



Recursive Hypocrisy: Indigenous Sovereignty and the Unresolved Contradiction of the Westphalian Order from 1648 to Caracas

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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that the 2026 capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro by U.S. special forces exposes not merely a contemporary breach of international law, but the unresolved foundational contradiction of the Westphalian states system itself: its constitutive suppression of plural and nested sovereignties. Through the critical lens of Indigenous Studies, the analysis re-frames sovereignty not as a monolithic property of the nation-state, but as a contested and relational field. It argues that the modern international order, born from the 1648 treaties that erased Indigenous political authority from European legal recognition, established a hypocritical logic that continues to reverberate. This logic simultaneously asserts the inviolability of state borders while rendering the inherent sovereignties of Indigenous nations within those borders invisible or contingent. The Venezuelan case serves as a potent exemplar of this recursive hypocrisy. The paper examines how the sovereignty of the Venezuelan state over territories like the Amazon, where nations such as the Yanomami, Pemón, and Warao exercise de facto autonomous governance, is itself a legacy of colonial imposition and remains actively contested. The U.S.-led intervention, while a flagrant violation of Venezuelan state sovereignty, was discursively justified in part by co-opting the narrative of Indigenous vulnerability, framing the action as a protection of these communities from state neglect and environmental predation. This instrumentalization reveals a cynical exploitation of the very colonial contradictions the Westphalian system created. The paper concludes that the organized hypocrisy of international relations is thus not simply a practice between states, but a deeply embedded structure originating in the original displacement of Indigenous political orders. Lasting stability requires moving beyond a system that can only see one sovereign per territory, and instead engaging with the plurinational realities that the system has always denied but never erased.

Keywords: Indigenous Sovereignty; Settler Colonialism; Plurinationalism; Westphalian Hypocrisy.

INTRODUCTION: THE CARACAS RAID AND A CRISIS OF RECOGNITION

The predawn military operation in Caracas on January 3, 2026, which resulted in the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, triggered a familiar global schism. One bloc of nations decried a catastrophic violation of the United Nations Charter and the core principle of state sovereignty. Another bloc, led by the United States and its closest allies, framed the action as a necessary enforcement of justice, a rescue of a suffering population from a criminal, illegitimate regime. This diplomatic polarization, however, obscures a deeper, more foundational crisis of recognition that the event inadvertently illuminated. The raid did not occur in a political vacuum but within a state whose own territorial sovereignty is built upon a bedrock of historical and ongoing colonial dispossession. Venezuela's authority over its Amazonian and interior regions, home to numerous Indigenous nations with their own systems of law, governance, and territoriality, represents a classic, unresolved contradiction of the modern nation-state model. This paper argues that to fully comprehend the hypocrisy laid bare in Caracas, where one sovereignty was violently violated in the name of protecting other, more marginalized claims to authority, we must excavate the origins of the system itself. We must turn to the critical field of Indigenous Studies to reframe our understanding of sovereignty not as a singular, Westphalian grant to states, but as a relational, contested, and often violently suppressed plurality.

The capture of Maduro was an act of what international relations scholar Stephen Krasner terms "organized hypocrisy," the systematic departure by powerful states from the norms they ostensibly uphold (Krasner, 1999). Yet, this analysis typically remains confined to the interstate level, examining hypocrisy as a practice *between* recognized sovereigns. This paper proposes a more radical thesis: that the very structure of the Westphalian system, canonized in 1648, is itself the product of an original, constitutive act of hypocrisy. This founding act was the deliberate exclusion of Indigenous political entities from the category of "sovereign" worthy of recognition, thereby creating a legal and political world where only European-style states could claim the prerogatives of autonomy and non-intervention. The treaties of Westphalia did not merely create a society of states; they created a sovereigns' club with a strict civilizational and political entry requirement, one that rendered the complex sovereignties of the Americas, Africa, and Asia as *terra nullius*, empty land, open for appropriation and domination (Anghie, 2004).

Consequently, the sovereignty of post-colonial states like Venezuela is inherently paradoxical. It is a sovereignty recognized by international law, yet it is often built upon and exercises authority over the unceded lands and unextinguished sovereignties of Indigenous nations. This creates what we term a *recursive hypocrisy*: the international system condemns violations of state sovereignty (as with the Caracas raid) while remaining structurally blind to, or complicit in, those same states' violations of Indigenous sovereignty within their borders. The Venezuelan Amazon, a site of immense ecological and cultural significance, is a prime theater for this recursion. Here, the Venezuelan state, through its military, extractive industries, and settlement policies, has a long history of encroaching on Indigenous territories, often with devastating humanitarian and environmental consequences (Zent & Zent, 2021). The sovereignty Venezuela claims and had violated in 2026 is, in this region, a sovereignty that is itself violently imposed and contested.

The U.S. justification for the Caracas operation cynically exploited this internal contradiction. In the years leading up to 2026, U.S. and allied diplomatic and NGO reports increasingly highlighted the plight of Venezuela's Indigenous peoples, documenting state neglect, environmental degradation from illegal mining, and violence from armed groups. This narrative was weaponized to construct a moral pretext for

action, painting the Maduro government as not only politically illegitimate but also as a violator of the most basic rights of its most vulnerable citizens. This framing appropriated Indigenous suffering to justify an interstate violation, performing a concern for nested sovereignties only when it served to undermine a rival state's unitary sovereignty. It was hypocrisy squared: a violation of one contested sovereignty, justified by the violation of other, more marginalized sovereignties that the intervening power had historically done little to protect.

This paper will therefore undertake a genealogical critique, weaving together international relations theory and critical Indigenous scholarship. First, it will establish the theoretical framework of recursive hypocrisy by engaging with Indigenous Studies scholars who deconstruct the monolithic state sovereignty model. Second, it will return to the "origin story" of 1648 to demonstrate how the exclusion of Indigenous polities was not an oversight but a foundational design principle. Third, it will examine the Venezuelan case as a contemporary exemplar, detailing the historical and ongoing contest over sovereignty in the Amazon. Fourth, it will perform a discursive analysis of the U.S. justification for the 2026 operation, revealing its strategic instrumentalization of Indigenous vulnerability. Finally, it will argue that the path beyond this recursive hypocrisy lies not in reinforcing the brittle model of the unitary Westphalian state, but in embracing political models of plurinationalism and relational sovereignty that acknowledge the complex, layered reality of authority on the ground. The raid on Caracas, in this light, becomes more than a geopolitical event; it is a symptom of a system suffering from a centuries-old crisis of recognition, one that can only be resolved by finally seeing the sovereignties it was built to ignore.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: UNSETTLING SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH INDIGENOUS POLITICAL THOUGHT

To move beyond the superficial analysis of the Caracas event as a simple breach of interstate law, we must first dismantle the concept of sovereignty that underpins that law. Mainstream international relations and legal theory typically treat sovereignty as an attribute of the state: a singular, indivisible, and territorially exclusive bundle of rights to govern. This is the Westphalian inheritance. Indigenous Studies, however, offers a profound and necessary critique of this model, forcing a conceptual rupture by arguing that sovereignty is not, and has never been, the exclusive property of the nation-state. Indigenous scholars and activists articulate sovereignty as something inherent, pre-political, and derived from a people's longstanding relationship to land, language, and law. It is relational, intergenerational, and often shared or overlapping rather than exclusive. This theoretical divergence is not merely academic; it represents a fundamental clash of political worlds, one that exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of the modern order.

The work of scholars like Taiaiake Alfred (Mohawk) is foundational to this critique. Alfred argues that the Western concept of sovereignty is inextricably linked to domination and coercive authority, concepts alien to many Indigenous governance traditions, which he describes as rooted in peace, power, and righteousness (Alfred, 1999).

For Alfred, the pursuit of "sovereignty" within the framework of the settler state is a trap, as it accepts the very terms of the colonial power that seeks to erase Indigenous existence. Instead, he advocates for a reclamation of *Onkwehonwe* (original people) consciousness and self-determination outside the state's juridical box. Similarly, Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) employs a Fanonian lens to analyze the politics of recognition within settler-colonial states like Canada. He argues that state-led recognition of Indigenous rights often functions as a mode of colonial governance,

incorporating Indigenous peoples into the state's legal and political structure in a way that manages dissent and facilitates continued access to land and resources (Coulthard, 2014). This "recognition" is a form of organized hypocrisy, affirming a limited form of cultural identity while denying the underlying claim to land and sovereign jurisdiction.

This critique directly challenges the Westphalian fiction of the blank slate. The doctrine of *terra nullius*, that land belonged to no one prior to European "discovery", was the legal and philosophical sleight of hand that enabled the denial of Indigenous sovereignty. As legal historian Anthony Anghie demonstrates, the development of international law itself was central to the colonial project. The "standard of civilization" was a malleable criterion used to deny sovereign status to non-European peoples, thereby placing their lands and resources outside the protective norms of European interstate society and into a realm of lawful conquest (Anghie, 2004). The Westphalian system, therefore, did not emerge in isolation; it co-evolved with colonialism, and its core principle of sovereign equality was from the beginning reserved for a select club of "civilized" European states. The sovereignty of others was not recognized but erased, creating a hierarchy of political existence that persists in the diminished legal personality granted to Indigenous nations today.

The concept of "recursive hypocrisy" emerges from this clash. At the international level, we see the organized hypocrisy Krasner describes: powerful states like the United States violate the sovereignty of weaker states like Venezuela while rhetorically upholding the sanctity of the norm. However, this hypocrisy is recursive because it operates at multiple, nested levels. The Venezuelan state, itself a product of a colonial creole revolution that displaced Spanish rule but not the colonial logic of land ownership, asserts a Westphalian-style, exclusive sovereignty over its entire territory. In doing so, it necessarily engages in its own practice of organized hypocrisy. It signs international declarations like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) while often failing to implement its core provisions of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) regarding development projects on Indigenous lands. It recognizes certain collective land rights in its constitution while simultaneously granting mining and oil concessions in those same territories, deploying military force to secure them, and failing to protect communities from violence by illegal armed groups and miners (Zent & Zent, 2021). The state's sovereignty is thus performative and contradictory: it is recognized internationally as absolute, yet it is exercised domestically in a manner that continuously violates the inherent sovereignties within its borders.

This recursive structure creates the conditions for cynical instrumentalization by external powers. When a state's internal sovereignty is built on the suppression of other sovereignties, it creates a vulnerability. External actors can selectively amplify the narratives of that internal suppression, the suffering of Indigenous communities, environmental destruction, to paint the target state as morally bankrupt and politically illegitimate. This is not done out of genuine solidarity with Indigenous struggles for self-determination, but as a strategic tool to undermine the state's claim to be the sole legitimate authority. The intervening power positions itself not as a violator of sovereignty, but as a protector of more authentic, albeit marginalized, claims to justice and authority. This completes the recursive loop: the hypocrisy of the international system (violating state sovereignty) is justified by highlighting the hypocrisy of the target state (violating Indigenous sovereignty), all while the intervening power's own historical and ongoing violations of both state and Indigenous sovereignties elsewhere are conveniently ignored. To understand the full architecture of this loop, we must first return to the moment where the logic of exclusion was codified: the Peace of Westphalia.

THE WESTPHALIAN FOUNDING: SOVEREIGNTY AS A COLONIAL CLUB MEMBERSHIP

The year 1648 is ritually invoked as the birth of the modern international system, a moment when a society of sovereign, equal states emerged from the ashes of religious war (Chkuaseli, 2025). This standard narrative, however, is a profound myth that actively obscures the system's colonial foundations. A critical re-examination, informed by postcolonial and Indigenous scholarship, reveals that the treaties of Münster and Osnabrück did not establish a universal principle. Instead, they constituted a specific political settlement *within* Latin Christendom, a compact among European princes and monarchs that explicitly excluded the vast array of political communities beyond Europe's borders. The Westphalian order was not born in isolation; it was born in tandem with, and as a facilitator of, the accelerating colonial project. Its conception of sovereignty was not inclusive but exclusory, creating a legal and political category that Indigenous nations, by design, could not inhabit.

The context of the Thirty Years' War was intra-European: a complex struggle over religion, dynasty, and hegemony within the Holy Roman Empire. The peace sought to manage these conflicts by cementing the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* and weakening the universalist claims of Emperor and Pope. It strengthened the internal authority of rulers within their own domains. Crucially, this recognition was mutual and conditional upon a shared cultural, religious, and political framework. As historian Benno Teschke argues, Westphalia did not create an anarchic society of equals, but a states-system under French hegemony, where sovereignty was the privilege of a specific class of European aristocratic and monarchical politics (Teschke, 2003). The "international society" described by the English School was, at its origin, a closed club (Bull, 1977). Its rules of membership, its *jus publicum Europaeum*, were designed for and by its members.

The simultaneous and inseparable process was the construction of a legal dichotomy between this European society and the rest of the world. The philosophical and legal tool for this was the "standard of civilization," a flexible and self-serving doctrine developed by European jurists. Figures like Francisco de Vitoria, though sometimes credited with a proto-universalism, ultimately crafted arguments that justified Spanish dominion in the Americas by framing Indigenous peoples as lacking certain political and social institutions, thereby placing them outside the full protection of natural law (Anghie, 2004). By the time of Westphalia, the discourse was firmly established: to be sovereign required a recognizable form of statehood, sedentary agriculture, Christianity, and European modes of governance. The complex, kinship-based, and often non-sedentary political formations of the Americas, or the sophisticated empires of Africa and Asia that did not conform to European models, were categorized as "uncivilized." This was not an empirical observation but a political classification designed to enable dispossession.

The practical manifestation of this was the doctrine of *terra nullius*, land belonging to no one. While most famously associated with the British colonization of Australia, its logic permeated the Americas. If land was not being used in a "civilized" manner (i.e., according to European practices of enclosure, agriculture, and permanent settlement), it could be considered vacant and open for claim by a "discovering" Christian prince. This legal fiction required the active denial of Indigenous sovereignty, which was not seen as sovereignty at all, but as a form of primitive occupancy that could be extinguished by a higher claim. The papal bulls of the 15th century, such as *Inter Caetera*, had already divided the non-Christian world between Spain and Portugal for conquest and conversion (McNeil, 2024). Westphalia secularized and reinforced this logic, transferring the authority to recognize sovereignty from the Pope to the concert of European states

themselves. Indigenous nations were not parties to the treaty, nor were they considered potential parties. They were the objects of the system, not its subjects.

This founding exclusion had two monumental consequences. First, it made colonialism not an aberrant sideshow to international relations, but its central, constitutive process. The wealth extracted from the colonies funded European state-building and warfare. The borders drawn in Berlin in 1884, partitioning Africa, were the Westphalian logic applied by force to a continent whose own political geography was simply ignored. Second, it created the paradoxical condition of post-colonial states (Moyo & Nshimbi, 2019). When colonies in the Americas and later in Africa and Asia achieved independence, they did so by claiming the Westphalian sovereignty that had been denied to them. They inherited the colonial borders and, crucially, the colonial state's claim to exclusive authority over all territory and peoples within those borders. The new states of Latin America, including Venezuela, declared sovereignty over territories that were the homelands of hundreds of Indigenous nations whose pre-existing political authority was never ceded by treaty nor defeated in war, but simply legally erased by the colonial doctrine of *terra nullius* and its successors (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

Therefore, the sovereignty that was violated in Caracas in 2026 is a sovereignty with a specific and violent genealogy. It is a sovereignty born of a club that excluded Venezuela's original inhabitants, then claimed by a creole elite who overthrew Spanish rule but maintained the colonial structure of land ownership and state power. This state's claim to exclusive authority over the Amazon is thus inherently contested, resting on a foundation of historical denial. This foundational hypocrisy, the creation of a system of sovereign equality that required the denial of other forms of political community, reverberates down the centuries. It creates the conditions for the recursive hypocrisy we see today, where the violation of a state's sovereignty can be cynically justified by pointing to that state's own violation of the sovereignties it was built upon. To see this recursion in action, we must turn from the abstract origins of the system to the concrete, ongoing struggle in the Venezuelan Amazon.

VENEZUELA'S CONTESTED AMAZON: SOVEREIGNTY IN PRACTICE AND CONFLICT

Venezuela's claim to the Amazon basin, constituting roughly half of its national territory, is a textbook example of the recursive hypocrisy embedded in the post-colonial state. The region is not a passive, empty space seamlessly integrated into the nation, but a dynamic and violently contested political field. Here, the Westphalian sovereignty asserted by the state in Caracas collides daily with the enduring, inherent sovereignties of Indigenous nations such as the Yanomami, Ye'kwana, Pemón, Warao, and many others. The Venezuelan state's exercise of its sovereignty in this region consistently follows a colonial pattern: it is characterized by extraction, militarization, and the marginalization of Indigenous self-governance, even as the state's constitution and laws offer some of the most progressive recognitions of Indigenous rights in the Americas. This tension between paper recognition and material practice reveals the hypocrisy of the state's unitary sovereignty claim and creates the precise conditions that external actors later exploit.

Venezuela's 1999 Constitution, championed by the late President Hugo Chávez, was groundbreaking in its explicit recognition of Indigenous rights. Article 119 states: "The State will recognize the existence of the indigenous peoples and communities, their social, political and economic organization, their cultures, uses and customs, languages and religions, as well as their habitat and original rights over the lands they ancestrally and traditionally occupy..." It further mandates the demarcation of these habitats and guarantees collective land rights. This constitutional framework aligns with international

instruments like ILO Convention 169 and UNDRIP, which Venezuela ratified. On paper, this suggests a plurinational model, acknowledging multiple political and cultural authorities within the state. However, the implementation has been a story of organized hypocrisy. Decades after the constitution's adoption, the process of demarcating and titling Indigenous territories remains incomplete, stalled, and politically manipulated. The state maintains ultimate control over subsoil resources, and the promise of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) has been routinely ignored (Zent & Zent, 2021).

The primary vector of this hypocrisy is the state's economic model, heavily reliant on resource extraction. The Amazon is seen not as a homeland for autonomous nations but as a reservoir of wealth, gold, diamonds, coltan, and timber, to be exploited for national development. Under both Chávez and Maduro, the government launched ambitious plans like the "Arco Minero del Orinoco" (AMO) in 2016, a vast zone south of the Orinoco River earmarked for mining. The AMO decree was issued without consulting the affected Indigenous communities, a direct violation of constitutional and international obligations. The result has been an environmental and humanitarian catastrophe. The influx of thousands of illegal miners (*garimpeiros*), backed by domestic and transnational criminal networks, has led to widespread deforestation, mercury pollution of rivers, and a surge in violence, malaria, and sexual exploitation in Indigenous communities (Azzellini, 2021). The state's response has been ambivalent: officially condemning illegal mining, but often unable or unwilling to control the military and government officials complicit in the trade, and promoting the AMO as an economic lifeline.

In this context, the Venezuelan state's sovereignty manifests not as protective authority but as a predatory and often absent one. For Indigenous communities, the state is represented by the military units that sometimes clash with miners but are often accused of taxing or protecting them; by the government agencies that grant concessions without consultation; and by the lack of basic health and education services. Their own systems of authority, the community assemblies, the role of shamans and captains, the customary laws governing land use, are not recognized as sovereign governance by the state. Instead, they are tolerated as cultural practices, while the real authority over life and death, land and resources, is contested between state actors, criminal syndicates, and the communities' own resilient but besieged forms of self-defense. This is the lived reality of recursive hypocrisy: the state's internationally recognized right to govern this territory is premised on its failure to govern justly or to recognize other, equally legitimate forms of governance.

The situation creates a profound vulnerability, not just for the communities, but for the legitimacy of the Venezuelan state itself. The glaring contradiction between constitutional rhetoric and on-the-ground reality provides ample material for criticism. International human rights organizations, environmental NGOs, and foreign governments compile detailed reports documenting the devastation. These reports are factual and necessary. However, in the geopolitical arena, they become ammunition. The suffering of the Yanomami from mercury poisoning or the displacement of Pemón communities by armed groups is no longer just a human rights tragedy; it becomes evidence in a larger case to paint the Maduro government as a criminal, failed, and illegitimate state (de Lima, *et al.*, 2025). The sovereignty that Caracas claims over the Amazon is thus rendered suspect, not because the claim is historically unfounded (all post-colonial states share this foundation), but because its contemporary exercise is so violently at odds with its own laws and with basic norms of humanity. This manufactured or highlighted illegitimacy is the crucial precursor that makes the next step, external intervention justified as rescue, seem plausible to certain audiences. It sets the stage for

the final, cynical act of recursive hypocrisy: the instrumentalization of Indigenous suffering to sanction a violation of the very state sovereignty that caused it.

INSTRUMENTALIZING VULNERABILITY: INDIGENOUS SUFFERING AND THE JUSTIFICATION FOR CARACAS

In the years preceding the January 2026 operation, a meticulous narrative campaign took shape in Western diplomatic circles, think tanks, and media outlets. This campaign focused intensively on the humanitarian catastrophe in Venezuela, with a particular and strategic emphasis on the plight of Indigenous communities in the Amazon (Pérez, 2025). Reports from organizations like Human Rights Watch, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and specialized NGOs detailed the collapse of healthcare, the malnutrition, the violence from armed groups, and the ecological disaster of the Arco Minero (Zapata-Herrera, *et al.*, 2024). These accounts were not fabrications; they documented a brutal reality. However, the way this reality was framed and deployed in geopolitical discourse transformed Indigenous suffering from a complex tragedy rooted in historical colonialism and contemporary state failure into a simplified moral pretext for regime change. This process represents the apex of recursive hypocrisy: the strategic co-option of the struggle against one layer of sovereign hypocrisy (the state's violation of Indigenous rights) to justify another, larger layer of hypocrisy (the violation of that state's sovereignty).

The U.S. State Department's annual human rights reports on Venezuela increasingly featured graphic, front-page descriptions of Indigenous suffering (Casey, 2025). Congressional hearings were convened with testimony from activists and experts. The language used escalated from "concern" to "atrocities," and finally to terms like "genocide" and "ecocide," rhetorically placing the Maduro government in the category of history's most criminal regimes. This discourse performed two crucial functions. First, it dehumanized the Venezuelan state apparatus, painting it not as a political adversary with a contested claim to sovereignty, but as a criminal syndicate masquerading as a government. Second, and more perniciously, it appropriated the moral authority of Indigenous victimhood. By positioning themselves as the amplifiers of Indigenous voices (selectively chosen voices that aligned with an anti-Maduro stance), the U.S. and its allies could claim the mantle of humanitarian protectors. This framing tapped directly into the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) doctrine, suggesting that the international community had not just a right, but a duty, to intervene to halt mass suffering.

This appropriation was deeply cynical. It ignored the long history of U.S. and Western policy that contributed to Venezuela's crisis through sanctions, which numerous UN experts have criticized for exacerbating the humanitarian situation and impacting the most vulnerable, including Indigenous peoples (Alena Douhan, the UN Special Rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures, raised these concerns repeatedly). It also ignored the complicity of Western consumer markets and financial systems in the illegal gold trade that was destroying the Amazon. More fundamentally, it displayed a profound disinterest in actual Indigenous self-determination. The concern was for Indigenous peoples as *victims* of the Maduro state, not as *sovereign political actors* with their own visions for their future. There was no serious diplomatic push for the Venezuelan state to finally implement FPIC or complete land demarcation. The goal was not to empower Indigenous governance structures, but to use their suffering as a lever to destabilize and delegitimize the central government. As Indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard's work would predict, this was "recognition" as a tool of colonial governance, this time at the international level: a performative concern that managed Indigenous political claims by funneling them into a narrative that served an external geopolitical agenda (Coulthard, 2014).

When the Caracas raid occurred, this pre-formed narrative was instantly activated. The official U.S. justification, while citing the capture of a “narco-terrorist” and the restoration of democracy, leaned heavily on the humanitarian imperative (Long, 2026). In news coverage sympathetic to the operation, images of scarred Yanomami landscapes and interviews with displaced Warao communities were juxtaposed with footage of the military operation, creating a visceral moral link. The message was clear: this violation of sovereignty was not an act of aggression, but an act of rescue. The hypocrisy was recursive and complete. The United States, a state whose own history is built on the genocide of Indigenous nations and the violation of countless sovereign states, positioned itself as the enforcer of moral order. It violated Venezuela’s sovereignty (Layer 1) by highlighting Venezuela’s violation of Indigenous sovereignties (Layer 2), all while obscuring its own role in creating the conditions that made both layers of violation possible.

The instrumentalization did not go unchallenged. Many Indigenous organizations in Venezuela issued statements in the wake of the raid rejecting the foreign intervention. They denounced the Maduro government’s failures but argued that foreign military action would only bring more violence, dislocation, and chaos, further endangering their communities and lands. They pointed out that their struggle was for self-determination and territorial control, not for a change of management in Caracas from one set of extractivist elites to another potentially more hostile set. This rejection exposed the hollow core of the humanitarian justification. It revealed that the intervention was not about fulfilling the aspirations of the Amazon’s original inhabitants, but about leveraging their pain for a classic, Westphalian-style power play. The Caracas operation, therefore, stands as a stark lesson in how the recursive hypocrisy of the system operates: the original sin of excluding Indigenous sovereignty creates a permanent fault line within post-colonial states, a fault line that great powers can exploit to undermine their rivals, all while performing a morality they themselves have never upheld.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE UNITARY STATE – PLURINATIONALISM AS AN ANTIDOTE TO HYPOCRISY

The capture of Nicolás Maduro in Caracas was a dramatic event, but as this analysis has shown, it was merely a acute symptom of a chronic, centuries-old condition. The recursive hypocrisy it revealed, the violation of state sovereignty justified by the state’s own violation of Indigenous sovereignty, is not a random occurrence but a structural feature of an international system founded on exclusion. The Westphalian order, born from a club mentality and the doctrine of *terra nullius*, produced a model of sovereignty that is unitary, exclusive, and ultimately brittle (Goetze, 2026). It forces a single, supreme authority onto territories that are often home to multiple, layered political communities with deep historical roots. The result is a perpetual cycle of internal suppression and external exploitation, where the sovereignty of the marginalized is either ignored or cynically weaponized.

The Venezuelan case exemplifies this tragic cycle. The state’s claim to the Amazon rests on a colonial inheritance that never recognized Indigenous nationhood. Its contemporary exercise of power in the region, through extractivist projects and militarization, continues this colonial pattern, creating humanitarian crises. This internal contradiction then becomes a vulnerability, an Achilles’ heel that external rivals can target. By amplifying the narrative of Indigenous suffering, they can erode the state’s moral and political legitimacy, paving the way for interventions that serve their own strategic interests, not the goal of Indigenous self-determination. The Caracas raid was the kinetic culmination of this discursive preparation. It was organized hypocrisy

operating at its most sophisticated and damaging level, exploiting the system's foundational flaw.

Breaking this recursive cycle requires a radical reimagining of the political unit at the heart of the international system. Reinforcing the model of the unitary, Westphalian sovereign state, whether by condemning its violation or by enforcing its authority, only perpetuates the problem. The solution lies in moving towards models of *plurinationalism* and *relational sovereignty* that are already being theorized and practiced by Indigenous movements and some forward-thinking states. Plurinationalism, as embodied in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador (however imperfectly implemented), explicitly recognizes the coexistence of multiple nations within a single political community. It rejects the idea of a single, homogenizing national identity and instead envisions a state as a pact between distinct peoples, each with their own forms of governance, law, and territorial connection (Schavelzon, 2015).

This is not merely a domestic arrangement; it has profound implications for international relations. A plurinational state's sovereignty would not be a monolithic, indivisible claim. It would be a negotiated, shared authority, where the central state's external sovereignty is exercised in consultation and partnership with internal Indigenous nations on matters affecting their territories and rights. This would transform the recursive hypocrisy from a vulnerability into a source of strength and legitimacy. A state that genuinely shares power with the Indigenous nations within its borders cannot be as easily accused of suppressing them. Its claim to represent that territory internationally would be more robust because it would be based on consent and partnership, not just historical force.

Of course, the path to plurinationalism is fraught. It challenges the core interests of extractive industries and centralized militaries. It requires a level of trust and political will that is often in short supply. Furthermore, the international system itself, with its UN composed of unitary states and its laws designed for them, is not yet equipped to recognize such complex sovereignties. However, the pressure is building. The global Indigenous rights movement, the climate crisis that highlights the stewardship of Indigenous lands, and the undeniable failures of the unitary state model in multi-ethnic societies all point toward this necessary evolution.

The raid on Caracas should serve as a warning. It shows that a system built on a hypocritical foundation will inevitably produce hypocritical actions. The way to prevent the next Caracas is not to police interstate violations more fiercely while ignoring internal ones, nor is it to champion interventions that exploit internal fractures. The way forward is to finally address the original exclusion. It is to build political communities, and ultimately an international society, that can acknowledge and accommodate multiple, relational sovereignties on the same land. This means taking Indigenous political thought not as a marginal critique, but as a central source for redesigning our shared world. Until we do, the recursive hypocrisy will continue, and the dawn will keep breaking over capitals where sovereignty is not a shield, but a target.

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