

Symbiosis:

Gangs and Municipal Power in Apopa, El Salvador

By Felipe Puerta, Héctor Silva and Steven Dudley*



Stories such as that of the former mayor of the El Salvador municipality of Apopa, José Elías Hernández, or “Old Timer” as the gangs knew him, are increasingly common in this Central American country marked by dark alliances between gangs and politicians.

On November 2, 2013, the Day of the Dead, the mayor of Apopa, José Elías Hernández, called Carlos Axume Arroyo to his office for a meeting that was unusual for an elected politician in one of El Salvador’s most important municipalities.

Axume Arroyo, alias “Humilde,” or “Humble,” was the leader of a local “clica,” or cell, of the MS13 gang in Apopa. He was also an employee at the mayor’s office, and had been ever since Hernández was elected in March 2012.

That same year, the MS13 and their rival gang, the Barrio 18, had made a pact with each other and with the federal government in which they pledged to not commit certain crimes. At a March 2013 event in Apopa celebrating the first year of what became known as “the gang truce,” a Barrio 18 spokesperson said the proscribed crimes included “robberies, extortions, lootings and theft.” The truce had been in force in Apopa before it spread to other parts of the country.

The truce, as would later be discovered, consisted of imprisoned leaders of the MS13 and Barrio 18 ordering their subordinates on the streets to lower homicide rates in exchange for economic benefits and the freedom to communicate and reestablish control over their underlings.

The problem was that not everybody was obeying the promises made by the imprisoned gang leaders. It was for this reason that Hernández had summoned Humilde to his office on that Day of the Dead in 2013.

For Hernández, it was essential to lower crime levels in the municipality. He and several other Salvadoran mayors were part of an initiative by then-President Mauricio Funes that would permit them to receive federal funds to implement social and economic programs in their municipalities.

Those resources, the mayor calculated, would not arrive if he did not fulfill his part of the deal: lowering homicide rates in Apopa. Humilde, according to judicial documents accessed by InSight Crime, was one of a few local gang leaders who had refused to follow the order from the MS13 leadership in prison to reduce homicides.

A witness in the Attorney General’s Office case against Hernández told prosecutors later that Hernández and Humilde discussed “issues of violence in the municipality” during their meeting, which lasted a little more than an hour. Humilde left, and while he was still near the mayor’s office, located in front of the municipality’s main plaza, he was ambushed and killed by gunfire. According to prosecutors, the hitmen were from the Barrio 18. But by 2017, the Attorney General’s Office had also tied Hernández to Humilde’s murder.

The charge is part of a series of accusations made against the now ex-mayor in an ongoing judicial process. The Attorney General's Office also accuses Hernández of participating in four other murders, of "illegal association," of using coercion and threats, of violence against women, and of illegal possession of cultural artifacts, among other crimes.

Through one of his lawyers and in public declarations [cited in the media](#), Hernández has insisted that he is innocent of all the charges. The most recent argument in his defense in the Humilde homicide case is that "nobody saw Mr. Hernández shoot." The prosecutor in the case responded that Hernández is not accused of actually shooting the victim, but rather of having ordered the murder. And in the indictment accessed by InSight Crime, the ex-mayor is also identified as the coauthor of this crime.

In June 2017, in a different case, a court in San Salvador condemned the mayor to six months community service for breaking rules regarding the registry, control and circulation of cultural artifacts. When he was arrested last year, 19 archeological artifacts had been found in his office, 16 of which had been declared part of the country's cultural heritage. Hernández responded by [claiming that](#), "my brothers and sisters know that these pieces belonged to my father."

The Attorney General's Office insists that Hernández is one of the cases that best illustrates how political power -- in this case, local government -- and the country's violent gangs formed a mutually beneficial relationship. For the gangs, this relationship brought money, work, free gasoline and even fried chicken. But above all, it brought influence in the municipal government. For Hernández, it brought votes, resources and a stranglehold on power.

The history of Apopa, one of the most important and populated of the suburban municipalities on the edge of the capital San Salvador, is one of the most important chapters in the story of the relations between the Salvadoran political system and the gangs: what they negotiate, what parts of that negotiation become public and what parts do not. It is also a story that has been repeated in other municipalities throughout the country.

Where Legality Meets Illegality

Apopa is a suburb 12 kilometers north of San Salvador where the MS13 and Barrio 18 have exercised territorial and social control for over two decades.

The location of the municipality has made it an important production and commercial hub as well as an obligatory crossing point for a large part of the goods that pass through the country's capital. The municipality is also a center for smaller industries. A source in the municipality told InSight Crime when we visited that the level of tax collection by the mayor's office has been high enough that the local government could easily function without federal government funds.

The combination of these of factors has made Apopa a prize for El Salvador's two main political parties, which have challenged one another for power since the end of the country's civil war in 1992. More votes in Apopa's municipal elections also means more votes for a party's legislative candidates, who are selected on the same day as mayors.

As in other highly populated municipalities near the capital that have a significant gang presence, Apopa is not just a reliable source of income for the gangs, it is a place where they have political influence, as demonstrated by the story of former Mayor Hernández, who, with the blessing of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista – ARENA) -- the traditional Salvadoran right wing party that governed the country between 1989 and 2009 -- managed to end the hegemony of its rival, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional – FMLN).

Although Hernández had no political experience at all when he decided to become a candidate, his broad social circle and his capacity to forge an agreement with the gangs to use their territorial control allowed ARENA to win a municipality that the FMLN had controlled for 15 years.

This type of arrangement was not new. In San Salvador, a high-ranking official from the National Police who has worked in the gang unit since the late 1990s and spoke to InSight Crime on the condition of anonymity, said the MS13 and Barrio 18 had forged election pacts with the country's main political parties for years in the municipalities of San Salvador's metropolitan area. A former government minister, who also spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, seconded this assertion.

"He is a gray person, someone that nobody in politics knew, but who knew how to use his alliances well."

According to the police source, however, the dynamic between the gangs and the political parties has evolved even further in recent years. He said the gang's "power" used to come from the fact that they gave "permission to the politicians to enter their communities and campaign." But more recent cases show the gangs are demanding that politicians do favors for them, supply them with food, and even give them money and jobs. This has helped the gangs widen their own social and political power base. And if the

Attorney General's Office is to be believed, Hernández's case was a clear illustration of this new type of arrangement.

At first glance, Hernández seems like an odd pick to run for mayor. According to numerous people interviewed by InSight Crime, Hernández had little formal education and had regular problems with the law. In 1987, Hernández was imprisoned for theft. Later, according to judicial documents that InSight Crime obtained, he joined a gang of truck hijackers. However, the investigation did not go anywhere, and Hernández did not face charges.

According to a source close to ARENA, Hernández's criminal history also includes petty drug trafficking, contraband and human smuggling. Hernández's rap sheet has numerous complaints and accusations against him, including allegations of threats, an alleged assault and a reported disorderly conduct, as well as connections to a kidnapping case. But none of these investigations led to any more charges or jail time.

Indeed, Hernández's criminal history may have given him an advantage, a deep understanding of how to manage the spaces where legality and illegality meet in El Salvador. And it was precisely this type of knowledge that would win him the election.

“He is a gray person, someone that nobody in politics knew, but who knew how to use his alliances well,” a former ARENA collaborator in the 2012 municipal elections told InSight Crime in reference to Hernández.

Part of Hernández’s astuteness was his ability to grasp that if he wanted to increase his power base, he had to make his operations more sophisticated and raise the profile of his personal relationships. With that in mind, Hernández targeted the Salvadoran textile industry at the same time as he maintained parallel ties with the underworld.

Hernández boasted, for example, about having close ties to prominent members of the textile industry, including Javier Simán, a businessman who is currently vying to be the presidential candidate for ARENA. According to the former ARENA collaborator, when Hernández approached the party before the 2012 municipal elections, he presented himself as an Apopa textile businessman. Sources from the municipality and records office at the Salvadoran Industrial Association (Asociación Salvadoreña de Industriales - ASI) show Hernández was a member. One of Hernández’s lawyers, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, also said that before dedicating himself to politics, Hernández sold fabric wholesale in Apopa and other municipalities around San Salvador.

As a candidate for mayor, Hernández took advantage of these contacts to broaden his electoral base by making the municipality’s textiles sector a central part of his electoral platform.

“I am a businessman, recognized on a local level, in San Salvador and internationally,” Hernández told a local media outlet. “I am close to the private sector, with the embassies of our allies, and it seems silly not to take advantage of these contacts inside and outside of El Salvador.”

How to Win a Mayor’s Office

Although Hernández was focusing his resources, both legal and illegal, towards recovering the Apopa mayor’s office for ARENA, he did not receive much attention from the party at first. A source close to ARENA said that at the time Hernández entered the race in 2012, winning the mayoral race in Apopa wasn’t a priority for the party; ARENA was instead concentrating its energy and resources on regaining power in the capital, San Salvador.

For ARENA, Apopa seemed like a lost cause. It had been ruled for three consecutive terms by Luz Estrella Rodríguez, an FMLN stalwart who had been in politics in the area since 1997. Later, Rodríguez would become vice president of ALBA Petróleos, the company financed in part with funds from Venezuela. She is currently Vice Minister of the Economy for FMLN President Salvador Sánchez Cerén.

Months before the elections, the FMLN’s party heads [decided](#) to run Zoila Quijada, then an FMLN congressional representative, instead of Rodríguez. According to local FMLN leaders, they thought Apopa was “easy to win.” For her part, Rodríguez attributed the switch to “differences I had with the Departmental Directorate of San Salvador.”

Although issues such as taxes, education and health were part of the debate, the battle between Hernández and Quijada was more personal than political. Hernández accused Quijada of “[not helping out at church](#),” and “not evangelizing in the communities.” He also accused her of “[defamation and libel](#)” in front of the municipal electoral commission.

In the end, Hernández got 20,419 votes, and Quijada 17,498. Hernández’s win surprised everyone, including ARENA. The flamboyant mayor attributed his triumph to the business community. But according to the accusations of the Attorney General’s Office, it was Hernández’s gang ties that were decisive.

The Attorney General’s Office’s accusation does not explain exactly when or how the relationship between the mayor and the gangs started. But prosecutors are sure it began long before the 2012 elections, and they offer several possibilities.

One of the four witnesses that the Public Ministry presented before the judge (which would later include two more, according to a source close to the judicial process) claimed that the mayor developed a “romantic relationship” with a woman named Ingrid Xiomara Berríos. According to the witness, Berríos was connected to the gangs and would later act as a secretary at the mayor’s office.

According to judicial records and other sources, communication between the mayor’s office and the gangs, facilitated by Berríos, led to the agreement that won Hernández the election. The gangs guaranteed Hernández a space to do politics, in part with votes and in part by preventing followers of other candidates from entering zones they controlled, prosecutors say. Later, this arrangement would include the commitment to keep homicides at a minimum.

In return, Hernández promised to create jobs for the gangs, in particular for the faction of the Barrio 18 known as the Revolucionarios. Berríos, the indictment says, provided the names of the gang members that received the positions.

The judicial files also indicate that during the course of their relationship, Hernández used public funds in order to buy Berríos two properties in the known gang stronghold of Valle Del Sol, as well as to provide her with a car and a driver because she didn’t know how to drive.

More importantly for the gang, prosecutors say that in 2012, the municipality agreed to a \$0.25 increase in daily municipal taxes for businesses operating in the central market. The surplus money from the tax, the indictment says, was given to the gangs.

In Apopa, as in other municipalities on the outskirts of San Salvador, these types of alliances were decisive -- so much so that during the 2014 presidential elections, the Attorney General’s Office has alleged, political parties sought to negotiate with the gangs again.

The mechanics of controlling votes is not easy, but the gangs used their physical presence and fearsome reputation to try to accomplish this feat. In the 2012 municipal election and the 2014 presidential elections, for example, election observers and gang members themselves told InSight Crime that the gangs established perimeters around voting centers in areas under their influence.

In some neighborhoods, particularly the ones the police do not normally enter, it was the gangs who decided who entered and who did not on the day of the elections. In other polling centers located in more populous areas where the gangs do not have absolute control, their members used other methods of intimidation ranging from direct threats against citizens to more subtle approaches such as gang members steering their relatives towards specific candidates.

In some cases, the gangs' influence was more sophisticated. InSight Crime received reports in El Salvador from two members of ARENA who were monitoring the ballots in the 2014 presidential election. They said the gangs set up stalls with computers in small stores nearby the polling stations and passed themselves off as members of non-governmental organizations who were there to help citizens vote. After requesting their IDs, the gang members intimidated them into voting for their preferred candidates, the ARENA election monitors said.

This, according to numerous accounts and the indictment, is what happened in Apopa in 2012.

"They intimidated us. They wouldn't let us enter," said the ex-ARENA collaborator consulted for this investigation.

The Shadow of the Gang Truce in Apopa

The gang truce was a complicated pact that was created and executed in secret by the Funes administration. Although the president and his advisors long denied any participation in the deal, [testimony in subsequent judicial processes](#) have made clear that the truce was a plan hatched by the government.

While we do not know the details of the quid pro quo between the gangs and the government, it is clear that the relationship between the gangs and politicians changed during this period. The parties sought out the MS13 and Barrio 18 with renewed interest, thinking about votes and resources. And the gangs sought out the politicians with an eye toward money, power and territorial control.

The arrangements were not all negative. In 2012, after the truce began, homicides dropped by half. [Apopa was no exception](#). The municipality experienced a 55 percent reduction in homicides compared to 2011. The Apopa district of Valle de Sol, the same gang-infested neighborhood where the mayor allegedly bought property for his lover Berríos, there was [not a single registered homicide](#) in the first 16 months after the truce.

During this period, the textile industry also realized political dividends. According to the 2012 to 2016 Municipal Competitiveness Plan, signed by Hernández shortly after becoming mayor, the municipality of Apopa had 4,803 businesses, of which 582 are in the industrial sector, mainly concentrated in textiles and metals.

The strong relationship between Hernández and elites of the textile industry would continue throughout his time in office. On June 4, 2016, when Apopa celebrated the [50-year anniversary](#) of one of the most emblematic companies in El Salvador, Industrias Sintéticas de Centroamérica (INSINCA), Hernández attended the event alongside high level executives and ex-company presidents.



Former Mayor Hernández, right, in Apopa city hall. Credit: municipal website

Apopa, however, also experienced the contradictions of the truce. While homicides fell, the relationship between politicians and gangs deepened, especially in municipalities where the MS13 and Barrio 18 hold sway. It was within this context, according to judicial investigations, that Hernández developed closer relations with the gangs, especially with the Revolucionarios faction of the Barrio 18.

It was the Revolucionarios, for example, who received the extra money from the higher taxes on the central market businesses. They also got the jobs within the mayor's office, gasoline for their cars and grilled chicken, all sponsored by the mayor's office. The gangs began to call Hernández "Maistro," which roughly translated means "Old Timer." It is a term of affection and respect in El Salvador.

The contacts between the mayor of Apopa and the gangs were not all secret and not always nefarious. Some officials have even suggested that Hernández hoped that the increase in the gangs' income from the extra tax money would serve as an incentive for them to stop extorting local businesses.

One intelligence source told InSight Crime that the plan only partially worked, and that some factions of the gangs continued to extort businesses even though they were getting money from the extra taxes. Statistics seem to support this version of events. During the truce, there was a slight downturn in reported cases of extortion -- one of the most underreported crimes in the region -- but by 2015, these reports had doubled compared to the year before.

In the media, Hernández admitted that he had directly negotiated with the gangs in the municipality about how the truce would be implemented. The mayor even made several trips to neighborhoods to erase Barrio 18 graffiti.

"This means peace for us," said one of the gang members during one of these political events. Apopa was the star of the gang truce, at least officially.

With this image, Hernández positioned himself as part of a select group of mayors that were to create “peace zones.” These 14 municipalities were tasked with developing projects for the reintegration of gang members into society. And for Hernández and the gangs, this meant more and better economic opportunities -- but only if they could keep the murder levels low.

By the end of 2013, this was becoming difficult. According to the judicial documents seen by InSight Crime, when Hernández was found out that members of the MS13 were refusing to obey orders to reduce crime and murders, he called imprisoned Barrio 18 leader René Alvarado, alias “Viejo Rata,” to see if he could help resolve the issue.

According to a protected witness who prosecutors call “Ninja,” Viejo Rata and Hernández developed a plan. On the Day of the Dead in 2013, while the mayor met Humilde in his office, Viejo Rata had two members of Barrio 18 arm themselves and wait for him in the central plaza, right outside city hall.

Sanctuary of Impunity

The struggle for power that El Salvador’s gangs wage in the streets of their neighborhoods is in some ways similar to that waged by political parties in the country’s government buildings. Power, in both cases, is used to benefit allies, friends or families with public works contracts or jobs in waste collection and other government businesses. In Apopa, the only real difference is what the criminal has around their neck: a tie or prison tattoos.

Hernández started to give the gangs money and diverted public resources into their hands.

In his first term in city hall, from 2012 to 2015, Hernández could count on a municipal council he chose himself, which facilitated his often highly discretionary management of public resources and contracts as well as all of his criminal activities.

However, in March 2013, El Salvador’s Legislative Assembly [approved a series of reforms](#) to the electoral laws paving the way for the launch of what were termed Plural Municipal Councils. In other words, council representatives would be elected by popular vote beginning in 2015. With these reforms, Hernández would lose control over the council. For him, all that remained were the gangs.

What this meant in practice was that, according to the Attorney General’s Office, the gangs became the mayor’s muscle, helping him to keep opposition council members in line with his agenda. And in exchange for the gangs’ protection and the electoral services that took him to power in 2012, prosecutors say Hernández started to give the gangs money and diverted public resources into their hands.

Specifically, between January and May 2014, the months following the murder of Humilde, prosecutors say there were three meetings between the mayor and leaders of the Revolucionarios during which the mayor allegedly swapped these municipal favors for votes for him and ARENA presidential candidate Norman Quijano.

ARENA has denied these allegations, but numerous witnesses gave prosecutors details of the meetings. Perhaps the most important of these is a witness the Attorney General's Office refers to as "Tanque," or Tank. Tank was arrested and decided to talk to authorities in exchange for a possible sentence reduction.

(In addition to Tank, prosecutors have five more witnesses, at least three of which are members of the Barrio 18: Durán, Ninja and Triple X. On October 26, the Attorney General's Office asked to include two additional witnesses.)

According to Tank, in one of these meetings at the mayor's office in 2014, Hernández asked the gangs (once again) to allow him to campaign in their areas of influence and for them to convince their relatives to vote for him. Hernández also allegedly asked the gangs to reduce the number of homicides.

In exchange, Hernández said he was willing to remove the police and the army from central Apopa. Only members of the local metropolitan police, the so-called Cuerpo de Agentes Metropolitanos (CAM), would have permission to be in that area, the mayor said.

Information later emerged indicating that some of the gang's leaders also received money transfers of up to \$10,000 in municipal funds, as well as access to vehicles, gasoline and maintenance services. Prosecutors have also claimed that some members of the gang received monthly salaries of \$5,000, a number hard to reconcile with the fiscal reality of the municipality and with the minimum wage of around \$300 that most gang members earned while working at city hall.

Hernández also pledged again to increase the daily taxes paid by businesses in the central market and to give the additional money to the Barrio 18 Revolucionarios, and to continue creating opening up jobs in city hall that the gang could fill as they saw fit.

The Thug Mayor

The day that two members of Barrio 18 allegedly killed Humilde in the central plaza after his meeting with the mayor, a CAM agent fired at the perpetrators. Seriously injured, one of the hitmen tried to escape, but was struck and killed by a car as he stumbled across the street.

According to the Attorney General's Office, instead of lauding the agent for his valor, he fired him. The mayor also ordered the CAM to never again intervene in a gang firefight in the center of the city "for any reason," not even if it could prevent a homicide.

Moreover, the indictment says the mayor ordered the head of CAM to give "the boys" permission to use the agency's vehicles and the municipal ambulance. The "boys" used both: the vehicles to move drugs and weapons, and the ambulance to transport gang members and their relatives who were injured or sick to the local hospital.

According to judicial documents InSight Crime obtained, as many as 25 CAM agents were eventually tied to the investigation, including Colonel Samuel Humberto Castro, who is mentioned by the alias "CAM Colonel."

Castro was, according to the indictment, a key interlocutor between the mayor and the gangs when he served as CAM director from 2013 to 2014. The indictment says that Castro met with the gangs on various occasions, and he gave the order to his underlings to transport and provide logistical support for the Revolucionarios when they transported drugs and weapons. Efforts by InSight Crime to reach Castro's lawyer to respond to these accusations were unsuccessful.

To be sure, the mayor and his closest aides acted much like gang members. A few months before the March 2015 elections, Hernández was accused of attacking and threatening Ovidio Cerón, the candidate for the Salvadoran Democracy Party (Partido Democracia Salvadoreña – PDS).



ALCALDÍA MUNICIPAL DE APOPA



DESPACHO MUNICIPAL

A QUIEN INTERESE

YO: JOSE ELÍAS HERNÁNDEZ HERNÁNDEZ, mayor de edad, del domicilio de Apopa, departamento de San Salvador, portador de mi Documento Único de Identidad Numero: cero uno siete cuatro seis nueve cinco dos guión cuatro; actuando en mi calidad de Alcalde Municipal de la Ciudad de Apopa, departamento de San Salvador, para el periodo del año DOS MIL QUINCE al año DOS MIL DIECIOCHO, por medio de la presente HAGO CONSTAR QUE: En fecha Veintinueve de mayo del año dos mil quince, se llevó a cabo Reunión Extraordinaria con diferentes Jefes, Subjefes, y otras personas que trabajan para esta municipalidad, dicha Reunión se llevó a cabo en las instalaciones de la segunda planta donde funciona la Clínica Municipal de esta ciudad, en la cual estuvo presente el Señor: JULIO ANTONIO RAMOS SANCHEZ, quien se desempeña como AUXILIAR DE GERENCIA, reunión que se desarrolló desde las diecisiete horas hasta las veintún horas de ese día, además se verifico en el Centro de Informática de entrada y salidas de empleados de esta Municipalidad y el Señor JULIO ANTONIO RAMOS SANCHEZ, se presentó a laborar a dicha municipalidad según Registro que lleva el departamento de Informática en horario normal.

Y para los usos que se estimen necesarios, extendo la presente en la ciudad de Apopa, a los veintinueve días del mes de febrero del año dos mil dieciséis.

Atentamente,


Sr. José Elías Hernández Hernández
Alcalde Municipal

Elias Hernández

In May 2015, in a neighborhood called Chintú, members of the Barrio 18 stepped from a bus, shot and killed a man, according to investigators at the homicide unit of the Attorney General's Office. One of those later [captured was Julio Ramos](#), an aide at the mayor's office.

The day after he was captured, Ramos escaped, following a decision by a judge to release him on his own recognizance. The judge was swayed by a letter from Hernández who assured him [that he was with Ramos](#) when the homicide was committed. Ramos is also charged in the indictment.

Ramos was [not the first employee](#) of city hall arrested because of his connections to gangs. In 2014, another employee had been detained for trying to help a gang member escape from police custody, and another city hall employee was accused of being a gang leader.

The problem went beyond Apopa. In the last two years, the Attorney General's Office has investigated at least five mayors for connections with gangs, and the body has prosecuted one other mayor in addition to Hernández: Miguel Ángel Jaime, [the mayor of Usulután](#), one of the most important cities in the eastern part of the country. One top prosecutor told InSight Crime that the government is investigating 11 of the 14 mayors who formed part of the "peace zones."

Violence also marked election day, March 1, 2015, when Hernández showed his already filled-in ballot to news cameras in an apparent violation of the law.

An election official -- who by chance was the sister of the opposition candidate Zoila Quijada of the FMLN -- saw him and reacted: "That vote is not valid," she said. "It's not valid."



Hernández showing his ballot. Credit: Canal 29

ARENA sympathizers erupted and aggressively crowded and pushed the election official. According to the indictment, Darwin Hernández, the mayor's son, grabbed her by the arm and threatened her with death.

The document says ARENA's alternate mayoral candidate also told the official, "We are going to kill you."

The official was arrested and released shortly thereafter. She later filed charges, and the Attorney General's Office issued an arrest warrant for Darwin Hernández, but the election official later dropped the charges.

In the interim, the connections between the mayor and the gangs were seeping out. In 2014, it emerged, he had [organized a wake](#) for three slain members of the Barrio 18 at the ARENA party headquarters, a story he would later deny.

In September 2015, [231 gang members were arrested](#) during a party in the headquarters of the professional soccer team in Apopa. Authorities said city hall had sponsored the event, during which they said pro-gang music was played.

But that was not the only party for the gangs or for city hall. Following his re-election in 2015, as a show of gratitude, Hernández rented four buses for gang members and their closest friends and relatives to travel to the beach in San Marcelino.

The party lasted more than a week, prosecutors say. Liquor, food and drugs [were financed](#) with public monies. One witness who spoke to authorities said they smoked marijuana, drank beer and snorted cocaine, all courtesy of city hall.

End of the Road

On June 4, 2016, police and prosecutors executed 40 raids and issued arrest warrants for the mayor, his wife, his son and 29 city hall employees.

Hernández was captured and charged with making threats. Hours later, Police Commander Howard Cotto issued a public statement outlining the breadth of the case and making clear that more charges would follow.

In all, authorities are [investigating five homicides](#) including the killing of Humilde, one attempted murder and a series of charges ranging from violence against women to illegal possession of protected archeological artifacts. Hernández was also accused of facilitating the gang's operations and giving them more than \$500,000 in transportation, gasoline and car maintenance fees.

During the raids, authorities also arrested city hall employees for issuing threats and working with illegal groups. Among those captured were the general manager of the central market, six CAM agents -- one of whom was a former policeman -- and the coordinator of social projects.



Screen capture of a Facebook post by Hernández

The police also said that they had identified another 35 members of the network who were operating from different jails, the majority of them Barrio 18 leaders who were imprisoned in the Quetzaltepeque prison.

A few minutes after the Attorney General's Office announced on Twitter that it had

arrested Hernández, the mayor himself issued a statement on Facebook saying he had been intercepted by police and detained. Minutes later, the message [was erased](#), when local media began questioning how Hernández, now in custody, would still have access to the internet.

One week after the first set of arrests, the prosecutor in the case said authorities had captured 32 of the 97 people involved in the network. For his part, Hernández said he

was a “[political prisoner](#)” before adding, “They have been prosecuting us for a long time because we are a rightist party. This was set up by leftists.”

Hernández’s Inheritance

The March morning sun was scorching, hot enough to force the school band to seek refuge beneath the large blue party tent in the middle of the central plaza in front of city hall where kids were distributing water bottles from red plastic receptacles. The blue of the tent recalled ARENA’s chosen color, and many in attendance tried to crowd beneath its protective shadow.

The gathering was part of an initiative the government was calling Apopa Seguro, or Safe Apopa, part of El Salvador Seguro, the national citizen security plan that the FMLN-controlled government of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén had recently announced.

Among the guests were Apopa’s new mayor, Colonel José Santiago Zelaya, as well as local and national officials, representatives of the international community and civil society and business leaders.

“Apopa was among the 50 most violent municipalities. We were second [highest]. Now we are 18th, which shows the plan worked,” the recently inaugurated mayor told the audience with pride when he got his chance to speak.

At the beginning of 2014, the police had declared the gang truce “[over](#),” after 501 assassinations between January 1 and March 1, 103 more than the same period during the previous year. Then, in 2015, the Sánchez Céren administration decided to abandon the efforts of some members of his cabinet to keep dialogue open with the gangs in the hopes of possibly reviving the truce.

Instead, the president had launched an offensive, a new version of “mano dura,” or “iron fist,” policies, which emphasize confrontation, prosecution and mass incarceration of gang members instead of negotiations, decriminalization of gang-related activities such drug consumption, and social, educational and economic programs to reduce the number of youth entering gangs.

To that end, the administration established a series of special police battalions whose job it was to find and destroy the gangs, a strategy that has helped keep El Salvador among the most violent countries on the planet.

But while in the central plaza they talked about confronting the gangs head on, inside city hall there were still vestiges of the mayor who decided to work with them. Hernández had been in jail nearly a year, but photos of the former mayor remained on some of the walls. City hall was still painted blue and his office was still the only one in the building with air conditioning.

Inside the office, Hernández’s desk remains, although on the day we visited, Colonel Zelaya was sitting behind it. Prior to becoming mayor, Zelaya was the alderman for the municipal council, director general of ARENA, interim mayor when Hernández traveled or was absent for any reason, and interim director of CAM. He was, in other words, Hernández’s right hand man.

When InSight Crime asked him about his relationship with the gangs, Zelaya demurred. “Now there is no relationship,” he said. “They wanted to extort me, and I told the media that I was not going to negotiate with them.”

According to the colonel, he even asked the Attorney General’s Office to monitor his phone calls. He added that the only contact he has with the gangs is through a US government violence prevention program.

“Right now, that relationship is over,” he said, referring to city hall’s one-time arrangement with the gangs.

On the economic side, however, the colonel [is continuing](#) with Hernández’s agenda. In early 2017, he announced the construction of two mega-projects valued at \$500 million, which include residences, offices and businesses. The municipality is also planning to construct a large mall. City hall hopes these projects can generate up to 7,000 jobs.

But despite Zelaya’s assurances, worries persist that relations between city hall and the gangs linger. Days after Hernández’s arrest, René Antonio Díaz Orellana, a councilmember from the FMLN, was assassinated while he was walking on the street with his family. The main suspects are gang members.

Around the same time, gang members reportedly called city hall’s property registry office, its central market authority and its garbage collection office to demand that their personnel resign. These offices, according to the indictment, were the same ones where Hernández had placed gang members.

Authorities did not connect the assassination of the councilman and the threatening phone calls, but city hall employees told InSight Crime they were worried the two events were related.

Colonel [Zelaya also later said](#) the gangs had called city hall to demand he reinstate their old privileges. The mayor asked for reinforcements, but he and his employees remained exposed, in part because Hernández had debilitated city hall’s own security forces in exchange for the gang’s support.

** This investigation was done with the assistance of Sweden. This is part of a three part series on mayors in the Northern Triangle. Cover picture by La Prensa Gráfica*

The InSight Crime Foundation

InSight Crime is a foundation dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime.

InSight Crime's goal is to deepen understanding on organized crime in the Americas through on-the-ground investigation and analysis from a transnational and policy perspective.

We fulfill this mission by:

- providing high quality and timely analysis of news events linked to organized crime in the region;
- investigating and writing reports on organized crime and its multiple manifestations, including its impact on human rights, governance, drug policy and other social, economic and political issues;
- giving workshops to journalists, academics and non-governmental organizations on how to cover this important issue and keep themselves, their sources and their material safe;
- supporting local investigators through these workshops and by publishing, translating and promoting their work to reach the widest possible audience;
- developing a region-wide network of investigators looking at organized crime;
- presenting in public and closed-door sessions to governments, non-governmental organizations, academics and stakeholders on best practices, strategies and pitfalls in implementing citizen security policy on the ground.

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