
PUNTOS DE VISTA



- Venezuela: An Example of a Stable Dictatorship in Latin America.
- De qué hablo cuando hablo de elecciones presidenciales colombianas del 2022.

Venezuela: An Example of a Stable Dictatorship in Latin America

Alejandro Díaz Castro¹
a.castro@uea.ac.uk

Recibido el 08/11/2022
Aprobado el 16/06/2023

Cómo citar este artículo:
Díaz, A. (2022). Venezuela: An Example of a Stable Dictatorship in Latin America. *Trans-Pasando Fronteras*, (20).
<https://doi.org/10.18046/retf.i20.5802>

¹Profesional en Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano y candidato a Master en University of East Anglia

Abstract

Abstract: The following article aims to analyze the current situation in Venezuela, after a bibliographical review on this topic. Thus, this essay will focus on the five stages a government faces when it loses legitimacy, as described by Samuel Huntington in his book *Democracy's third wave*. Furthermore, after analyzing them, it will draw some arguments explaining why Venezuela has not made a U-turn into democracy yet, to end with a conclusion.

Key Words: Lilliberal democracy, electoral democracy, Venezuela.

Introduction and Political Context

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, democracy has been facing what was called by John Ikenberry the "crisis of success. The absence of a common existential threat undermined cohesion within the liberal West, creating the conditions for fragmentation and the rise of different regimes legitimized by the electoral democracy" (Way, 2022. pp 8, 9). From this perspective, this research examines the stability of dictatorships using Venezuela as a case study. To do this, the essay will draw on Samuel Huntington's ideas regarding the mechanism used throughout history to maintain power. Furthermore, it will analyze some concepts, such as electoral democracy and illiberal democracy.

Before starting the analysis, it is important to note that Venezuela's recent political history determines the origins of the current economic and political crisis. First, Hugo Chavez (1954-2013) came to power in 1998 with the Fifth Movement Republic party (MVR) (Maya, 2014) in the context of a series of stunning electoral victories during the economic chaos and the political immobility that characterized Venezuela in the past decade. After being elected, he was president for fourteen years, from 1999 until the day of his death in 2013. His political ideology continued with his successor, Nicolás Maduro, and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Due to Chavez's support when he was still alive, Maduro gained the votes of the majority of Venezuelan citizen. Since then, PSUV, born through the coalition of the MVR and the minoritarians that support the Chavismo ideology, has been in power alongside Nicolás Maduro. In other words, Venezuela has had just one political party and two presidents, with the same ideology, in power for twenty-three years.

Literature review and method

This essay aims to contribute to the debate on the current situation in Venezuela, identifying some helpful information written by academics on this topic: Samuel Huntington's third-wave theory of democratization and the most recent publications made by scholars such as Svensson (2019), Maya (2014), Calderón (2015), to have an up-to-date understanding of the situation in the country. In addition, this research will focus on the five stages a government faces when it loses legitimacy, as described by Samuel Huntington (1991). How have these stages occurred in this country since Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro got into power? Finally, the central question in this essay is the following: Why are some dictatorships more stable than others?

Huntington's theory and Venezuela's analysis.

The dissemination of the anti-imperialist narrative in Venezuela was one of the driving forces behind the decision of many Venezuelans to support Chavez's presidential political project. Also, some countries in Latin America joined the Chavista ideological movement, organizations, and alliances associated with Hugo Chavez, such as the Petrocaribe, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) (Calderón, 2015). For instance, Petrocaribe is an organization through which Venezuela offers oil supplies to other countries in favorable financial terms. The ALBA regional integration block prioritized, as its agenda, social welfare, bartering, and mutual economic assistance. Similarly, there is UNASUR, which was supposed to act as a consensus mechanism for political dialogue in South America. The combination of an anti-imperialist narrative and the strengthening of

Chavez-affiliated institutions resulted in a scenario that the German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, calls "the flip side of mutual interest is mutual pain" (Way, 2022, p. 8). This observation refers to the fact that even if Venezuela faces a legitimacy crisis in the future, it is likely that an important number of Member States or beneficiaries of the organizations that were affiliated with the Chavista movement at the moment of joining are forced to remain loyal to both Venezuela as a State and its Chavista's president. This is why a dictatorship like Venezuela can be more stable sometimes than at others.

This essay refers to illiberal democracy as "a description of a State that holds regular and more or less legitimate elections but, at the same time, violates the civil liberties of its citizens", as Venezuela did with the students' protest and the press persecution (Zakaria, 1997, p.22). In addition, it is worth noting here that, according to Huntington, illiberal democratic regimes can maintain their power by becoming repressive. This was precisely the strategy that the Venezuelan government used against students and independent mass media, closing thirty-three radio stations and one television channel, accusing them of not meeting the government-imposed requirements to operate (Segal, 2013). These actions are one of the key characteristics of illiberal democracies where "governments have not arrested journalists but rather have muzzled them" (Way, 2022, p. 6). In addition to silencing the voices of opposition, the government created a television channel, 'Telesur', to support the regime. However, having an official channel to provide media support to the regime is another point in favor of a stable dictatorship due to the collective imagination created through the controlled narrative of the government.

The third stage in the evolution of the strategy of an authoritarian State in crisis is to provoke an external conflict to restore legitimacy by appealing to nationalism (Huntington, 1991). Venezuela made a bid to do so, but, in the end, the attempt failed. In particular, when he was still alive, Chavez and, after his death, Nicolás Maduro threatened Colombia with an external conflict for a long time, such as ordering, in 2009, the Venezuelan army to be ready for a war with Colombia. However, Colombia never reacted violently to these actions. Instead, as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, Bogotá took the threat to the United Nations Security Council, and Venezuela suffered a sensible diplomatic defeat. Although the actions by Venezuela did not escalate into an external conflict, they turned out to help divert attention from Venezuela's internal political crisis and facilitated the regime's task of remaining in power without actually going to war.

The fourth stage of Huntington's classification is to simulate the characteristics of a democracy. In this context, it is important to differentiate between the policy of a true working electoral democracy and the Venezuelan government's attempts to adopt the façade of an electoral democracy. According to Huntington, electoral democracy is the political regime that meets the following criteria:

"Elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable *sine qua non*. Governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, short-sighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests and incapable of adopting policies demanded by the public good.

These qualities make such governments undesirable, but they do not make them undemocratic." (Huntington 1993 cited in Zakaria, 1997, pp. 24-25)

Between 1998 and 2018, Venezuela witnessed five presidential elections in Venezuela. Three of them were won by Hugo Chavez and two by Nicolás Maduro. These elections sought to legitimize the Venezuelan government. Yet, only twenty-three governments worldwide recognized Venezuelan elections as "open, free, and fair" (Gómez Ramírez, 2020). For the rest of the world, the rule of law in Venezuela is in question, as well as the provision of civil and political liberties (Nyysönen & Metsälä, 2020). This is because many irregularities in Venezuela's elections, such as identity theft, manipulation of the process by the loyalist electoral council, and intimidation, among other undemocratic tactics (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela>) have been detected. In other words, the elections in Venezuela evidenced the implementation of a strategy to legitimize an authoritarian rule, allowing the only political party in Venezuela to remain in paramount political power for twenty-three years.

Finally, the last stage described by Huntington has to do with the abolition of the authoritarian government and making a U-turn to democracy. Unfortunately, so far, this has not been the case in Venezuela. One of the reasons behind this scenario is external factors, including the assistance of other authoritarian governments such as trade and investments offered by Russia, China, and Türkiye. In addition, the Chavista government of Venezuela also benefited from the diplomatic support of other authoritarian governments (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022).

Another factor is what Max Weber called charismatic authority (Weber, 1965) Hugo Chavez was one of the most charismatic leaders in recent Latin America's history. In the past, there had been leaders in Latin America who created political and ideological movements under their last names such as Castro in Cuba and Peron in Argentina, but the most recent one is the Chavismo. In this context, even though Nicolás Maduro is not as charismatic as Hugo Chavez, he did take advantage of the Chavismo movement to remain in power, appealing to his ideology and the fact that Chavez chose him to be his successor.

Finally, there is a peculiar role of the oil sector in Venezuela since Venezuela's president does not need popular support to obtain economic resources. The current president can stay in power using oil money to finance political programs, guaranteeing him to continue as president for at least another two electoral periods.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that some dictatorships are more stable than others for different reasons. Firstly, if the country has natural resources, it makes it attractive to other countries who might offer political support in exchange for tangible benefits, especially if there are international in the case of Venezuela. Secondly, when the government is repressive and controls the mass media by having, for instance, its own television channel such as Telesur in Venezuela, to disseminate news and propaganda in favor of the government, alternative narratives are silenced and reality is obscured, strengthening dictatorial control. Third, the constant threat of an external conflict distracts attention from internal matters, which prolongs the dictatorship. Finally, a

dictatorship can gain some degree of legitimacy by orchestrating elections, which are used by allies in the diplomatic and economic field to justify their links to the authoritarian regime in question.

Bibliography

Calderón Carlota Salazar. (2015). Cambio y orden social en Venezuela, Durante el "Chavismo" (thesis). Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz Announces Paradigm Change in Response to Ukraine Invasion," dw.com, 27 February 2022.

Gómez Ramírez, E. (2020) Controversial legislative elections in Venezuela - european parliament, Controversial legislative elections in Venezuela. European Parliament. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659427/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)659427_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659427/EPRS_BRI(2020)659427_EN.pdf) (Accessed: October 27, 2022).

Huntington, S. P. (1991). Democracy's third wave. *Journal of Democracy*, 2(2), 12–34. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0016>

Maya, M. L. (2014). Venezuela: The Political Crisis of Post-Chavismo. *Social Justice*, 40(4 (134)), 68–87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24361611>

Nyysönen, H., & Metsälä, J. (2020). Liberal democracy and its current illiberal critique: The emperor's new clothes? *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73(2), 273–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1815654>

Repucci, S., & Slipowitz, A. (2022). Authoritarians on offense. *Journal of Democracy*, 33(2), 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0017>

Sagarzazu, I., & Thies, C. G. (2018). The foreign policy rhetoric of populism: Chávez, oil, and anti-imperialism. *Political Research Quarterly*, 72(1), 205–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912918784212>

Segal, A. (2013). Totalitarianism, dictatorship and authoritarianism: Definitions and re-definitions. *Government and Public Management*, 91–127.

Svensson, E. (2019). New authoritarianism in Venezuela during Maduro – a case study on civil and political rights violations (thesis). (A. Persson, Ed.). Linnaeus University, Swedish.

Way, L., 2022. The Rebirth of the Liberal World Order?. *Journal of Democracy*, 33(2), pp.5-17.

Weber, M. (1965) *in Politics as a vocation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Zakaria, F. (1997) 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, 76, 6