



Chepe Luna is welcomed by family in 2012

Drug trafficker-turned-transport tycoon "Chepe Luna," shot dead in Honduras last month, will be survived by his web of corruption, with an extensive network of collaborators in the Salvadoran state.

The streets made Chepe Luna pay his debts. The underworld. They shot him six times near his business in Comayaguela, Honduras, where he

had set up shop after escaping with ease from the Salvadoran justice system in 2009, becoming the owner of a prosperous transport company. The Honduran police say the murder may have been a settling of scores by competitors in the buses and trucks business, but they have not ruled out the idea that it was linked to old debts in the Central American drug trafficking world.

Jose Natividad Luna Pereira, alias "Chepe Luna," is dead. He was a founding member of the Perrones -- the first Salvadoran drug "transportista" group -- which was born and came to power under the protection of the corrupt National Civil Police (PNC), Attorney General's Office and the entire judicial branch. He is survived by his friends in uniform, as well as those who wear jackets and ties in government offices and in the Legislative Assembly. He is survived by a list of public sector employees who helped him prosper in exchange for making them rich as well, helping him move drugs and undocumented persons in exchange for passing them the agreed-upon fee.

SEE ALSO: Chepe Luna Profile

He is survived, in El Salvador, by a system that is corrupt to its very core. This system is already making agreements with his successors in the underworld, and has already extended a hand, offered a uniform, a badge, the legal protocol -- all the services of the state -- in order to continue doing business.

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The last I read, in a Honduran paper, was that they were going to pay funeral tributes to Jose Natividad Luna Pereira in Pasaquina. He was born, according to his birth certificate, in Santa Clarita, a sector of that municipality in the La Union province, where he grew up with those who later became his sidekicks in the Perrones. And they ought to pay tribute: Chepe Luna, as he was later called in police reports from four Central American countries, financed local campaigns for the ARENA party, invested money in the Municipal Limeño and Atletico Balboa soccer teams when both were in the Major Leagues or in the process of moving up, paid for business parties and, above all, paid bribes -- lots of bribes.

In Eastern El Salvador, from Barrancones to Santa Rosa de Lima and San Miguel, Chepe Luna became a prime example of the infiltration of organized crime in the Salvadoran state, after two decades of paying protection fees to the state, its agents and the political parties.

Chepe Luna escaped from four operations in El Salvador that the entire state -- ministries and presidential palaces from Flores to Saca -- and their US advisors began without knowing that he, Mr. Jose Natividad, had in his pay various officials at the tables where his captures were planned. Or, in hindsight, it is quite probable that they were, in fact, aware.

Chepe Luna was a friend -- a very good friend -- of a PNC director. He invited him to rodeos and offered him rides in his all-terrain vehicles. And before being friends with that director, Ricardo Mauricio Menesses Orellana, he was friends, or at least an acquaintance-with-benefits, with various heads of the anti-narcotics, finance, intelligence, migration and criminal investigation divisions of the PNC.

SEE ALSO: Corruption in El Salvador: Politicians, Police and Transportistas

In my book "The Infiltrators," which I presented in El Salvador this past May, I wrote an entire chapter about Chepe Luna and his police buddies. Below I have reproduced a paragraph that speaks to the reach of this narco-contraband runner who made the nation state his best, most loyal concubine:

In a short period of time, Luna Pereira ... began to position himself as the most powerful contraband runner in the east, thanks to his territorial control over the Salvadoran wetlands adjacent to the Gulf of Fonseca, his access to merchandise in Nicaragua and Honduras, and, most importantly, an

extensive network of collaborators that he built little by little in the Salvadoran state. This occurred particularly in the police, but also in the Attorney General's Office and in the judicial system. A report written by the Housing Ministry in San Salvador in 2004 explained it like this: "the contraband of all types of merchandise increased because the police chiefs alleged that they received gifts from the major structures ... at the end of 2003 and in the first nine months of 2004, the police favored the contraband runners to the extent that they did not touch the owners of goods who paid bribes."

Chepe Luna's alliance with Central American states -- first the Salvadoran state and later the Honduran state -- was so effective that operations against him failed, courts threw out cases against him, and warrants for his arrest were lost. Meanwhile he, calmly, smiling as in the last photo that was published of him by the Honduran press following his umpteenth capture and release, made his businesses grow. And kept bribing and getting closer to the power structures.

The money, however, was not enough for Chepe Luna to block the automatic weapons that his assassins emptied into him in Comayaguela. The Santa Clarita native, in addition to bribery, had gotten involved in the business of informing the Central American police about his former partners in crime in El Salvador, according to what two members of the police in the United States and San Salvador told me. And ratting, as is widely known in the underworld, is not a good business.

It could be that the tombstone of Jose Natividad Luna Pereira, who measured 1.65 meters in height, was born in Pasaquina and had Salvadoran identity number 2936356, will be placed over his tomb in the Eastern Plains, or that they will bury him in Tegucigalpa -- he was always a slippery figure. It could say: here lies Chepe Luna, a man with many friends in the Salvadoran state.

**Hector Silva is a journalist who worked for 15 years in La Prensa Grafica of El Salvador. Since 2012, he has been a fellow at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University. This article originally appeared in Salvadoran newspaper El Faro and was translated and reprinted with permission. See Spanish original [here](#).*

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