

When the Exception Becomes the Norm: Crisis as an Ordinary Experience in Venezuela

July 2021



Noria Research

Noria Research is an independent and non-profit research organization with roots in academia. Our primary mandates are to translate data gathered on the ground into original analyses, and to leverage our research for the purpose of informing policy debates and engaging wider audiences. It is our institutional belief that political crises cannot be understood without a deep grasp for the dynamics on the ground. This is why we are doctrinally committed to field-based research. Cognizant that knowledge ought to benefit society, we also pledge to positively impact civil society organizations, policymakers, and the general public. Created in Paris in 2011, Noria's research operations now cover the Americas, Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

Licence

Noria Research encourages the use and dissemination of this publication. Under the cc-by-nc-nd licence, you are free to share copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. Under the following terms, you must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. You may not use the material for commercial purposes. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of Noria Research.

Coordinators: Fabrice Andréani, Yoletty Bracho

Editor: Xavier Houdoy

Translation: Fabrice Andréani, Yoletty Bracho, Rachel Gomes

Graphic Design: Romain Lamy & Valentin Bigel



When the Exception Becomes the Norm: Crisis as an Ordinary Experience in Venezuela

July 2021

Coordinators:

Fabrice Andréani is a PhD candidate in political science at the University Lumière Lyon 2 (Triangle-UMR 5206). Member of the Group for Interdisciplinary Studies on Venezuela (GEIVEN). Lecturer at the University Lumière Lyon 2 and Sciences-Po Lyon.

Yoletty Bracho is a PhD candidate in political science at the University Lumière Lyon 2 (Triangle-UMR 5206). Member of the Group for Interdisciplinary Studies on Venezuela (GEIVEN). Lecturer at the University Lumière Lyon 2.

Interviewees:

Keymer Ávila is a jurist and criminologist, researcher at the Institute of Penal Sciences and lecturer at the Central University of Venezuela (UCV-CENDES). He cooperates with the Activism and Research Network for Coexistence (REACIN), and the Observatory of Penal Systems and Human Rights at the University of Barcelona.

Yoletty Bracho is a PhD candidate in political science at the University Lumière Lyon 2 (Triangle-UMR 5206). Member of the Group for Interdisciplinary Studies on Venezuela (GEIVEN). Lecturer at the University Lumière Lyon 2.

Fernando Garlin Politis is a PhD candidate in ethnology at the University Paris Descartes and the Population and Development Centre of the Research Institute for Development (IRD-CEPED, Paris).

Arnoldo Pirela is an economist, associate professor at the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) and researcher at the Center for Development Studies (UCV-CENDES). He is associate researcher at the Population and Development Centre of the Research Institute for Development (IRD-CEPED, Paris).

Alejandro Velasco is a historian, associate professor at New York University (NYU-Gallatin) and chief editor of *NACLA Report on The Americas*, from the North American Congress on Latin America (<https://nacla.org/>).

Verónica Zubillaga is a sociologist, associate professor at Simón Bolívar University (USB) and founding member of the Activism and Research Network for Coexistence (REACIN: <http://reacin.org/>).

Table of Contents

- 9 **Introduction**
- 11 **1. The Contemporary State and Oil: The Complex Ties Between Politics and Economy**
- 13 Leaving Oil Behind? Culture and Politics in the Collapse of Venezuela
 –Interview with Arnaldo Pirela, conducted by Fabrice Andréani
- 21 Did the Bolivarian Revolution Transform the Venezuelan State? The Working Class,
 the State, and Activism in Venezuela
 –Interview with Yoletty Bracho, conducted by Mathilde Allain
- 29 **2. Dealing with Official and Clandestine Violence**
- 31 Differentiated Use of Institutional Violence in Venezuela
 –Interview with Keymer Ávila, conducted by Fabrice Andréani
- 39 The Experience of Armed Violence in the Barrios of Caracas: Gangs, Military
 Operations, and Conflict Management in Day-to-Day Life
 –Interview with Verónica Zubillaga, conducted by Yoletty Bracho
- 47 **3. Venezuela as an International Issue: From Migration Experiences to the International Stage**
- 49 Migrating Home, Going Home Abroad: Venezuelan Refugees’ Detours Between
 Colombia and Venezuela During the Covid-19 Pandemic
 –Interview with Fernando Garlin Politis, conducted by Yoletty Bracho
- 57 All Options on the Table? The United States’ Venezuelan Policy Under the
 Trump Administration
 –Interview with Alejandro Velasco, conducted by Fabrice Andréani

Introduction

For several years now, Venezuela has been plagued by an unprecedented combination of political, institutional, economic, social, health, and security crises.

After losing control of the Parliament in 2015, President Nicolás Maduro's government declared a state of emergency that has not been lifted since. Dissent and protest have been fiercely suppressed, and political pluralism has become increasingly limited. In turn, the parliamentary opposition, who stood behind the figure of Juan Guaidó over the past two years, has called upon the United States to retaliate by cutting off the state's already-shrinking sources of income and threatening military intervention.

State institutions have long failed to preserve the minimum material, legal and even physiological living standards that were maintained with difficulty until just over six years ago. They do, however, continue to encourage the accumulation of capital by civilian and military groups that increasingly overlap with the ruling elite. In this context, Venezuelan people must often choose between living in deprivation, suffering and constant torment, or embarking on a perilous exodus toward faraway lands. Since 2014, five million Venezuelans, or 15% of the country's inhabitants, have chosen the latter option.

The situation's more dramatic aspects are often played up by national and international media, with a focus on spectacular anti-government protests and political infighting. However, the urgent calls for a peaceful and democratic outcome to this crisis, now become the norm, often obscure the complexity of the country's authoritarian system, and of a political landscape in which national, regional and global dynamics are intertwined.

To be sure, the “humanitarian crisis” or “complex

humanitarian emergency” that emerged shortly after the death of Hugo Chávez and election of Maduro in 2013 has much to do with the latter's refusal to relinquish or share power. But the underlying levers of power wielded by this so-called “failed” or “rogue” state are much more pervasive and deeply entrenched in Venezuelan society, given the increasingly blurred line between the public and private sectors and the continued fragmentation of violence.

This project aims to analyze the dynamics behind the perpetuation and banalization of the multifaceted Venezuelan crisis. The point is not, of course, to downplay the seriousness of the present moment, which cannot be reduced to a political or media-fueled fiction: the crisis is both subjectively experienced by a large number of people, and objectively measurable through data. However, in examining the everyday behavior, interactions, and representations of intermediate, subordinate and other anonymous actors of social and political life, this project's contributors understand that, contrary to a great many expert and partisan predictions, the ruling political power has not necessarily been weakened by the country's collapse. In many regards, the opposite seems to have happened, although one should not rule out *a priori* potential new scenarios involving public protests, military action, or even elections.

Through six interviews, our researchers explore the ways in which the exception has become the norm in Venezuelan society. Drawing from recent fieldwork and archives, they examine some of the many intertwined dynamics in play, their particularities and connections to past crises, and the ways in which they have structured the daily lives and expectations of Venezuelans in their country and abroad.¹

1 Most of the interviews followed on a series of discussions initiated at the public conferences hosted by the Interdisciplinary studies group on Venezuela (GEIVEN) in Paris and Lyon in 2019.

1. The Contemporary State and Oil: The Complex Ties Between Politics and Economy

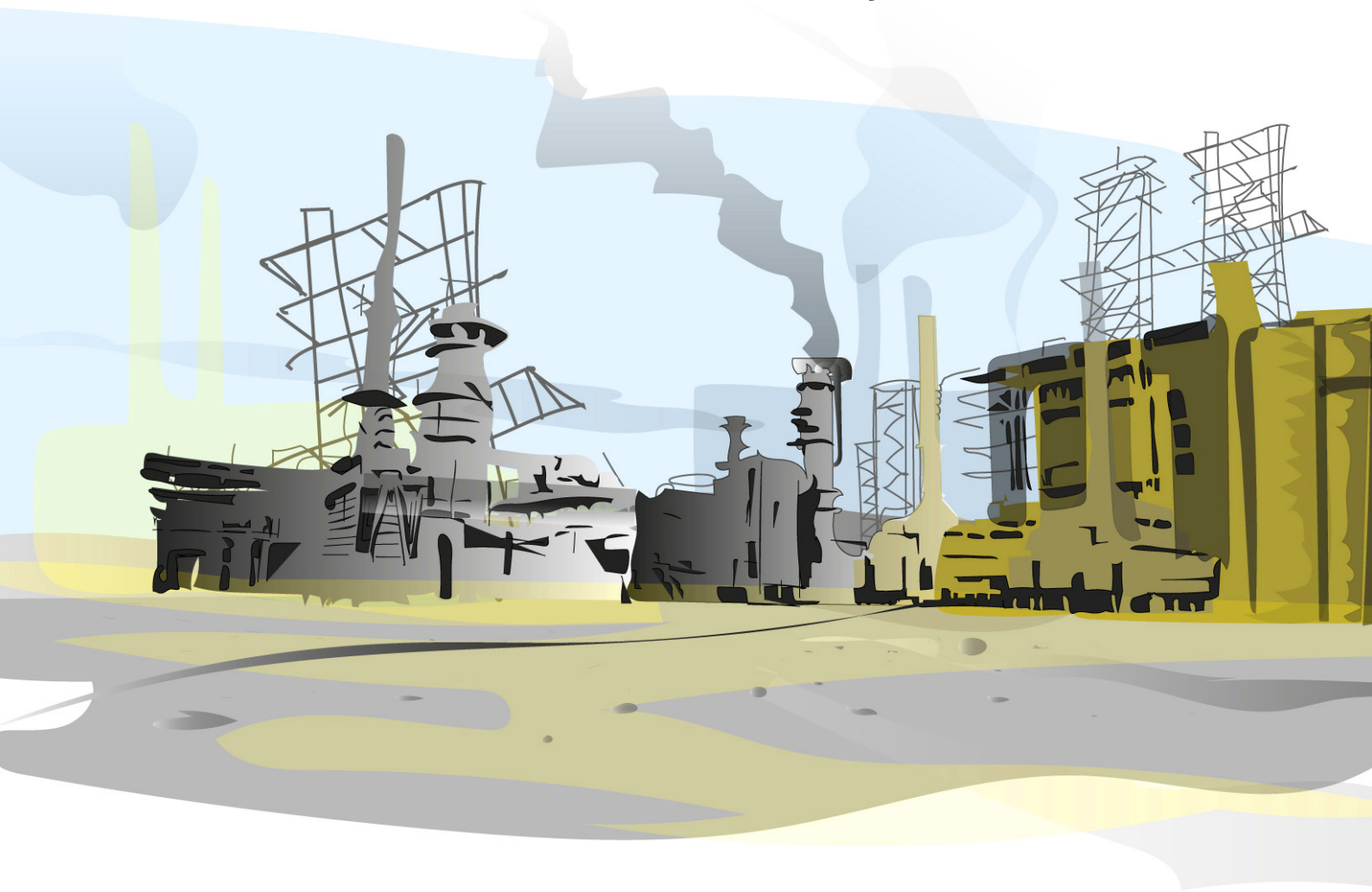
Ever since the first oil concessions were granted to foreign companies in the 1910s, the fortunes of the Venezuelan state have been closely tied to oil extraction and trade.

As a counterpoint to a significant body of academic literature on “oil states,” **Arnoldo Pirela** analyzes the counterproductive effect of the reigning paradigm on national economic development. Pirela argues that this paradigm, under which states mass-invest the profits drawn from oil booms into other sectors, is based on a traditional landowning model. Indeed, although the rollback of social policies between the Chávez and Maduro years was largely linked to the drop in oil prices, it was the mobilization of the military and circumvention of the existing institutional framework in the name of the “Revolution” that gave full rein to the predatory practices of the ruling elite at the expense of basic infrastructure and public services – and at the expense of the citizens who need them the most during the current crisis.

In this context, **Yoletty Bracho** explores the limits of the revolutionary project, with a focus on the relationship between the working classes and the state. Indeed, the participatory, redistributive policies rolled out by the Chavista governments were promoted by left-wing activists hoping to “transform the state from the inside”, working with organizations present in the *barrios* (working-class districts). But the growing fragility of participatory initiatives and the deterioration of the crisis have shown that most collaborative projects were circumstantial. Citizens are nowadays more likely considered “beneficiaries” of humanitarian aid rather than “right-holders”, while aid workers now play a central role in handling the serious problems of everyday life. For matters of social assistance and redistribution, working-class Venezuelans have had to adapt to those new players, who tend to prioritize issues of subsistence over politics.

Leaving Oil Behind? Culture and Politics in the Collapse of Venezuela

Interview with Arnaldo Pirela,
conducted by Fabrice Andréani



In your opinion, what are the most salient features of the current socio-economic crisis in Venezuela?

Venezuela is plagued by an unprecedented, multifaceted crisis, marked by historic levels of poverty and extreme poverty (95% and 80% of the population, respectively) and alarming rates of undernutrition as well as child and maternal mortality. In 2016, several NGOs and international experts had already labeled the situation a “complex humanitarian emergency”. The country’s GDP has dropped by 90% since 2014, with sustained hyperinflation and near-total destruction of production capacity – including that of the oil industry, which until then had generated most of the country’s currency –, as well as of basic infrastructure and services such as water, power, gas, transportation and even gasoline. Public healthcare depends almost exclusively on international humanitarian aid, and when even that is not enough, patients must purchase medication and equipment themselves. In less than six years, more than five million people have fled the country, often under extremely precarious circumstances.

For those who remain, the legal minimum wage amounts to a few dollars per month. The vast majority of workers are paid less than \$10 per month, with company executives earning just over \$50; meanwhile, average monthly food cost for a household is estimated at nearly \$500. Even if they receive foreign currency from relatives now living in another country, a growing number of Venezuelans have been forced to enter the informal or even underground economy, though 60% of the active population was already working in the informal sector in 2014.

Venezuelan society is increasingly dominated by those best “connected” (*enchufados*) to high-ranking public officials or to senior military commanders, who control commodity exports and imports of staple products. These prominent civilian and military figures equally capture and extort the revenue generated by illicit or even criminal activities, including currency and gasoline

smuggling, drug-trafficking, and the gold mining business in the Venezuelan Amazon and Guyana regions – an activity that also contaminates the country’s main freshwater and biodiversity reserves.

The Hugo Chávez years coincided with an unprecedented oil boom, before prices plunged shortly after Nicolás Maduro’s election. What is the role of oil in the current crisis?

Oil and price fluctuations are not responsible for this crisis, nor for previous ones. Certainly, when leaders mismanage the revenue generated by oil booms, it is often the most vulnerable segments of the population that pay for the fall in prices and growing debt. However, Venezuela does not suffer from the “oil-rentier model” or the “resource curse” so much as it is plagued by its elites’ attitudes towards oil, called “the Devil’s excrement” by diplomat Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo, the founder of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC, 1960). Throughout the 20th century, Venezuelan elites exhibited a mindset typical of 19th century landowners. To cite the long-known phrase popularized by writer Arturo Uslar Pietri’s, the idea was always to “sow” oil revenues within less technical sectors, or even to replace them with other activities – especially agriculture, although the amount of land considered arable under optimal conditions makes up just over 2% of the country’s surface area.

The amount of funds squandered – or embezzled from government coffers – during the Chávez years can be attributed to the exacerbation of that landowning economic culture as part of a “revolution” project that happened to be rather vague and ever-changing, but nonetheless constantly calling for a “radical” transformation of the nation’s political, economic and social life, together with regional geopolitics. This ambition was often invoked to justify the circumvention of public finance oversight mechanisms, especially parliamentary ones, which had been painstakingly put in place over the previous four decades of democracy.

The comparison of Chávez's achievements with those of his predecessors is very telling. Between 1917, when it was first created, and 1972, the Venezuelan oil industry generated an average of \$2.69 per exported barrel. Thanks to this revenue, Venezuela was no longer the poorest country in the region by the 1930s, although no actual development strategy had been put in place. The country quickly became urbanized; a network of roads was built, along with modern public education and healthcare systems. By the end of the 1960s, nearly 40% of the population belonged to the middle class.

The global energy crisis of 1973-74 triggered an unprecedented boom that peaked in 1981, with an average barrel price of \$29.71. Some investments made after the 1976 nationalization of the *Petróleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA)* oil company turned out to be unwise (especially in the automobile industry, at a time when the sector was being restructured in the rest of the world), but others allowed the country to strengthen its public infrastructure and services, including healthcare, education, sanitation, electricity, gas, communications, and transportation. The country became the wealthiest in Latin America and was commonly called "Saudi Venezuela". Its GDP per capita was higher than that of France, and the *Concorde* flew regularly between Paris and Caracas. The decline in crude oil prices over the next two decades weakened Venezuela's quasi-welfare state, but never to the levels to which the country has now fallen.

“The post-2014 oil crash
only accelerated a long-
term process of disinte-
gration”

Under the Chávez governments, the average price per barrel between 1999 and 2012 was \$56.2. Yet in

spite of the president's near-daily announcements and unveilings on television, no significant public project had been achieved at the time of his death in 2013. The country's landscape is littered with the vestiges of a long series of unfinished construction works: highway overpasses, railroad lines, incongruous Chinese electronic equipment factories and Russian weapons plants, and even power plants, which are now sorely lacking in the country.

Ironically, it is thanks to two programs created in the 1970s by social-democratic President Carlos Andrés Pérez – a longtime enemy of the “Bolivarian Revolution” – [note] Andrés Pérez was the target of the failed putsch attempt which made Chávez famous in 1992. He had returned to power in 1989, promising a restoration of the 1970s “Great Venezuela”, only to adopt austerity measures that led to the harshly-repressed Caracazo protests. [/note] that the country has maintained its international presence: on the one hand, the study-abroad scholarships awarded by the *Foundation Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho*, which enabled professionals to pursue careers in the American and European labor markets; and on the other, the *National System of Children and Youth Orchestras and Choirs of Venezuela*, a renowned model of classical music teaching for the working class that has produced masterpieces celebrated all over the world.

As a matter of fact, the post-2014 oil crash only accelerated a long-term process of disintegration, the symptoms of which had first appeared much earlier.

Chávez regularly claimed that Venezuela had the largest petroleum reserves in the world, but now the country has almost stopped producing oil: as far as disintegration goes, it seems that Venezuelan leaders have destroyed the proverbial goose that laid the golden eggs, the PDVSA oil company. How did that happen?

Within the large coalition elected in 1998, which included nationalist military officers and civilians from a variety of backgrounds ranging from center-right to radical left, “control of the oil tap” was deemed the absolute priority, as if it granted access to unlimited power. For some officials, this would enable the Bolivarian Revolution to “succeed where Cuba [had] failed.” Although PDVSA was legally state-owned, it had gained a certain degree of autonomy and become one of the most competitive oil companies in the world – so much so that the left called it “a state within the state”. Chávez paid little regard to usual procedures for the appointment and promotion of executives and constantly equated “meritocracy” with “oligarchy”, putting PDVSA at the center of an acute political crisis in 2002-2003, with a failed coup attempt against Chávez and a three-month oil strike. Chávez then dismissed 20,000 strikers, and the company never recovered.

PDVSA was then harnessed to advance “21st-century socialism”, which remained largely undefined while propagating a culture of indiscriminate subsidies for a broad range of goods and services. Besides food and

medication, these subsidies also included currency and gasoline, regardless of the buyer’s income. This system led to regular shortages, a drop in national productivity, and the proliferation of black markets. Exchange controls were introduced in 2003, in theory to prevent capital flight. PDVSA then basically had to sell its foreign currencies to the state at half-price (compared to international exchange rates). The state’s unchecked allocations of these currencies had the opposite effect to that intended.

In addition, Chávez launched a series of nationalizations (petroleum joint ventures, telecommunications, electricity, steel, retail, agro-industry, etc.) beginning in 2007. As a consequence, the main national asset, PDVSA, had to perform three functions at the same time: it became the parent company for a large number of subsidiaries in sectors that were sometimes very remote (e.g., food sales); but it was also a lender of last resort, as well as guarantor for loans taken out by the state from international partners. In fact, while other state-owned companies were floundering, PDVSA was involved in everything but oil.



“PDVSA, Patria, Socialismo o Muerte”

At the same time, the government appropriated the surplus reserves of the Central Bank, which were intended to be used in the event of an oil crash, siphoning off approximately \$7 billion between 2004 and 2006. Worse still, from 2007 onwards, the government also committed to reimbursing the loans granted by China via future oil sales, the value of which has now exceeded \$50 billion (approximately one third of the current public debt).

In the end, along with nationwide power outages and rationing of running water, explosions in refineries and pipelines due to lack of maintenance became more frequent as early as the end of the 2000s. It is therefore hardly surprising that after remaining stable throughout the Chávez years at under three million barrels per day, the production of crude oil fell by almost two-thirds between 2014 and 2019, even before the first oil sanctions imposed by Donald Trump's administration.

Despite its socialist rhetoric, the Chávez years were marked by high porosity between the private and public sectors. Maduro tried for a time to preserve Chávez's "legacy", before taking what many Chavistas and leftists call a "neoliberal" turn. He has now liberalized the exchange rate and even broached the possibility of privatizing public companies. How should we interpret this turnaround?

Hugo Chávez did not invent Venezuelan "hyper-presidentialism" or clientelism, but he did bring them to new heights by involving the very heart of the state: the military. He also established a party-as-State, operating in parallel with existing institutions and exempt from all parliamentary or judicial control. In fact, all major public budgets and other ad-hoc funds were managed at Chávez' discretion, with the help of his Minister of Economy and Planning, Jorge Giordani. The system

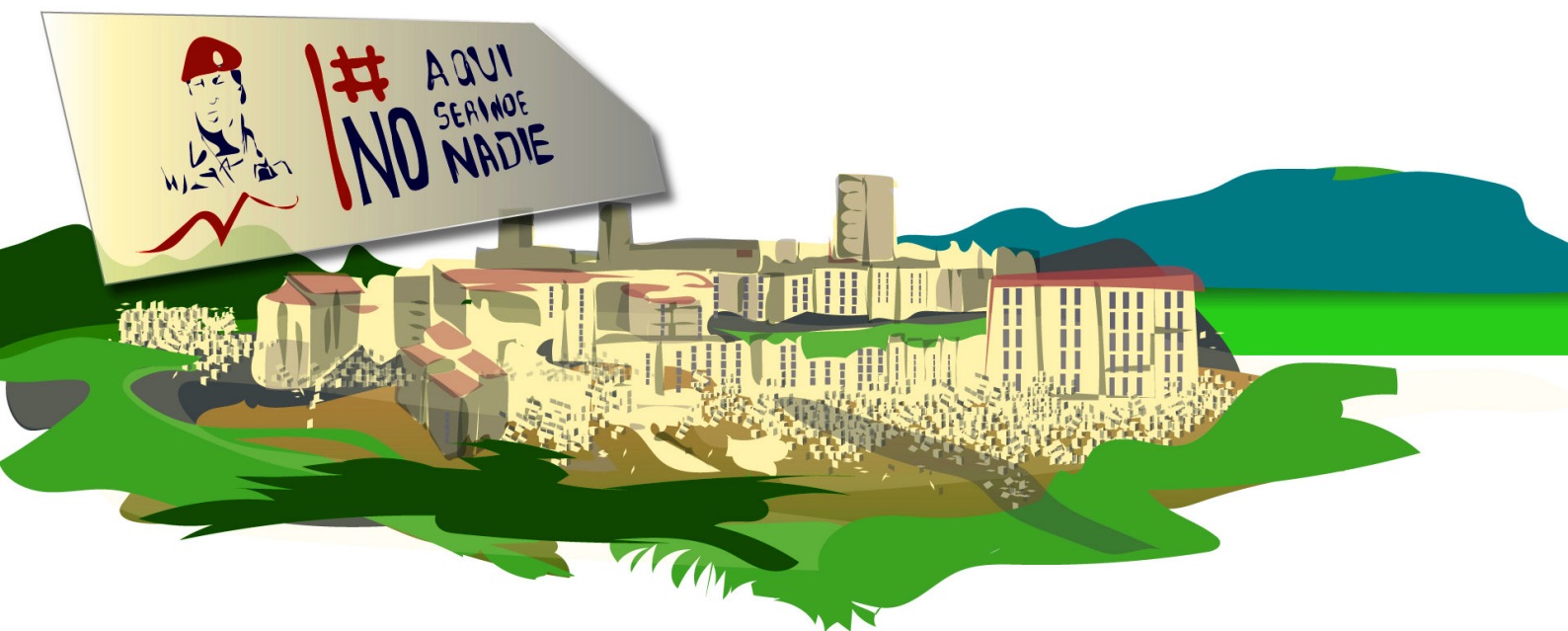
was especially vulnerable to corruption because the main principle of human resources management was "loyalty", which encouraged the approval of "projects" improvised by any local or foreign "tricksters" (*vividores*) scheming to obtain the lion's share of profit in sectors where the government had decided to invest. Chávez even went so far as to give his former bodyguard control of the public treasury... before replacing him with his personal nurse.

In addition to the PDVSA behemoth and its many subsidiaries, all state-owned companies and public-private partnerships were thus used as dedicated channels to drain public funds for the benefit of the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) leaders in power as well as their business partners. Among the many corruption schemes linked to clientelism within the government, the so-called "boli-bourgeoisie" (*boliburguesía*), the "Bolivarian bourgeoisie" that emerged under Chávez accumulated vast amounts of money by taking advantage of exchange controls, through the speculative capture of petrodollars allocated to companies with preferential rates: the currency was purchased from the state at an artificially low rate and then sold on the black market with margins of over 100%.²

Some even managed to use social programs to earn hefty profits in a short period of time. For instance, in March 1999, when servicemen were deployed to work in healthcare or on roadwork projects in the lower-income barrios [districts], tens of millions of dollars in cash "disappeared." Then there is the example of the "social production companies" (EPS in Spanish), a designation which refers to the legal status imposed on PDVSA subcontractors beginning in 2006.³ These companies had a multiplying effect on corruption: in addition to systematic kickbacks, the EPS were required by law to contribute to PDVSA's new "social fund", whose managers in turn used the services of the same "social production companies".

² According to a group of Chavista economists (including former ministers), more than half of the one trillion petrodollars captured by the state between 2002 and 2013 were embezzled using that channel.

³ The legal status was created following the failure of the "cooperatives" funded by public loans, most of which were never reimbursed.



Ciudad Caribia, a « socialist city » of the Great Housing Mission.

To be sure, the healthcare, food and education “missions” launched in 2003 with Cuba’s support (shortly before a referendum that could have led to Chávez’s removal) did contribute to the initial reduction in poverty at the height of the oil boom. But they were never embedded in the relevant ministries, and the Cuban state charged a high price for the work of its doctors and trainers while making substantial profits on the salary they effectively perceived.

In 2011-2012, Chávez’s last presidential race – during which he was terminally ill – marked a point of no return for public coffers, especially after the launch of the Great Housing Mission. The program involved the mass construction of free, fully-equipped homes, using the services of companies based in countries governed by the regime’s allies. Existing urban-planning standards were utterly disregarded when it came to calls for tenders, maps, materials, transportation, waste, etc. In the end, the homes were up to 50% more expensive than those in the rest of the region, while their durability left much to be desired. When Giordani resigned from the government in 2014, he wrote an open letter accusing Maduro of not having rebalanced public accounts in a timely manner, and in the same document recalled that the debts gene-

rated by the Great Housing Mission were as “vital” for electoral reasons as they were “excessive” from a financial perspective.

It was not until late 2018 to mid-2019 that Maduro resigned himself to legalizing and extending the grip of “lawless capitalism”, after suffering successive cycles of social protests and sanctions imposed by the Trump administration.[note]The Trump administration restricted the refinancing of the debt in dollars in late 2017, the export of oil to the United States in 2019-2020, and the import of American gasoline and diesel in 2020.[/note] Maduro liberalized the exchange rate and prices, and even celebrated on television the de facto dollarization of the economy. These decisions led to a proliferation of stores selling secondary products and luxury goods to an ultra-privileged minority of customers, but there is little doubt that a large share of the capital that was invested or repatriated in the process could no longer be kept in Europe or the United States due to actual or alleged ties between its owners and the ruling class.

In the end, as the government was running out of oil revenue, it began selling to countries such as Turkey,

Qatar or Iran shares of gold extracted in the Orinoco Mining Arc⁴ under the supervision of various armed groups, including the Colombian ELN and FARC dissident factions. Finally, navigating the byways of global geopolitics, Maduro managed to get an “Anti-Blockade Law” passed by decree. The text plans for the massive and unconstitutional privatization of the oil industry as well as of the entire productive apparatus controlled by the state. The potential buyers of those extremely risky, hyper-devalued assets, as well as the price they would pay, the sums they plan to invest to reactivate production – especially oil production – and their strategy for recouping this investment all remain unknown. Possible scenarios include high-risk investments, and/or a large-scale money-laundering operation within the state or hidden by the state, led by Maduro’s proxies in the military high-command or in the elite ranks of the Bolivarian hierarchy.

4 The Orinoco Mining Arc is a huge mining area comprising 12% of the territory, officially inaugurated in 2016 by a State of Exception Decree, and where a great quantity of precious minerals can be found (gold, bauxite, diamonds, cobalt, coltan...).

Further Readings

Arnoldo Pirela, « Siete claves para comprender a Venezuela y un vistazo al futuro: mitos y avatares de la economía », *Cuadernos del CENDES* [online], n°100/36, 2019.

Arnoldo Pirela, « Geopolítica petrolera y autoritarismo en América Latina y el Caribe: el caso de Venezuela », *Caravelle* [online], n°115, 2020.

Did the Bolivarian Revolution Transform the Venezuelan State? The Working Class, the State, and Activism in Venezuela

Interview with Yoletty Bracho,
conducted by Mathilde Allain



The Bolivarian Revolution launched by Hugo Chávez in 1999 aimed to transform the Venezuelan state. You studied its effects in the barrios (working-class districts), along with the changes in the relationship between their inhabitants and public administration. How has this “people’s power” materialized in Venezuela, and what does it mean to “transform the state” in this context?

The concept of “people’s power” is rooted in activism, but in the Venezuelan context it also has an administrative meaning. It has been used by Chavista governments (from 1999 to the present day) to label their participatory public action programs. Originally, these programs aimed to bring the Bolivarian Revolution into lower-class districts by providing people with access to public goods and services, including water, power, street-cleaning, education, and healthcare. They were based on processes labelled as participatory and cooperative that allowed beneficiaries and administrations to interact.

In order to roll out these programs, administrations employed intermediaries tasked with coordinating between public institutions and inhabitants of working-class districts. More precisely, they hired activists affiliated with left-wing political movements and organizations and who already had close political and social ties with working-class districts. These activists worked for the state out of political conviction, but also because they found employment opportunities within Chavista administrations. Their goal was twofold: to ensure that public resources reached lower-income districts, and to lay the groundwork for the maintenance of these networks long after they had gone. This is what they called transforming the state from the inside. In the end, those intermediaries can be said to have met with little success in achieving this transformation.

You mention several movements within the Venezuelan left, a divergence that somewhat contradicts the idea of a left united behind the Bolivarian Revolution. What are the different facets of the Venezuelan left?

The image of a monolithic Venezuelan left was largely created by Chavista political forces. Broadly speaking, we can identify two major groups within the Venezuelan left: the political left and the non-governmental left.

By political left, I mean groups that are affiliated with political parties. In this regard, one must keep in mind the formative role played by Hugo Chávez in the creation of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in 2006 and of the “Great Patriotic Pole” (GPP – former Patriotic Pole) in 2012. These entities were founded to unify left-wing parties by merging several political organizations into a single party (PSUV), and by establishing an electoral coalition (GPP) to support PSUV candidates. Chavista forces thus aimed to rally left-wing groups behind a united electoral front while simultaneously stifling plurality within those groups and heading off political dissent.

As for the non-governmental left, it is comprised of structures known in Venezuela as “popular organizations.” Historically, these organizations joined other left-wing groups to campaign for issues such as human rights, the right to housing, and the abolition of forced military conscription. They later became the primary liaisons for Chavista governments in the implementation of participatory public action programs. For example, when community health centers were opened in a number of low-income districts in Caracas (*Misión Barrio Adentro*), representatives of popular organizations acted as intermediaries for public administrations, and in the process established strong ties between their organizations and Chavista governments. These ties explain why the autonomy of the popular organizations – many of which claim to be “Chavistas” – has been strictly limited, although a few of them have openly distanced themselves from certain prominent Chavista figures.



May cross and San Juan singing

You have conducted fieldwork in Venezuela as part of your research. Can you describe the district you studied and the ways in which the people you interviewed experienced the process of state transformation?

My research mainly focused on two working-class districts in Caracas, *23 de enero* ("January 23rd") and *La Vega*. *La Vega* is a large district west of Caracas, built on a hill, like many of the city's other low-income areas. There, I conducted my investigation in the neighborhood of *Las Casitas* ("Little Houses"), located high up on the hill, 15km from the historic city center. This was the home of a family whom I will refer to as the Maldonados for the purposes of this paper. They led the protests for access to housing and public services in the district during the 1970s-1980s.

Over the course of these protests, the Maldonados learned how to petition and engage with public authorities; they were then able to use that experience when

Chavista governments came to power. Thus, in the 2000s, the Maldonados became the primary liaison for public administrations in the implementation of participatory public action programs in *Las Casitas*. Thanks to their efforts, a free-access computer center was set up in the neighborhood, along with a supermarket for subsidized goods, while the local playground was brought up to standard and made suitable for youth activities.

This example demonstrates how public resources were allocated to lower-class districts thanks to the working relationship between intermediaries like the Maldonado family, who represented the interests of their district, and the administrations themselves, which now employ activists with deep local knowledge. But we must remember that these examples are limited to a specific time and place, and that the participatory policies rolled out by Chavista governments therefore have not sustainably altered the structural inequalities that cause hardship for the country's working class.

Have those new interactions between citizens and administrations redefined the attitude of working-class district residents toward the city, and more broadly toward politics since the 2000s?

The history of Venezuelan working-class districts is a tug-of-war between alliance and confrontation with the state. In the 2000s, the implementation of participatory policies by Chavista governments seemed, on the surface, to change things, turning the state into a potential ally. One of the most visible manifestations of these changes was the newfound access of the working class to the city. Indeed, when the daily lives of the working class were no longer limited by their economic and social ties to low-income districts, but expanded to reach the dominant political and economic interactions in the city, those segments of the population were able to forge new alliances that translated into symbolic and material goods for working-class districts.

As of late 2021, the continued tension between the working class and the state appears to be heading toward complete rupture. In this context, the mobility of the working class has been severely eroded, especially as a result of the economic and political crisis. This lack of mobility limits the local economies and social scope of the districts. Combined with the repression of dissent, these constraints have seriously hampered the ability of the working class to organize and protest.

You also studied the experience of social activists who worked for public administrations in Venezuela, focusing on changes in their means of activism, and on the change they in turn effected in the state. Who are the people who drive the revolution from within the institutions?

In my research, I identified several categories of activists who became intermediaries for participatory public action. The first category consists of activists

Brick houses in a barrio



from working-class districts. Whether through local activism or higher education, these people were able to move up the social ladder and join activist organizations outside of their districts, with a national scope. The second category is comprised of middle-class intellectuals who join working-class organizations despite having no direct ties to lower-income districts. Instead, they follow in the political footsteps of their parents (former Latin-American and Venezuelan left-wing activists), and often get their start in student organizations.

The last category is that of internationalist activists, with young people coming from various European (France, Spain) and Latin American countries (mainly Argentina) to support the Bolivarian Revolution. These three categories worked together to design and implement participatory programs launched by Chavista governments, while enduring difficult working conditions themselves. Indeed, even though those intermediaries had significant political responsibility, they were employed on unpredictable short-term contracts, which necessarily limited their ability to create actual change within the state.

Efforts toward state transformation may still be plagued by major administrative, economic and political constraints, but what about public participation?

Although Chavista governments did not invent participatory policies, they did give them new impetus in the 2000s. What is left of these policies is a repertoire of state action that has been recognized by political actors from a wide range of backgrounds, which leads me to believe that participatory policies will continue to exist in Venezuela in the long-term. However, their substance and meaning are likely to change. The idea of transforming the state from the inside, which enjoyed some support at the beginning of the 21st century, gave Chavista participatory policies a powerful, “popular” political meaning that strove for a measure of universality. This idea was considerably

less prominent, however, in public action programs in the late 2000s and early 2010s. More recently, the participation promoted by Nicolás Maduro uses the crisis as a pretext to sidestep any political or democratic issues. It is now limited to the distribution of meager food rations to those in need.

In the current context, it is the NGOs that are taking on a central role in solidarity systems, and in the expression of human rights demands from the working class. International NGOs now rely on their Venezuelan counterparts in their day-to-day management of the crisis from a humanitarian perspective. This reorganization of solidarity policies has created a twofold rift: the political rift between civil associations and popular organizations vying to establish relations with national and international NGOs; and the social divide between activists familiar with the workings of NGOs and those who are left out.

In short, humanitarian action is now a structural feature of daily life in Venezuela. But forms of solidarity based on humanitarian action can discourage people from political engagement. Indeed, the neutrality that defines humanitarian action and that is supposed to allow aid workers to carry out their missions in deeply divided societies may distance beneficiaries from political debates, even though those beneficiaries are also citizens and therefore must play the key role in the development of a potential democratic future for their country.

One last question about the social science practices and methodology in politically polarized settings: How did you manage to conduct your field study in the deeply polarized context of Venezuelan society? How do you ensure the continuity of your work, given that the country’s political and social situation continues to deteriorate as you write?

I have had to establish a certain distance between the field studies I conducted in 2014-2015 and current events in 2021. My writing is based on data from a specific time that has meaning at a precise moment. This data sheds light on the present, but cannot explain all of the current circumstances. The analytical distance between my field studies and the current situation in Venezuela is particularly salient as I draft my dissertation; I am now writing in the past tense, although I started in the present. I know that I am dealing with dynamics that in part belong to the past, and I must treat them as such.

As for my position, as a researcher, towards my subject and field of study in the current context, I continue to feel a personal involvement in what is happening in Venezuela, and to base my work on an ethnographic method that brings me into close proximity with people on the ground. This closeness allows me to maintain my sensibility and connection to the field without jeopardizing the physical, emotional, and temporal distance necessary for objectivity. However, my own evolving political and scientific beliefs have on occasion brought me into conflict with interviewees with whom I used to be very close. Our political trajectories may drive a wedge between us, as we have different opinions about what is happening in Venezuela. Although this realization troubles me, I believe that it is through the clarity of my political and scientific convictions that I can position myself today in the Venezuelan debate, especially given the drastic changes in the country's situation.

In this context, the binary approach that had previously dominated the political and scientific debate on Venezuela, one to which many of us might have contributed, now seems to me more meaningless than ever. The divisions through which we analyze the country should be reconsidered in order to incorporate the new dynamics underlying the lives of Venezuelans: new social and political boundaries created by migration, new manifestations of class divisions within a deeply impoverished society, and the production, reception and rejection of state violence, among

others. Personally, as a researcher and an immigrant, I feel it is important to reflect on these phenomena, and on the new political and scientific demands that allow us to transcend the limits of a binary and reductive analysis of the experience of the Venezuelan people, and thus of my own experience as well.

2. Dealing with Official and Clandestine Violence

While the state has increasingly relinquished the management of social issues to humanitarian organizations, it has become a central actor of everyday violence.

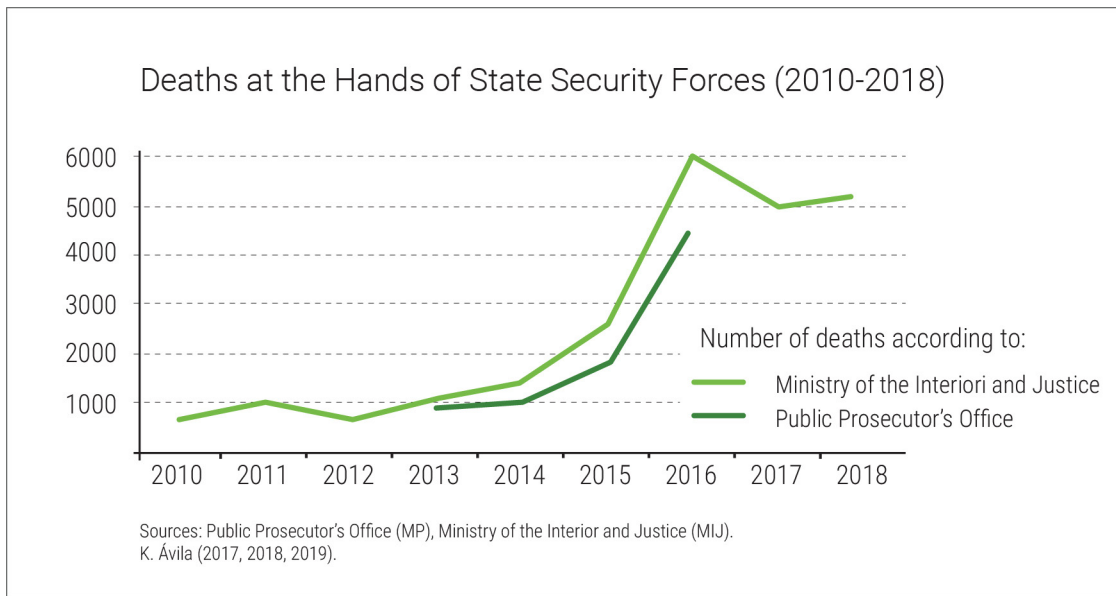
Keymer Ávila uses the statistical processing of a variety of data to analyze everyday institutional violence. To be sure, the repression of political opponents and dissidents has surged over the past few years, through both official and clandestine – and sometimes deadly – channels. Meanwhile, the “slow-drip massacre” of lower-class, racialized young men (*morenos*) under the pretext of combating crime has become an everyday tragedy. To a wide extent, state violence is differentiated by class, race and gender. It is also perceived in society through the prism of those intersecting categories, as existing forms of violence are treated differently depending on the opposition groups and dissidents that address them, and on their respective resources and influence.

But this violence is not inflicted on a passive population. Within the country's *barrios*, there are various ways of managing institutional and non-institutional violence. **Verónica Zubillaga** describes the role of women, who develop strategies for taking care of their families and neighbors and for limiting the violence that they encounter. However, the viability of these strategies is highly dependent on local circumstances and ever-changing state policies, lowering these women's room for maneuver. In this regard, “*mano dura*” policies are synonymous with an escalation of armed conflict between the state and the gangs that develop in lower-class districts. As a result, a climate of fear has set in, while women are silenced and deprived of the “conversational” tools that they would normally use to defuse interactions with violent actors.

Differentiated Use of Institutional Violence in Venezuela

Interview with Keymer Ávila,
conducted by Fabrice Andréani





Sources: Ministry of the Interior and Justice (MIJ), Public Prosecutor's Office (MP).
K. Ávila (updated and adapted version of the original chart published in 2019).

What is the current state of relations between security forces and the Venezuelan population, especially the working class?

Historically, Venezuelan security forces have been known for their militarization, their partisan politicization, and their excessive violence against the working class. The warfare tactics used against various left-wing guerrillas in the 1960s and 1970s,⁵ resulting in thousands of cases of human rights violations, were incorporated over the following decades into ordinary law enforcement practices. In February 1989, military and police repression of the *Caracazo* popular protests against neoliberal reforms resulted in 500 to 3000 deaths, according to local and international NGOs. It represented a point of no return.

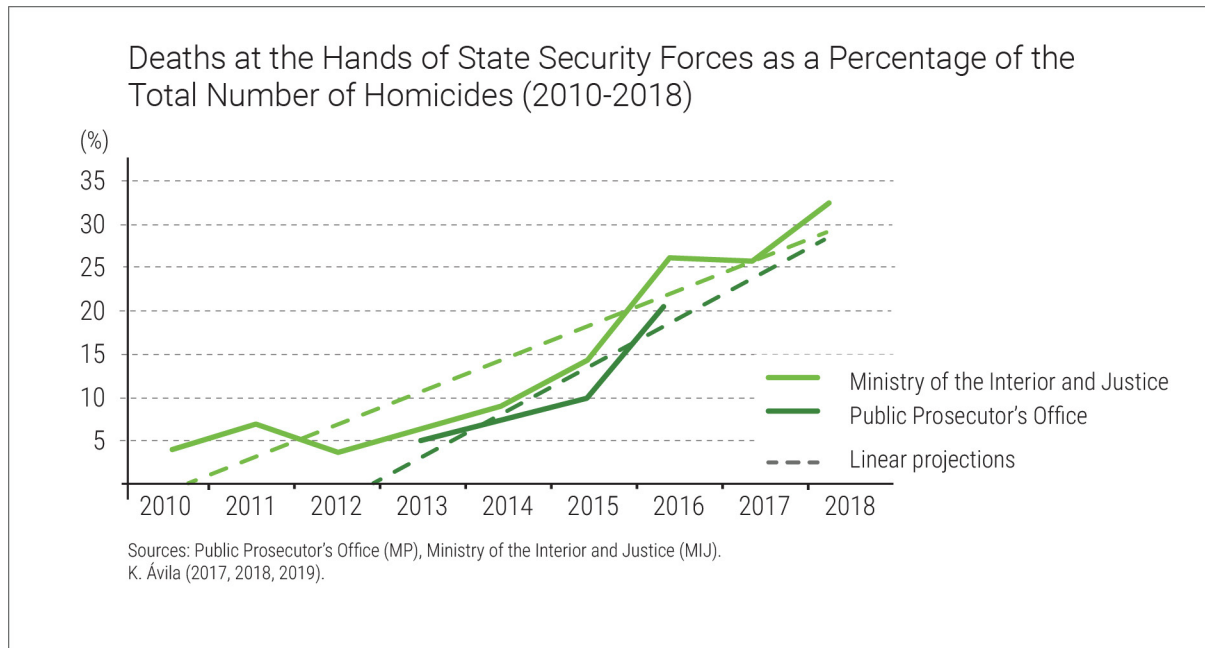
The country entered the 21st century with a pledge to permanently break with a delegitimized political system that excluded and criminalized the working class. But in spite of a few changes to the law and in public discourse, the violence perpetrated by secu-

rity forces has actually become more frequent and deadly across the past decade, especially from 2013 onwards, with major peaks in 2015, 2016 and 2018. This trend was accompanied by a considerable deterioration in economic and social conditions, as well as by the government's loss of legitimacy, generalizing institutional violence against the backdrop of an overall regression of civil and social rights.

The table above shows a significant increase in the number of victims killed by state security forces between 2010 and 2018, the period for which official figures are considered to be most reliable. Out of 23,688 deaths recorded over eight years, 69% occurred between 2016 and 2018, while the number of deaths caused by security forces rose by 622% between 2010 and 2018, from 2.3 to 16.6 per 100,000 inhabitants. That rate is higher than the overall homicide rate of most countries in the world (6.1 per 100,000 on average).

5 [Editor's note] The guerrillas emerged out of the Communist Party (PCV) and other left-wing parties and were backed by Cuba. They sought to end the domination of the Social-Democratic (AD) and Christian-Democratic (COPEI) parties, which alternated in office since the 1958 democratization.

Over the same period of time, the share of those killings in the overall homicide rate, which is itself one of the highest in the world (estimated to be between 50 and 70 per 100,000 inhabitants), likewise surged from 4% to 33%. At present, one out of every three homicides is attributed to the intervention of state officials.



*Sources: Public Prosecutor's Office (MP), Ministry of the Interior and Justice (MIJ).
K. Ávila (2017, 2018, 2019).*

This type of homicide is nearly four times less frequent in Brazil, where it represents 7% of total homicides, and more than three times less frequent in the United States, where it accounts for between 8 and 10%. In 2017, there were more such cases in Venezuela (4998) than in its neighbor to the south (4670), even though Brazil has seven times as many inhabitants.

I regularly monitored and cross-referenced cases mentioned in the press, in addition to reviewing official and independent victimization reports, the extensive research conducted by my peers, and the testimony of victims' families and neighbors. My work demonstrates that the people killed during security interventions were almost exclusively poor, racialized (*morenos*, or dark-skinned) young men living in the *barrios* (working-class districts). The government's version of events, which is disseminated via state media and other sources, legitimizes those homicides by portraying the victims as criminals who "died during a confrontation with the police".

But on closer examination, it appears that such confrontations actually represent a minority of cases; they could even be termed the exception. Even setting aside evidence from the numerous eyewitness accounts, the official death toll for these "confrontations" reveals a highly problematic situation in terms of academic knowledge as well as of international standards on the use of lethal force by the state. The use of lethal force is generally considered abusive and disproportionate when the civilian death toll is ten times higher than the number of fatalities among state agents. Here, however, the civilian mortality rate is ninety-four times higher. The same official figures also estimate the number of fatalities to be sixteen times as high as the number of injured, and the number of fatal outcomes to be five times as high as the number of arrests. In other words, given all of the information available, it seems that the use of lethal force is intentionally excessive most of the time, and often rises to the level of extrajudicial killings.

In the early years of Chavismo, a number of vocal critics of the violence perpetrated by state security forces, particularly in the working-class districts, were drawn to that political movement. Has nothing been accomplished since?

Since achieving independence, Venezuela has always lacked a unified institutional police system. As a rule, police agencies were poorly regulated and excessively militarized, with little legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In addition, they were scattered across the country, and many of them acted as private militias on the regional and local levels, serving the interests of the political potentates of the time. Due to legal gaps and procedural fragmentation, a lack of coherence, symmetry, and coordination between units had become the norm, together with financial and career-related uncertainty. During Hugo Chávez's reelection campaign in 2006, following a series of scandals implicating police in several cases of kidnapping and murder, the government declared its intention to come to grips with the problem. By creating the National Commission for Police Reform (CONAREPOL), Chávez found a clever and credible way to channel the security-related grievances that his opponents had placed in the public spotlight.

For three years, the CONAREPOL represented a pluralistic, inter-institutional workplace, in which technical and academic input was mobilized to create a police force based on the protection of human rights, the professionalization of civil servants, and the civilian nature of the institution. This work consisted of three parts: a detailed diagnosis of problems in the police force at the national, regional and city levels; the constitution of a police force that would be more attuned to the country's social, cultural and political circumstances; and recommendations to enable increased oversight of police management by citizens. The initiative relied on large-scale public consultations and systematic surveys, which generated a solid foundation of evidence and legitimized the entire process, while hinting at a more general change in public policy.

The CONAREPOL led to the adoption of the Law on Police Service (2009), which provided a model for a civilian, preventive, professional police force that would uphold human rights. It also aimed to harmonize the various police agencies and to create a national police service. Since 1937, this function had been *de facto* fulfilled by the National Guard, a military corps, whose members often headed municipal and regional police units.

However, despite its indisputable contributions to Venezuelan law and public policy, the ideal represented by the CONAREPOL was not implemented in actual institutional practices. In fact, the work of the Commission allowed the government to use the "new model" to restore the reputation of police institutions whenever their legitimacy was called into question. But the government instead permitted – and even encouraged through its directives – a counter-reform movement to develop on the ground. The reform became a rhetorical ritual obscuring ordinary police practices, which in turn became all the more dangerous and harmful.

One of the results of this paradoxical process was the development of police hypertrophy, *i.e.*, the accelerated and disproportionate growth of the police institution. Instead of creating sensible change based on frequent assessment, the CONAREPOL has been used as a pretext to significantly expand the police force at every political and administrative level (national, regional, municipal) – the very opposite of what the Commission had recommended. From 2006 to 2017, the total number of police officers rose from around 115,000 to 175,000 (a 53% increase), and the number of police officers per 100,000 inhabitants increased from 429 to 557 (207 higher than the international average of 350). This is a clear indication of the emergence of a police state.



A mother searches for her relatives' graves in a cemetery in Guaremas, 2019.
ARR Francisco Sánchez.

Moreover, the considerable increase in the number of police officers has been coupled with the utmost disregard for recruitment and training standards, thus further undermining the subsequent oversight and evaluation of those new armed recruits, who are sent out onto the streets after undergoing hasty training. These officers then lay down their own law outside of any legal or institutional framework,⁶ calling into question the true role of police in Venezuela. There is no doubt that the current homicide rates, both overall and due to state agents, can largely be attributed to police hypertrophy.⁷

These changes accompanied the continued militarization of social and political life. The militarization of security forces is nothing new, but it is still worth

pointing out that of the past fifteen Ministers of the Interior, twelve were former military officials. And beyond the appointment of military officers in various sectors of government, this trend has also affected the professional culture and practices of civil servants in general, including civilians, and especially police officers, who have developed an essentially belligerent, predatory attitude toward the civilian population. Over the years, this has led to increasingly systematic, brutal, and militarized police operations, such as the Operations for the Liberation of the People (OLP), which were launched in 2015, or those conducted today by the Special Actions Forces of the Bolivarian National Police (FAES in Spanish). This situation is the direct antithesis of the CONAREPOL model.

6 The general impunity rate was estimated at over 90% – in spite of high incarceration rates for minor offenses and occasional displays of “efficiency” for victims coming from a privileged background –, but that rate is even higher for police officers and servicemen.

7 Police hypertrophy also leads to the fragmentation of security forces, which are divided into various factions pursuing their own (and eventually illegal) agendas, often clashing with each other: in 2016, 19% of police officers who were shot dead were killed by a fellow police officer (27% in the Caracas area).

How is this institutional violence distributed across the social space?

The issue of repression and institutional violence in Venezuela has often lent itself to partisan interpretation. Many traditional media outlets, representing capitalist interests and reflecting racial and class prejudices, tend to paint all victims of violence with the same brush. In doing so, they create confusion

around an already critical situation. Indeed, the thousands of victims mentioned above are poor, racialized young men, who lived in the *barrios* and have been annihilated under the pretext of “public security.” They do not appear to be dissidents or protesters. This is not to say that the repression of protests is not brutal, but the use of lethal force in those cases is by no means as massive or systematic as in daily security operations in working-class districts.



A father lays down a picture as an offering during a religious ceremony for young victims, Caracas,

2019. ARR Francisco Sánchez.

Moreover, when poor residents of working-class districts take to the streets in protest, the repression they face is much more violent than that inflicted on students or young people from the middle class. This inequity was obvious in January 2019, when nearly 60 people died in less than two weeks. To some extent, from the state’s point of view, the massacre of poor people in the name of “security” served as a practice run for the use of state violence against sectors with greater social, political and media capital. While these

sectors showed relative tolerance or even support for militarized operations in the *barrios* in 2015 and 2016, they were eventually subjected to unprecedented levels of violence during the 2017 large-scale protests.

This being said, to deter middle- and upper-class protesters, the government generally prefers to rely on theoretically non-lethal but equally abusive and

violent means, such as police searches, arbitrary arrests and detentions, military tribunals, torture, and destruction of and damage to personal property. Such practices illustrate what Achille Mbembe calls the “infrastructure war”,⁸ in which public officers resort to looting and predation, stealing valuable items – money, jewelry, electronics, clothing, or even food. Of course, this type of institutional looting is also used against the poor, but in the case of middle-class protesters, it does not end with the destruction of their homes and the execution of their relatives.

These war tactics are also applied against the most visible and influential opponents of the government, including mayors and deputies. Together with PRO-VEA, an NGO, we calculated that in 2018 alone, politically motivated arrests increased by 574% compared to the average over the past decade. Additionally, at least five political prisoners have died in prison since 2015.

Moreover, not only has the repression of the opposition become largely normalized – with bans on running for election, arrests for “violence” or “conspiracy” (whether real or alleged), and forced exile – but the government also considers dissidence or disaffiliation among civil servants to be acts of high treason punishable by long prison sentences or else exile. The most emblematic cases include the exile of the former Public Prosecutor in the summer of 2017, and the imprisonment of two former ministers: Hugo Chávez’s former Defense Minister in 2008 and Maduro’s former Interior and Justice Minister in 2018 – both remain to this day in prison.

Finally, concerning broader policing practices, the government has used an extensive range of disciplinary tools in order to target the poorest groups of the population. For instance, the “Homeland card” provides access to basic goods and services, and CLAP (Spanish acronym for Local Supply and Production

Committees) packages contain subsidized food products that are often sorely needed in light of chronic shortages and hyperinflation. The Homeland card and CLAP packages are powerful means of political and social control. They led to the denunciation and extortion of protesters in many *barrios* in early 2019, spreading terror in communities and destroying the ties of solidarity and fraternity between neighbors.

How are those inequalities on the ground echoed in the media?

The difference in media coverage of the daily deaths of young people in the *barrios* versus those of young protesters is very telling. In both cases, the victims are killed by state agents for clearly political reasons, but their portrayal in the media is largely determined by racial, class, ideological and political biases.

To describe the first category of deaths, those that take place in the *barrios*, I use the term *slow-drip massacre*. These homicides do not make national headlines; they are not used as rallying cries by opposition parties, or by most NGOs and international human rights defense organizations. They are the faceless, nameless dead. Their relatives have no space in which to express themselves, and no significant support network. Victims are labeled “criminals” after their deaths in order to justify their murders. But the message is clear: the state can kill the poor with total impunity. And this rationale can very well be applied to other groups of the population if need be...

The second category of deaths, those of young protesters, tends to be more sporadic and selective. These generally include young middle-class students or unionized workers, affiliated in one way or another with an institution of greater organizational capacity. Those victims are used by political parties in their campaigns; they make headlines and are prioritized

8 A. Mbembé, “Necropolitics”, *Public Culture*, 2003, n°15, pp. 11-40.

by local human rights NGOs and their transnational partners, so that victims are transformed into hero-martyrs. This undoubtedly affects the institutional response to this type of event, as well as the actual and perceived costs of state violence.

Further Readings:

Keymer Ávila, « *¿Qué pasó con la reforma policial en Venezuela? Preguntas y respuestas básicas sobre el proceso en su etapa púber* », Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), 2019.

Monitor del uso de la fuerza letal en América Latina. Un estudio comparativo de Brasil, Colombia, El Salvador, México y Venezuela. CIDE/LAV/FIP/IUJ/FBSP, 2019.

Situación de los Derechos Humanos en Venezuela. Derecho a la Libertad Personal. Informe Anual 2018, PRO-VEA, 2019.

The Experience of Armed Violence in the Barrios of Caracas: Gangs, Military Operations, and Conflict Management in Day-To-Day Life

Interview with Verónica Zubillaga,
conducted by Yoletty Bracho



What is the role of violence in the barrios and in the daily experience of working-class people in Venezuela? Where does it come from, and how does it spread and multiply?

First, one can distinguish three types of violence in working-class districts: structural violence, interpersonal armed violence, and institutional police violence. Structural violence refers to all of the social conditions underlying the urban marginalization and social, political, and economic exclusion that many Venezuelans have to face. It includes the dynamics that produce inequalities based on social status, skin color, and neighborhood, amongst others.

This type of inequality prevents people from accessing basic public services, such as transportation, water, and electricity, as well as fundamental economic and social rights such as housing, education, healthcare and employment. Through my work with the REACIN network (Activist and Research Network for Social Cohesion), of which I am a member, I have observed that structural violence operates insidiously, disrupting the daily lives of its victims and destroying their futures in the long term. It also determines the survival strategies adopted by the social groups affected, especially young men, who are often forced to turn to the informal sector and even to the illicit economy.

“Weapons ‘slipped through the fingers’ of police and military officers”

There has been a significant proliferation of firearms in Venezuela, more precisely during the politically and socially conflictual times that accompanied the political process known as the “Bolivarian Revolution.” According to the reports released by the Presidential Commission on Firearm Control and Disarmament (to which I contributed), most of these weapons were legally imported into the country. They then “slipped through the fingers” of police and military officers, ending up in the hands of young gang members, organized crime groups, and illicit trade networks more generally, due to the connections between these entities.

The proliferation and circulation of firearms among those living in extreme poverty has led to the emergence of highly violent social dynamics. For instance, conflict over the control of territories linked to illicit markets – such as the drug trade – translates into interpersonal armed violence and has produced mainly casualties⁹, mainly among poor young men.

The presence of heavily armed criminal groups has led to increasingly lethal responses from law enforcement authorities and fueled an escalation in violence. This cycle of violence is the result of the heightened militarization of public security policies, characterized by policies known as *Mano Dura*,¹⁰ which have fueled a growing prison population, among other effects. As a response to this tough-on-crime policy, gangs – mainly comprised of young men from working-class districts – have joined forces in order to acquire more weapons and form more sophisticated organized criminal groups.

⁹ From 1999 to 2009, according to official figures, homicide rates increased from 25 to 49 per 100,000 inhabitants. In 2016, a year after a deadly wave of militarized police operations, the rate had reached 70 per 100,000, the highest in Latin America after El Salvador.

¹⁰ “Strong hand” or “heavy hand”. The term is used to refer to tough-on-crime police practices. More information about these policies can be found in the interview with Keymer Ávila.

“Venezuela currently has one of the deadliest police forces in Latin America”

Their inter-organization has triggered an escalating armed response from law enforcement, which contributes to the deployment of large-scale and lethal violence, turning public authorities into actors of illegitimate violence. Extrajudicial killings are encouraged in these kinds of situations. This is the third type of violence: institutional police violence.

In the post-Chavez era, this institutional violence—mostly inflicted through *Mano Dura* policies—underwent significant change. From 2015 onwards, such change becomes evident: on the one hand, police operations became more militarized, amounting to mass invasions of working-class districts; on the other hand, the policy of disproportionate incarceration of the residents of those districts shifted toward a policy of pure and simple execution.

The observation that can be drawn from these dynamics highlights how Venezuela currently has one of the deadliest police forces in Latin America. This situation was recently documented in studies carried out by researchers from several countries in the region, and in [reports](#) by the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights and the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela.

In such a dramatic situation, how do the residents of working-class districts deal with this violence in their daily lives?

In the working-class districts of the city of Caracas,

which are the main focus of REACIN’s research, life is defined by intense, small-scale social interaction in communities where everyone knows each other. It is a life built of exchanges, favors, and mutual assistance that compensates for a chronic lack of justice and protection from public authorities. The management of violence in these districts is thus intrinsically linked to each neighborhood’s social dynamics.

We use the term “[armed territorial order](#)” in our work to reflect the fact that within a city, manifestations of violence are historically, spatially, and socially situated. They should be analyzed in light of the history of each *barrio*’s communities and their relationship to the police; they vary depending on the type of armed actors active in the community.

In the neighborhoods closest to the city center, we have observed that a minimum standard of coexistence is maintained by the residents and armed groups of young men. This mutually shared standard has been adopted in the different sectors of the *Carache barrio*¹¹, where we have conducted long-term ethnographic studies. It takes the form of a community rule forbidding attacks on neighbors in the same sector of the *barrio*. The “sector” has thus become the new border determining the members of a geographical community, between whom the use of violence is restricted.

As a result, the relationship between young armed gang members and their neighbors can be described as a *continuum*, ranging from open hostility to tense coexistence, and even exchanges of favors: gang members offer residents protection, while residents shield gang members from the police. In districts where civil society organizations are well-established, residents are able to reach this type of basic agreement with the gangs because they have more leverage and therefore greater influence within the power relationships that define the use and the regulation of violence.

11 A « sector » is an internal division of the *barrio*. It is an informal division that tends to overlap with territorial and social limits: for instance, it takes into account the notion of “community” as a unit of mutual social experiences. The names of the districts have been changed to protect anonymity.



Carache's brick houses

In this context, what is the role of law enforcement authorities? In other words, how does the state contribute to the production of violence in working-class districts?

Mano Dura policies in Venezuela have contributed to turning district gangs into organized criminal groups – a phenomenon already observed in other countries such as El Salvador. Over time, as a consequence of those policies and of the persistent lack of welfare state programs, those armed groups have become prominent informal political forces. More recently, law enforcement policies have led to the mass incarceration of poor young men from working-class districts, which have encouraged gangs to organize and join forces to fight police, especially in the *La Caracola barrio* a group of neighborhoods in which we have recently conducted research, extending from the city center to the south of Caracas.

Police forces and public authorities began to stigmatize this *barrio*, calling it the *Corridors of death*. By doing so, they justified a series of militarized interventions called “Operation for the People’s Liberation” (OLP in Spanish). On July 13, 2015, the first day of the OLP, at least 14 people were killed in *La Caracola*. From 2015 to 2017, communities were subjected to weekly raids, during which heavily armed policemen in balaclavas broke down doors and forcibly entered homes. Our investigation showed a significant number of extrajudicial killings, together with the systematic theft of residents’ belongings and other forms of police brutality.

The communities in *La Caracola* have thus found themselves trapped between organized criminal gangs and law enforcement, two equally tyrannical armed groups. In this difficult situation, local residents have been forced to side with local criminal groups. In return, criminal groups grant them certain favors while subjecting them to their authority, in order to ensure the neighborhood’s loyalty and protect themselves from law enforcement.



Cota 905.

ARR Juan Francisco Mejía

What role do women play in the experience and the management of violence in these districts?

As part of our ethnographic observations for REACIN's research, we emphasize the central role of women in the micro-politics of the *barrios*. We focus on the role played by mothers in developing strategies to compensate for the lack of state protection in highly violent situations. In order to protect their families, women have resorted to a wide range of tactics, from resistance to collaboration with armed groups. Those practices can either limit violence or amplify it. They form the basis for the political survival strategies to which these women dedicate much of their social and psychological resources.

“If a young man does not respect the basic rules of community life, his reputation may be tarnished by word of mouth”

Conversational and rhetorical resources play a key role in these strategies: threats to call the police are one of the most widespread tactics, even when they are not carried out. But the ultimate mechanism by which young armed men are controlled is gossip. If a young man does not respect the basic rules of community life, his reputation may be tarnished by word of mouth, which may lead to his being reported to the police or reprimanded by other armed men in the community who are more inclined to uphold the rules. In this type of situation, women's conversational resources are the source of their power.

However, in districts like *La Caracola*, women are no longer dealing with gangs, but with organized crime groups. If they are suspected of spreading rumors outside of the district, especially to law enforcement authorities, and therefore contributing to the preparation of police interventions in the *barrios*, they may pay with their lives. This threat became all the more real when a woman suspected of being a *chismosa* (someone who spreads *chismes*, or gossip) was publicly set on fire in *La Caracola*.

The situation of women in *La Caracola* is very different from that in *Carache*, the district closest to the city center. Although *Carache* also has a long history of police abuse, the community there was not subjected to invasive militarized operations of *Mano Dura*, such as the aforementioned OLP. Indeed, thanks to longstanding social action by religious, education and community organizations, various strategies have been developed to deal with violence.

In this community, women worked together to reach a basic understanding with local armed gangs. For instance, weapon-free zones were delineated, and armed confrontations were limited in the neighborhood. According to those women, they succeeded thanks to the support of local organizations, but also by using the conversational and rhetorical resources specific to the district's micro-politics: they talked to, shouted at, scolded, and confronted men carrying weapons in public.

When comparing women's experiences of violence in various districts of Caracas, it appears that the militarization of security policies has left mothers powerless and increasingly bound to local armed groups. Indeed, these policies are depriving women of the resources that they have traditionally used to negotiate improvements for their communities.

3. Venezuela as an international issue: from migration experiences to the international stage

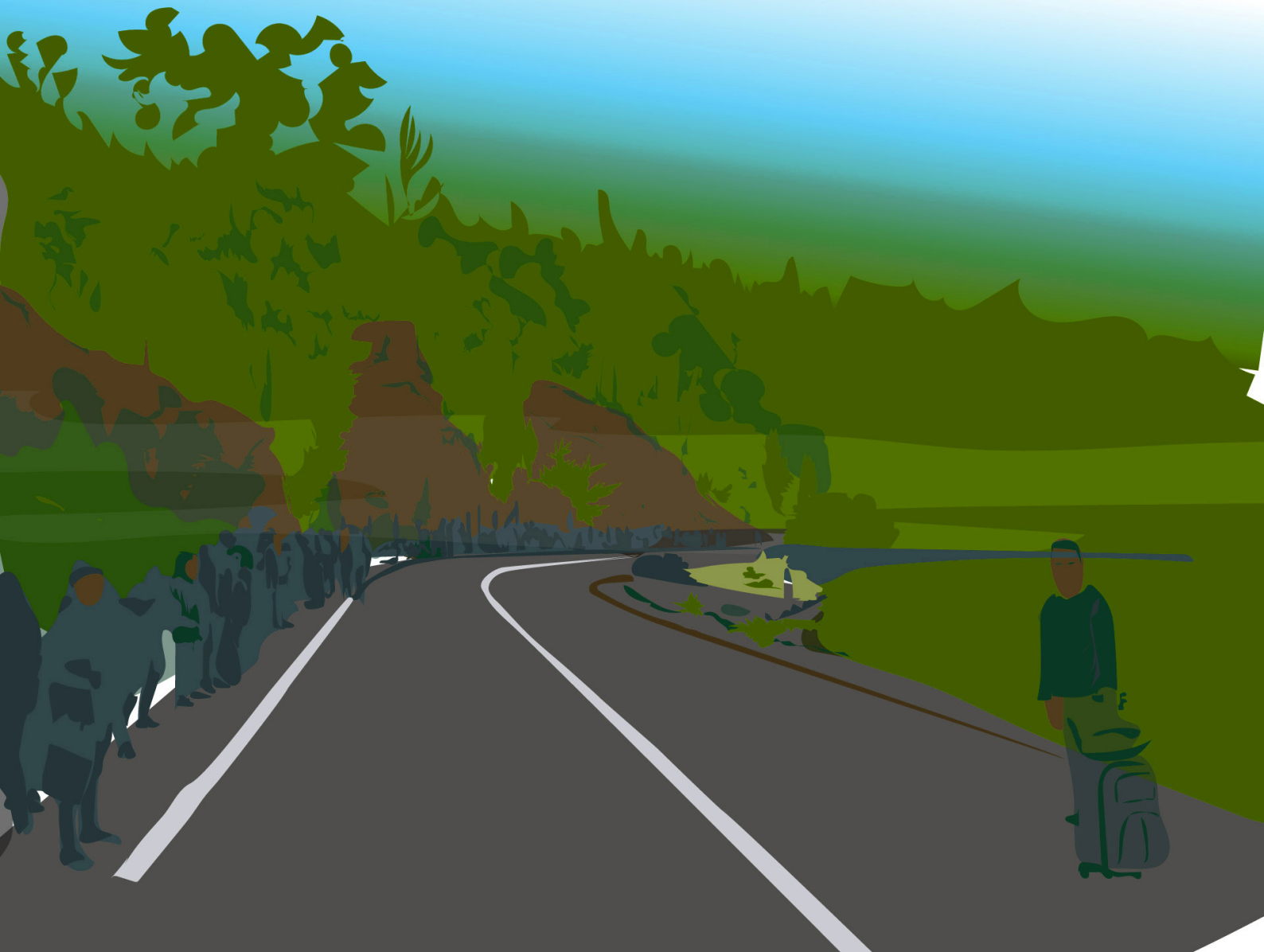
These days, Venezuelan society no longer exists exclusively within the borders of the state, but also outside of them, as Venezuela has become a prominent international issue.

Through a case study of Colombia, **Fernando Garlin Politis** explores the contradictions in migration policies toward Venezuelan refugees in Latin American countries. Colombia's approach has often been described as an "open door policy", and yet the management of migration by this neighbor state includes numerous administrative barriers that make it difficult for Venezuelans to settle permanently. During the lockdown imposed to curb the COVID-19 pandemic, many Venezuelan immigrants lost their livelihoods and had no choice but to return to their home country. The Maduro government then forced them to quarantine in squalid, restrictive conditions, making their return at least as arduous as their departure.

With regard to migration as well as international policy, the decisions of the White House have proved deeply consequential for Venezuelans. Venezuela even became a major topic during the 2020 American presidential race. **Alejandro Velasco** describes how the Trump administration positioned itself as the "defender of democracy" to gain an edge in the election, only to adopt a largely counterproductive policy: economic sanctions intended to target the Venezuelan state instead exacerbated its citizens' daily suffering while increasing their dependence on government assistance. Moreover, unconditional US support for young deputy Juan Guaidó as "interim president" emboldened him to play a game of one-upmanship against President Maduro, who yet turned out to be much stronger than what election results might indicate.

Migrating Home, Going Home Abroad: Venezuelan Refugees' Detours Between Colombia and Venezuela During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Interview with Fernando Garlin Politis,
conducted by Yoletty Bracho

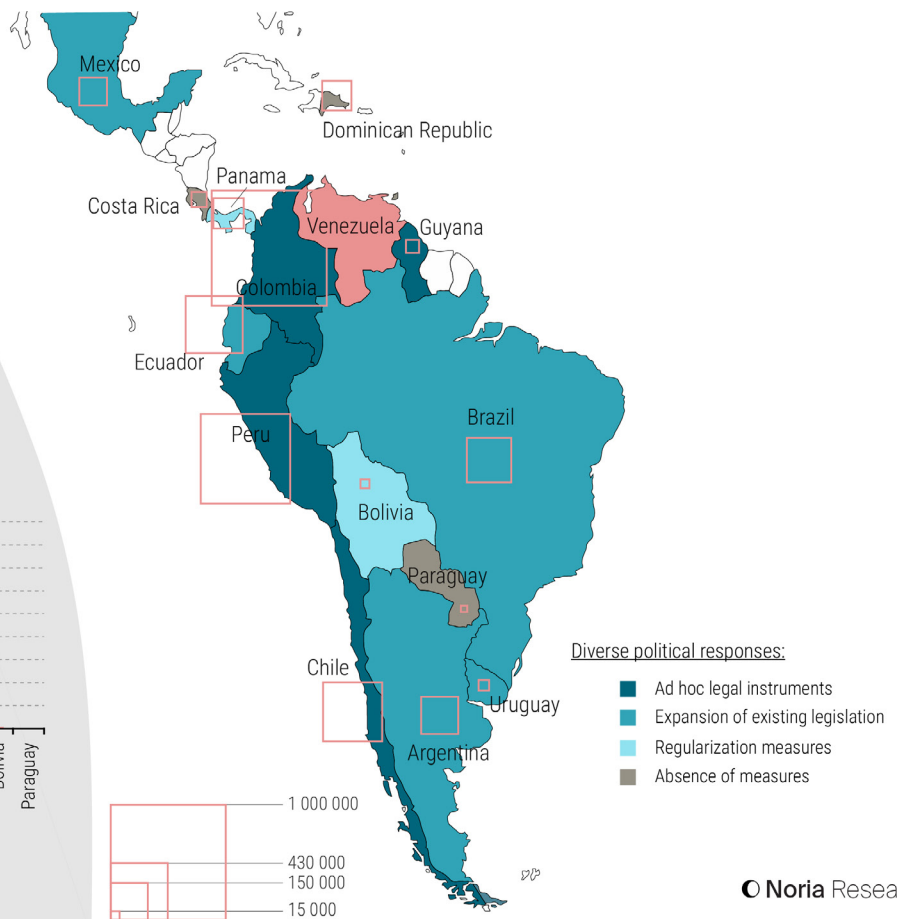
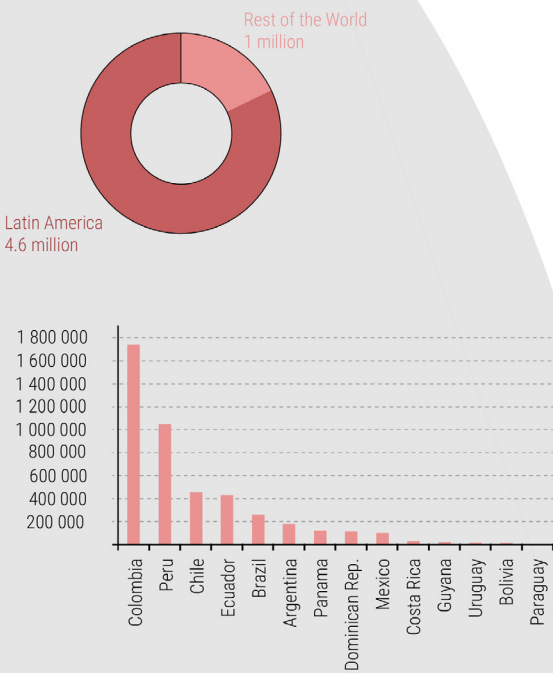


Could you give us a quick overview of Venezuelan migration in Latin America? More precisely, what is the immigration policy toward Venezuelans in neighboring Colombia?

In less than six years, Venezuelan migration has become the largest exodus in contemporary Latin American history and the second largest in the world after the Syrian exodus. To cope with the mass arrival of Venezuelans, most South American countries have adopted policies to control and organize migration

flows. For instance, “humanitarian” or “democratic” visas have been issued to regularize Venezuelans’ immigration status in Ecuador, Chili, and Peru. Compared to the sensational policies of forced return and deportation of refugees at European and American borders, these restrictions are more subtle, and their divisive, marginalizing effects on the populations are less obvious.

Distribution of Venezuelan refugees and migrants across Latin America



Source: Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for refugees and migrants from Venezuela (R4V), April 2021

Colombia receives the largest number of Venezuelan refugees. According to official statistics, in February 2020, a total of 1,825,000 Venezuelans were living in Colombia, 66% of whom were undocumented. These figures have been disputed by international organizations, which call them overly conservative; they argue that there could be up to 3 million Venezuelans in Colombia.

To address this mass immigration, the Colombian government has implemented a two-stage policy toward Venezuelans. The first stage began in 2018 and continued until January 2021: over that period, official rhetoric promoted a policy of “integration through work.” The second stage began on February 8, 2021 and could be described as a “humanitarian integration” policy, promising the regularization of 1.7 million undocumented Venezuelans through a “temporary migrant protection status.” Since the second stage is still very recent, I will focus in this interview on the effects of the “integration through work” policy, and of its disruption during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, on the experience of Venezuelan refugees.

In 2018, Special Stay Permits (PEP in Spanish) were made available to Venezuelan refugees. They granted Venezuelan citizens temporary residency for 90 days, with the possibility of an extension of up to two years. Those Special Stay Permits were free, but could only be issued upon the presentation of a valid passport, which in practice excluded a large number of refugees. In fact, Venezuelans must sometimes wait up to a year to receive a passport through the official channels. Many of them, under time pressure, sometimes have to give bribes of as much as USD\$2000 to administrative clerks to accelerate the process. Since a lack of economic resources is usually one of their main reasons for leaving their country in the first place, these backdoor methods for obtaining passports are often out of reach for people whose financial situation is already precarious. As a consequence, they are forced to take out loans and arrive in Colombia in even worse financial shape.

Once the Special Stay Permits expired, there was no procedure in place for acquiring permanent residency in Colombia. This restriction had serious consequences on the lives of Venezuelan refugees. Indeed, as Venezuelan organizations in Colombia point out, it is already very difficult for them to open bank accounts, obtain employment contracts, enroll in universities, or receive recognition for their professional experience. Because of these issues, especially the last, many refugees end up working in the informal sector, for instance as street vendors selling coffee and candy.

This situation was aptly described by a representative of an international humanitarian organization at an academic forum attended by officials from the Colombian Ministry of Labor. “Venezuelans can only work the jobs that Colombians no longer want: garbage collection, street cleaning, heavy manual labor in factories and in other sectors,” he said. This seems to contradict the official narrative of so-called “integration through work.”

As immigration policies are tightened, one can assume that the COVID-19 pandemic has still further restricted refugees' migration experiences. Could you tell us to what extent immigration policies have been affected by the pandemic, and what impact lockdowns have had on Venezuelan refugees?

The Covid-19 pandemic has put Colombian immigration policy toward Venezuelan refugees to the test. Borders were closed on March 14 and a lockdown was imposed a week later, lasting until August 31, or for more than five months. Those measures limited commercial activity, the only source of income for much of the Venezuelan community: according to the National Statistics Office (DANE), 90% of Venezuelans work in the informal sector. In addition, most refugee support centers and shelters for indigent Venezuelans were forced to close.

Under these circumstances, economic insecurity and the lack of protection for Venezuelan refugees in Colombia were being felt more acutely than ever. Once more, the limits of the “integration through work” policy were exposed, along with the discreet refoulement practices that it entailed. Indeed, Venezuelan refugees’ fear for their own safety and increasingly dire financial straits led some to return to their home country.

According to [Colombian statistics](#), 2.35% of Venezuelan refugees in Colombia returned home in 2020. For now, this trend is still limited in scope, since before restrictive measures were imposed to curb the pandemic, the number of Venezuelans coming to Colombia had kept increasing: [they rose](#) by 62% from 2017 to 2018, and by 39.45% from 2019 to 2020. These figures should also be read in conjunction with [the stories](#) of thousands of Venezuelan “*caminante*” (walker) families, who cross the border illegally every day in spite of the strict travel restrictions.

Who are those refugees who decide to go back home, and how do they prepare for this journey, both financially and emotionally?

Through interviews conducted remotely, due to access and travel restrictions, I was able to identify two main categories of Venezuelans who return home.

The first category, less common, is comprised of lower-middle-class immigrants originating from impoverished suburbs, who return permanently to Venezuela for three main reasons. First, these people have homes in Venezuela, something they do not always manage to find in Colombia; back in Venezuela, they often own a family house or apartment. Secondly, faced with two situations of equal uncertainty, they believe they would have more possibilities to get by in their home country. The

third reason is the discrimination that they suffer in Colombia, and the impression of being treated like “beggars.” Based on the interviews, it appears that this group of migrants, equally downgraded in Venezuela and in Colombia, tends to return because of economic and family ties.

The second category represents the majority of migrants who go back to Venezuela. They are working-class people from rural areas and the suburbs of small towns. They return home to better prepare for their next journey; as Franklin puts it, the idea is to “immigrate home for now, in order to go back abroad later.” The people in this group generally had a very difficult first experience of emigration, without documents or familiarity with the legal procedures necessary to obtain a residency permit in Colombia. As a result, many fell victim to scams when attempting to legalize their status by buying an identity card or Special Stay Permit.

This group of refugees often decided to emigrate following a specific event, such as the murder of a relative; food, water, and power shortages; lack of medication in hospitals; and so forth. They then set off on a long journey, most of them on foot. They describe learning to “survive” in a variety of perilous situations, and they are willing to undertake the journey multiple times in the unwavering quest for a better life.

Your work with these groups of refugees shows that their return is difficult and the outcome far from guaranteed. How are they received in Venezuela, given the current health crisis? Why do some of them choose to stay, while others prepare to leave again?

Once migrants begin their journey back to Venezuela, their experiences greatly depend on the quality of their social connections. For instance, Yolanda is a



Bunkbeds in a shelter

refugee who went back to Venezuela for good after living in Colombia for two years. Her story illustrates the hardships that Venezuelans must face as they return home in the midst of the pandemic.

Yolanda grew up in the suburbs of Caracas, where she worked in a hair salon. She decided to emigrate to Colombia when some friends offered her a position as a mobile hairdresser in the border city of Cúcuta. She had to stop working when the lockdown was announced. With no prospects of economic stability in the short term, and no support from the people she knew in Colombia, she chose to go back to Venezuela, where she decided that she would sell perfumes that she had used her savings to buy to make ends meet.

Yolanda's journey back home began in Cúcuta, where she put her name on a waiting list to cross the border through a humanitarian corridor. After 17 days, Yolanda learned she might still have to wait another two weeks, and since she was nearly out of money to support herself, she called her cousin, a member of the Venezuelan armed forces, for help. He pulled a

few strings in the Colombian border control agency to allow Yolanda to cross the border two days later. This example shows that border outcomes often hinge on unofficial communications between Venezuelan and Colombian state agents.

Yolanda's ordeal did not end on the other side of the border. She was first transferred to one of the "shelters" set up by the government to restrict the movements of returning Venezuelans in order to stop the spread of the virus. These centers are known as Integrated Social Services Points (PASI in Spanish). She was then transferred to a sports-facility-cum-holding-center monitored by soldiers during daytime.

The "refugees" were forced to remain in the makeshift shelter until they tested negative for Covid-19. After leaving this second shelter, Yolanda was transferred to a school, where she spent nine days. Having gained the trust of the school's chief security officer by informing him about two women who were about to give birth and needed urgent evacuation, she was allowed to leave soon thereafter.



A shelter's interior

Yolanda further recounts that upon arriving in Caracas, she was inexplicably “allowed to go free,” unlike several of her acquaintances, who were placed in a hotel by the government for 21 days as a preventive (and excessive) measure. Now, after a 58-day journey, Yolanda asserts that she is back for good, although she keeps in touch via WhatsApp with refugees whom she met in the shelter at San Antonio del Táchira. They have invited her to return to Colombia with them as soon as the borders reopen. But Yolanda has decided to stay, saying that she loves her country, even though life is hard and she feels like an outsider now.

There are seemingly two reasons for Yolanda's decision: first, she is anxious about the debt she incurred in Colombia in order to support herself; and secondly, she claims that she prefers to scrape by in a city where she can give her daughters a home, which is easier for her in Venezuela than in Colombia. However, in the end, she says that she would be ready to leave again, “if it is in God's plan.”

In learning about these difficult and sometimes dangerous experiences, one wonders about the impact they must have on refugees. Can you tell us more about the subjectivity of the refugees that you interviewed?

In studying Yolanda's and other refugees' journeys during the pandemic, I observed the effects of these experiences on the ways in which they define their objective needs, i.e., food, shelter, and healthcare; their subjective needs, including legitimacy and the feeling of being taken into account; and their capacity to interact with public and international authorities to fulfill these needs. Pervasive in Yolanda's story is a feeling of detachment caused by her forced return to Venezuela. Her ordeal as a refugee, along with the immobility imposed by public health measures in both countries, emphasizes how little protection she expects from both national and international authorities. This type of subjective experience prevents refugees like Yolanda from viewing themselves as right-holders, and therefore

discourages them from applying for the protections that are available to them.

The experience of migration also has a significant impact on migrants' attitudes toward their future. Many of the refugees who return to Venezuela no longer dream of improving their situation. Their hopelessness has been exacerbated by the pandemic; returning refugees, largely criminalized by the Venezuelan government, often feel excluded in their own country. One of my interviewees aptly put this feeling into words: "I'm not asking anything of anyone," he said. "I don't want to be given anything. I just want to have something to do and to be paid, anywhere, so that I can eat."

Thus, subtle refoulement practices have become more visible on both sides of the border during the COVID-19 pandemic, alienating refugees from the social and health protections of both states.

Further Reading:

Eduardo Domenech, "Las migraciones son como el agua": Hacia la instauración de políticas de "control con rostro humano", *Polis* [\[online\]](#), 35 | 2013

All Options on the Table? The United States' Venezuelan Policy Under the Trump Administration

An interview with Alejandro Velasco,
conducted by Fabrice Andréani



How would you characterize the U.S. policy towards Venezuela over the last four years?

From the very start, Donald Trump administration's Venezuela policy heralded its rather singular approach not only to foreign affairs, but to politics more broadly. Despite waging a four-years-long aggressive "maximum pressure" campaign against Nicolás Maduro's government, the President and his team lacked a cohesive strategy with clear guidelines echoing well-defined national interests. Rather, it was a more of a disjointed, discontinuous and often contradictory policy, strongly driven by specific – and regularly competing – personal interests of officials in charge.

This campaign saw the imposition of a series of major financial and trade sanctions on the Venezuelan State which were supposed to pave the way for a hypothetical "regime-change". At the same time, Trump and his collaborators adopted an ever-more threatening communication, regularly informing Maduro that "all options are on the table". But sanctions ended up striking the population far more than the regime, only aggravating an already extremely severe humanitarian situation, while Bolivarian leaders quickly understood that threats of U.S. military intervention were hardly credible.

In fact, with all his boisterous rhetoric, Trump's interest in Venezuela was always less about "regime-change" than about winning Florida's all-important Electoral College votes in 2020, as he was seeking a second term in office. So he basically spent very much time stoking decades-long anti-leftist fear among Latin American expatriate communities, especially Cubans in Miami. That helps explain why, early in his tenure, Trump outsourced his Latin America policy to Florida Senator Marco Rubio. Himself of Cuban descent, Rubio's own interest in the region lay in reversing Barack Obama's diplomacy of rapprochement with Havana. In his view, ousting Maduro and

installing a US backed regime in Caracas would essentially be a way to break the Cuban government's primary lifeline – that is, discounted Venezuelan oil.

While American senior officials were also pushing to strangle Maduro's regime and see it collapse, in each case Venezuela was a means to different ends, not an end in itself. Starting with foreign policy "hawks" Mike Pompeo and John Bolton, who respectively became Secretary of State and National Security Advisor in 2018: both shared a warlike rhetoric, but Pompeo was well aware that both the State Department and the CIA (he had just headed) broadly opposed any military adventure in Venezuela, just as the Pentagon did; whereas Bolton clearly thought that a successful operation against Maduro would convince a skeptical Trump of the desirability or feasibility of waging war with Iran – an obsession he'd been advocating at the White House ever since G.W. Bush's first term in office (2001-2004).

By 2019, Trump gave more credit to that broad interventionist line. He decided to show full support to young Venezuelan representative Juan Guaidó, elected "interim president" by the opposition's parliamentary majority – and calling on the army to join – as a reaction to Maduro's widely flawed reelection in 2018¹². Simultaneously, Elliott Abrams, a neoconservative who made his marks along with Bolton throughout Ronald Reagan's administrations (1981-1988), was appointed Special Representative for Venezuela. For his part, Vice-president Mike Pence began promoting his evangelical coreligionist Guaidó as a providential figure who would "free" the Venezuelan people – and guarantee his re-election along with Trump's. However, Bolton was pushed to resign as early as September 2019 – given his lack of results –, and ended up expressing harsh criticism for Trump's "weakness" on the Venezuelan dossier in his memoirs published nine months later.

In the end, most officials had reasons of their own to

12 Voters overwhelmingly boycotted the process, as the regime refused to update long-outdated electoral rolls (despite the continuous exodus) and banned prominent opposition parties and leaders from participating.



believe the assumptions of the most radical sectors of the opposition in exile, who convinced them that Maduro was much weaker than what the basic facts on the ground indicated. So while elsewhere in the world Trump sought to negotiate and break “deals” with various types of repressive regimes that restrict political pluralism – North Korea, Egypt, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia –, his approach to Venezuela seemed to stand out as an exception. But this posture was both poorly informed and inconsistent, and thus most often erratic and counterproductive.

To what extent did this policy differ from that of former president Barack Obama, and what conclusions can we draw from it today?

The Obama administration’s strategy sought to combine, as the saying goes, both “sticks and carrots”: on the one hand, targeted sanctions against regime officials suspected of corruption, drug trafficking or

human rights violations, freezing their assets in the U.S. and denying them visas to enter American soil; on the other hand, clearly stated conditions for reducing sanctions. In 2016, given the government’s crack-down on the opposition’s newly elected parliamentary majority¹³, the organization of free and fair elections, where Venezuelans themselves could decide their political future, became a primary condition for sanctions relief.

By contrast, the Trump administration’s sanctions were all “sticks” and no “carrot”. That approach was based on the belief that Maduro was politically weak, and could easily be ousted by cutting of the state’s main sources of revenue, at least in U.S. dollars. Trump’s economic strangulation policy, first announced in August 2017 – after a four-months-long and heavily repressed protest¹⁴ –, started by forbidding Wall Street from acquiring new Venezuelan debt obligations. Then came the embargo on Venezuelan oil exports to the U.S., along with the freezing of the

13 Ever since 2016, Maduro has continuously governed through the state of exception, nullifying both legislative and executive implications of the opposition’s landslide victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections, and even suspending a mid-term popular recall referendum against his presidency.

14 Ending with the installation of a “plenipotentiary” Constituent Assembly after a fully regime-designed voting process that was boycotted by an overwhelming majority of registered voters.

Venezuelan State's assets in America and some of its allies (2019); assets included Citgo, the subsidiary of the national oil company PDVSA which runs an extensive refinery and distribution network in the U.S.

« This policy strengthened Maduro's and his cronies' grip over the bulk of Venezuelans »

The effects of such sanctions ended up spreading throughout the entire population, especially once PDVSA's U.S. partners felt short of federal exemptions to continue to operate in Venezuela, and after Caracas was banned from importing American gasoline and diesel (2020). This whole policy proved to be completely counterproductive, as it strengthened Maduro's and his cronies' grip over the bulk of Venezuelans. Households without regular access to foreign currencies such as dollars or euros grew ever-more dependent on the increasingly meager resources – especially food – controlled by the government. On top of that, after several years denying the very existence of an economic crisis, Maduro could now point to sanctions as the sole reason for the government's shortcomings and marshal renewed support both at home and abroad.

Additionally, when the U.S. recognized Guaidó's "interim presidency" in January 2019, some fifty states throughout Latin America and Europe followed suit. But then again, this diplomatic isolation strategy had the opposite effect: Maduro held on power by rallying support from the military as well as international allies like Cuba, Russia, China, Iran, but also Turkey. As the expectations Guaidó had generated for a quick change began to evaporate, he was thrown into increasingly erratic tactical choices. In April 2019, he staged an ultimately aborted military-judicial coup,

with most of his alleged co-conspirators within the regime never showing up. A few months later, he supported the planning of a maritime invasion by a handful of dissident Venezuelan soldiers and U.S. mercenaries, ending up with a spectacularly botched operation in May 2020.

Such choices undermined the credibility of the "interim president's" figure at home and abroad – including in Trump's view – and generated deep fissures within the opposition – while strengthening the reputation of Maduro's counter-espionage services, along with their Cuban partners'. Moreover, by tying themselves to a short-term strategy, the U.S. and Guaidó were caught in a vicious cycle, needing to apply ever more stringent – and counterproductive – sanctions.

Ultimately, the cruelest irony of the Trump administration's strategy supporting Guaidó's "virtual government" – a nickname favored by inner opposition critics – is that it *did* help spur somewhat of a "regime-change", just not the kind it may have sought: from a seemingly weak authoritarian regime around 2016-2017, to a relatively consolidated dictatorship, with a much weaker opposition to boot.

Should we expect any change from Joe Biden's new administration?

Joe Biden has a difficult road ahead when it comes to Venezuela. On the one hand, any strategy that appears to ease the pressure on Caracas and/or Havana will risk further alienating the votes of Cuban and Venezuelan expatriates and exiles ahead of mid-term elections – the very communities that helped the Republican Party keep the state of Florida in 2020.

On the other hand, the failure of the Trump adminis-

tration's "maximum pressure" approach clearly calls for rectification, especially as Venezuela's crisis has long since become a regional – if not hemispheric – crisis. Millions have fled to neighboring countries, putting pressure on already weak local economies and public services, and generating xenophobic backlashes in Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and elsewhere. Those pressures have only grown during the Covid-19 pandemic, and they are likely to accentuate as those nations try to recover in the months ahead. Hence beyond ideological discrepancies, Latin American governments will probably redouble efforts to bring the U.S. to a different stance on Venezuela.

The Biden administration may use many different tools in order to overhaul Trump's failed policy. For sure, as promised during the campaign, it has recently granted Venezuelan exiles a Temporary Protected Status (TPS) through which they may legally settle and work in the U.S. during eighteen months. But additionally, and looking back to some of the Obama administration's key provisions, Biden can offer Maduro's regime a series of clear political benchmarks in order to gain financial and commercial sanctions relief.

Similarly, its administration can shift its attention from

radical opposition sectors in exile to more moderate ones inside Venezuela, like 2012 and 2013 presidential candidate Henrique Capriles. Such a move might help resume talks hosted by Norway between contending parties and shepherd a realistic electoral solution, including chavismo as a key player – whether embodied by Maduro or not; these negotiations had been repeatedly scuttled by the Trump administration's constant push for Guaidó to outbid. To be sure, while any change in course concerning Venezuela may be risky for the new administration, nothing would be more perilous and counterproductive than maintaining the current *status quo*.

How might Maduro try to regain his legitimacy on the regional and global stage?

We should be clear that whatever legitimacy Maduro may hope to gain in the region and beyond is neither democratic nor electoral, but rather *political*. For the last four years, and especially after Maduro's highly controversial reelection in 2018, antichavismo joined efforts with the Trump administration to "nerd" the president abroad, make him irrelevant. They constructed and promoted a totally erroneous reality in which his *de jure* lack of legitimacy is tantamount to a *de fac-*



to lack of legitimacy. Within this context, what Maduro is basically seeking now is leverage over any eventual negotiation with the so-called “international community”. So his focus will be twofold: cement his control over political forces claiming to represent chavismo, and keep the opposition splintered.

Regarding the first aspect, parliamentary elections on December 6, 2020 were plagued both upstream and downstream by government-driven judicial maneuvers and irregularities not only against antichavismo, but also dissident chavista sectors, including a self-serving modification of the whole voting pattern. The government managed to grab over 90% of Parliament, but at the price of a massive opposition boycott. Maduro was equally enabled to stifle any whiffs of criticism from chavista bases and to reward “madurista” loyalists, in a bid to solidify his control over the state.

Meanwhile, and with respect to the second aspect, the opposition has once again begun to eat itself from within. In fact, even as some quarters in the “international community” continue to show support for Guaidó, the end of the legal term of the former National Assembly (on January 5, 2021) and the departure of his patron from the White House (on January 20) have seriously called into question his ability and legitimacy to represent, much less lead, an ever-more variegated and fragmented opposition.

Noria Research

From fieldwork to knowledge

Noria Research

www.noria-research.com

 @Noria_Research