Globovisión's studios with slogans accusing it of serving the interests of the United States and Venezuela's moneyed elite.

Soon afterward, Mr. Chávez threatened Globovisión with legal action, saying it broadcast images with subliminal messages intended to provoke an assassination attempt against him.

The collective also damaged the exterior of the headquarters of Fedecámaras, the country's main business federation, saying it conspired to create the shortages of basic foods that now plague many parts of Venezuela.

In an interview at its headquarters, where the collective has set up what it described as a situation room to monitor news broadcasts by Venezuela's five main television networks, the group's leaders said a disinformation campaign against them was under way.

Its members said local news media reports blaming them for the detonation of a small explosive device at the Central University of Venezuela were unfounded. Armed conflict, members said, would be employed only after other options were exhausted.

"The bourgeois media has an erroneous image of us as outlaws," said Fausto Castillo, who described 23 de Enero as a theater for insurgent activity. "We're simply responding to reactionary elements, as if this were Belfast or Gaza or El Chorrillo," the area in Panama that saw heavy fighting during the United States invasion there in 1989.

The collective's leaders did not brandish any guns during a recent interview, though other visitors to their headquarters in a state-owned building say they are well-armed and photographs of members of the collective that have circulated on the Web show them firing weapons in the environs of 23 de Enero.

In a country where leftist revolutionary imagery on billboards and state television is common to the point of becoming banal, the group, which says it has 100 members, fits right in.

Simply radical chic they are not, the group's members say, but they all wear bandannas decorated with images of Che and the colors of Venezuela's flag. They say they have cells in other cities including Puerto La Cruz and Valencia. Formed in 2005 and named "Alexis Lives" in honor of Alexis González, who died in the chaos

surrounding the brief 2002 coup and is considered a martyr, the collective requires entrants to study texts by Lenin, Mao and Ho Chi Minh.

An older organization, the Tupamaros, named after a Uruguayan urban guerrilla movement, has long been the most prominent armed group in 23 de Enero. The Tupamaros even had their own political party, dissolved this year to become part of Mr. Chávez's Socialist Party.

Along with the Piedrita Work Group, an organization thought to have close ties to Venezuela's military, Alexis Vive is one of the most visible of newer groups that have been formed and among the most radical in its pro-Communist ideology.

Mr. Velasco, the historian at Hampshire College, said the groups saw Mr. Chávez as "a tool with which to achieve strategic goals" of moving to a socialist society. "They see themselves as revolutionaries first and Chavistas second," he said.

Still, Alexis Vive's leaders said they admired Mr. Chávez's capacity to lead a broad transformation of Venezuelan society and made it clear how they would react if more pointed resistance to the president's rule — from outside or inside the country — emerged.

"We're not the police or the national guard, but if there is a coup or an effort to assassinate the comandante, we will go into the streets to defend the revolution," said a 25-year-old member with the nom de guerre Américo Gallego, using the military title Mr. Chávez's most ardent supporters often employ to describe the president. "If Chávez wants us to react, we will."