

Venezuela in Crisis

A Backgrounder

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This essay provides a rigorous but readable background for arguably one of the most pressing geopolitical issues in twenty-first century Latin America – the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela under President Nicolás Maduro of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). To this end, this essay analyzes and connects three distinct political phenomena in Venezuelan history whose interrelated development explains the country's current instability: Puntofijismo (1958-1998), Chavismo (1998-2013), and Madurismo (2013-present). It first describes the collapse of Puntofijismo, Venezuela's pacted democracy and oil-dependent petro-state to contextualize the rise of Hugo Chávez's political project in 1990, Bolivarianism. The paper then considers how Chávez's regime continued and ruptured with Puntofijismo through clientelism, exclusionary politics, and the creation of an illiberal hybrid regime. Based off of these foundations, the essay situates the current student protests, military repression, and humanitarian crisis under President Maduro. Using both English and Spanish-language source material, this paper lays bare the current complex reality that is Venezuela.

dependence on petroleum revenue.⁴ Petro-states like Venezuela, a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), are noted for their extractive and distributive state capacities. Strong reliance on non-productive and capital-intensive resources affects political arrangements such as social classes, regime types, state institutions, and the decisions of policymakers. Regime type is especially subject to oil dependence due to the “symbiotic interaction between the...incentives created by the petro-state and a particular type of democracy.”⁵ The latter hints at “partyarchy,” a term coined by Michael Coppedge in his 1997 book, *Strong Parties and Lame Ducks*.⁶ The title refers to Venezuela’s post-transition tradition of corporatist elite bargaining, intra-elite compromise, and economic conservatism in managing petroleum revenues and state-society relations.⁷ As Hellinger notes about AD and COPEI’s talks at Punto Fijo, “The issue was not whether some type of system would be better... than democracy, but whether this particular democracy was delivering on the promise of ‘sowing the oil’ in a project of national development that would include all Venezuelans.”⁸ From 1958 to 1979, Venezuela’s petro-state and pacted democracy resulted in a system of consistent economic growth, strong political parties, and governability.

The erosion of government stability during the 1980s explains why Hugo Chávez’s ideology Bolivarianismo, or Bolivarianism, successfully channeled institutional anomie and social demand into a revolutionary political platform. In his 2002 article, “The Decline and Fall of Democracy in Venezuela,” Daniel Levine notes that the synergy between the petro-state and pacted democracy reinforced certain systemic ills in Venezuela, such as corruption, truncated political participation, corporatism, patronage, presidentialism, and bureaucratization. Thomas Friedman further captures these ideas in his famous “First Law of Petropolitics,” which posits that the price of oil and the pace of freedom move in opposite

directions in oil-rich states.⁹ In 1983, when oil prices dwindled, the stability of these arrangements weakened as well. Several events followed that undermined the legitimacy of *Puntofijismo*. Among these is the *Caracazo*, the Caracas-based riots of February 27, 1989, which unfolded in response to the government’s structural adjustment program. Equally crucial were the attempted military coups of 1992 on February 4 and November 27 led by military lieutenant Hugo Chavez followed by the impeachment of former President Carlos Andrés Pérez in December 1993, who abandoned COPEI and later won on an anti-party platform. Levine explains the implications of these events for Venezuela’s *Puntofijista* democracy:

At each of these points a key pillar of the system was undermined or removed: economic strength (Black Friday); social pacts, control, and civil order (27 February); a depoliticised and controlled military (4 February and 27 November); and unquestioned executive dominance and party hegemony (the destitution of Pérez and the election of Caldera). The nature of the crisis reflects the dimensions of decline: economic decay, political ossification and immobilism, and rising protest.¹⁰

Evidently, the 1980s issued a terminus to Venezuela’s *Puntofijista* democracy. The qualities of petro-state and pacted democracy, economic growth, stability, governability, controlled organized social life, and military subordination to civilian rule, were no longer guaranteed. Factionalism, civil outcry, and polarization were underway.

The collapse of *Puntofijismo* ran parallel with the emergence of an alternative political project of special relevance to contemporary Venezuela, Hugo Chávez’s *Bolivarianismo*. Bolivarianism refers to the political thought embodied in the military movement called the Movimiento Revolucionario Bolivariano (MRB), which was involved

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with the aforesaid coup d'état against President Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992. In his essay, "Explaining Political Change in Venezuela," Pedro Sanoja observes, "The ideas of Bolivarianism are derived from contradictions inherent to existing institutions, and can only be understood in relation to the values and practices embedded in them, which Bolivarianism aimed to replace."¹¹ Sanoja refers to the opportunities presented by the decay of the *Puntofijista* institutional order, including the inability of AD and COPEI in the corporatist pre-Chávez institutional setting to placate social demands. This breakdown of social consensus is seen in the rise of civil society groups during the 1980s, such as human rights organizations, *barrio*, or district, associations, local church groups, and insurgent unionism, all assuming an anti-establishment disposition.¹² Coincident with this social activism was party disaffiliation and competing political programs alongside Chávez's MRB, such as *Convergencia* and *Causa R*,¹³ a political opportunity that Laclau terms a "populist rupture."¹⁴

Hugo Chávez's ideology of Bolivarianism successfully channeled this opportunity into a political project. Chávez's Bolivarianism invokes the philosophies of figures from 19th century Venezuela, specifically the "Trinity" of the Liberator, Simón Bolívar, his tutor, the pedagogue Simón Rodríguez, and Ezequiel Zamora, a military leader during the Independence Wars from 1810 - 1823. Bolivarianism also incorporates Rousseauian notions of direct democracy, socialism, Christianity, and *tercermundismo*, or "Third Worldism."¹⁵ These ideologies form an effective

critique of *Puntofijismo*.¹⁶ This project critically recognized civil society's unifying plea for the overhaul of *Puntofijista* democracy by linking the Venezuela of 1830 with the Venezuela of 1990 and drawing connections between the periods as an unfinished Manichean struggle for freedom. In short, Chávez's Bolivarian ideology during the 1990s made strategic use of anti-*Puntofijista* civil society demand. Ultimately, Bolivarianism and its repudiation of pacted democracy became institutionalized in December 1998, when Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) became the democratically elected President of Venezuela.

Hugo Chávez's fifteen-year administration from 1998 to 2013 was distinguished by a reformist break with previous institutional arrangements, but also maintained a continuity with past governance structures, norms, and practices. This seemingly contradictory duality helps situate contemporary Venezuela within its prior development as a pacted democracy and rentier economy, but also accounts for contingencies like Chávez's 1999 constitutional reform and regime hybridity. This perspective allows for a more complete understanding of the current humanitarian crisis in Venezuela under President Nicolás Maduro.

Chávez's government shared several characteristics with the Punto Fijo system. According to Julia Buxton, "While the political crisis has been...portrayed as a new phenomenon that emerged as a result of Chávez's policy programme and style of government...the conflict has deep historical roots and...has been shaped by the

legacy of political organisation in the pre-Chávez era.”¹⁷ One continuity is what Buxton calls the “politics of exclusion.” Buxton views the policies and social constituency of Chávez and *Chavismo* as a product of the state apparatus molded by the historically dominant parties, AD and COPEI, including rent distribution, inter-elite compromise, restricted political choice, and oil dependence. *Puntofijista* governance relied on restricted access to the state. Venezuela’s “Fourth Republic” prevented the poor from organizational representation; for instance, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV) concentrated welfare benefits among urban workers affiliated with Democratic Action.¹⁸ Buxton asserts that Chávez’s “Fifth Republic,” while increasing electoral access to the politically disenfranchised such as Afro-Venezuelans, also excluded beneficiaries of the *partidocracia* such as urban elites. Exclusionary politics is just one example of continuity from the pre-Chávez era into the Chávez era.

Other continuities under Chávez’s regime relate to the Venezuelan economy. Specifically, the Venezuelan economy under Chávez was similar to the economy before the 1920s. Both were oil-dependent petro-states, which some scholars refer to as “rentier socialism.”¹⁹ The Council on Foreign Relations reports that today, as under Chávez, oil accounts for about 95 percent of Venezuela’s export earnings.²⁰ Enjoying international prices of over \$110 a barrel while also never creating a reserve fund for future oil busts, Chávez unabatedly continued rentier policies. In 2003, after dispatching 18,000 employees from Petroléos de Venezuela (PDVSA), the state’s oil company, Chavez initiated a number of *misiones bolivarianas*, or “Bolivarian missions.” These were social programs meant to eradicate short-term social ills, such as Misión Mercal, fighting food scarcity, and Misión Barrio Adentro, providing free preventative primary care in poor working-class neighborhoods.²¹ Buxton notes, “Chávez is very much a symptom...of the politi-

cal crisis in the country.”²² Evidently, Chávez’s regime partly continued the legacy of *Puntofijismo*, such as the exclusionary politics and rentierism.

Chávez also considerably departed from *Puntofijismo* in several ways. According to Javier Corrales in *Dragon in the Tropics*, Chávez’s constitutional reforms constructed a “hybrid regime.”²³ The first change Chávez made in 1999 was to rewrite the 1961 Constitution into the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela (CRBV).²⁴ This document monumentally reorganized political life.



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The CRBV instituted recall referendums for public officials, replaced the bicameral legislature with a unicameral National Assembly, lengthened the presidential term from four to six years, and allowed for presidential re-election. Corrales argues that these amendments foreclosed pacted democracy in Venezuela and allowed for increased access to government for the politically disempowered. However, they also transformed the country into a hybrid regime, which are political systems that combine democratic and autocratic traits.²⁵ The 1999 Constitution allowed for Rousseauian council-based democracy, but also created a “high-stakes” political system that reduced checks and balances and centralized political leadership. The advantages of holding executive office were indeed heightened, but the cost of remaining in the anti-*Chavista* opposition were overwhelming because state resources were deployed to party loyalists. Corrales posits that such clientelism or opportunistic social spending results from increased political competition and declining institutional constraints, especially after the failed 2004 recall referendum. Corrales calls this, “crowding out

the opposition.”²⁶ Ultimately, Chávez’s death in March 5, 2013 would leave Venezuela with a regime that not only reiterated features of thirty-year-long *Puntofijismo*, such as the politics of exclusion and rentier socialism, but that also produced contingent dynamics of its own, such as an illiberal and authoritarian hybrid regime.

On April 19, 2013, current President of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, inherited this complicated legacy. The vicious circles of pacted democracy and the petro-state have conditioned the calculus of Maduro’s decision-making—what some Latin American observers have termed *Madurismo*.²⁷ The petro-state’s statist, oil-centric, and rentier development continue to define Venezuela’s economy. Likewise, *partidocracia* furnished Maduro’s government with self-sustaining practices, such as exclusionary politics, rentier socialism, and clientelism. However, *Chavismo*, while conditioned by AD and COPEI’s *Puntofijista* legacy, introduced its own dynamics such as control of the media, Manichean ideology, and the creation of a “high-stakes” political system such that the opposition is isolated. Of course, the petro-state can never be divorced from its political siblings, *Puntofijismo*, *Chavismo*, or *Madurismo*, especially when global oil prices crash, which they did in 2016 to \$26 a barrel. This would again provide a new opportunity for a shift in Venezuelan politics. As under Chávez, this would be a shift not toward liberal democracy but illiberalism and, increasingly, autocratic rule. As a result, Maduro’s current regime is the product of a decades-long combination of elite intentions, institutional legacies, and historical contingencies.

Madurista governance is not just a repeat of *Chavismo*. Unlike Chávez, who used oil revenue to weaken oppositionists, Maduro has used political repression since he faces diminished oil revenues and scant savings. After Maduro narrowly defeated Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) candidate, Henrique Capriles, in 2013, over 800 public protests have occurred in Cara-

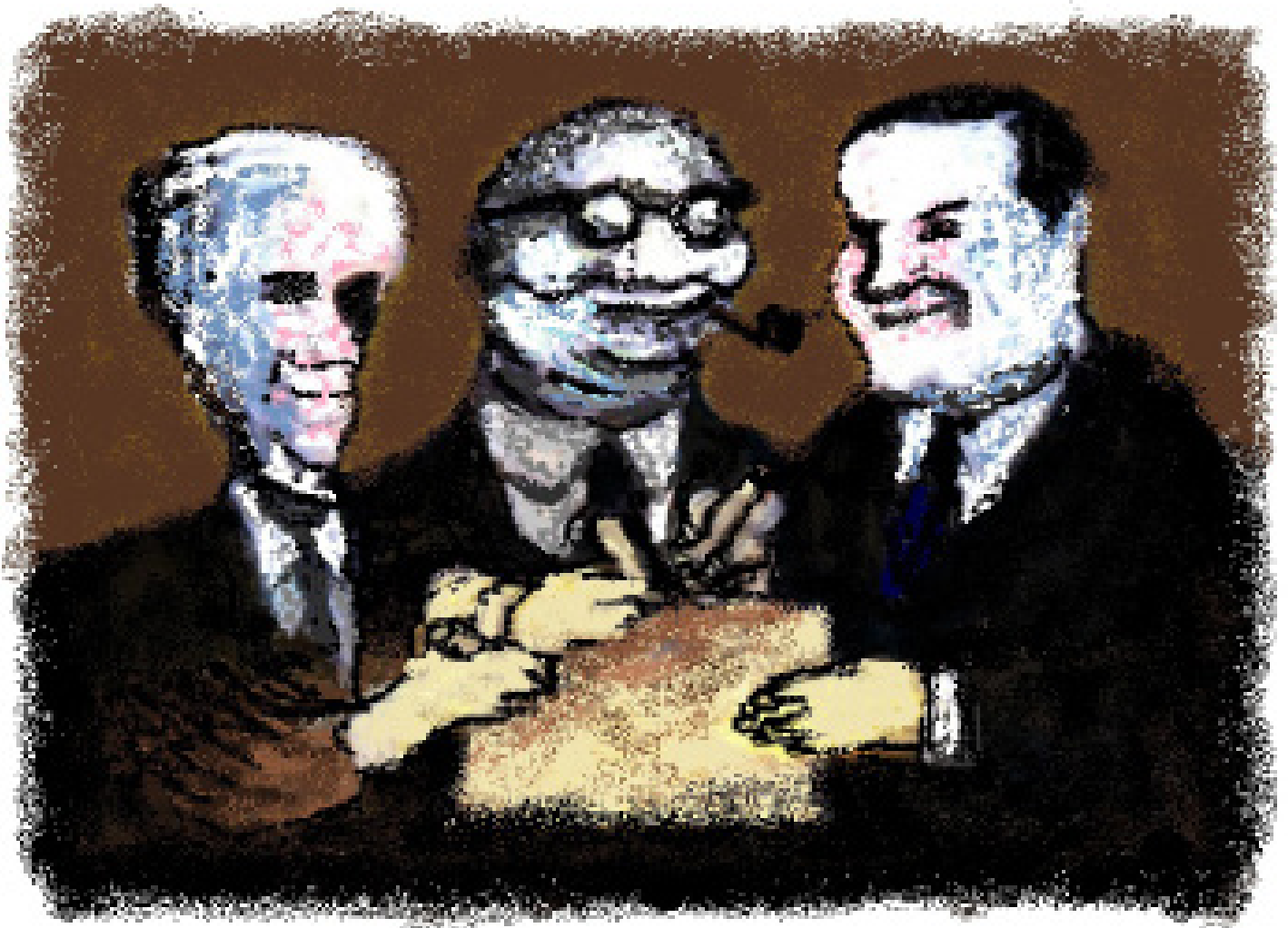
cas, mostly led by students like Gaby Arellano from Universidad de Los Andes. Maduro has correspondingly purged opponents and employed military repression. Moisés Naím calls this Venezuela’s “Plan B: Strip virtually all power from every institution it [has] lost control of,” namely the National Assembly, where the opposition obtained two-thirds of the seats in 2015.²⁸ In response in 2017, Maduro jailed the Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma and fired both the Minister of Defense, Diego Molero, and the Minister of the Interior, Miguel Rodríguez Torres.²⁹ In 2016, when the opposition requested a recall referendum, the loyalist-dominated Supreme Court cancelled the process, and in March 2017, nullified the National Assembly.³⁰ A joint communique issued by several Venezuelan human rights NGOs, such as *Todos Por La Libertad*, reports that as of December 2017, there are over 400 political prisoners.³¹ Amnesty International reports that the military has been conducting arbitrary detentions and illegal raids.³² Opposition leader Lilian Tintori frequently uploads videos to her Instagram account featuring the police attacking protesters with bats, tear gas, water hoses, and marble pellets.³³ In December 2017, Maduro forbade certain opposition parties from participating in national elections. In short, Maduro’s regime is distinguished by dictatorial, autocratic, and repressive one-man rule.

Venezuela’s crisis is most importantly humanitarian, not just political and economic. Poverty is now back to pre-Chávez levels. Infant mortality in 2016 increased 30 percent and maternal mortality 65 percent. Malaria, previously eradicated, has reemerged. Also in 2016, Venezuela saw its highest-ever number of homicides: 28,479. Hundreds are now also fleeing to neighboring Colombia. \$196 billion in debt has prompted Venezuela to seek aid from Russia, as China’s Sinopec in November 2017 sued PDVSA for \$23.7B in unpaid loans.³⁴ In December 2017, Maduro initiated negotiations with op-

position leaders in the Dominican Republic on a six-point agenda, including the release of political prisoners.³⁵ The nephews of the first lady, Efraín Flores and Franqui Freitas, have been jailed in the U.S. on drug charges.³⁶ The list of cataclysms under Maduro are endless, but they all indicate one thing: *Madurismo* is neither *Puntofijismo* nor *Chavismo*. It is a quintessentially new phenomenon that Venezuela has never seen before. It is the latest chapter in the unraveling of a discredited pact democracy, feeble petro-state, clamorous civil society, and hybridist *Chavismo*.

Ultimately, Venezuela is a country in crisis. Such contemporary tumult, is rooted in, conditioned by, and inseparable from Venezuela's mid-twentieth century history. This history is one of *Puntofijismo* between AD and COPEI from 1958 to 1998, defined by two interrelated pillars: the *petroestado* or petro-state, and *partidocracia* or pact democracy. The former has rendered state-society relations in Venezuela dependent on the extraction and distribution of oil rent; the latter has created restricted political participation, corporatist civil society, patronage, presidentialism, and bloated bureaucracies. What happened during the 1980s forewarned a storm of social demand, radical reform, and high political competition in Venezuela. When oil prices dwindled in 1983, civil society actors emerged calling for an overthrow of *Puntofijismo* and its exclusionary politics, and Hugo Chávez's Movimiento Revolucionario Bolivariano (MRB) successfully channeled this demand into a democratically elected political project. This "Bolivarian Revolution," however, proved just as exclusionary and clientelistic through *misiones bolivarianas*, while simultaneously creating an illiberal hybrid regime via his rewritten 1999 Constitution. Nicolás Maduro has inherited this regime, but diminished oil revenues have caused him to become increasingly autocratic, purging political opponents, using military violence, isolating the country diplomatically, and engaging in drug traffick-

ing. Venezuela is at a tipping point, and the time has come for a transition to genuine democracy.



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