VENEZUELA ANALYSIS

ANALYSIS ON SITUATION IN VENEZUELA, AUGUST 2016.
On December 6th, 2015, Venezuela saw sweeping changes to its parliament following elections. The parliamentary elections, which were hotly contested between pro-regime “Chavista” delegates in favor of retaining the policies of current president Nicolás Maduro and opposition politicians proffering themselves as the necessary actors to introduce sweeping reform intended to curb endemic issues of corruption, poverty, and crime in Venezuela. President Maduro, a protégé of Hugo Chavéz, came to power after being picked by Chavez to succeed him after the ruler’s death from cancer ended his fourteen-year rule before going on to be elected after a term as interim President in April 2013. Whereas Chavéz was wildly popular with poor and working class Venezuelans for his introduction of expanded social welfare programs funded by the country’s oil wealth (32% of Venezuelans live under the poverty line), Maduro has overseen a drastic decrease in popularity after food and electricity shortages have caused daily life to come to a grinding halt for many citizens as people are forced to wait for hours in line for basic necessities and have seen their work weeks cut to four days. Inflation in the country is drastic, and as a result many citizens turn to the black market to procure basic supplies, and plummeting oil prices have led to a contraction in the country’s coffers and a 6000% increase in petrol prices for Venezuelans.
The December 2015 elections, which drew a 74% turn-out, resulted in a drastic change to the make-up of the Venezuelan parliament. The ruling Chavista PSUV (Socialist Party of Venezuela) was defeated by the opposition MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable), with the latter winning a supermajority of 109 to 55 seats. The MUD is an electoral coalition of parties ranging from left to center right created to form a united opposition to the ruling Chavez regime and the successive Maduro regime. The election resulted in the first parliamentary session since Chavéz came to power in 1999 that PSUV do not hold the majority of seats. Venezuelan society features high levels of economic inequality between social classes and the resulting politics have traditionally been quite polarized. Generally speaking, the poor and working classes dependably support Chavista candidates and policies, while middle and upper class Venezuelans are in favor of opposition parties. As the December parliamentary elections suggest, however, the gap between ideologies in social classes is closing as Chavista policies fail to sufficiently negate the realities of inflation and food shortages.
Maduro’s government, from its ideology to its policies, structure and practices, is largely a product of Hugo Chavez’s 14-year rule of Venezuela. Therefore, one must look at Venezuela under Chavez to understand the current situation in the country.

Chavez, a military leader in the Venezuelan army, successfully led a military coup in 1998, was popularly voted in as Venezuela’s president and commissioned a new constitution to be drafted under the ideals of the Bolivarian Revolution. The new government was to be ruled by a “servant leader” who listens to the people, or pueblo, according to Chavez. It was inspired by the revolutionary, Simon Bolivar, the legendary South American leader who threw off the Spanish colonizers in the 1800s. Chavez established laws and practices that were largely popular to the poor masses, especially when oil prices were up and the economy was booming, but was divisive as Chavez’s rhetoric became increasingly leftist. In 2002, Chavez was overthrown for a week by the opposition in a coup, but soon regained power. Upon his return, Chavez began to consolidate more power under his regime as he announced a new move to 21st Century Socialism. The regime became increasingly undemocratic, gaining control over major economic and political institutions with amendments to the constitution made by the new PSUV party-controlled National Assembly and Judiciary.
Chavez maintained his popularity during this time, largely due to the oil boom since 2003, which funded his various misiones, chavista social programs, as well as accruing massive loans from overseas. However, after Chavez’s re-election in 2012, public support for the regime began to falter. The price of oil was in decline, forcing the end of Chavez’s various social programs, inflation was rising, and supplies were becoming scarce. Additionally, crime had been on the rise since Chavez had gained power, with rates reaching the second highest in the Americas by 2012.

Before he passed away from cancer in 2013, Chavez named his vice president Nicolas Maduro as his successor and Maduro has since remained loyal to the chavista legacy. However, whereas Chavez had managed to maintain power despite much opposition because of a relatively booming economy and a persona that inspired the support of the masses, Maduro lacks both the charisma necessary to spark the same connection, and with a rapidly deteriorating economy, not to mention soaring crime rates and rapid unemployment, public approval for the president and his regime has seriously deteriorated. In reaction, Maduro has adhered to Chavez’s traditional tactics of fear mongering, calling for the power to decree in a state of emergency, and mobilizing the forces under his control to prop up his government and suppress growing anti-governmental sentiment.

Under the 1999 constitution, the presidency, in coalition with the vice president and council of ministers, forms the executive branch. The president is popularly elected for 6-year terms, and, since 2009, may run for an unlimited number of terms. During his 14-year rule, Chavez collected much power under the presidency, powers which Maduro has inherited. As head of the ruling PSUV party, Maduro has control of both the National Assembly and Judiciary. In addition, Maduro is Commander in Chief of the armed forces, which has been greatly useful in enforcing laws and policies of the president. Maduro as president also serves as the main foreign minister, giving him the power to make deals with leaders of states such as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran, among others, and to declare Venezuela’s foreign policy goals. Maduro also has the power to declare a state of emergency, which usually is followed by being granted by the Assembly power to decree via the Enabling Law. Maduro has used this method twice, once during the 2014 protests and again in 2015 when the US placed sanctions on Venezuelan officials accused of violating human rights during the 2014 crackdown on antigovern-
In March 2016, Maduro enacted a state of “economic emergency” in response to increasing food shortages and huge energy deficits, once again granting himself sweeping powers despite objections from the opposition-held parliament.

Maduro has inherited major socioeconomic and political problems from Chavez’s rule, which have only worsened since 2013. In addition, while Maduro largely owes his initial presidential victory in the 2013 special elections to Chavez’s endorsement, Maduro only beat the opposition by 1.6 percentage points, amid cries of fraud from those opposed to the regime. Since then, Maduro’s popularity has significantly worsened as he reacts to crises in the traditional chavista fashion, using the military to encroach on civilian life and suppress anti-government demonstrations, creating policies supported by the judiciary that allow the state to collect more power, and making unsubstantiated claims of US-backed coups and assassination attempts in hopes of unifying the people under his regime through fear of Venezuela’s traditional enemy. Maduro’s tactics have only increased anti-government sentiment, however, and as the regime becomes more authoritarian, Maduro faces major criticism from the opposition, the international community and even his own coalition government.

The National Assembly, created under the 1999 constitution, is a unicameral parliament made up of 165 deputies.

The parliament, although intended to be representative of the people, has become increasingly polarized, with those in favor of the regime and those opposed largely gathering into two major camps. The 2014 anti-government protests were a massive growth point for the opposition, which was able to carry on the momentum of the unrest into the December elections. The opposition Democratic Unity coalition (MUD), despite being made up of parties from across the political spectrum - including the left - is accused of being a right-wing movement by supporters of the PSUV (the party of Chavez and Maduro) for promoting policies intended to stimulate business.

The MUD has put forward an “Amnesty Law” intended to free political prisoners detained due to dissent of the government. Leopoldo Lopez is the most prominent of these political prisoners, having been locked up in 2014 on a 14-year charge after accusations of incitement to violence during anti-government protests in which 403
people were killed (extensive documentation by hu-
man rights groups have maintained that the majority
of the killings were committed by the security forces of
the Maduro regime). Despite the passing of the law in
the assembly, López remains imprisoned - the Supreme
Court has intervened along every step of the opposition’s
efforts to enforce amnesty for political prisoners. The
retention of the policy and the failure to uphold the am-
nesty law has served to criminalize legitimate criticism
of the regime, in an attempt to create an atmosphere of
fear and paranoia intended to silence potential dissent.

The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), the
party of the regime, was created by Chavez in 2006. It
is made up of most major parties in support of the re-
gime, including Chavez’s own Fifth Republic Movement.
The party supports chavismo policies, and by extension
Maduro. As the majority in the Assembly, it controls the
legislature and provides Maduro with whatever he calls
for, as long as it supports the regime. However, the party
is suffering from Maduro’s rapidly decreasing popularity,
losing the 2012 majority of votes (although maintain-
ing a majority of seats due to a “reversal bonus” from a
2009 electoral law). Additionally, tensions within the par-
ty have been building as the opposition grows and Mad-
uro grows increasingly desperate to maintain his hold
on power. In June 2014 former ministers of the regime
criticized Maduro, his incompetence and his increasingly
authoritarian hold on the country, in a public letter, ex-
hibiting the growing cracks in loyalty of the coalition.

The Democratic Unity Table (MUD) is the main party of
the opposition. After they failed to instill change by boy-
cotting the 2006 parliamentary elections, the opposition
parties formed their own coalition, MUD, in hopes that
it would allow them greater sway in winning votes and
power. The party has been relatively successful since,
planning out their tactics and strategies, and formulat-
ing clear and visible campaigns. Their rise in popularity
has also been a product of general discontent on the
part of the voters, as the current regime fails to provide
basic goods and services and increasingly uses suppres-
sive and violent tactics to address dissent. The opposi-
tion party won the majority of seats in the December 6
parliamentary elections, winning 109 seats and beating
PSUV which only achieved 55 seats. While this is a vic-
tory for the opposition, Venezuela continues to face an
uphill battle with the struggle of severe shortages only
worsening.
The judiciary was intended in the 1999 constitution to be a separate branch of government, providing a legal check to the executive and legislative branches. However, in 2004 Chavez saw that an amendment to be made that added 12 seats to the Supreme Court and granted the Assembly appointment power of the justices. The court was then packed with justices loyal to the regime, and since then the judiciary has been seen as no longer an independent and unbiased institution. Evidence of this has been documented. A report made by four attorneys in 2014 revealed that over 10 years and 45,474 sentencings, the judiciary has ruled in favor of the government every time. The judiciary has also been known to check its own justices, as most visibly exhibited by the case of former Judge María Lourdes Afiuni who followed Venezuelan law and international advice in pardoning an opposition member. She subsequently found herself in 2009 being tried on corruption charges, thrown in prison where she was allegedly tortured, placed under house arrest until 2013, and is currently barred from her profession, cannot leave the country, and cannot access her bank account or her social networks. Finally, the judiciary has recently played a role in charging major opposition leaders with inciting violence.
during the anti-government protests in 2014, on September 10 of this year sentencing the popular leader, Leopoldo López, to nearly 14 years in military prison. Additionally, the justices have supported Maduro and the Assembly in light of last year’s elections by indicting and banning other key opposition leaders from running in the December 6 parliamentary elections.

Maduro’s control over a corrupt judiciary was most recently exposed in the media in October 2015 when one of the lead prosecutors in Leopoldo Lopez’s case, Franklin Nieves, came forward, admitting to Lopez’s innocence and apologizing for his role in the opposition leader’s sentencing. The prosecutor’s confession has proved the opposition’s suspicions that Lopez’s arrest last year was politically motivated. Mr. Nieves and his family have escaped to Miami and are currently seeking asylum. On July 22nd of this year, a video of Nieves was posted on Twitter showing him pleading with his judicial colleagues in Venezuela to revert Lopez’s sentencing calling it “a farce.” He calls upon the court to cancel Lopez’s sentence in order to be at peace “with our consciences, our families and our country.”

The judiciary branch, governed by the Supreme Court, is notoriously pro-regime. It has been successful in negating measures taken by the majority opposition parliament that are unfavorable to the Maduro regime, such as the overruling of parliament’s objection to Maduro’s declaration of an “economic emergency” in order to grant himself greater powers - affirming the executive’s ability to act without approval of congress. Critics of the regime assert that the Court frequently works outside of the frameworks and boundaries of the constitution in order to back Chavista policies and politicians. The “Amnesty Law” intended to free political prisoners from the opposition imprisoned for protesting the regime, which passed in the newly-constituted parliament, was rejected by the Supreme Court - thus cementing an already known fact that the judiciary branch acts unilaterally in favor of the interests of the Maduro regime.

In the time running up to the election, the Supreme Court engaged in electoral suppression. Several candidates running for the opposition were banned from doing so, and even elected officials (three opposition legislators and one pro-government lawmaker) were prevented from taking office after the December elections after the Supreme Court intervened on an account of alleged voting irregularities.
Venezuela’s hybrid political model is an electoral authoritarian regime, in that the authoritarian government is propped up through the use of democratic habits, particularly voting. Venezuela’s departure from democracy since 1998 has largely been aided through voting. Chavez was voted into office via popular election in 1999, and the number of elections since then has become increasingly frequent. However, as Chavez and now Maduro continue to consolidate power, elections have become heavily weighted in the regime’s favor. The electoral process has become increasingly unfair, as the regime uses its control over the major economic institutions, media, resources, and funding to create large, visible campaigns for candidates of the ruling coalition. Conversely, this proves to be a major hurdle for the opposition, who do not have these public resources at their disposal and who also suffer governmental discrimination, as was seen with the recent banning of major leaders from running in the parliamentary elections. Therefore, although elections have become more frequent, they have also become less fair and have contributed to further legitimization of the regime and its actions.

Elections have become increasingly undemocratic, contributing to the violation of human, civil and political rights of the electorate as well as the opposition candidates. Reports have shown that, instead of contributing to a transitional process towards democracy, elections have aided the regime in plunging further into the abyss of authoritarianism. Freedom House has released reports on the rule of law in Venezuela, dropping the country from its list of “electoral democracies” since 2009 after 300 candidates from the opposition were banned from running for offices. In another report in 2014, Freedom House stated that Venezuela has also deteriorated in its respect of political and civil rights, dropping it from 2.5 in 1998 to 5 in 2014 (on a scale of 1-7, one being most free). In the run up to the December 6th elections, repression of the opposition happened on a systemic scale, with many vocal dissenter being legally barred from running for office, and imprisonment of those charged with “inciting violence” for protesting.
The opposition, recognizing the ineffectiveness of their boycott in 2006, has since embraced the use of the electoral process to gain power. Although heavily in favor of the ruling coalition, voting remains the most democratic avenue of change in Venezuela. In order to become a contender, however, the opposition has had to band together, forming MUD. MUD has gained increasing electoral success, and major wins have forced the regime to accommodate the opposition. However, the regime continues to simply change the rules when MUD gains a win in order to keep real power away from opposition leaders.

The creation of a more powerful opposition has led to a largely 2-party system in government, polarizing the government into two camps. Although a good electoral strategy, this has created an ideological problem, as the opposition chooses to run on platforms of economic liberalization and streamlining the process to business development, while the citizens really wish to see normality restored through policies that will stop the supply and food shortages, decrease the crime rates and increase employment.
Nationalized and established as the main source of revenue for the Venezuelan economy by Chavez, the oil industry had enabled the regime to fund popular social welfare programs that endeared Chavez to the people. However, because oil exports have become Venezuela’s main source of trade (amounting to around 95% of export earnings and 25% of GDP), Venezuela’s economy is extremely volatile, entirely dependent on the global price of oil. The drastic state of Venezuela’s economy today is testament to this, as its industry and trade dropped severely with the global price of oil. With the industry in crisis, massive orders to fill and debts to pay, Maduro has been on a global campaign to ask for loans from its allies in China, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia in order to stay solvent. In addition, with the help of Russia, Venezuela has called for a conference between OPEC and non-OPEC members to discuss raising the base price of oil, which dropped from $105 per barrel in June 2014 to $50 per barrel in October 2015. Maduro has called for the price to be raised to $88 per barrel, the amount Venezuela needs in order to service its debts past 2015. The price of a barrel of crude oil today is $42. As the nationalized oil industry is the source of Venezuela’s monetary power, this economic blow has not only severely incapacitated the ruling coalition’s ability properly provide for itself and stakeholders, but shortages and inflation have caused massive discontent from the citizens. 2016 saw a 6,000% in oil costs, with petrol gone from being virtually free for Venezuelans to people actually paying for gas and seeing the subsequent restriction of movement of the price hike.
The shortage of food and goods in Venezuela has reached the level of national crisis. It is not uncommon for people to stand in line for hours to buy basic staples like bread and beans, and a scarcer good like chicken, for example, could see queues lasting nine or ten hours on the rare occasions when it is available. Soviet-era communist jokes have seen a transcontinental resurgence in Venezuela with quips about the shortages and unbearable queues becoming a common form of commentary on the economic situation.

(An old man walks into a grocery store in Caracas. After waiting patiently in line, he asks the shopkeeper for a container of cooking oil, a jug of milk and, a quarter kilo of coffee. The clerk apologizes, saying that all three items are out of stock, and the disappointed patron walks off. Overhearing this exchange, the next person in line remarks to the proprietor: “Cooking oil? Milk? That stupid old man, he must be crazy.” The storekeeper considers this a moment and responds: “Yes, but what a remarkable memory!”)
As a result of the shortage crisis, Venezuela has seen the emergence of a thriving black market economy and smuggling. Inflation is astronomical, which means that the bolivar, the Venezuelan currency, has decreasingly weak purchasing power. Food staples are price controlled in Venezuela, but because shortages are so drastic, people seek out non-price-controlled alternatives which can go for substantially higher. These days, price-controlled chicken goes for 65 bolivars a pound. Chicken on the black market can go for as high as 1,300 bolivars. People can usually only buy the same item twice a week - a system designed to function as rationing, but that goes virtually unchecked due to the black market trade.

As shortages and inflation increase, the power of the Venezuelan economy decreases. The economy shrank by 5.7 percent in 2015, while inflation concurrently went up to 81 percent. The last inflation calculations in December 2015 showed the inflation rate being 181 percent. The dire economic situation contributes to crime and general social malaise, fueling unrest. In the midst of the economic crisis, Maduro granted himself sweeping powers in the declaration of an "economic emergency", which allows him to intervene in private businesses and limit access to currency. The opposition’s intent to reverse the declaration was overturned by the Venezuelan Supreme Court.
Venezuela’s macroeconomic policy was already poor when the price of oil plummeted in 2014. The economy has become increasingly reliant on the oil industry during Chavez’s rule, accounting for roughly 95% of Venezuela’s exports. In addition, the production of oil had been in decline since the oil boom, making the economy reliant more specifically on the price of oil. Due to the focus on the oil industry, the country has neglected investment in other industries, choosing to import other resources and goods. The rigid exchange rate policy and failure to accrue more than $7 billion more in foreign exchange reserves during the oil boom further exacerbated the energy crisis, as it left no room for adjustment and rates were widely overestimated to begin with. Finally, an increase in domestic consumption of oil and smuggling reduced Venezuela’s oil surplus and by extension exports.

Chavez had also increased consumption and borrowing during his rule, leaving Venezuela in debt which has since risen sharply to an estimated $142 billion (64% of GDP) in 2015. Now that the country is in crisis, Venezuela is predicted to default on its loans, as it may only be able to continue to finance them (with roughly $11 billion more loans from countries like China and Russia) through the end of 2015. There is also a chance that hyperinflation may occur next year. Additionally, this prediction is making it much harder to attract investors during a time when Venezuela’s economy needs it the most. 2016 has seen the progression of Venezuela into full blown economic crisis. In the meantime, Venezuela has been struggling to pay its loans by cutting around 30% of imports, which has led to the rapid precipitation of food, supplies and medicinal shortages. Jamaica, which has been indebted to Venezuela since 2006 due to oil trade, has agreed to pay its debt back in food, medication and fertilizers which citizens are in dire need of.
The resulting situation on the ground is dire. According to recent polls, 59.6% of those asked described their personal and family economic situation as negative, with 66.4% saying the situation has gotten worse since last year and 53% believe the situation will only get worse in the next six months. The people’s lack of hope and approval are a reflection of the impact the economic crisis has had on the ground.

The shortages, especially food shortages, are so drastic that it has surpassed the issue of rampant crime as the topic of most concern to the Venezuelan people. In fact, the lack of food is so great that 1 in 3 households in Venezuela do not eat three times a day. Additionally, only 33.7% of those asked have hope that the shortages will decrease. As the shortages continue to worsen, public discontent with the government rises as it is perceived as responsible for the economic crisis and has done little to solve the situation.

In addition to food and supply shortages, the inflation rate of the Bolivar has hit triple-digit levels. The currency, however, is not only inflated, but increasingly unstable, as exchange rates vary from 800 bolivars per USD on the black market, while the official rate is reported to be 9.95 bolivars per dollar. The largest bill, a 100 Bolivar bank note, is now worth less than 10 U.S cents.
A result of economic crisis, rampant unemployment, uncontrolled crime and governmental crackdown is an overbearing sense of lost opportunity among the country’s educated. Many students and professors, hoping for a chance to make a living and freeing governmental persecution for their critical beliefs, has led to a massive brain drain.

As is common in suppressive regimes, Venezuela has seen a steady outflow of some of its most educated since Chavez came into power. Many of these emigrants are young and educated, often escaping repression or discrimination in Venezuela. Additionally, as the situation in Venezuela has deteriorated with increasing rapidity, the rate at which people are leaving has increased in the past three years. It is estimated that roughly 1.5 million Venezuelans, or 6% of the population, live abroad, many settling in countries in Central or North America and Europe. Many of these emigrants form a large number of the most educated of Venezuelans. Around 90 percent of those who leave have at least a Bachelor’s degree, 46 percent hold a Masters and 12 percent have a PhD.

The situation is worrying, to put it directly. Venezuela is bleeding human capital at a time when that is the very thing the country will need to recover.
Since Chavez came into power in 1999, crime rates have steadily risen. It has gotten so bad, that Gallup named Venezuela as the most insecure nation in the world in 2013. The rise has largely been attributed to other countries like Colombia by the Venezuelan government, but the majority of the population is aware of the stark rise in homegrown crime. In response, first Chavez and now Maduro have pledged to address the rise in crime, creating special task forces such as Chavez’s Bolivarian Military Police in 2009 and Maduro’s 2013 crackdown on trafficking with his Plan Patria Segura. However, the issue has become so dire, especially violent crime in the barrios or slums of Caracas, that crime is normally the main topic of concern among Venezuelan citizens.

Although not the most discussed area of the crime situation, petty crime like theft and burglaries have been on the rise. A 2014 Gallup poll revealed that only 19 percent of Venezuelans felt safe walking home at night. This is largely attributed to the growing economic divide due to fiscal mismanagement under Chavez and now Maduro’s regimes. Additionally, the recent severe economic downturn and supply shortages have largely contributed as well, with robbery becoming so prevalent that videos of people looting stores has become a regular occurrence.
The area of crime largely attributed to Colombian cartels, the trafficking of drugs, humans and oil among other commodities has become ingrained in the Venezuelan system. Due to its location and relatively good infrastructure, Venezuela has become a major trafficking channel for smugglers and organized crime. In addition, the underfunding of Venezuelan security forces have made them susceptible to bribery and even active participants in the trafficking. Additionally, government crackdowns on trafficking and the ongoing economic plunge in Venezuela have led to more citizen involvement in illegal trade. According to the 2010 UN World Drug Report, Venezuela has the fourth highest level of drug seizures, a testament to the prevalence of the trade. The economic crisis, which has only worsened in 2016, has seen the presence of a booming black market and the proliferation of smuggling.

Crime levels have continued at a tremendous level with little discernible change under the new parliamentary leadership. In a new and particularly heinous case, 21 gold miners were disappeared and murdered in March 2016, with locals and family members placing the blame on gang violence.

The most worrisome area to locals in regard to crime in Venezuela is the growing rates of violent crimes and murders taking place. An NGO, Venezuelan Violence Observatory (OVV), released a report that showed an increase in homicide rate from 25 per 100,000 in 1999 to 79 per 100,000 in 2013, second only to Honduras in the region. Additionally, the OVV placed the capital Caracas at 82 per 100,000 in 2014, the highest murder rate in all of Latin America. The homicide rate has increased so starkly, many are calling it an “epidemic.” The actual numbers of murders keep varying depending on the organization investigating and publishing the figures. Some claim there are 58 homicides per 100,000 people in Caracas while others claim there are 119 per 100,000. In comparison, the United States’ rates lies at about four homicides per 100,000. Many people blame Maduro and his dysfunctional government for the rise in crime, which further emboldens the opposition.

The regime has responded by scapegoating Colombia for this as well. Maduro was recently filmed blaming Colombian “paramilitaries” for the high murder rates in his weekly television address. Additionally, a great deal of censorship has been going on, where the few who go to the police to report a murder are told to stay away from the media in exchange for a timely investigation into their case.
Many crimes that do occur never even get reported, as people do not trust the police and have no faith in the efficiency of the judicial system, and for good reason. Venezuela has been consistently listed since 1995 as one of the most corrupt countries in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index. In the most recent 2014 report, Venezuela was ranked 161 out of 175 countries, where 1 is least corrupt, and 175 is the most. Additionally, Transparency’s Global Corruption Barometer revealed that the police is the institution most widely regarded by citizens as being highly corrupt at 83% of respondents. These numbers reflect the fears of citizens who are afraid of reporting crimes to the police, who are often known to be involved in crime themselves.

Venezuela regularly acts in contempt of international law in its violent repression of dissenters and its human rights violations. For the past decade, Venezuela has refused entry to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights as well as UN rapporteurs. In 2012, Venezuela withdrew from the American Convention on Human Rights, intending to deny protections under the agreement to opposition of the regime.

Hundreds of low-income and immigrant individuals have been killed in raids by the police and military in poor neighborhoods, and the same forces have carried out mass detentions and internment. According to Human Rights Watch, “security forces detained more than 14,000 people temporarily between July 2015 and January 2016, during the operations, to “verify” whether they were wanted for crimes, but fewer than 100 were ultimately charged with any offense.” The raids have resulted in the deportation of at least 22,000 asylum-seeking Colombians.
Since the spirit of the Bolivarian Revolution overtook the South American countries, there has been a close alliance among the regimes against the capitalist west, and especially the US. A major alliance founded by Venezuela and Cuba on a united desire to create trade agreements among the Bolivarian South American states is ALBA. The alliance provides a major support to one another’s regimes, and thus has failed to significantly criticize Venezuela’s ruling coalition. However, a crack in the armor may have been shown when a public letter signed by 21 former leaders of South American and Spanish states, was published, condemning Venezuela’s violation of prisoners’ rights to due process, and calling for the release of several political prisoners, the most notable being Leopoldo López. ALBA does not seem ready to do much more to critique Maduro’s regime.
Castro’s Communist Cuba has notably been the model to which Chavez aspired and Maduro claims to aim for as well. However, with Venezuela’s crashing oil industry, Cuba has felt pressured to find new strategic alliances and trading partners. Under such economic pressure, Cuba has entered into talks with the US, the regional power traditionally seen by both Cuba and Venezuela as their ideological enemy. Therefore, the appearance of warming relations between the US and Cuba is worrisome for Venezuela, as Cuba has been its strongest regional ally since Chavez came into power. Without Cuba’s ideological support, Venezuela’s ruling coalition will become significantly weakened, especially if it loses Cuba as a trading partner. Cuba and the US have now officially resumed diplomatic relations.

Amid a strong anti-governmental sentiment and PSUV’s loss of its hold on the Assembly, Maduro has been reigniting old fights with neighboring Colombia and Guyana.

Maduro has been blaming much of the smuggling and crime on Colombian cartels sneaking through the borders between the two countries. He earlier this year used these issues to justify a state of emergency in much of the northern parts of Venezuela, which has allowed the military to be deployed to control protests in those regions. In addition, the state of emergency justified his request to the Assembly to be given the power to decree, which was granted and will last until the end of December. Recently, Maduro has called for tightened border controls along the Colombian border as well as the deportation of over 1,700 Colombians who are allegedly connected to Colombian smuggling rings. Since then, however, relations have eased up a bit, with ambassadors being sent to one another’s country’s capital.
city, easing border measures and even allowing some deported Colombians back into Venezuela. This may be partly due to the public outcry as allegations of mistreatment of Colombians by Venezuelan guards have been made. Over the summer of 2016, Venezuela has further relaxed its border restrictions with Columbia allowing people to cross over into the neighboring country in order to buy basic necessities lacking inside Venezuela. Over 200,000 people came from across the country to desperately attempt to acquire food, medications and basic supplies at normal prices. And now, since August 2016, Venezuela has agreed with Colombia to completely reopen its borders. This goes to show that Maduro’s government continues to fail its people and the situation is not getting any better, even though the crossing of the border allowed for temporary alleviation.

In regard to Guyana, Maduro is exploiting the old border dispute between the two countries, possibly in an attempt to divert the attention away from the worsening socioeconomic situation in the country. The dispute is over the area of the Essequibo River, which makes up 40% of Guyana’s territory and to which Venezuela lays claim. After recalling each other’s ambassadors, the two countries have since agreed to UN mediation. In July of 2016, Guyana ordered the deportation of 14 Venezuelans who had previously crossed the border illegally in order to acquire food. The Guyanese Ministry of State however, has issued a statement saying it is willing to help any Venezuelan citizen entering Guyana legally looking for basic necessities. Only illegal aliens are to be denied aid.
In light of the current economic crisis in Venezuela, Maduro has found his government in growing debt. In order to settle payments and keep the government running, Maduro has embarked on a global campaign to seek more financial support from his allies. Those closest to the regime are China, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Since 2007 China has given Venezuela $50 billion in aid in an oil-for-payment debt settlement plan. Since Venezuela’s further economic descent, China has offered more aid, most recently last September lending Maduro an additional $5 million to boost Venezuela’s oil industry. Although China’s own financial minister has advised against continuing to support Venezuela, the country is China’s main source of influence in the region, and it looks as though China will continue to financially prop up Maduro’s regime, if somewhat reluctantly.

Since Chavez came to power in 1999, relations between Venezuela and Russia have grown, primarily due to Venezuela’s purchase of military supplies from Russia. As a fellow oil supplier, Russia has been supportive to Maduro’s recent call for talks between OPEC and non-OPEC members to discuss raising the global base price for oil.

Other allies to Maduro’s campaign for talks on oil prices are the oil giants and anti-West allies, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both have met with Maduro, pledging their support to his regime.
Maduro has carried on the traditional chavista position of the US as the enemy capitalist and oppressive government from which the Venezuelan people must be protected. As his authority weakens and the regime destabilizes, Maduro has increased his public denunciation of the US. He has recently claimed to have discovered new US backed plots of coups and assassination attempts. This is a familiar tactic, often used by Chavez in the past to unite the Venezuelans under an imminent fear of US encroachment. However, it seems that the tactic may have become over-used, as a recent poll revealed only 15 percent of Venezuelans polled even believed these claims were well founded. Additionally, Maduro declared a state of emergency last March after Obama placed travel sanctions on several PSUV officials. Finally, Maduro has rejected any US intervention via the Carter Center in monitoring the upcoming December 6 elections.

Recent events have further strained relations between the two countries. On Wednesday November 11 2015, it was announced that the US had two nephews of Maduro’s First Lady arrested in Haiti and brought to the US to stand trial on drug charges. The men were reported to be arranging a shipment of 800kg of cocaine into the US to be sold in New York. Maduro has responded by indirectly condemning the US for intervening in Venezuelan affairs.

Additionally, in response to a recent charge made by the Organization of American States that Venezuela’s election process and environment was unjust, the regime accused the OAS of basically being a puppet of the US. The CNE has also rejected a previous OAS request to send a group to observe the elections.
The military has become increasingly linked to the government ever since Chavez led a military coup against the old regime in 1998. Since then, the military has been at the regime’s side, despite Chavez’s fear of another military coup. In 2014, Maduro deepened the bond between military and the regime by effectively making the military a political party. This enabled them to more effectively counter the opposition protests with pro-government protests of their own. In addition, the responsibility to curb the anti-government protests have become increasingly in the hands of pro-government militias, who are much more violent than the traditional armed forces who are trained to handle protests and riots. This has led to increased physical violence and intolerance against opposition protestors. Additionally, Maduro has been using the armed forces more and more in addressing other societal issues, especially the food and supply shortages. Soldiers now guard the entrances of stores at which long lines of Venezuelans are cued to receive rations. Essentially, Maduro’s increased use of military means to handle societal problems is turning Venezuela into something disturbingly similar to a police state.
Chavez’s legacy, although widely divisive, is remembered with relative fondness by a large portion of the Venezuelan citizenry. Much like in other areas of the world, like Serbia with Marshall Tito or Cuba with Hugo Chavez, what people remember is the ideology that Chavez held. This ideology, speaking about the “pueblo” or the people ruling themselves through the guidance of a “servant ruler”, is what many remember Chavez to be practicing. With his memory his only presence, people take that romantic notion of what he believed and attach many of the faults to the current regime. Because the current regime claims to adhere closely to Chavismo, it has managed to hold onto enough popular support to stay in power. However, Maduro’s hardline policies and military favoritism in a time of deepening socioeconomic distress seems to have severely weakened this pillar. Many people no longer feel loyal to the regime, and enough have become disenchanted by the government’s actions that its ideology no longer applies.
Chavez, a former army general and coup-maker, strengthened the ties between the military and the regime. After the short coup in 2002, Chavez began to instigate new policies, consolidating more power around himself. Part of these policies was to ensure military loyalty. Under Chavez, frequent change of positions in the military prevented close ties among potential military dissidents from being maintained. Additionally, Chavez used his close relationship with Cuba, allowing Cuban military into Venezuelan ranks, allegedly to act as spies for the regime. Since Chavez’s death, Maduro has chosen to align himself even more closely with the military pragmatists, evidenced by their increased presence in government positions. Additionally, while most of the country experiences supply shortages, members of the armed forces continue to enjoy subsidized housing, loans, and basic goods. This action has simultaneously ensured military loyalty and decreased Maduro’s popular support, thereby forcing the regime to become more repressive.

The PSUV party, Chavez’s coalition party, was created in 2006 as one of Chavez’s acts to consolidate power. It consists of several parties traditionally in favor of the regime, including Chavez’s own Fifth Republic Movement. Although still very powerful and loyal to the regime, cracks have begun to show in the ranks since Chavez’s death in 2013. Some are not as confident in Maduro’s ability to lead, as evidenced in a public letter written by former ministers, criticizing Maduro. Additionally, as the crises in Venezuela continue to deepen and public support for the government wanes, disagreement on how to address the situation has occurred among the coalition. The two main camps are the military pragmatists and the populist idealists.
The judiciary, although officially a branch uncontrolled by the other branches of government, has not been free since Chavez had an amendment passed in 2004, packing the Supreme Court with chavistas by adding 12 seats and giving the PSUV-controlled parliament the power to appoint. Evidence of this has been given in a 2014 report, which showed that in the 45,474 cases ruled on by the courts, the government won them all. The judiciary, a branch intended to rule on constitutionality of laws, props up the regime by ruling in favor of every law the regime’s officials create. This allows the regime to do virtually whatever it deems necessary to remain power, without fear of being accused of illegal activity. The refusal of the Supreme Court to grant amnesty to critics imprisoned for speaking out is one of the main ways in which the judiciary illegally supports the regime through its own convoluted and fabricated rule of law.

Much like the judiciary, the CNE is supposed to act as an independent branch of the government. In reality, the CNE’s officials are chavistas nominated by the president and elected by the PSUV-dominated National Assembly. The CNE is responsible for overseeing all national elections and ensuring that they are transparent and fair. However, as the CNE is loyal to the regime, their legitimacy is highly suspect, calling into question the fairness and transparency of national elections.

The CNE’s ties to the regime has allowed the ruling PSUV elites to manipulate elections, commit election fraud such as electoral irregularities, governmental interference and voter manipulation. The control the ruling elite holds on the electoral system has proved to be a major hurdle to opposition candidates as they struggle to qualify in elections, gain media attention and are intimidated by the regime.

Additionally, the CNE, being tied to the ruling coalition, can provide the government with information meant to be confidential, such as names of those who voted for opposition candidates. This enables the government to discriminate against those who are opposed to the regime, blocking them from jobs and social groups.
The oil and natural gas industry, Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA), nationalized in 1976 and politicized under Chavez in 2006, has become the major source of income to the Venezuelan economy. This was a result of Chavez’s trade agreements with major oil importers such as China and the US. The large oil supply unique to Venezuela in South America has been a major source of wealth for much of Chavez’s regime. As long as oil is in high demand, the revenue made from the nationalized industry have thickly lined the pockets of the government. This has allowed the government to carry its widely popular social programmes, or misiones, to maintain public support, as well as fund large, visible campaigns and sponsor local pro-government industries. However, as the global price of oil plummets to an all-time low, the government’s main source of funding has been dramatically cut, forcing Chavez and now Maduro to cut the popular social programmes and destabilizing the government as it struggles to maintain social and economic order. As a result, public approval has plummeted as the government fails to provide basic goods and services while simultaneously encroaching militarily into the lives of Venezuelan citizens.
The education system set up under Chavez’s government is intended to instill socialist values in the next generation. In primary and secondary schools, the collection of schoolbooks used are very much tools of the regime. The books use propaganda to instill a sense of loyalty and approval in the regime in the impressionable Venezuelan children.

In 2003, Chavez instituted a reform of Venezuelan higher education through the creation of the Bolivarian University of Venezuela. This was a part of a program to make higher education accessible to the poor. The result is that the poor masses get taught in a university highly loyal and monitored by the regime, thus acting as an ideological control over the more educated and politically active university student population. However, as the socioeconomic situation worsens, more and more professors and student have turned toward the political opposition, undermining the culture of chavismo in the universities.
The visual media in Venezuela is mostly in support of Maduro’s regime. The only free anti-government TV network is attacked by the regime. State Media is a key propaganda tool for the regime, as it is in most autocratic regimes. It’s large amount of funding allows it greatest reach in Venezuela, which makes it the most likely stations to get viewed by the more isolated rural Venezuelans.

Private media, especially on television, has been significantly altered by the regime. Those programs that have spouted anti-government sentiments find themselves systematically repressed by the regime. RCTV, a major private television news station, had its license revoked by the government in 2007. In 2013, the other main opposition channel, Globovision, was forcibly bought out by people loyal to the regime. Additionally, the government has established several alternative TV and radio stations, and has funded community stations loyal to chavismo. These government actions have effectively warned the remaining private media stations, who have since avoided criticizing the regime and have given little media coverage of the opposition. In 2013, Freedom House rated Venezuela as having an unfree media.
After virtually abandoning unsuccessful tactics of armed insurrection and violent protests, and abstaining from the 2006 elections, the opposition has revitalized its movement. It has chosen to go the electoral route, to gain power, as it is still the most democratic way of doing so in Venezuela. In order to present themselves as a competitive candidate to the ruling coalition, the opposition groups have mostly united to form the MUD party. As a group, they have worked to form a unified platform and strategy, gradually winning more offices, especially on the municipality level, as they become increasingly popular and the government declines in that respect. The opposition has employed these extremely successful tactics in taking over parliament with a “super majority” of the seats being taken by MUD representatives. This is the single most disruptive event towards the regime in recent years, demonstrating that the majority of Venezuelans were disillusioned enough with the regime to vote them out of office in massive numbers.
However, although the opposition has used grassroots campaigning to gain the support of the poor in the past, they seem to be losing their sense of what the poor majority wants. This was evidenced most visibly in the 2014 protests, where the largely student-based middle class population marched, with virtually no representation of the majority class in Venezuela, the poor. This was because the opposition has chosen to advocate for changes unfamiliar and of less concern to the poor than more pressing issues like supply shortages, unemployment and rampant violent crime. However, the structure of the opposition and methodology is well developed, and would be instrumental in disrupting the regime, especially if they were to realign their goals with the poor in mind.

When Chavez took control over the schools with its creation of Bolivarian universities, the anti-chavista student population was left behind. This group then took full control of the student movement. Additionally, the regimes failure to correctly handle initial demands made by the students showed a lack of governmental support for autonomy at the universities, which served to further politicize the student movement. The student movement has become a surprisingly powerful force since they organized their first major protests in reaction to the government’s revocation of a major television stations broadcasting license in 2007. The student movement was primary group involved in the 2014 anti-government protests, and, although they have been suppressed, remain a vocal force against the regime.
Former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles has advocated for a referendum that would allow Venezuelans to vote on the possibility of calling for an early presidential election. To accomplish this legally, the opposition would need to obtain four million signatures within a designated amount of time. However, even if the opposition were able to do so, regime intervention seems highly likely. The National Electoral Council, who would be in charge of the process, is lead and managed under near total PSUV control. In what is widely seen as retaliation to Capriles’ recommendation, the government has called for an investigation of him and his state government on corruption charges.

On the level of a bottom-up approach, opposition leaders like María Corina Machado have advocated for popular protest and resistance as the best way to topple the Maduro government. This would require more than just street protests and would need to be an all-encompassing effort from all sectors of society.
Maduro has always stuck to chavismo tactics: allowing elections BUT use of military, fear tactics, using judiciary to ban opposition leaders from running, trying to distract by picking fights with neighbors, refusing to allow outside organization to monitor elections, declaring a state of emergency and being granted the power to decree.

This is an extremely likely turn of events, and we can see how this is playing out now in 2016 in the aftermath of the elections: the opposition took control of the assembly, but are undermined constantly by other branches of the government in their attempts to create change (laws rejected by the judiciary, Maduro granting himself sweeping powers despite parliamentary rejection, the continuation of raids and crime by police and military, the failure of the government to release political prisoners and attempts to imprison more critics of the regime, etc)


Alan Hernandez. “Jamaica is paying its oil debts to Venezuela with food.” (1 August 2016) Vice News https://news.vice.com/article/jamaica-is-paying-its-oil-debts-to-venezuela-with-food

