JIED Journal of Illicit Economies and Development

Organized Crime and Hybrid Governance of Violence in the Brazilian Amazon

RESEARCH

MARCOS ALAN FERREIRA

LSE Press

ABSTRACT

This article examines the coexistence of criminal and state governance in the Brazilian Amazon since 2016. It highlights that hybrid governance, where both the State and criminal organizations share legitimacy, is a reality in these areas. Methodologically, the study employs data triangulation, drawing from interviews, conversations during two field research trips, official documents, and press articles collected between 2016 and 2024. The research reveals that the Amazon plays a crucial role in the international drug trade, functioning as a logistical hub for criminal organizations. These organizations, particularly the PCC and CV, with support from smaller groups, compete for control of the region and new illicit markets in environmental exploitation, resulting in lethal violence. The article contributes to the literature by offering a novel perspective on hybrid governance of violence in a forested area, contrasting with the usual focus on urban environments.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Marcos Alan Ferreira
Federal University of Paraíba, Brazil
marcosferreira@ccsa.ufpb.br

KEYWORDS:
hybrid governance; violence; organized crime; Amazon

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Ferreira, M.A. 2025. Organized Crime and Hybrid Governance of Violence in the Brazilian Amazon. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 7(1): pp. 54–71. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.291

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the coexistence of criminal and state governance in the Brazilian Amazon since 2016. It highlights that hybrid governance, where both the state and criminal organizations share legitimacy, is a reality in Amazon basin. We depart from the very idea that in South America, the transnational dynamics of crime are clearly evident in the organization of drug trafficking. The cycle begins with the production of drug inputs, such as the cultivation of coca leaves in Andean regions near the Brazilian Amazon. This raw material is processed in laboratories guarded by heavily armed men, using weapons illegally sourced primarily from the Global North. Once the drug is ready for consumption, criminal organizations exploit weak border controls to distribute it to consumers around the world (Ferreira, 2019b).

Alongside this process, the collateral damage becomes apparent, with innocent lives lost, police officers killed, and young people drawn into the drug trade as a response to inequality. The Amazon is no exception to this scenario (FBSP, 2024; UNODC, 2023). The region plays a crucial role in international drug trafficking because it is not only close to areas where the raw materials for widely consumed narcotics like marijuana and cocaine are produced but also serves as a strategic logistical hub for criminal organizations aiming to increase their profits in illicit markets (Couto, 2024; Dias, 2024; Ferreira and Framento, 2019).

Recently, several academic studies have examined how transnational organized crime operates in the Amazon region (Couto, 2020; Couto 2024; Dias, 2024; Ferreira and Framento, 2019; Ferreira and Framento, 2020; Stahlberg, 2022). The literature emphasizes the need to expand the focus to better understand state negligence in the region (Chagas 2024; Couto, 2024; FBSP, 2023a; Jacarandá, 2024) and the nature of criminal governance in border areas (Villa *et al*., 2021; García Pinzón and Mantilla, 2021). Additionally, there has been growing attention to the intersection of drug trafficking and environmental crimes (FBSP, 2023a; GI-TOC, 2023; Soares *et al*., 2021; UNODC 2023).

In this challenging context for Brazil and its neighboring countries, two interconnected questions emerge: Who truly holds authority and, potentially, legitimacy in the Brazilian Amazon when it comes to drug trafficking? How can we understand the competition between different sources of authority and legitimacy that inevitably leads to lethal violence?

To address these questions, this article has as main objective to explore the coexistence of criminal and state governance in the Brazilian Amazon since 2016. Methodologically, the research is based on data triangulation, primarily using semi-structured interviews. These interviews were cross-referenced with official documents, press articles from 2016 to 2023, and discussions held at the 2023 Brazilian Public Security Forum in Belém-PA. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the roles of criminal organizations and the state in the region, as well as to identify the challenges that need to be addressed to reduce the violence associated with these actors.

The article is grounded in the concept of hybrid governance, which refers to the shared legitimacy between the state and criminal elements within a given territory (Pimenta *et al*., 2021; Villa *et al*., 2021). The analysis is supported by the variables suggested by Pimenta *et al*. (2021).

Embedded in the debate on governance, violence, and organized crime, this work aims to make a dual contribution to the literature. First, it seeks to examine the governance of violence through the lens of hybrid governance, offering a complementary perspective to the important discussion on criminal governance (Arias, 2006; Ferreira and Richmond, 2021; Lessing, 2021). As we will see, this approach allows for a clearer understanding of territories that are not exclusively controlled by criminality but rather coexist with state authority. Second, it contributes to the emerging discussion about a region that only recently has been explored within the debate on criminal governance, which typically focuses on violent social spaces in urban areas (Cavalcanti Filho, 2023; Rodrigues *et al*., 2021; Siqueira *et al*., 2022).

Following this introduction, the article is structured into four sections. It begins with a review of the concepts of criminal and hybrid governance of violence. Next, the methodological procedures are described, followed by an overview of the criminal violence that has permeated the state of Amazonas since 2016—an important temporal marker symbolizing the end of the truce between the three most active criminal organizations in the region at that time: the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), the Comando Vermelho (CV), and the Família do Norte

(FDN). The final section, the longest and divided analytically into six subsections, begins with a detailed explanation of the methodological procedures and then examines the dynamics of hybrid governance in Amazonian territories.

THE CONCEPT OF CRIMINAL AND HYBRID GOVERNANCE OF VIOLENCE

The impact of criminal violence on Latin American society has been extensively documented in numerous studies conducted both within and outside Brazil (Adorno and Salla, 2007; Biderman *et al*., 2019; Couto, 2020; Feltran, 2018; Ferreira and Gonçalves, 2022; Manso and Dias, 2018). In regions critical to organized crime, there is intense and violent competition for control over governance and the management of illegal activities (Soares *et al*., 2021; Stahlberg, 2022). Territorial dominance is vital for controlling these markets. At the same time, the state's militaristic and repressive responses disproportionately impact certain racial groups—often Black—and socioeconomic classes, particularly the materially impoverished (Ferreira and Gonçalves, 2023). This underscores that the struggle to control illicit activities is often violent, making it essential to understand the concept of governance and its broader implications.

Criminal governance concept

Governance here is understood as 'any collectivity, private or public, that employs informal as well as formal steering mechanisms to make demands, frame goals, issue directives, pursue policies, and generate compliance' (Rosenau, 2004, p. 31). Specifically, criminal organizations can create a new form of 'social sovereignty' aimed at structuring practices and agency within a particular area of social life (Latham, 2000, p. 3). This undermines the traditional authority of states over their populations and establishes a new source of authority (Lilyblad, 2014; Villa *et al*., 2021), which is often recognized by the population through physical coercion, fear, or even consensus. This dynamic is evident in various criminal organizations operating in South America.

When criminal organizations take over governance functions due to a lack of state control or when state control is challenged (Ferreira and Gonçalves, 2022; Lessing, 2021; Villa *et al*., 2021), this situation is referred to as criminal governance. Jorge Mantilla and Andreas Feldmann (2021) refine this concept by defining criminal governance as the 'regulation of social order, including informal or illegal economies through the establishment of formal and informal institutions that replace, complement, or compete with the state and distribute public goods (e.g., social services, justice, and security)' (Mantilla and Feldmann, 2021). Criminal governance can impact members, non-members, and the civilian population in areas controlled by criminal organizations (Lessing, 2021, p. 3).

Ferreira and Richmond (2021, pp. 162–163) emphasize that criminal governance often results from state neglect in providing authority and public services in areas with high levels of structural violence. When state institutions fail to provide security and governance, especially if security forces are seen as unreliable and violent, an alternative social order with its norms, notions of justice, and methods of punishment emerges (Willis, 2015, p. 57).

Although criminal governance frequently relies on fear and coercion to maintain legitimacy and authority, it is also supported by popular backing through clientelist and paternalistic relationships (Arias, 2006). In some cases, this form of governance can become so dominant that it regulates violence and reduces conflict, potentially benefiting the state as well (Biderman *et al*., 2019; Ferreira and Gonçalves, 2022; Stahlberg, 2022). This is particularly true when the state neglects its population, offering minimal social services and relying solely on repressive security measures (Pearce, 2010).

Despite its focus on criminal authority, criminal governance rarely stands alone in a contested territory. It coexists with state power, which can be present through government policies or repressive measures that target specific groups while ignoring others (Ferreira and Gonçalves, 2023).

Concept of hybrid governance of violence

The interplay between formal state governance and criminal governance has become a defining feature of certain regions in the Brazilian Amazon. In these contexts, authority and social order are not monopolized by the state but rather a complex coexistence of legal institutions

and criminal networks. This shared arrangement allows both entities to exert influence over territories, populations, and resources, creating a fragmented landscape of power where compliance with state laws often intersects with adherence to criminal rules.

Recent scholarship conceptualizes this dynamic as hybrid governance, characterized by overlapping spheres of control in which violence, social norms, and economic activities are regulated by both state and non-state actors (Ferreira *et al.*, 2024; Pimenta *et al.*, 2021; Villa *et al.*, 2021). Such systems tend to emerge most visibly in marginalized urban peripheries or isolated rural zones, where institutional fragility and geographic remoteness enable criminal groups to fill governance vacuums. Analysts emphasize that studying these phenomena requires a localized lens, as the nuances of power-sharing—how communities navigate dual authorities, or how criminal groups mimic state functions—are best observed at the micro-level (Pimenta *et al.*, 2021). This approach reveals how hybridity adapts to specific socio-spatial conditions, from resource extraction sites to borderland settlements, shaping everyday life in the Amazon.

Hybrid governance reflects a system in which state and non-state actors interact across both formal and informal channels, shaping power dynamics along horizontal and vertical axes (Villa *et al.*, 2021). Horizontally, non-state actors—often criminal organizations—employ coercion and violence to regulate daily social interactions, economic activities, and territorial control. Vertically, the state maintains its formal authority over populations and spaces, yet this authority coexists and often negotiates with the parallel structures imposed by illicit groups. This dual framework creates an environment where governance is neither fully state-led nor entirely criminalized, but instead operates in a balance of influence (Ferreira *et al.*, 2024).

In such arrangements, criminal groups rarely seek to entirely supplant the state. Instead, they carve out niches of social control to secure illicit markets and territorial dominance, operating in parallel to state institutions. Meanwhile, the state persists in asserting its monopoly over legitimate violence, though this assertion often serves elite interests rather than universal public security (Pimenta *et al.*, 2021, p. 5). The resulting symbiosis perpetuates cycles of violence, as state and criminal actors compete for authority while marginalized populations navigate overlapping demands for compliance (Ferreira and Richmond, 2021). This interplay underscores how hybrid governance reinforces systemic inequalities, particularly in regions where institutional fragility and elite capture enable criminal enterprises to thrive alongside—and often in collusion with—formal power structures.

Here is a straightforward example based on previous research and fieldwork conducted four years ago. A common citizen of modest means living in an area controlled by PCC's criminal governance will usually seek state-provided health services through a medical post or hospital. The same applies if they need a civil document. However, if they need justice after a robbery in their neighborhood, they might not be able to afford a lawyer and pursue formal legal channels. In such cases, they may turn to the local drug dealer or enforcer to recover their stolen property.

This scenario highlights a symbiosis between the state and criminal organizations, which include actions and policies that unintentionally bolster criminal organizations and sustain criminal governance. For example, mass incarceration provides resources for criminal organizations, including recruitment opportunities, networking, collective action incentives, and coercive power (Lessing, 2021). Simultaneously, the growth of criminal organizations justifies increased state investment in public security, benefiting security agents and companies that profit from violence, as well as corrupt officials who exploit the situation for personal gain. Another key aspect is the involvement of state agents in illegal markets, either by protecting these illicit economies or even by participating in criminal groups.

Ultimately, this symbiosis between the state and criminal organizations in the governance of violence is a persistent issue in South America (Lessing, 2021), and it is also evident in the Amazonian borderlands (Stahlberg, 2022). While there is literature on hybrid governance in places like Rio de Janeiro (Pimenta *et al.*, 2021; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021), Colombia (Villa *et al.*, 2021), and Recife (Cavalcanti Filho, 2023), there is still a gap in understanding the specific context of the Amazon, despite some studies focused on criminal governance in urban areas and prisons (Paiva and Siqueira, 2019; Siqueira *et al.*, 2022).

Based on this premise, it is believed that understanding how the hybrid governance of violence is configured in contemporary Amazonia is crucial. To explore this topic, we will use an analysis grounded in the variables suggested by the study published by Pimenta, Suarez, and Ferreira

(2021, p. 7), which are consistent for a detailed examination of a territory experiencing hybrid governance. I explore with more detail this approach in the Methodology section.

METHODOLOGY

To provide greater clarity on the Amazonian regional context, hybrid governance is examined through the analytical framework proposed by Pimenta *et al*. (2021). Originally developed to understand the dynamics of violence between the state and criminal groups in Rio de Janeiro, this framework suggests that understanding hybrid governance requires examining five key variables: the variations in territorial competition, the patterns of violence, the types of legitimacy exercised within a given territory, the scale of illegal activities, and the coexistence of legal and para-legal systems of justice enforcement. While this model may risk amplifying the perception of hybrid governance as a pervasive phenomenon, it remains a useful tool for this study, which seeks to explore the broader dimensions of the coexistence between state and criminal authority in one of the most critical regions in the global debate on transnational crime. Its application here offers valuable insights into the mechanisms through which hybrid governance operates in one of the planet's most contested and strategically significant areas.

By applying this framework, the analysis aims to shed light on how these variables manifest in the Amazon, a region marked by its unique geographic, social, and political dynamics. This approach not only highlights the interplay between state and non-state actors but also underscores the complexities of governance in a region where institutional fragility and transnational criminal networks intersect.

The variables are here examined in a slightly different order than presented by the authors, with a focus first on contextualizing the violence and territorial control of the sources of authority. Figure 1 summarizes the order of the variables that will form the basis for the following analysis:



Figure 1 Variables for examining hybrid governance of violence in contemporary Amazon region.

Source: Elaborated by author, based on Pimenta, Suarez and Ferreira (2021, p. 7).

As mentioned in the introduction, the following analysis is based on semi-structured interviews. According to Leech (2002), this format allows for testing foundational ideas based on the researcher's prior knowledge while also providing an in-depth perspective that enables interviewees to speak freely or address unexpected topics. Our interview guide was primarily focused on understanding how criminal governance is configured according to the five variables proposed in the study that conceptually inspired this article (Pimenta *et al*., 2021).

Regarding the selection criteria, interviewees were chosen based on a combination of factors, including their empirical or theoretical knowledge of governance dynamics in the Amazon, as well as considerations for the safety of both the researcher and the interviewees. Security concerns in the region often limited access to certain stakeholders, and the selection process prioritized those who could provide informed and reliable insights while minimizing risks. In total, approximately 40 contacts were made, including both formal interviews and informal conversations. However, only those who met the selection criteria and agreed to participate under safe conditions are listed in the methodology. Below in Table 1, we list the 18 interviews used for this research.

#	INTERVIEWEE	LOCATION/DATE
1	Intelligence Agent (Amazonas state) #1	Manaus, Oct/2023
2	Intelligence Agent (Amazonas state) #2	Manaus, Oct/2023
3	Intelligence Agent (Federal) #1	Manaus, Oct/2023, informations updated in Feb/2025 by telephone
4	Intelligence Agent (Federal) #2	Manaus, Oct/2023
5	Military Police Officer (Special Forces) – Amazonas	Manaus, Oct/2023, informations updated in Feb/2025 by telephone
6	Intelligence Agent (Federal) #3	Tabatinga, Oct/2023
7	Local Political Leader	Tabatinga, Oct/2023
8	Local Resident	Tabatinga, Oct/2023
9	Anthropologist	Benjamin Constant, Oct/2023
10	Intelligence Agent (Federal) #4	Online, Sep/2023
11	Judge – State of São Paulo	Online, Apr/2023
12	Prosecutor – State of São Paulo	São Paulo, Apr/2023
13	Federal Police Agent #1	Online, Apr/2023
14	Federal Police Agent #2	Online, Apr/2023
15	Sociologist #1	São Paulo, Apr/2023
16	Political Scientist	São Paulo, Apr/2023
17	Sociologist #2	São Paulo, Apr/2023
18	Electricity Sector Employee	Online, Jun/2023

Table 1 Interviews Used in the Article.

The interviews aimed to gather insights from authorities on the presence of criminal governance, focusing on those directly involved in combating organized crime in the Amazon. Interviews conducted in São Paulo aimed to provide a broader perspective on the PCC's activities in the region, given that many investigations have been centered in the state where this organization operates. In general, the interviews lasted one hour. We adhered to ethical standards for academic research, obtaining consent from all interviewees. To protect their safety, we have kept their identities anonymous, only identifying their institutions. More information about this is provided in the Appendix.

The data collected was triangulated with information from official documents and news sources, forming the basis for the analysis categorized according to the variables proposed by Pimenta *et al*. (2021). Insights from experts at the 2023 Brazilian Public Security Forum in Belém-PA also contributed to the analysis. It is important to note that this analysis reflects the situation up to February 2025 and may change significantly due to the evolving nature of organized crime.

This study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Due to security concerns and the volatile environment in the Amazon region in 2023 and 2024, particularly in areas influenced by organized crime groups such as the PCC and CV, the research primarily relied on interviews with law enforcement and judiciary personnel. While these perspectives provide valuable insights into the structural and operational aspects of criminal organizations, they do not fully capture the street-level dynamics or the lived experiences of local communities. To address this limitation, I sought to triangulate the data by incorporating press reports and documents from civil society organizations that are also investigating the same phenomenon. These additional sources helped to provide a more balanced perspective, though they cannot fully substitute for direct engagement with a broader range of stakeholders, including indigenous leaders and other community actors. Future research should prioritize these voices to offer a more nuanced and holistic analysis of how organized crime interacts with and impacts local populations in the Amazon.

CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON: FROM *PAX ECONOMICA* TO COMPETITIVE VIOLENCE

For decades, the Amazon has been a strategic area for the trade of drugs deemed illegal by prohibitionist regimes. Its vast expanse, featuring navigable rivers, drug production and processing

sites, and minimal state presence, attracts criminal groups looking to establish drug transport networks (particularly for cocaine) for both domestic consumption and international trade, including routes through Europe, Asia, and potentially West and North Africa (UNODC, 2023).

The Amazon's distinct geographic and sociopolitical landscape fosters a dual reality: pervasive state corruption that erodes institutional capacity, and a fragmented state presence exacerbated by the region's sparse population and remote isolation, especially in the border zones central to this study. Fieldwork carried out in 2023 yielded numerous accounts that underscored these dynamics. For instance, a military police officer shared an anecdote from an operation in riverine communities roughly 500 kilometers from Tabatinga, where a 30-year-old resident revealed they had encountered a police officer in person just once (Interview 5). In a similar vein, a local politician highlighted the difficulty of challenging illegal markets when political adversaries are not only elected but also financed and empowered by organized crime networks operating in border cities (Interview 7).

In this context, to taking into account the geographic setting of transportation in Amazon is crucial. The main method for transporting drugs involves using large containers on ships or concealing narcotics among substantial volumes of legal cargo like food, fuel, and bottled water (Interview 14). While air transport does play a role, it often complements river transport. Planes deliver drugs to specific locations in the forest, where they are then moved by boats. Smaller vessels are critical in this process, capable of carrying hundreds of kilograms of cargo. This method is widespread and difficult to fully intercept, given the crucial role of river navigation in the region. Consequently, law enforcement can only perform random inspections, making it challenging to gauge the full scale of drug trafficking in the Amazon rivers.

Small and medium-scale drug trafficking in the Amazon region often relies on human carriers using riverboats, with methods such as concealing drugs in luggage and bags, ingesting capsules, or chemically altering substances to sew them into clothing. These carriers, known as 'mules,' are often local residents with extensive knowledge of the region. Indigenous people and citizens from neighboring Amazon countries (especially Colombia and Peru) are frequently recruited (Interviews 5 and 7).

These dynamics have historically facilitated a form of parallel integration in the Amazon. In this region, powerful organized criminal groups operate networks, conducting illicit business and driving increased movement of people, capital, and goods across national borders (Oliveira, 2006, p. 27). This is made possible through the corruption of state agents and the adaptability of illicit markets.

An illustrative case of this parallel integration of drug trafficking occurred when Brazilian drug trafficker Fernandinho Beira Mar, linked to the Comando Vermelho, was arrested on April 21, 2001, in an area controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) while trading weapons for cocaine (Helal Filho, 2021). Similarly, it remains common today for drug suppliers in foreign territories to engage with various rival Brazilian criminal organizations.

However, between 2016 and 2017, a significant shift occurred, marking the beginning of a new phase characterized by a sharp increase in violence. Previously, control over drug trafficking in the Amazon seemed stable, with organizations and individual operators acting within historically established areas, notably Comando Vermelho (CV) and Família do Norte (FDN), and a smaller presence of Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). The latter predominantly controlled the drug trafficking routes along the borders at south of Amazon basin in Pantanal region, from Mato Grosso do Sul to Paraná limits with Bolivia and Paraguay. This route was crucial for distributing narcotics to Europe, Africa, and North America, known as the *Rota Caipira* (Countryside Route). However, the PCC's ambition extended northward, positioning it as a major competitor against CV and FDN. These three key actors—PCC, CV, and FDN—play central roles in the violence dynamics of the Brazilian Amazon and merit a brief overview.

Comando Vermelho emerged in the late 1970s in Rio de Janeiro as Brazil's first organized criminal group focused on the logistics and sale of illicit drugs (Manso and Dias, 2018).[1] The name 'Comando Vermelho' was reportedly given by military officials linked to Brazil's dictatorship at the time to demonize the group, associating it with the revolutionary leftist movements that were imprisoned alongside its founders in Candido Mendes Prison (Ilha Grande).

1 For more about CV's historical background, see Paixão (1987), Lima (2016), Manso and Dias (2018).

Initially focused on prisoner solidarity and rights, the movement expanded its goals in the 1980s and came to dominate about 70% of the drug dealing operations in Rio de Janeiro. In the 1990s, Luís Fernando da Costa, known as Fernandinho Beira-Mar, emerged as a key leader in drug trafficking operations closer to the borders, making the Amazon a central hub for illicit markets (Manso and Dias, 2018). Two decades later, the group has a dominant presence in the two largest Amazon states—Pará and Amazonas—and maintains a presence in all other states.

Regarding the PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital), it has become one of the leading criminal organizations in Brazil and neighboring countries over the past two decades.[2] Between 2006 and 2012, the PCC underwent an organizational shift under the leadership of Marcos Herbas Camacho, alias Marcola. During this period, the organization began operating through a collective body known as the 'sintonia final geral' (Ferreira, 2019a; Manso and Dias, 2018). Recent research shows that the PCC's influence extends beyond Brazil, with connections to smaller organizations in several South American countries (Sampó and Ferreira, 2020). Furthermore, the PCC maintains direct links with major European criminal organizations such as the 'Ndrangheta and reportedly has ties to Serbian and Albanian mafias' (Interviews 11, 12, 15, 16, and 17).

In 2016, Gelson Palermo (known as the Sicilian), a PCC leader, likely in alliance with the CV (Comando Vermelho) through Sergio Lima dos Santos, orchestrated the murder of Jorge Rafaat, a significant independent drug trafficker operating at the Brazil-Paraguay border. Disagreements over drug trafficking operations following Rafaat's killing led to the breakdown of a non-aggression pact between the CV and PCC over control of cocaine trafficking hubs along the borders. This split triggered an unprecedented surge in violence within the Amazon region, driven by its strategic role in the international cocaine supply chain, leading to a sustained increase in homicide rates along Brazil's borders with neighboring countries (FBSP, 2023b; GI-TOC, 2023; UNODC, 2023).

Finally, the Família do Norte (FDN) was the third largest criminal organization in Brazil between 2016 and 2019 and has a different context from the CV and PCC. While studies suggest its existence since 2004 (Stahlberg, 2022), the FDN gained national attention with the police operation 'La Muralla,' carried out by the Federal Police in Amazonas in 2016 (Framento and Ferreira, 2019; Stahlberg, 2022). The investigation revealed that the FDN was founded in 2006 by two prisoners, Gelson Lima Carnaúba (known as 'G') and José Roberto Fernandes Barbosa (known as Zé Roberto da Compensa, Messi, or Pertuba), to control drug trafficking outside the Amazonian prisons (Brasil, 2016). However, interviews conducted for this research suggest that João Pinto Carioca (known as João Branco) may have also played a key role in establishing the FDN (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4).

Before their split in 2018, José Roberto was the top leader of the FDN, while Gelson handled relations with criminal groups outside Amazonas (Ferreira and Framento, 2019). Each leader was responsible for managing a team that, for instance, carried out assassinations of enemies or members who broke the group's rules (Brasil, 2016).

The FDN's rapid growth was followed by an even faster decline. Although the FDN demonstrated its ability to influence elections and expand beyond the realm of organized crime, it was initially loosely supported by traffickers operating independently until 2004. At the same time, the PCC's dominance over the drug trafficking route in central Brazil—known as the *Rota Caipira*, which leads toward the coast and then to Europe—caused the CV to worry about the PCC's encroachment on the Amazonian borders. There was also fear that the FDN, previously an ally, might grow strong enough to disrupt the drug supply to the CV from the Amazonian region (Interviews 7 and 9).

After the wave of violent prison riots in the Amazon region in 2017, which resulted in the deaths of dozens of inmates and exposed deep fractures within criminal factions, the Comando Vermelho (CV) intensified efforts to co-opt leaders from the Família do Norte (FDN). These clashes, particularly in prisons like the Anísio Jobim Penitentiary Complex (COMPAJ) in Manaus, were driven by escalating tensions between rival groups vying for control over key drug trafficking routes. In the aftermath, the CV successfully absorbed key figures from the FDN, including Gelson Carnaúba, a founding member of the faction, who aligned with the CV following internal disputes over the FDN's leadership and strategic direction. With Carnaúba's arrest in 2024, Clemilson dos Santos Farias (known as Tio Patinhas) became the leading figure

2 For more about PCC's historical background, see Adorno and Salla (2007), Biderman *et al*. (2019), Ferreira (2019a), Manso and Dias (2018), Feltran (2018).

of the CV in the region. This alliance between Carnaúba and leaders like Tio Patinhas has made the CV the most powerful criminal organization currently in Amazonas.

In 2024, Zé da Compensa is in a maximum-security prison, unable to reorganize the group effectively. Carnaúba's departure left the FDN's legacy to his son, Luciano da Silva Barbosa (known as L7), who was brutally decapitated in June 2022, probably murdered by CV. Additionally, Zé da Compensa's brother, Cloves Fernandes Barbosa (known as Clovinho), was also murdered.

With the third founder of the FDN, João Branco, arrested and with limited ability to reorganize, the FDN declined. During research trips in 2023, the prevailing view was that the FDN is now virtually non-existent, existing only among a few members detained in the Compaj prison in Manaus. This assessment was confirmed through numerous interviews with intelligence officials from the prison administration and the Military Police (Interviews 1, 2, 5, 6 and 10).

HYBRID GOVERNANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMAZON REGION

In the following subsections, the analysis provides an overview of hybrid governance in the contemporary Brazilian Amazon, focusing primarily on the roles of the PCC and CV. It highlights how these groups exert significant social and political influence in the region, driven by their dominance in the international drug trade and their expansion into new illegal ventures, such as illegal mining. The discussion explores key dimensions of this dynamic: the competition for territorial control, the scale and patterns of violence, the mechanisms through which criminal legitimacy is established, the scope of illegal activities, and the operation of parallel judicial systems, often referred to as the 'law of crime.' This framework underscores the complex interplay between state and non-state actors in shaping governance in the Amazon.

COMPETITION FOR TERRITORIAL CONTROL OF VIOLENCE

For many years, cocaine from Andean countries like Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia has transited through Brazil making the country a major departure point for drugs heading to Africa, Europe, and Asia (Feltran *et al.*, 2023). Here, it is important to emphasize that the domestic market is equally significant, as Brazil is one of the largest consumers of cannabis and cocaine in the world. This dual role—as both a major transit hub and a substantial consumer market—underscores the country's central position in the global drug trade. While Brazil's urban areas have long struggled with violence from criminal faction disputes since the 1990s, rural areas were historically less affected. This has changed dramatically as criminal groups have sought opportunities in regions like the Amazon (Stahlberg, 2022), resulting in a gradual increase in homicide rates in the region since 2000 (FBSP, 2023a).

The Amazon region's strategic location has made it important in the illicit drug trade, particularly via the Solimões River (Duarte, 2023; Queiroz, 2023). This river serves as an alternative trafficking route through the Amazon, connecting to various tributaries that lead to Colombia and eventually to the cities of Belém and Macapá (Couto, 2020). Significant increases in homicides have been observed along this route (Soares *et al.*, 2021).

The region's numerous rivers and hidden airstrips provide trafficking opportunities due to limited law enforcement resources. Criminal groups export most of the cocaine to Europe and West Africa through ports in Brazil, Guyana, and Suriname. A substantial portion is routed through Venezuela and transported in semi-submersibles to the open sea, where it is transferred to ships leaving from other countries (GI-TOC, 2023). This growth is driven by a sharp increase in global drug consumption, which has led to the expansion of coca cultivation in Andean countries (UNODC, 2023), contributing to a market worth over $200 billion annually (Jacarandá, 2024).

Thus, although the PCC, CV, and FDN had a presence in the Brazilian Amazon before 2016, these groups increasingly targeted the region due to its critical role in the cocaine trade. In the case of the CV, its operations extend not only within Brazilian territory but also into Peru, an increasingly prominent hotspot for coca cultivation (Interview 2; Huerta and Brehaut, 2023). Following the end of the truce between factions in 2016, territorial control became highly contested and violently disputed between 2017 and 2019, as detailed in the next subsection.

In response, state efforts to address this violent territorial conflict have been inadequate, hindered by difficulties in inter-agency cooperation and coordination between federal entities responsible for public security. Interviews revealed a blame game, where the severity of the

situation is often attributed to other agencies, outdated legislation, or lack of resources. Despite the high presence of state agencies in the border area, the notion that this is an 'absent state' region is inaccurate (Cunha, 2020).

Ultimately, state governance relies heavily on public servants who, almost in isolation, work to counter the criminal governance coexisting with state authority. However, it is essential to consider the unique logistical challenges of policing the Amazon rivers, including the extraordinarily high cost of fuel, constrained institutional budgets, and seasonal variations that severely limit navigation during the dry season (Interview 5). These factors create significant barriers for law enforcement, often leaving vast stretches of the river network unpatrolled and enabling illicit activities to proceed with minimal interference.

In this context, integrated operations led by the Ministry of Justice against criminal activities in the Brazilian Amazon prominently involve government agencies focused on environmental and indigenous rights, such as the Ministry of the Environment (MMA), the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), and the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA). Despite their primary focus on environmental issues rather than public security, these agencies have played a significant role. Between 2018 and 2023, there were 77 cooperative operations involving the Ministry of Justice and FUNAI, IBAMA, and MMA. In contrast, during the same period, 55 operations were conducted in partnership with state governments, the Federal Police, and the National Penitentiary Department (DEPEN) (FBSP 2023a, p. 153).

The low number of operations involving state police may reflect a lack of trust from the Ministry of Justice, possibly due to corruption. Reports of politicians and criminals seeking votes, as well as corrupt police officers involved in trafficking, are common (Interviews 1, 2, and 5). For instance, before conducting a police operation in the Vale do Javari (Interview 9), leaders of strategic groups like the Special Forces of the Amazonas Military Police often work in secrecy to avoid local colleagues. This is intended to prevent strategic information from leaking to influential traffickers through the police officers themselves (Interview 5). Additionally, at least five interviews reported that it is not uncommon for police officers to resell drugs or cover up drug trade activities through extortion (Interviews 3, 4, 5, 10, 13).

While the state has struggled with its core responsibilities, the PCC, FDN, and CV have clashed in prisons over the last decade. These prison spaces are crucial for strategic territorial control in the peripheries of Amazonian cities and at specific border points. Among these points are navigable rivers, areas with minimal state presence or neglect, and both legal and illegal ports and airports. In this territorial competition, it is evident that after the intense violence from 2017 to 2019, certain territories have become more clearly defined. For example, CV has gained strength since 2019 in the state of Amazonas due to the weakening of FDN, which is now limited to a small group within one wing of the Anísio Jobim Penitentiary Complex (COMPAJ) (Interviews 1 and 2).

The fragmentation of the FDN has led to the rise of smaller, yet violent and influential organizations that now play significant roles in the complex criminal landscape of the Amazon. Among these is the Revolutionary Amazon (RDA), a splinter group from FDN that is currently allied with the PCC. Another notable group is *Os Crias*, also known as the Command of the Triple Border, which operated in the region where Brazil, Peru, and Colombia meet (Pedroso and Amancio, 2023; Rapozo *et al.*, 2024). Os Crias had controlled until 2023 parts of the Javari Valley at the time of the murders of journalist Dom Phillips and indigenous activist Bruno Pereira in 2022, though there is no direct evidence linking them to the killings. Although there are claims that the group is extinct (Funari, 2024), two interviewees for this research stated in a telephone call in February 2025 that the group is now significantly weakened but still exists with limited influence in the prison system of Amazonas (Interview 3 and 5).

Historically dominant in the state of Pará, CV continues to control much of the territory but is now facing challenges from *Comando Classe A* in the city of Altamira, a small organization focused mostly in drug trafficking likely allied with PCC. CV is becoming more aggressive in its efforts to control areas within this state, including increasing its presence in *quilombola*[3] communities and attempting to dominate illicit markets from strategic ports such as Barcarena to Belém.

3 Territories or communities inhabited by descendants of African slaves who escaped from plantations during the colonial period in Brazil. These communities are recognized for their unique cultural heritage, traditions, and social organization. The Brazilian government has taken steps to acknowledge and protect the rights of quilombola communities, recognizing their historical significance and working to address issues such as land rights and social inequality.

However, PCC's influence is growing in neighboring border states. In Acre, local organizations are partnering with PCC, with notable examples including *Bonde dos 13* and IFARA. Originally formed by 13 local traffickers to counter PCC, Bonde dos 13 eventually aligned with the group. While IFARA weakened by 2024, its initial focus was on trafficking drugs from Bolivia to Northeast Brazil. These alliances in Acre are unstable and can shift as leaders are arrested and confined to maximum-security prisons.

In Rondônia and Roraima, the São Paulo faction is particularly interested in mining areas. In Rondônia, while CV has some presence, the territory is mainly controlled by PCC. For example, maintaining the power grid in various parts of the state requires coordination with PCC's local network. Without this communication, employees are at risk and not allowed to perform maintenance tasks. This indicates that a private company has integrated interactions with criminal governance structures into its operational procedures in Rondônia (Interview 18).

In Roraima state, investigations by the state Public Prosecutor's Office and corroborated by Chagas (2024) reveal that PCC has divided the state into nineteen zones to manage drug trafficking, store firearms and ammunition, and expand illicit activities in rural mining regions. PCC reportedly established a presence in Boa Vista in 2014, recognizing it as a key territory for trafficking near the Venezuelan border (see Figueiredo and Guimarães, 2024).

The situation in Roraima may be witnessing the rise of a new actor potentially capable of escalating violence: the Venezuelan faction Tren de Aragua. The actual presence of this organization in Brazil is still debated (Sampó and Trancoso, 2024). Some interviews suggest it is not very significant, while others view it as a serious issue. According to the Public Prosecutor's Office of Roraima, the PCC operates without directly confronting Tren de Aragua, possibly even collaborating with them (Alessi, 2021). There is likely an arrangement where the PCC manages drug trafficking in the peripheral areas of Boa Vista, while Tren de Aragua focuses on human trafficking (Venezuelan migrants to Brazil) and drug trafficking within the Venezuelan community residing in Brazil (Interview 10). However, the 2016 truce between CV, PCC, and FDN, which eventually led to tragic violent incidents, illustrates that cooperation among criminal organizations is fragile and can quickly devolve into violent conflict over control of criminal activities.

Turning to Amapá, which borders French Guiana—a territory that has remained a colony since the 17th century—the state became the most violent in Brazil in 2023. Before 2022, local gangs, such as the União Criminal Amapaense (UCA) and Família Terror do Amapá (FTA), controlled the area and fought over power and territory. However, in 2022, the PCC and CV entered the scene, forming connections with local factions. In response, police violence has become excessive and brutal, with a significant number of deaths linked to police interventions. The factions have also forged new alliances, with the PCC aligning with the FTA and the CV with the UCA (FBSP, 2023a).

Variations in the outbreak of violence and fluctuations from 'balance' to 'local war'

The establishment of PCC operations in the Amazon's triple-border region initially appeared to deal a potentially fatal blow to the CV's trafficking activities, further consolidating the PCC's dominance over illicit markets along the borders with Paraguay and Bolivia. A northern drug export route would enhance the PCC's monopoly on drug trafficking in Brazil, reduce the risk of police actions against its *Rota Caipira*, and provide a viable alternative for its business (Ferreira and Framento, 2019; Ferreira and Framento, 2020). However, recent developments challenge this narrative. Contrary to expectations, the PCC has not succeeded in defeating the CV in the tri-border region. In fact, the opposite has occurred: by mid-2023, the CV had effectively defeated Os Crias and its PCC backers, reasserting its influence in the area.

Even though, since 2016 the PCC's ambitions in Amazon has resulted in numerous deaths (Stahlberg, 2022), escalating the violence from a state of equilibrium to an unprecedented surge. Data from 2022 revealed that 13 out of the 30 most violent cities in Brazil were located in the Amazon (FBSP, 2023a). The Brazilian Public Security Forum's subsequent report indicates that "the rate of lethal violence in the municipalities of the Legal Amazon is 44% higher than the national average. While the national rate was 23.4 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2022, the rate in the Amazon reached 33.8 per 100,000" (FBSP, 2023a, p. 28). In 2024, a modest decrease in the homicide rate was recorded, yet it remains alarmingly high at 32.8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (FBSP, 2024). Some of these homicides are linked to land conflicts (see CPT, 2023), but it is widely agreed among interviewees that organized crime plays a crucial role in the rise in deaths (Interview 1, 3, 10).

From mid-2016 (and even during the COVID-19 pandemic), CV's attempts to regain control from the PCC involved targeted killings and a series of horrific prison massacres. In January 2017, 93 inmates were executed during a week of riots in Manaus and Boa Vista. Later, over three days in May 2019, about 57 inmates were killed in Amazonas prisons due to internal conflicts within FDN. Similarly, in late July 2019, 57 inmates were brutally murdered, including some who were decapitated, in Altamira-PA during a clash between PCC, FDN, and CV (Ariza and Arboleda, 2020).

Currently, the acute violence between criminal factions in prisons has decreased compared to 2019. This change is attributed to the public attention that such brutal violence generates, which leads to greater demands for repressive prison policies. This complicates the management of illicit markets, as Brazilian organized crime relies on a failing, poorly managed prison system that allows it to operate with its own rules outside state law (Dias, 2024). Additionally, there has been an increase in violence and basic rights violations in Amazonian prisons (Candotti, 2022). Thus, the situation remains volatile, exacerbated by state violence and incidents such as the July 2023 rebellion at the Antônio Amaro Alves prison in Rio Branco-AC, which resulted in five deaths.

In addition to violence within prisons, organized crime disputes can have violent collateral effects on the civilian population. Between 2022 and 2023, 438 Yanomami indigenous people died from starvation and lack of medical care, including 68 babies under one year old (Resende, 2023). These deaths are directly linked to illegal mining operations, which cause deforestation and disrupt rivers. This illegal mining is the result of a combination of state negligence, the involvement of state agents, and the presence of organized crime seeking new business opportunities in Roraima (Chagas, 2024), along with illegal mining operators working on indigenous lands.

Moreover, the overlap between drug trafficking and environmental crimes has led to approximately a 40% increase in violence against indigenous and peasant leaders in the Amazon in 2022 (CPT, 2023, p. 165).

Types of legitimacy exercised by governance actors

The quest for legitimacy in strategic Amazonian territories encounters intense competition at key control points in the market (Pinho *et al*., 2023). As discussed in the previous section, this competition often leads to high levels of violence, particularly from 2017 onward. The pursuit of legitimacy is achieved through fear, but it can also be perceived positively by certain populations when criminal organizations provide public goods like support with food and medicines to deprived population.

Previous studies have indicated that when a criminal group establishes dominance in a territory, violence rates often decrease (see Biderman *et al*., 2019; Ferreira and Gonçalves, 2022; Stahlberg, 2022). This reduced violence can lead to greater acceptance of the criminal organization's legitimacy. Therefore, it is not surprising that some discussions about violence in the Amazon view the control exerted by groups like CV and their allies positively, as it can lead to temporary periods of 'pacification.'

However, this acceptance is generally limited to mining operators and riverine communities who prefer the relative stability provided by a criminal faction over overt violence. For indigenous and *quilombola* communities, the impact is severe and can disrupt the entire social fabric. For example, beyond the PCC's involvement in drug trafficking and mineral extraction on Yanomami lands, CV also has a strong presence in quilombola areas of Pará. In these regions, criminal organizations often override local traditions and even attempt to control local festivities.[4]

In managerial terms, the legitimacy of criminal organizations varies depending on their structure (Lessing, 2021). For example, the PCC is known for its strong rational-bureaucratic component. This is evidenced by its use of membership registries, written social rules, and strict financial oversight of its operations (Lessing, 2021; Manso and Dias, 2018). This organizational model for managing coercion and authority has been emulated by local groups, as seen in studies of the FDN (Ferreira and Framento, 2020). Recent reports also suggest that the CV now operates with similar registries and bureaucratic processes (Interview 12).

4 It is crucial to emphasize that the presence of the PCC and CV extends beyond the forested areas of the Amazon basin. The legitimacy and influence of these criminal groups also significantly impact urban zones across the region. This dynamic has been well-documented in key studies, such as those by Candotti (2022), Dias (2024), Ferreira and Framento (2020), and Paiva and Siqueira (2019), which highlight how criminal governance permeates both rural and urban contexts in the Amazon.

However, the evidence gathered reveals that the CV's (Comando Vermelho) legitimacy model relies less on bureaucratic structures and more on a network-based organization. Local groups align with the CV informally, united by shared values such as opposition to the PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital), operational independence from a central authority, and a focus on maintaining control through coercion and dominance over strategic territories along the Solimões River—especially in key cities like Tabatinga (Interview 1, 5, 10). In February 2025, the press extensively reported on a possible truce between the CV (Comando Vermelho) and PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital) across Brazil. As of the completion of this article, it has not been possible to confirm whether this truce was effectively implemented or not.

In contrast, local and emerging groups—such as *Comando Classe A* and *Bonde dos 13*—appear to be in earlier stages of development. They function more like gangs that align with and support larger, more established factions like PCC and CV.

Scale of illegal activities operative in the current Amazon

Criminal governance coexists with state governance, but with a key difference: it operates outside the formal market to maintain its authoritative and coercive power (Pimenta *et al.*, 2021). Drug trafficking is the primary focus of these activities, and drug consumption has increasingly become significant in Amazonian cities, enhancing the profitability for market operators (UNODC, 2023).

Organized crime groups in the Amazon region, particularly the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and Comando Vermelho (CV), have complex interactions with local communities that often blur the lines between criminal enterprise and social service provision. These groups have expanded their influence into the Amazon providing quasi-governance in marginalized areas where state is negligent with citizens (see Pearce, 2010). For instance, they may offer protection, resolve local disputes, or even provide financial assistance to impoverished families, thereby fostering a degree of loyalty or dependence among community members—especially in small cities and metropolitan areas like Manaus (Interview 1, 3). This dynamic allows them to operate with relative impunity, as locals may be reluctant to cooperate with law enforcement due to fear of retribution or a sense of indebtedness to the groups (see Ferreira and Gonçalves, 2022).

However, the presence of these criminal organizations has a profound and often destabilizing impact on public security in the Amazon. The PCC and CV's involvement in illegal economies fuels violence, as rival factions compete for control over lucrative territories and resources. This has led to increased homicide rates, forced displacement of communities, and the erosion of trust in local institutions (FBSP, 2024). While some communities may initially benefit from the services provided by these groups, the long-term consequences are overwhelmingly negative, as the rule of law is undermined and cycles of violence and exploitation persist, reproducing structural and cultural violence (Ferreira, 2017). This is more clearly seen in riverine communities along Amazon rivers (Queiroz, 2023).

The importance of Amazonian rivers in drug trafficking has introduced a unique challenge: river piracy (see Queiroz, 2023). Criminal groups engage in plundering high-value goods such as gold along the Solimões River and are also known for stealing drug shipments. This results in one criminal organization robbing another. For instance, a boat transporting cocaine, under CV's orders, risks interception and cargo theft in cities along the route to Manaus. Cities like Coari and Tefé, which have a strategic PCC presence (FBSP, 2023a), have seen a shift in tactics. Instead of directly controlling borders, the PCC uses a more sophisticated approach, employing pirate groups to steal drugs from rival factions.

The severity of river piracy led to the establishment of Base Arpão in Coari, Amazonas, in 2020—a joint effort by the state of Amazonas, the Brazilian Navy, and the National Security Force. Despite these efforts, the Solimões River remains a major channel for illegal trade, marked by violent clashes between criminal faction vessels and pirate groups, often beyond the reach of law enforcement. Additionally, drug consumption is rising among youth along the Solimões River, a tragic consequence for a population traditionally linked to the forest (Queiroz, 2023).

Beyond drug trafficking, organizations like the PCC and CV have found new opportunities in the Amazon that are not present in their usual urban-prison environments (see Diogo, 2022).

The so-called Solimões Route compels these criminal organizations to establish a presence not only in the rivers but also in remote forest areas away from police oversight (Interviews 2 and 3). These areas have become profitable sites for illegal gold and timber extraction, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, and even illegal fishing (Interview 6).

Regarding gold, the most notable case is in the state of Roraima. According to UNODC (2023), the PCC's presence in the state coincides with areas where gold is being mined, as well as border areas where the São Paulo faction cooperates with the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua. Additionally, the PCC is involved in new ventures such as sexual exploitation through control of brothels located in mining zones. Generally, the women working in these brothels are recruited from the outskirts of Boa Vista or among Venezuelan migrants.

In the Vale do Javari the link between criminal activities and environmental crimes is clear. Pedroso and Amancio (2023) highlight that 'everything is interconnected: drug trafficking, timber trafficking, smuggling, child trafficking and sexual exploitation, arms trafficking, animal trafficking, and illegal fishing.'

This convergence of criminal activities operates within a gray area that blurs the line between illegal and legal. A Prosecutor in Pará explains, 'Some companies use gold extracted illegally from extractive reserves or indigenous lands. These companies process this gold and then sell to major businesses in Brazil or abroad.'[5]

In the context of global capitalism, gold, timber, fish, and wildlife are treated as market commodities. Higher-level operators in this capitalist system work to turn illegal markets into legally functioning ones through certification processes. Consequently, the scale of illegal activities expands as they are legalized, leading to increased profits for operators within the capitalist framework.

Coexistence of parallel legal and political systems in the current Amazon

One of the central aspects of hybrid regimes of violence governance is the coexistence between the rule of law and a criminal law (Villa *et al*., 2021). In the Amazon case, this was clearly seen in the wave of violence experienced in prisons between 2017 and 2019.

The violent killings were the result of orders from the upper echelons of criminal organizations, with the evident goal of eliminating competitors in the market they seek to profit from. This follows the same logic as the criminal courts that operate in areas where PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital) and CV (Comando Vermelho) are dominant, where individuals at the top of the hierarchy issue orders about who lives, who dies, and who can be forgiven.

However, it is currently observed that criminal judicial governance tries to accommodate violence for the smooth functioning of the market. This implies reducing lethal violence against competitors, especially if they are smaller factions that can be co-opted. In this sense, it is common in the region for PCC and CV to absorb smaller, formerly competing groups, "forgiving" former enemies such as Bonde dos 13 (against PCC) or former members of FDN (against CV).

In this system of justice led by criminal organizations, the union between CV and local factions is expressed in the slang 'tudo 2,' or TD2. In other words, when it is said to be 'tudo 2,' it means that local operators and CV are two sides of the same coin and cooperate in criminal governance. Conversely, the slang 'tudo 3,' or TD3, reflects a similar logic but applies to PCC and its allies.

Finally, it is noted that since 2016, given the tensions and conflicts present in the Amazon region, the legitimacy obtained by criminal organizations is similar to that of the emergence of the modern state (see Tilly, 2017), imposing a sui generis type of political system that coexists with the state. In other words, coercion is the defining model and formative force of an emerging governance system, with authority exercised through the imposition of violence in strategic territories to achieve economic goals. Similar to Tilly's model, those who qualify as organizations controlling the means of coercion within defined territories also exercise priority over other organizations operating in these same territories (Tilly, 2017).

5 Alvaro Souza, Public Prosecutor, in a public presentation at the panel 'The Role of GAECO/MP in Combating Organized Crime in the Legal Amazon – Part 1,' 17th Brazilian Public Security Forum, June 22, 2023, Belém-PA.

FINAL REMARKS

Violence in the Amazon stands out negatively from the national average. This is due to a combination of state limitations in enforcing the law over a vast territory, a strategic location for the global narcotics chain, and an emerging exploitation of illegal environmental and social markets. Such actions happen in a context where governance is fluid and hybrid, with both the state and organized crime acting as legitimate actors and controllers of violence—sometimes even in a symbiosis that feeds back into both organized crime and the state.

Thus, an examination of the five variables of hybrid governance suggested by Pimenta *et al*. (2021) shows that the Brazilian Amazon is a region where violence governance is shared between the state and various criminal organizations that have been prominent in recent decades. Until 2019, the three main criminal sources of governance were PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital), CV (Comando Vermelho), and FDN (Família do Norte). The state faces difficulties related to the vastness of the territory and has also been negligent towards the region, especially from 2019 to 2022.

Currently, the governance ecosystem is becoming more complex, with the emergence of new actors such as Os Crias, Bonde dos 13, RDA, and Comando Classe A. These play a secondary role compared to the dominance of PCC and CV and are more fragile, but their capacities should not be underestimated, especially considering the impact they have on the civilian population and environmental degradation. Finally, this criminal governance scenario creates parallel systems of justice and social control, largely based on coercion, fear, and also cooperation between factions for territorial control.

In this context, it is urgent to consider the role of the state in cooperation with civil society, combining presence with social policies, enhancing intelligence sectors, and investing in sustainable development to provide legal alternatives for livelihood and survival. An integrative education that combines environmental respect with the reinforcement of cooperative values common to forest peoples would also be highly beneficial to help to put youth away from criminal networks.

Finally, it is important to highlight that this is a problem that extends beyond Brazilian borders and affects the entire region. It is a transnational issue that requires cooperation among Amazonian countries. The Amazon Summit (August 2023), with seven paragraphs of intended cooperation in public security, offers hope for more coordinated policies (Brasil, 2023). It remains to be seen whether these are mere intentions or if well-crafted diplomatic texts will translate into concrete actions for the region.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix I.** Ethics Procedures and Interview Guide for "Organized Crime and Hybrid Governance of Violence in the Brazilian Amazon". DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.291.s1

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was funded by Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), grants Bolsa Produtividade #303638/2022-2 and 302285/2019-9, and grant Pró-Humanidades #408989/2022-0.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Marcos Alan Ferreira orcid.org/0000-0002-3196-6508
Federal University of Paraíba, Brazil

REFERENCES

Adorno, S. and **Salla, F.** (2007) 'Criminalidade organizada nas prisões e os ataques do PCC', *Estudos Avançados*, 21(61). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-40142007000300002

Alessi, G. (2021) 'Venezuelanos ganham força e cargos-chave no PCC em Roraima após 'batismo' feito por liderança nacional', *El País Brasil*, 7 February. Available at: https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2021-02-07/venezuelanos-ganham-forca-e-cargos-chave-no-pcc-em-roraima-apos-batismo-feito-por-lideranca-nacional.html (Accessed: 31 August 2023).

Arias, E.D. (2006) 'The dynamics of criminal governance: networks and social order in Rio de Janeiro', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38(2), pp. 293–325. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X06000721

Ariza, L.J. and **Tamayo Arboleda, F.L.** (2020) 'El cuerpo de los condenados. Cárcel y violencia en América Latina', *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, 73, pp. 83–95. Available at: https://doi.org/10.7440/res73.2020.07

Biderman, C., de Mello, J.M., de Lima, R.S. and **Schneider, A.** (2019) 'Pax monopolista and crime: the case of the emergence of the Primeiro Comando da Capital in São Paulo', *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 35(3), pp. 573–605. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-018-9393-x

Brasil – Ministério de Relações Exteriores. (2023) *Declaração Presidencial por ocasião da Cúpula da Amazônia – IV Reunião de Presidentes dos Estados Partes no Tratado de Cooperação Amazônica*. Available at: https://www.gov.br/mre/pt-br/canais_atendimento/imprensa/notas-a-imprensa/declaracao-presidencial-por-ocasiao-da-cupula-da-amazonia-2013-iv-reuniao-de-presidentes-dos-estados-partes-no-tratado-de-cooperacao-amazonica.

Brasil – Polícia Federal. (2016) *Operação La Muralla*. Manaus.

Candotti, F.M. (2022) '"Quando a Massa Erra, o Estado Avança": notas sobre transformações carcerárias e criminais em Manaus (Amazonas)', *Revista TOMO*, 40, pp. 198–198. Available at: https://doi.org/10.21669/tomo.vi40.16790

Cavalcanti Filho, R.C. (2023) 'Os mecanismos de governança não estatal da violência em uma comunidade pobre do Recife/PE', *Cadernos Metrópole*, 25, pp. 537–562. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1590/2236-9996.2023-5708

Chagas, R.P. (2024) 'O "Narcogarimpo" na Terra Indígena Yanomami', *Boletim de Análise Político-Institucional*, 36, pp. 91–100. Available at: https://doi.org/10.38116/bapi36art7

Couto, A.C. (2020) 'Ameaça e caráter transnacional do narcotráfico na Amazônia brasileira', *Confins. Revue Franco-Brésilienne de Géographie/Revista Franco-Brasileira de Geografia*, 44. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4000/confins.25852

Couto, A.C. (2024) 'Relações transfronteiriças do narcotráfico na Amazônia: dos crimes conexos aos desafios da segurança regional', *Boletim de Análise Político-Institucional*, 36, pp. 71–79. Available at: https://doi.org/10.38116/bapi36art5

CPT – Comissão Pastoral da Terra. (2023) *Conflitos no Campo – Brasil 2022*. Brasília: CPT.

Cunha, F.M. da (2020) *Cadastrar, incluir e proteger: as malhas da assistência social na fronteira Amazônia*. Doctoral Thesis, Universidade de São Paulo.

Dias, C.N. (2024) 'Dinâmica da violência e do crime na macrorregião norte do Brasil: o efeito das facções criminais', *Boletim de Análise Político-Institucional*, 36, pp. 59–70. Available at: https://doi.org/10.38116/bapi36art4

Diogo, P. (2022) 'Da Cadeia à Fronteira: a expansão territorial do Primeiro Comando da Capital', *Revista de Ciências Sociais*, 53(3), pp. 53–91. Available at: https://doi.org/10.36517/rcs.53.3.d03

Duarte, J.F. (2023) 'A rota do fim do mundo: mercado global de drogas e organizações criminosas na Amazônia', *Revista De Políticas Públicas*, 27(1), pp. 47–63. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18764/2178-2865.v27n1.2023.3

Feltran, G. (2018) *Irmãos: uma história do PCC*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

Feltran, G., Pinho, I.V. and **Bird, L.** (2023) *Atlantic connections: the PCC and Brazil-West Africa cocaine trade*. Geneva: GI-TOC.

Ferreira, M.A. and **Framento, R.S.** (2019) 'Degradação da paz no norte do Brasil: o conflito entre Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) e Família do Norte (FDN)', *Revista Brasileira de Políticas Públicas e Internacionais*, 4(2), pp. 91–114. Available at: https://doi.org/10.22478/ufpb.2525-5584.2019v4n2.48617

Ferreira, M.A. and **Gonçalves, A.B.** (2022) 'Criminal governance and systems of parallel justice: practice and implications in Brazilian urban peripheries', *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, 68, 100519. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2021.100519

Ferreira, M.A. and **Gonçalves, A.B.R.** (2023) 'Faces of a perverse state: mano dura policies in Brazil from a historical perspective', in J. Rosen & S. Cutrona (eds.) *Mano Dura Policies in Latin America*. Routledge, pp. 129–151. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003398417-9

Ferreira, M.A. and **Richmond, O.P.** (2021) 'Blockages to peace formation in Latin America: The role of criminal governance', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 15(2), pp. 161–180. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2021.1878337

Ferreira, M.A., Villa, R.D. and **Braga, C.M.** (2024) 'Complex hybrid governance in the South American borderlands: the agency of grassroots actors in transforming violent conflicts', *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*. Early View. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21448

Ferreira, M.A.S.V. (2017) 'Estudos críticos da paz e crime organizado transnacional', *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 113, pp. 29–50. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4000/rccs.6643

Ferreira, M.A.S.V. (2019a) 'Brazilian criminal organizations as transnational violent non-state actors: a case study of the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC)', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 22(2), pp. 148–165. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-018-9354-7

Ferreira, M.A.S.V. (2019b) 'Transnational organized crime and structural violence in Brazil', in C. Atieno & C. Robinson (eds.) *Post-conflict security, peace and development*. Cham: Springer, pp. 37–54. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-01740-8_3

Ferreira, M.A.S.V. and **Framento, R.** (2020) 'Atores não-estatais violentos transnacionais na América do Sul: um exame dos casos do Primeiro Comando da Capital e da Família do Norte', *Revista Brasileira de Segurança Pública*, 14(1), pp. 72–87. Available at: https://doi.org/10.31060/rbsp.2020.v14.n1.1011

Figueiredo, A. and **Guimarães, R.** (2024) 'Esquemas criminais: a emergência do primeiro comando da capital no garimpo ilegal da Terra Indígena Yanomami', *Boletim de Análise Político-Institucional*, 36, pp. 101–111. Available at: https://doi.org/10.38116/bapi36art8

Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública (FBSP). (2023a) *17º Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública*. São Paulo: Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública.

Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública (FBSP). (2023b) *Cartografias da Violência na Amazônia vol. 2*. São Paulo: FBSP.

Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública. (FBSP). (2024) *Cartografias da Violência na Amazônia vol. 3*. São Paulo: FBSP.

Funari, G. (2024) *Illicit frontiers: criminal governance in the Amazon's tri-border region*. Geneve: GI-TOC.

García Pinzón, V. and **Mantilla, J.** (2021) 'Contested borders: organized crime, governance, and bordering practices in Colombia-Venezuela borderlands', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 24(2), pp. 265–281. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-020-09399-3

Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). (2023) *Amazon Underworld: Criminal economies in the world's largest rainforest*. Geneva: GI-TOC.

Helal Filho, W. (2021) 'Como foi a prisão de Fernandinho Beira-Mar numa selva da Colômbia, há 20 anos', *O Globo*, 20 April. Available at: https://blogs.oglobo.globo.com/blog-do-acervo/post/eu-crio-gado-e-tenho-imoveis-so-isso-prisao-de-fernandinho-beira-mar-na-selva-da-colombia.html (Accessed: 29 August 2023).

Huerta, P. and **Brehaut, I.** (2023) 'Comando Vermelho cria raízes na Amazônia Peruana', *Info Amazonia*. Available at: https://infoamazonia.org/2023/08/17/comando-vermelho-cria-raizes-na-amazonia-peruana/.

Jacarandá, R. (2024) 'A Cocaína na Amazônia: o tráfico de drogas e a redistribuição das redes criminais no sudoeste amazônico', *Boletim de Análise Político-Institucional*, 36, pp. 81–90. Available at: https://doi.org/10.38116/bapi36art6

Latham, R. (2000) 'Social sovereignty', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17(4), pp. 1–18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/02632760022051284

Leech, B.L. (2002) 'Asking questions: techniques for semistructured interviews', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 35(1), pp. 665–668. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096502001129

Lessing, B. (2021) 'Conceptualizing criminal governance', *Perspectives on Politics*, 19(3), pp. 854–873. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720001243

Lilyblad, C.M. (2014) 'Illicit authority and its competitors: the constitution of governance in territories of limited statehood', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 2(1), pp. 72–93. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2013.870046

Lima, W.d.S. (2016) *Quatrocentos contra um: uma história do comando vermelho*. Rio de Janeiro: ANF.

Manso, B. and **Dias, C.N.** (2018) *A guerra: a ascensão do PCC e o mundo do crime no Brasil*. São Paulo: Todavia.

Mantilla, J. and **Feldmann, A.E.** (2021) 'Criminal governance in Latin America', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.697

Oliveira, F.M.M. de (2006) *Redes narcotraficantes e integração paralela na região amazônica*. Master's Dissertation, Universidade de Brasília.

Paiva, L.F.S. and **Siqueira, Í.B.L.** (2019) '"No Norte, tem Comando": as maneiras de fazer o crime, a guerra e o domínio das prisões do Amazonas', *Revista Brasileira de Sociologia*, 7(17), pp. 125–154. Available at: https://doi.org/10.20336/rbs.486

Paixão, A.L. (1987) 'Falanges vermelhas, serpentes negras e a ordem prisional', in A.L. Paixão (ed.) *Recuperar ou punir? Como o Estado trata o criminoso*. São Paulo: Cortez.

Pearce, J. (2010) 'Perverse state formation and securitized democracy in Latin America', *Democratization*, 17(2), pp. 286–306. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13510341003588716

Pedroso, R. and **Amancio, N.L.** (2023) 'O crime na tríplice fronteira', *Amazonia Real*, 30 August. Available at: https://amazoniareal.com.br/especiais/o-crime-na-triplice-fronteira/ (Accessed: 31 August 2023).

Pimenta, M.C.B.S., Suarez, M.A.G. and **Ferreira, M.A.** (2021) 'Hybrid governance as a dynamic hub for violent non-state actors: examining the case of Rio de Janeiro', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 64. Available at: https://www.scielo.br/j/rbpi/a/YsLymvJ7XLJ67gc4jptK6SC/ (Accessed: Date).

Pinho, I.V., Rodrigues, F.J. and **Zambon, G.** (2023) 'Navegar é Preciso: ss jornadas da cocaína e a expansão das facções pelo Brasil', *Novos Estudos CEBRAP*, 42, pp. 41–58. Available at: https://doi.org/10.25091/S01013300202300010003

Queiroz, K.O. (2023) 'Pirataria fluvial e a percepção espacial da violência – a geografia do medo no rio Solimões no Amazonas', *Observatório de La Economía Latinoamericana*, 21(8), pp. 10132–10152. Available at: https://doi.org/10.55905/oelv21n8-124

Resende, L. (2023) 'Quase 70 bebês indígenas morreram em Roraima em um ano, aponta relatório do governo do estado', *CNN Brasil*, 14 February. Available at: https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/nacional/quase-70-bebes-indigenas-morreram-em-roraima-em-um-ano-aponta-relatorio-do-governo-do-estado/ (Accessed: 31 August 2023).

Rodrigues, T., Pimenta, M., Miranda, W.M. and **Quirino, J.** (2021) 'Gobernanza híbrida, violencia urbana y legitimidad en tiempos de pandemia: el caso del Comando Vermelho en el Complexo do Salgueiro, de Río de Janeiro, Brasil', *Análisis Político*, 34(102), pp. 123–149. Available at: https://doi.org/10.15446/anpol.v34n102.99938

Rosenau, J. (2004) 'Strong demand, huge supply: governance in an emerging epoch', in I. Bache & M. Flinders (eds.) *Multi-level governance*. Oxford: Oxford Press, pp. 31–48. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/0199259259.003.0003

Sampó, C. and **Ferreira, M.A.** (2020) 'De la fragmentación de las estructuras criminales a una proto-mafia: un análisis del Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) en Sudamérica', *Revista de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional*, 6(2), pp. 101–115. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18847/1.12.6

Sampó, C. and **Troncoso, V.** (2024) 'El tren de Aragua: la transnacionalización del crimen organizado a través del tráfico de migrantes', *Análisis Político*, 37(108), pp. 147–176. Available at: https://doi.org/10.15446/anpol.v37n108.116972

Siqueira, Í.B.L., Nascimento, F.E.M. and **Moraes, S.S. de** (2022) 'Dinâmicas inter-regionais de mercados e governança criminal em perspectiva comparada entre Fortaleza e Manaus', *Dilemas: Revista de Estudos de Conflito e Controle Social*, 15, pp. 441–468. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4322/dilemas.v15nesp4.46476

Soares, R., Pereira, L. and **Pucci, R.** (2021) 'Ilegalidade e Violência na Amazônia', *Amazonia 2030*, December. Rio de Janeiro: PUC-Rio; Instituto Igarapé. Available at: https://doi.org/10.59346/report.amazonia2030.202112.ed26

Stahlberg, S.G. (2022) 'From prison gangs to transnational mafia: the expansion of organized crime in Brazil', *Trends in Organized Crime*, pp. 1–23. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-022-09453-2

Tilly, C. (2017) 'War making and state making as organized crime', in *Collective violence, contentious politics, and social change*. Routledge, pp. 121–139. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315205021-8

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2023) *World Drug Report 2023*. Vienna: United Nations publication. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18356/9789210028233

Villa, R., Braga, C. and **Ferreira, M.A.** (2021) 'Violent nonstate actors and the emergence of hybrid governance in South America', *Latin American Research Review*, 56(1), pp. 36–49. Available at: https://larrlasa.org/articles/10.25222/larr.756/ (Accessed: Date).

Willis, G.D. (2015) *The killing consensus: police, organized crime, and the regulation of life and death in urban Brazil*. Oakland, California: University of California Press. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520285705.001.0001

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Ferreira, M.A. 2025. Organized Crime and Hybrid Governance of Violence in the Brazilian Amazon. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 7(1): pp. 54–71. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.291

Submitted: 18 October 2024
Accepted: 25 June 2025
Published: 16 September 2025

COPYRIGHT:
© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Journal of Illicit Economies and Development is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.