

Gonzalo E. Vázquez

# Venezuela's Bolivarian Authoritarianism

The Advance and Collapse of a Petrostate  
under Hugo Chávez



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*To my beloved wife, Maria Leticia, and our three wonderful children, Gonzalo, Leticia, and Juan Ernesto, whose love and support have enriched every moment of this incredible journey of life.*



## Preface

My interest in publishing this book is to share my findings, analysis and understanding of the transformation that Venezuela has had politically under Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), from a participatory democracy to an authoritarian regime.

I am one of the almost 8 million people who have left Venezuela over the 25 years since Hugo Chávez assumed Venezuela's presidency in 1999, a phenomenon without precedent in the contemporary history of our country and of the American continent. People like me perceive leaving Venezuela as an alternative, searching for options for well-being, economic stability, a promising future and personal security for our families.

For the past 25 years, Venezuela has been governed by Chavismo, a socialist-inspired movement that began with Hugo Chávez's democratic election in 1998 and has since become more authoritarian. After Mr. Chávez passed away in 2013, his protégé Nicolás Maduro narrowly secured the presidency (Glatsky, 2024).

After assuming office in 1999, Hugo Chávez took advantage of Venezuela's substantial oil reserves and surging crude prices to benefit the country's citizens, offering subsidized goods and services that, between 1999 and 2011, decreased extreme poverty by 15% (Center for Preventative Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). However, this depleted the state-owned oil company, PDVSA. As well as draining money from the company, Chávez replaced the company's professionals with his political and military allies, leading to years of mismanagement of facilities and underinvestment in maintenance. PDVSA, once highly respected as well managed, became bloated and inefficient. Moreover, Chávez heightened Venezuela's dependence on oil exports, with these exports comprising approximately 71% of total exports in 1998 and escalating to nearly 98% by 2013. Consequently, the global oil price crash in 2014 precipitated a severe economic downturn (Center for Preventative Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

The term "Dutch disease," which originated in the 1970s after the Netherlands discovered natural gas in the North Sea, highlights the vulnerability of economies dependent on petroleum and other natural resources. When a nation experiences a resource boom, it attracts significant foreign invest-

ment that strengthens the local currency and encourages cheaper imports. Consequently, resources and capital may shift away from vital sectors like manufacturing and agriculture, which economists view as essential for sustainable growth and competitiveness. Over time, the country may become overly reliant on exporting natural resources, and if these sectors decline the economy suffers (Roy & Cheatham, 2024).

Venezuela is a glaring example of a failed petrostate and of the concept known as Dutch disease. Because oil has dominated Venezuela's economy for over a century, a dramatic drop in oil prices triggered the country's economic and political decline (Roy & Cheatham, 2024).

Tensions rose after Maduro's narrow victory in 2013 and escalated further in 2015 when the opposition secured control of the National Assembly, marking the first time in 20 years that the legislature was not dominated by Chavismo supporters. Despite widespread protests and allegations of fraud in the May 2018 election, which drew condemnation from the Lima Group of fourteen nations, Nicolás Maduro was reelected for a second six-year term and assumed office in January 2019. Two weeks after his inauguration, on January 15, the National Assembly declared Maduro's election invalid. According to the succession provisions outlined in the 1999 constitution, opposition leader Juan Guaidó announced his intent to assume the interim presidency until free and fair elections could be organized. The Organization of American States, along with the United States, Canada, and a majority of the European Union nations, swiftly recognized Guaidó as the acting president. Despite international support for Guaidó, Maduro retained backing from several influential countries, including China, Cuba, Russia, and Turkey (Center for Preventative Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2024) and remained as president.

Politically, once Venezuela's opposition was unwilling to back Juan Guaidó, his international support faded, and the Biden Administration joined in retracting its recognition of Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate leader. Conversely, Nicolás Maduro's standing has seen some improvement on the international stage. Western diplomats have resumed discussions with his government, and Maduro has benefitted from the election of more sympathetic leaders in Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia (Center for Preventative Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

Since the crisis escalated in 2015, approximately eight million Venezuelans have fled their homeland. Six million of these refugees have sought refuge in other Latin American countries, with over 2.5 million settling in Colombia alone. Within Venezuela, severe shortages of food and medicine

persist, exacerbated by the government's inability to provide essential social services. Additionally, the country faces ongoing challenges with the spread of infectious diseases (Center for Preventative Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

In an attempt to address economic challenges, the Maduro government resorted to printing money, triggering a prolonged period of hyperinflation that was projected to reach ten million percent by 2019. This crisis led to the adoption of a de facto two-currency system, where the U.S. dollar became the predominant currency (Glatsky, 2024).

Maduro's consolidation of political power and persistent economic stagnation in the country have led to a modest increase in outbound migration from Venezuela. The United States continues to experience a significant influx of Venezuelan migrants at its southern border. Meanwhile, Latin American nations continue to grapple with the challenges of accommodating and providing services to asylum seekers. Preventing further destabilization in the region and addressing the humanitarian crisis remain key priorities for the United States (Center for Preventative Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). The U.S. State Department continues to express deep concern over Maduro's human rights record. Maduro is currently under investigation by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged crimes against humanity. Furthermore, Maduro's use of armed groups known as *colectivos* to suppress opposition adds to these concerns (Center for Preventative Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

After years of boycotts, the opposition in Venezuela decided to participate in the 2024 presidential election, although maintaining unity remained a challenge as various leaders vied for prominence. Maria Corina Machado emerged as a prominent opposition figure, despite government restrictions preventing her from running for public office. However, concerns persisted that the elections would not be conducted freely or fairly, given the government's ongoing suppression of opposition voices and its complete control over the National Electoral Council (CNE) (Center for Preventative Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

The 2024 presidential election was the first Venezuelan election in over a decade where an opposition candidate had a realistic chance of winning. Analysts suggested that a change in leadership could potentially reduce the mass migration (Glatsky, 2024).

Despite the government's efforts to hinder legitimate elections, it allowed former diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia to register as the candidate for a coalition of opposition parties. González emerged as the unexpected

consensus candidate after the popular opposition leader, María Corina Machado, was barred from running by Mr. Maduro's government (Glatsky, 2024).

After the election, the opposition collected tally sheets from over two-thirds of the electronic voting machines, which showed González had won by a margin of more than two-to-one (Rueda, et al., 2024). The tally sheets have long been considered the ultimate proof of election results in Venezuela. In previous presidential elections, the National Electoral Council published online the results of each of the more than 30,000 voting machines, but the Maduro-controlled panel did not release any data this time, blaming an alleged cyberattack mounted by its opponents from North Macedonia (Rueda, et al., 2024). Instead, Venezuela's National Electoral Commission declared Nicolás Maduro the winner. Most Western governments, including Spain, refused to recognize his victory and demanded that authorities publish a breakdown of votes. But severe repression after the election, including accusing González of terrorism and issuing a warrant for his arrest, caused him to flee to Spain (Rueda, et al., 2024). The U.S. continued to monitor the situation in Venezuela and U.S. policy responses, with potential adjustments to the sanctions policy (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Since 2005, the United States has implemented targeted sanctions against Venezuelan individuals and entities involved in criminal, undemocratic, or corrupt activities. In response to the increasing human rights abuses and corruption by Nicolás Maduro's government, which has been in power since 2013, the Trump Administration broadened U.S. sanctions to include financial restrictions, sectoral sanctions, and sanctions on the Venezuelan government (Congressional Research Service, 2024). Amidst the ongoing political deadlock, the United States imposed sanctions against the Maduro government, particularly targeting oil shipments to Cuba, as Maduro increasingly relied on Cuban military and intelligence support to stay in power. The U.S. also threatened sanctions against third parties linked to Venezuela's oil sector and, though military intervention was discussed, it did not come to fruition. Meanwhile, Russia continued its steadfast support for Maduro, deploying troops to Venezuela in March 2019 and aiding the government in evading sanctions on its oil industry. China pledged its support to the Maduro administration via its endeavors to rebuild the country's electrical grid (Center for Preventative Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). There has been cautious optimism in Caracas

following Washington's decision to ease certain sanctions on Venezuela's oil and gas sector (Roy & Cheatham, 2024).

Following the Venezuelan opposition's unification to challenge Maduro in the 2024 elections, the Biden Administration offered sanctions relief as an incentive for the Maduro government to allow a free and fair electoral process. However, by April 2024, the Administration re-imposed most sectoral sanctions due to antidemocratic actions by Maduro's officials, which breached an October 2023 electoral agreement with the opposition (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

With Donald Trump having secured a second term, his administration is likely to place greater emphasis on Latin America than any U.S. administration in the past three decades, including his own first term. This focus stems from his key domestic objectives: curbing unauthorized immigration, combating the smuggling of fentanyl and other illegal drugs, and limiting the flow of Chinese goods into the U.S., all of which heavily rely on policies directed toward Latin America (Winter, 2024, p.1). The appointment of U.S. Senator Marco Rubio as secretary of state not only highlights the rise of a Cuban immigrant's son and a fluent Spanish speaker, but also positions him as perhaps the most experienced and well-connected U.S. official on Latin American affairs to hold such a high-ranking role since Nelson Rockefeller served as vice president under President Gerald Ford in the 1970s (Winter, 2024, p.2).

During his first term, the bulk of Trump's criticism and hostility was aimed at the socialist regimes in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, targeting them with sanctions and other measures that were widely supported across the region at the time (Winter, 2024, p.4). The Biden administration attempted to engage in negotiations with Maduro's regime, only to witness it committing extensive fraud during the July presidential elections and imprisoning another group of political opponents. Trump is now likely to adopt a more confrontational stance toward all three dictatorships, which are significant priorities for Rubio and other members of Trump's Florida-centric advisory team (Winter, 2024, p.7). In fact, on 27 February, 2025 news outlets reported that Trump said he planned to revoke Chevron's concession agreement, which allowed the company to continue to operate in Venezuela. Trump attributed the move to Venezuela's electoral situation and its failure to receive migrants from the U.S. as quickly as it had agreed to (Bloomberg News, 2025). While some experts suggest that this might be a bargaining tactic and that the revenue opportunities might be absorbed locally, the move would certainly be a major impact on Venezuela in the

short term. Chevron contributes about 20% of Venezuela's oil production, which would be a serious threat to Venezuela's economy at a time when Maduro is particularly vulnerable. A poll held after his most recent inauguration showed that nearly 80% of Venezuela's citizens report frustration and disappointment (Bloomberg, 2025).

In this book, my research goal was to objectively evaluate Venezuela's political system under Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) to respond to two research questions: First, under Chávez, did Venezuela move from democracy to autocracy? Second, under what circumstances was Chávez able to seize and hold onto power? Two primary responsibilities comprised my analysis. Initially, I contrasted the institutional characteristics of the current regime with those of the former Pacto de Punto Fijo administration, as well as with theoretical principles of authoritarianism and democracy. Secondly, I looked at the political actions and historical settings that contributed to Chávez's ascent to power and his capacity to maintain it.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

Prior to the election of President Hugo Chávez in 1998, Venezuela was ruled by a pluralistic regime operating according to the *Pacto de Punto Fijo*, under which two major political parties (the Social Christian and the Social Democratic) competed with each other in free, universal elections for political posts. The last years of the Punto Fijo Pact were plagued by economic and political troubles. In 1992, Hugo Chávez led an unsuccessful coup against the government (Carlos Andrés Pérez was president at the time) and gained popularity by vowing to radicalize the Venezuelan democracy, eradicate political corruption and bring forth social equity. By appealing to a politically disengaged electorate as an anti-establishment outsider, Chávez won over half of the votes in the 1998 national election. Once in position, he implemented a wave of systematic changes to the country's political machinery that undermined important pillars of democracy and strengthened the absolute power of his presidency.

Against harsh criticisms both at home and abroad, Chávez won four consecutive presidential elections and his party captured the majority of seats in the legislature and in the judiciary. On December 9, 2012, Chávez appeared on national television to give his final public speech before leaving for Cuba for cancer treatment. Surrounded by a group of Chavista loyalists, Chávez reaffirmed his grand vision of Bolivarian socialism (also known as 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism); demanded unity among nationalist parties, the military, and the people; and called on the populace to support Nicolás Maduro, his hand-picked successor (Ministerio del Poder Popular del Despacho de la Presidencia y Seguimiento de la Gestión de Gobierno, 2017). By the time of his death in March 2013, Chávez had set a precedent as Latin America's most frequently elected president.

Many controversies surround the Chávez regime. His supporters claim that the Bolivarian government was a creative experiment of radical and participatory democracy led by Chávez, the modern-day Robin Hood. In sharp contrast, critics argue that the regime represents a new form of authoritarianism, combining elements of populism, nationalism, and political hierarchy. In the realm of socioeconomic performance, Chavistas believe that 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism was an essential cause of improvements in poverty reduction, while opponents associate Chávez's radical policies

with rampant crime, hyperinflation, and mismanagement of state resources. So, how should one assess the Chávez regime? Did it sway towards a brutal dictatorship or did it resemble a new form of emancipatory democracy? Given a regional trend of democratization and Venezuela's democratic past, why and how did Hugo Chávez move in the opposite direction and how could he cling to supreme power for over a decade?

The objective of my investigation was to seek answers for these thorny puzzles by systematically assessing Venezuela's political regime under Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) to address two research questions: One, did Venezuela experience a turn from democracy to autocracy under Chávez? Two, what were the conditions that allowed Chávez to successfully capture and sustain power? Two central tasks were entailed in my analysis. First, the regime's institutional features were compared to the previous Pacto de Punto Fijo regime and against theoretical yardsticks of democracy and authoritarianism. Second, both the historical contexts and political strategies were considered and explanations for Chávez's ascent and for his ability to hold onto political dominance are offered.

### *Study Outline*

Venezuela is an atypical case in Latin America in terms of political developments. For four decades between 1958 and 1998, when most of its neighbors were toiling in military dictatorships, it celebrated a democratic system in which free, fair elections were maintained. However, since the late 1990s—when many other Latin American nations transitioned to democratic rule—the Venezuelan democracy has suffered perilous setbacks. A populist leader, Hugo Chávez, occupied the national office and ruled by decree, marginalizing political and civic dissidents and spending large sums of petroleum earnings to garner political support. Economically, Venezuela under Chávez did not escape the boom-and-bust features of a petro-state that had overshadowed the country since the 1970s.

### Theoretical Debates

Generally speaking, three competing paradigms exist to conceptualize democracy. The procedural fashion is the dominant approach and defines democracy by its political processes. Emphasizing bedrock principles and

political leadership, this approach is rooted in classic works by Max Weber on plebiscitary leadership democracy and was further developed by Robert Dahl in his thesis of polyarchy, in which a highly democratized regime is characterized by three fundamental procedures, including citizens' freedom to form preferences and to voice them and to take actions accordingly (Eliaeson, 1998). Supporters of the substantive concept, inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Alexis de Tocqueville, treat democracy as a normative and ideological project. Instead of focusing on succinct measures to achieve democracy, scholars such as Welzel and Klingemann (2014) stress the importance of a dynamic, holistic process of democracy that rewards equality and contains emancipatory elements. Last but not least, constructivists such as Joseph M. Bessette (1997) (1980), Jürgen Habermas (1996), and Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2004), equate democracy with political decision-making that celebrates public deliberation (Bennett, 2004). The deliberative approach is mainly concerned with the necessary discourse to establish a democracy, with particular consideration of legitimacy and the common good (Cohen, 1989, p. 17).

Each paradigm has its merits and limitations. Both the substantive and deliberative approaches prescribe normative and empirical underpinnings for political democracy. Compared with the pragmatism that is enveloped in the procedural tradition, these two strands of thoughts are ontologically closer to the classic ideal of democratic rule by and for the people. However, ambitious undertakings to bring forth equality; liberty; and diversity; as required by substantive or deliberative processes, are more applicable to older democracies in North America and Western Europe. Venezuela first liberalized amidst the second wave of democratization following the end of World War II and its Puntofijismo regime lasted four decades, which may have been too short a time to allow for sufficient substantiation or deliberation to take hold. Henceforth, the procedural approach is most suitable to help determine the quality and degree of Venezuela's democratic period, as the primary standards for elections, forms of representation, accountability mechanisms, and institutional balances can be clearly identified.

Most academic works contend that Chávez's Venezuela was not a full democracy, but authors differ on where they would put the regime on the spectrum between democracy and authoritarianism. Scholars such as Coppedge in his *Explaining Democratic Deterioration* (2005) and Dahl—see especially *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (1971)—treat the Chávez regime as a partial democracy that, albeit restrictive and inefficient, still fulfilled the basic requirements of procedural democracy. Others, such as Bean

(2016) and Ciccariello-Maher (2016), characterize it as a radical, counter-hegemonic democracy. Another group, which includes Corrales and Penfold-Becerra—see especially *Dragon in the Tropics* (2015), Brewer-Carías (2010), and Ottaway (2002), classifies Chávez’s rule as autocratic or “semi-authoritarian.” Informed by these empirical studies on politics in modern Venezuela, my thesis contains theories about Venezuela’s political trajectory under Hugo Chávez that were created by checking the regime’s institutional features against accepted definitions of democracy and authoritarianism.

As a general consensus exists regarding the fact that Venezuela under Hugo Chávez drifted away from the liberal form of democracy, my thesis also includes an evaluation of the regime against theoretical concepts of authoritarianism. In a broad sense, an authoritarian regime is governed with informal rules by a small group of leaders whose legitimacy is derived from coercion or unfair elections and whose power is not subject to sufficient checks and balances (Van den Bosch, 2013; Vásquez, 2002). Political scientists have further subdivided the concept of authoritarianism into several types, such as electoral authoritarianism (Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010), competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2002), bureaucratic authoritarianism (O’Donnell, 1979), and soft authoritarianism (Gillingham & Smith, 2014). Different from totalitarianism and other traditional, illiberal dictatorships, these new forms of authoritarianism describe regimes that allow limited degrees of political competition but tilt the playing field in favor of the ruling party.

## Research Objectives

By examining the political institutions, the economic structures, the social relationships, and the role of charismatic leadership during the Chávez era in both comparative and single-case, idiosyncratic manners, my study includes an attempt to place the regime precisely on the spectrum between the prototypes of democracy and authoritarianism. Via historical comparison, my work investigated the characteristics of Venezuela’s political institutions under the Chávez regime and the Pacto de Punto Fijo time as well as during the pre-1958 military dictatorships, and this was done with attention to sociopolitical and macroeconomic factors.

The second main objective of this study was to probe a host of factors that can potentially explain Venezuela’s extraordinary shift from Puntofijismo to Chavismo. While literature on the determinants of democratization