

US Justice Department: "The Cartel of the Suns" Isn't a Real Cartel, So What?

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The US Department of Justice withdrew its accusation that the "Cartel of the Suns" is a formal drug trafficking organization. Meanwhile, the Trump administration and its Secretary of State publicly maintain the idea of a cartel led by Maduro.

In a quiet but significant legal move, the US Department of Justice removed from its official documents the assertion that the "Cartel of the Suns" is a real, hierarchical drug trafficking organization, distancing itself from a central piece of the narrative used by the Trump administration to justify actions against Venezuela and its president, Nicolás Maduro. This change, introduced in a revised indictment following Maduro's kidnapping, stands in stark contrast to the rhetoric maintained by President Donald Trump and his Secretary of State, Marco Rubio.

The new indictment, reviewed Tuesday by The New York Times, no longer describes the "Cartel of the Suns" as a transnational criminal organization. Instead, it mentions it only twice and defines it as a "patronage system" and a "culture of corruption" fueled by drug money within the structures of the Venezuelan government and armed forces. This is a radical distancing from the original 2020 indictment, which mentioned the alleged cartel 32 times and presented it as a structured entity led by the Venezuelan president.

This legal reversal calls into question the legitimacy of the designation of the "Cartel of the Suns" as a foreign terrorist organization, a measure taken by the Treasury and State Departments in 2025 at the direction of Secretary Rubio.

Experts Confirm What the Justice System Finally Admits

Analysts and specialized organizations have maintained for years that the term "Cartel of the Suns" is a Venezuelan colloquialism from the 1990s, not the name of a formal cartel. Elizabeth Dickinson, deputy director for Latin America at the International Crisis Group, stated that the new description is "exactly true to reality," unlike the previous version.

Dickinson pointed out that political designations "are far removed from reality" because they do not require evidence in court, while a criminal indictment does.

The inconsistency of the official narrative becomes evident when reviewing key documents. Neither the DEA's (Drug Enforcement Administration) National Drug Threat Assessment nor the UN World Drug Report has ever listed the "Cartel of the Suns" as a major criminal organization.

Persistence of the Rhetoric Despite the Legal Change

Despite this substantial modification to the legal charges, top figures in the Trump administration continue to publicly employ the original narrative. In an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press," Secretary of State Marco Rubio insisted on referring to the "Cartel of the Suns" as a real organization and Maduro as its leader.

"We will continue to reserve the right to target drug-trafficking ships that bring drugs into the United States, including the Cartel of the Suns," Rubio stated, adding that Maduro is the leader of that cartel.

This persistence in the discourse contrasts with the claims contained in the revised indictment, which also introduces a connection between Maduro and the leader of the Venezuelan prison gang Tren de Aragua. Analysts like Jeremy McDermott of InSight Crime consider this link weak and a "reflection of political rhetoric" rather than solid evidence.

Implications and Broader Context

The kidnapping of the Venezuelan head of state and his wife opens a complex legal and political chapter. Maduro and his life partner and political ally, Cilia Flores, pleaded not guilty on Monday before a federal court in Manhattan to charges of conspiracy to traffic drugs, among others.

Legal experts anticipate that Maduro's defense could base part of its strategy on challenging the legitimacy of the arrest and on arguments of immunity as head of state.

This episode highlights a recurring gap between the political rhetoric used to justify far-reaching actions and the evidentiary standards required in a court of law. While the administration continues a verbal and military offensive against what it calls drug trafficking organizations, its own Justice Department had to qualify and withdraw one of the foundational claims of that campaign in the Venezuelan case.

The discrepancy reveals how a narrative constructed for geopolitical purposes can lack the necessary support to stand on its own within the realm of law, even when that same narrative drives statements and actions on the international stage.

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