

# Venezuela: The Decline of a Democracy

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**Abstract** The political crisis in Venezuela has been aggravating for the past 5 years; the economic imbalance has increased the chances of social disintegration while government focuses on holding to power. The institutional deterioration provides forms of control consistent with the authoritarian model in detriment of the values and principles of a democracy that was once a model for stability in Latin America.

**Keywords** Democracy · Decline · Authoritarianism · Transition · Deconsolidation · Venezuela

## Introduction

Venezuela's unrest has been frequently making the headlines for the past 3 years, but since the end of March of 2017, the oil-producing country has been hit by a severe governance crisis that has not left the front pages. The reasons for the country's misfortunes are a string of poor public policy choices, widespread mismanagement, extensive corruption, and ideological demagoguery. These shortcomings have played a decisive role in the progressive collapse of the political project the late Hugo Chavez sought to consolidate, and that after his death, has been under threat not only by the absence of its charismatic founder, but also by the consequences of years of flawed decisions.

The political crisis under which Nicolas Maduro—the designated heir—has conducted the transit to a *post Chavez*

era has been tumultuous, and it remains to date very critical as the country faces an expected debt default. The political resolutions taken by the government aimed at suppressing the opposition have unleashed significant repercussions within *chavismo* itself, amplified in 2017 by the violent crackdown on the opposition in response to the uproar generated by the intention of the executive branch to overpower the legislative branch. The Supreme Court's decisions Nos. 155 and 156 at the end of March 2017 to strip the National Assembly of its functions were the tipping point in a series of steps taken by the executive-controlled judiciary.

These decisions have also had an extensive impact on the already crumbling Venezuelan economy, the insistence on a broadly criticized exchange rate policy, plus an alarming sky-high inflation rate are just two indicators of the substantial failure by the government to control basic economic variables, where Nicolas Maduro is to blame for continuing a policy begun by Hugo Chavez, but also for adding to the deterioration of the crisis, as his administration has been renewing the Economic Emergency Decree<sup>1</sup> as an instrument to deepen state control of the economy.

The inevitable scenario for a social crisis has developed throughout the dire financial conditions the country has gone into as a result of a steep decline in oil prices in a country where the hydrocarbon sector production accounts for 96% of its exports.<sup>2</sup> The situation has greatly contributed to a dramatic drop in imports that make up most of the consumer goods in the country, severely shrinking food staples, ranging from chronic shortages to full-scale

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-economy-idUSKCN0UT2ER>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/venezuela/overview>.



scarcity, leading to life-threatening absence of treatments for chronically and terminally ill patients. These are the outcomes of a government policy that favors paying off its debts before responding to the country's basic needs.

## Venezuelan Crisis

For the purpose established in this contribution, we will refer to the notion of crisis based on the approach presented by Koselleck and Richter<sup>3</sup> referring to the evolvement of a concept that reflects its close ties to the epoch where it takes place, and more specifically, whether it relates to the end of a period, or the transition to something better or worse. The notion of crisis portrays the unease and aspiration to transform the current conditions in a given society.

Venezuela's recent political history is one of chronic crises that worsened in 1998 with the rise to power of Hugo Chavez as a victory against the system that was built in 1958 after 10 years of military dictatorship (Puerta Riera 2011). That system, a representative democracy, had been struggling for some time due to a deep divide between the political elite and society, where the middle class led the dissatisfaction against the political system, subject to the vast majority of criticism, where political parties were held responsible for the disengagement with society.

In Venezuela, the growing disaffection with conventional vehicles of democratic representation led Hugo Chávez to the presidency in 1998. Under his leadership, democracy in Venezuela has eroded, and the country has polarized sharply between his followers and foes (Mainwaring et al. 2006: 2).

Contrary to the most common perceptions, Chavez attracted not only the poor, but also much of the middle class voted for him in 1998 (Lupu 2010). The idea of crisis in this context comprises the depletion of a model, along with the denouncement of a contract (the *Puntofijo Pact*), and the embrace of an old acquaintance, the much-desired strong man that would put things into order.

<sup>3</sup> 'Applied to history, "crisis," since 1780, has become an expression of a new sense of time which both indicated and intensified the end of an epoch. Perceptions of such epochal change can be measured by the increased use of crisis. But the concept remains as multilayered and ambiguous as the emotions attached to it. Conceptualized as chronic, "crisis" can also indicate a state of greater or lesser permanence, as in a longer or shorter transition toward something better or worse or toward something altogether different. "Crisis" can announce a recurring event, as in economics, or become an existential term of analysis, as in psychology and theology. All these possible uses can be applied to history itself' (Koselleck and Richter 2006: 358).

## Political

The purported *Socialist Revolution of the 21st Century* promised to bring participatory democracy to all the outcasts, the underprivileged, and the disowned through more than 40 years of democracy for the elites. The rise to power of Hugo Chavez meant the abandonment of bipartisanship after a long crisis that dragged not only the political parties and the status quo, but also the political system itself, to the point that within the very same elite that Chavez displaced, he found the initial support to fund his electoral bid in 1998. The dismantling of representative democracy was necessary to allow participatory democracy to replace it (Puerta Riera 2010, 2012), but instead, *chavismo* chose to build their political process over the already existing institutions, which lead to a hyper bureaucratic intertwined system that inevitably created a parallel state with the expected consequences of patronage, cronyism, and corruption.

The critical situation Venezuela has been enduring for the past 5 years continues to make headlines, quite a difference from previous years when the crisis-hit oil-producing country was still much regarded by the international community as a stable democracy. Even the United Nations thinks there are 'remains' left of democracy to save, while the country is subjected to the abuse of an unconstitutional body, the National Constituent Assembly, cobbled together by the regime to definitely wipe-out any trace of democratic procedures. The progressive dismantling of the remaining democratic institutions, such as the National Assembly (legislative body), and the assault on the Attorney General's office are stark reminders that there are very few—if any—independent institutions left. The Supreme Court is one the most discredited institutions in the country, a tool the regime has not hesitated to use to advance in the consolidation of a totalitarian system where the dominant faction eliminates any contestation to its power: the recent approval of an anti-hate law by the National Constituent Assembly is a stark reminder to society that the regime is in control of the narrative, one that continues to push toward an increasingly authoritarian exercise of power.

The ruling political movement formed by late president Hugo Chávez has presided over a deterioration in democratic institutions since 1999, but conditions have grown sharply worse in recent years due to a concentration of power in the executive and harsher crackdowns on the opposition. The opposition-controlled legislature's powers have been curtailed by a politicized judiciary that serves the executive's interests. Government corruption is pervasive, and law enforcement has proven unable to halt violent



crime. The authorities have restricted civil liberties and prosecuted perceived opponents without regard for due process (Freedom in the World<sup>4</sup>).

The split between Luisa Ortega, the Attorney General, and the government would have had a major influence on the stability of the regime under other circumstances, but the totality of institutions, with the exception of the National Assembly, are under control of the regime, making the difference. The divisions among the numerous factions pale in the face of the possibility of losing power. There is no stronger incentive for Maduro and rival groups to remain together than the threat that they may be indicted for human rights abuses, corruption or drug trafficking abroad. They will hold on to power at any cost, and this includes the military since they also have pending accounts with international justice for human rights violations and drug trafficking.

### Economic

The current crisis in Venezuela is the result of more than a decade of efforts being put in imposing a model of state control, ‘made in Cuba.’ The successful technological assimilation of a ‘know-how’ crafted throughout almost 60 years of tyranny gave Cuba the opportunity to escape another ‘special period,’ that with the looming financial crisis in Venezuela, seems all but inevitable for the Caribbean regime this time. The swift deterioration of the country cannot be seen as the result of the dropping oil prices or the recently enforced sanctions by the Trump administration. This is no doubt the result of years of mismanagement, but also of a well-defined strategy to destroy the economy, weaken society, and gain institutional control through electoral processes at first, and later by judicial decisions, along with social dominance, first through widespread crime, and later by scarcity and hunger. It is difficult to imagine that this level of destruction has not been intentional when it is precisely what has given Nicolas Maduro the lead in his challenge to undermining the democratic forces in the country.

The path to an authoritarian regime [as defined by Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013: 114)] would have been impossible without the involvement of the armed forces. Their role has been central to the progression of the authoritarian model, and this can be traced back to the numerous decisions Hugo Chavez made to hand more power to the Military as a guarantee of loyalty to the regime, allowing high-ranking officials to financially benefit from corruption and public resources management as a way to control the institution [food distribution, customs,

taxes, oil, iron, and mining industries are controlled by retired and active members of the armed forces]. This would explain the massive failure of a country that having received the largest oil revenues of its history, ended up in bankruptcy, with debt worth US\$ 120 billion.

Venezuela hosts a devastated economy,<sup>5</sup> incapable of producing enough to satisfy consumption demands, after the regime’s policy of land expropriation left the agricultural industry in complete disarray, making imported goods the main source for basic staples in the country. The private sector can barely cover 30% of the market demand<sup>6</sup> and is subject to the most absurd price controls. The foreign exchange rate continues to be an instrument for corruption, as the world’s highest inflation rate (254.9%<sup>7</sup>) keeps its citizens away from food, medicines and other basic amenities. The oil industry has a record low production, due to lack of investment, maintenance, debt with drilling companies, and low-quality production. The government first blamed an ‘economic war’ led by its foes, and later the United States sanctions against prominent members of the regime, for the excruciating economic crisis they are going through, with no acknowledgment to the corruption, controls, and poor decisions that are driving the country to the edge of a humanitarian crisis.

### Social

As critical as the situation continues to be, the prospect of Maduro abandoning power seems less probable, even after months of massive protests came to an end after the National Constituent Assembly, amid calls of fraud, took over. The intermittent attempts to broker a dialogue as a solution to the crisis, steered by former Spanish Premier, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, have only contributed further to discrediting the opposition, and deepening the mutual distrust thereby adding to its reluctance to participate. The main concern is that a dialogue process is insufficient, as it will not allow Maduro (and the military) to buy time, while the opposition’s capacity to be a credible actor is constantly being weakened.

The social impact of the crisis has drawn the region’s attention and interest to what is happening in Venezuela. With thousands of people exiting the country and many more within it suffering, there are all the indications in place of an ongoing migration crisis on one hand, and a humanitarian crisis on the other. Regional players are now

<sup>4</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/venezuela>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://money.cnn.com/2017/07/26/news/economy/venezuela-economic-crisis/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://prodavinci.com/2017/11/12/actualidad/susana-raffalli-el-estado-dejo-de-ser-garante-del-derecho-a-la-alimentacion-por-hugo-prieto/>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/countries-with-highest-inflation-rates-in-the-world-2017-10/#2-democratic-republic-of-congo-224-13>.



taking steps to prevent a mass exodus and are intent on avoiding the consequences of having to cope with an unprecedented wave of migrants.<sup>8</sup> Today, Venezuela is on the brink of becoming a failed society and the international community seems to be incapable of assessing the human toll of this disaster. Venezuela, a country that in 2015 was recognized by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations for its work in the fight against hunger and malnutrition, is today host to numerous babies who are dying of hunger and malnutrition.

The current situation is dire and the rise in cases of malnutrition is alarming, with 2016 official statistics indicating a 33% prevalence of malnutrition (1 in 3). The reappearance of diseases that had been overcome such as diphtheria and the increase in mortality rates from nosocomial infections provides the picture of a public health care system in serious disrepair. The impossibility to find medication for chronic illnesses like diabetes, or treatment for terminally ill patients, has propelled Venezuelans into neighboring countries to seek treatment. The effects of the crisis are so severe that the education system is experiencing an exodus of students and teachers who can no longer afford to continue going to school and are leaving the country for their own survival.<sup>9</sup>

### Transition from a Weak Democracy to a Military Authoritarianism

Since his rise to power, Hugo Chavez always placed his confidence in the military, making the alliance with civilians a provisional arrangement until the institutional framework for the revolution would assure the complete control of society in the hands of the military. Chavez never concealed the mistrust he had for civilians, which was part of the core argument for the February 4, 1992 coup that initiated his path to power. The steps taken were carefully crafted, beginning with the *Plan Bolívar 2000* (Trinkunas 2004: 51), a social intervention program carried out by the military, inaugurating a period of prominent participation across all ranks of government positions, in key decision-making and policy implementation responsibilities with the justification to provide relief in the crisis the country had been facing.<sup>10</sup>

In Venezuela, the military factor was essential from the roots of the current process, both for the origin of the maximum leader, for the antecedent expressed in

the two military coups of 1992 (matrixes of the Bolivarian movement and its iconography), as well as for its overlap with civilian elements—belonging to the partisan and societal universe of the Venezuelan left—to configure the civic-military alliance that gained power by electoral route in 1998 (Chaguaceda 2015: 22).

The leading role the armed forces took through the *Plan Bolívar 2000* not only meant the displacement of career bureaucrats, but also for elected officials who progressively lost authority and resources that would have been otherwise allocated to address these same issues in their constituencies, outlining a clear pattern of preponderance of the armed forces in public administration. Although the program was seen as a relief intervention, it was inevitable that it would cause damage within the armed forces, as they were being challenged with increasing responsibilities in the civilian world, in what is often looked at as a major disengagement from its traditional duties. The greater damage, nevertheless, has been a deeply politicized military in which factional conflicts have since emerged as a consequence, with periodic purges as a corrective measure, like the one that followed the failed *coup* attempt in April of 2002.

The relationship of subordination between the armed forces and government was first replaced by cooperation, and afterward by a near absolute control by the military, which has developed into the complicity of the highest command of the armed forces with the government in corruption and drug trafficking activities (according to recent sanctions imposed by the US government<sup>11</sup>). If this relationship were to be threatened by the instability of the coalition (the moderate factors of the civilian wing that want to survive), then there would be the possibility that some of the partners would be willing to negotiate their exit. However, the shortcomings of the opposition tend to increase when the government seems to weaken, provoking the opposite effect on the coalition in power as it prevents them from falling out.

The military hierarchy is tied to the regime, not only because of their support, but also due to their high level of involvement in illegal activities and human rights violations that have triggered individual sanctions by the USA, making them prisoners in their own country, since some of the highest ranking military officials have faced threats of extradition as warrants for their arrest have been issued when traveling abroad.<sup>12</sup> These episodes have intensified the belief that *chavismo* needs to remain in power to avoid

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-11-08/us-military-joins-brazil-army-exercises-in-amazon>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/17/venezuela-migrants-america-leaving-home>.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.poderopedia.org/ve/organizaciones/Plan\\_Bolivar\\_2000](http://www.poderopedia.org/ve/organizaciones/Plan_Bolivar_2000).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20170809.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article1977337.html>.



its proponents being turned over to foreign governments in North America and Europe that have ready indictments against them. While these are sufficient arguments to make the case for the support Maduro still has from the military, after almost 3 months of daily protests in Venezuela, and more than a hundred [extra-official] deaths<sup>13</sup> due to the military repression, the latest's decisions made by the regime aim at the probable consolidation of a praetorian regime, defined by Huntington (1973: 193), as the intervention of the military in politics.

The challenge of high quality governance has, in some contexts, been exacerbated by economic slow-down and persistent criminal violence. For example, the scarcity of basic goods in Venezuela provoked violent street protests in 2014 (Rodríguez 2016). In 2017, the incumbent administration took arguably illegal steps to tighten the Chavista regime's hold on power (BBC 2017; Rodríguez and Zechmeister 2017). Viewed by citizens as a "self-coup", this action sparked renewed street protests. The military responded by cracking down on protestors, resulting in numerous deaths (Cohen et al. 2017: 1).

Venezuela's future is hanging over a cliff: the multiple deaths, hundreds detained, and close to a thousand injured have left people feeling helpless all across the country, and there does not seem to be a resolution to this crisis in the near future. The possibility of ending the crisis would necessarily entail a negotiation, brokered by a third country perhaps, but definitely considering protection and other guarantees for the regime to leave power. The road ahead is very uncertain, although it is not the first time the country is under a military dictatorship, after 40 years of democracy, most of the population has never experienced life under this type of regime before. This could explain why so many teenagers flooded the streets of Venezuela in demand for the return of democracy to the country. The decision is entirely on the hands of the military, not only because they support Maduro, but also because the military is in charge of running the country in practical terms.

The changes experienced in the US strategy, as part of a new foreign policy agenda, join the efforts being made by the Organization of American States and more recently the European Union willing to put pressure on the Maduro government for negotiations that include transparency in the 2018 presidential elections, freedom for political prisoners, changes in the electoral council, and the opening of a humanitarian channel to distribute food and medicines. As of November 2017, when this article was written, a new round of talks to find a negotiated solution to the crisis has

just been announced—almost in tandem with the announcement that the country was technically in default of its debt obligations.<sup>14</sup> And all of this is happening in a climate of healthy skepticism from all sides.

## Conclusions

We have briefly described the characteristics of the Venezuelan crisis of democracy, outlining elements and outcomes that reflect its political culture as well. Although this democracy was consecrated constitutionally as representative, the model had not developed completely, leaving enough space for non-democratic alternatives to arise. Furthermore, the crisis of legitimacy is largely a product of the scant representativeness of political leaders, this is mainly due to the lack of credibility in their leadership, which has contributed to erode the trust on the political system, and democracy itself, as reflected by the *Latino-barometro* survey:

In Venezuela satisfaction with democracy decreases between 2016 and 2017 from 24 to 13% with a fall of eleven percentage points and with a difference of 17% points below the regional average (*Latino-barómetro* 2017: 9).

In what has been interpreted as the dismantling of the institutional framework for democracy (Puerta Riera 2012), Chavez built his notion of state on the severely deteriorated democratic institutions he tried to bring down in the 1992 coup. The idea of *crisis* was the fissure Chavez found to be fertile for his rise to power, a deranged set of institutions showing early signs of exhaustion, along with the disaffection of a frustrated middle class that cut ties with the political elite and the system that carried the duty to consolidate democracy, one of the steadiest in a region plagued by dictatorships. The nature of political crisis in the Venezuelan context is frequently tied to military actors, and Chavez's ascension to power was no other than the fulfillment of the expectations of a significant part of society for a strong man, once again.

The transition from a guarantor of institutionalism to main supporter of an authoritarian regime has put the spotlight on the military institution, dreading its role as a political actor, considering its historical tradition, when not in power, keeping close to it. Furthermore, the complexity of a political culture deeply articulated with democratic values, but also allowing significant space for the cult of the military, reducing the capacity of society to distance themselves from a social control apparatus that has been

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/venezuela-democracy-vote-protests-death-toll-caracas-nicolas-maduro/>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/5f07e298-c326-11e7-a1d2-6786f39ef675>  
<https://www.ft.com/content/5f07e298-c326-11e7-a1d2-6786f39ef675>.



part of the collective imagination since the inception of the republic. The greatest threat Venezuela is facing in the brink of complete collapse is that a military regime will likely take over power amidst the chaos *chavismo* has condemned the country to go through, there is very little reference to conversations with the military, and there are no signs of talks with the highest military command, precisely the one that has allowed Maduro and his regime to remain in government. The increase in international sanctions, with the European Union joining the United States strategy, seems to further isolate the regime as it faces creditors, depending on the support from China and Russia, most likely to be limited.

This configures a critical scenario with feasible long-term solutions if a negotiation takes place as soon as possible. The rebuilding of the country contemplates two tiers of action, the economic platform and the social fabric, where the first one will accelerate the second one. The complete economic structure must be rebuilt, industrial and commerce sectors are nearly in ruins, the controls scheme needs to be lifted in order for the economy to restart. The oil industry is currently under pressure, as prices are increasing, PDVSA is at historic-low production capacity, a scale model of the complete economic chaos.

The social fabric is the grimmest face of the Venezuelan crisis; the toll on human lives as a result of food and medicines scarcity is appalling;<sup>15</sup> the impact in terms of human development will affect the future of the country for decades, as children are the most vulnerable targets of this human crisis.<sup>16</sup> The flood of nationals crossing neighboring countries borders in a desperate escape stands as a powerful image of a country that was once an immigrant receptor itself, now turned into an emigrant producer.<sup>17</sup> The alarms in the region have started to sound, probably too late, but the concern is at this point that the humanitarian response might not be in place once the country collapses.

The lives of people are at stake, and the country is submerged in a sea of hopelessness. The references of people delving through garbage cans; deaths caused by organ failure in transplant patients that were off the

medicines that prevented rejection and;<sup>18</sup> fatalities due to diphtheria<sup>19</sup> or malaria,<sup>20</sup> and the collective weight loss<sup>21</sup> are part of the astounding account of the destruction in a country that had once lived the Saudi dream. Perhaps one can hope that democratic culture will prevail, ruling factors will come to their senses, and spare the people more misery, abdicating to their ambition to remain in power, but this seems to be the least possible outcome for the time being.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/venezuelans-suffer-deadly-scarcity-food-medicine>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://money.cnn.com/2017/11/14/news/economy/venezuela-debt-default-sp/index.html>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-class-of-1994-venezuelas-golden-generation-is-fleeing-the-country-1510681572?mod=e2tw>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://elestimulo.com/blog/trasplantada-muere-tras-rechazar-rinopor-falta-de-medicamentos/>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-health/suspected-diphtheria-cases-up-in-crisis-stricken-venezuela-data-suggests-idUSKBN1AE0QM>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2017/10/economist-explains-1>.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/20/venezuelas-crisis-cause-its-people-to-cut-meals-and-lose-weight.html>.

