

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
HELM'S SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

A Case Study: Socialism in Venezuela

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Introduction

Venezuela has historically been an example of a successful democracy and a thriving economy compared to neighboring countries in South America. This success rapidly changed after an economic downturn, worsened by corruption and socialism. Following a series of

military uprisings in the 1990s, Venezuela succumbed to socialism under the leadership of Hugo Chavez. The current president, Nicolas Maduro, carried out the socialist ideals of Chavez and progressed the instability of the nation through corruption and organized crime. Political and economic situations worsened, giving way to the influence of dangerous terrorist groups such as FLN, FARC, and Hezbollah. Extreme poverty led to chaotic desperation of Venezuelan citizens, who were forced to scramble for food and basic supplies during massive shortages. Where chaos abounds, terrorism thrives. Multiple terrorist groups used the decline of Venezuela to advance terrorist ideologies and turn Venezuela into a criminal state that funnels terrorist funding through the government. The combination of the rise of socialism and economic collapse has led to an increasingly vulnerable state, allowing Iran to use the nation as a foothold for terrorism and Hezbollah that is rapidly spreading throughout the entirety of South America, threatening the stability and security of the United States. As evident in Venezuela, socialism is an ineffective government structure as it weakens a nation economically and makes a nation susceptible to terrorism and political instability.

Tenets of Socialism

It is difficult to define socialism as it is and evolving and changing government structure.¹ There is, however, one aspect of socialism that has consistently been evident in many forms of socialism: the idea that there should be “social ownership and control of the economy”.² Socialism relies on a central economy and pushes for government control over most realms of society. Socialism discourages competition, thereby slowing domestic economic growth and innovation. Socialism is a flawed political structure and will always pose significant economic problems. This government structure has historically proved unsuccessful, and Venezuela is a clear example of socialism expediting the social and economic decline of a formerly prosperous nation.

Escalation to Socialism in Venezuela

Venezuela is a country rich with oil reserves, setting it apart from its South American counterparts. The country was also unique in Latin America, as during the late 20th century it was the most apparently stable nation and operated under a supposed democracy, contrasting the harsh dictatorships prevalent throughout Central America. Venezuela was an example to many nations, with a seemingly stable political and economic system and was considered a “model democracy in Latin America” until the 1990s and a “most unlikely place for a radical social revolution.”³ From the outside, the nation appeared to meet all the requirements for political success: “regular multi-party elections, freedom of speech and organization, two dominant parties alternating in office, a rudimentary welfare state and a relatively stable economy.”⁴ While Venezuela exhibited the traits of a democracy, the nation only had a democracy in comparison to the rest of Latin America. The “democracy” in Venezuela was always a limited democracy, with

¹ Donald F. Busky, *Democratic Socialism: A Global Survey*, (United Kingdom: Praeger, 2000).

² Donald F. Busky, *Democratic Socialism: A Global Survey*, (United Kingdom: Praeger, 2000).

³ D.L. Raby, *Democracy and Revolution : Latin America and Socialism Today*, (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

⁴ Ibid.

stifled human rights.⁵ Although the democracy was flawed, Venezuela had a successful government and economy in comparative measures.

In addition to a semi-functional democracy, Venezuela possessed the strongest oil economy in the region. Following the end of Venezuela's dictatorship in 1958 until the end of the "oil boom" in 1978, the nation expected to continue on the successful trajectory join the developed world and emerge as the most prosperous nation in Latin America.⁶ The faith in democracy vanished when this hopeful economic goal was not met, and the time period from 1979-1999 proved to be a "bitter disappointment" to most citizens.⁷

The economy of Venezuela historically thrived in the early 20th century, as the oil in Venezuela was discovered prior to the oil reserves in the Middle East.⁸ The vast natural oil resources, however, were heavily relied on for a large percentage of economic revenue. Venezuela's oil industry exhibited the "Dutch disease," which infers that the rapid growth of one independent portion of the economy will "produce problems in other sectors."⁹ Venezuela has rich oil reserves, but overfocused the economy solely on oil, leading to the decline of economic counterparts such as industrialization and agricultural revenue.

The sheer dependence on oil for economic success set the nation up for an economy crash. This economic posture led to a vulnerable state of the country politically and economically. In fact, following the end of the oil boom in 1978, poverty sharply increased throughout the nation. Venezuela had the highest rate of poverty growth in Latin America from 1980 to 1996, with a poverty rate of 18% of the population in 1980 to over 65% in 1996.¹⁰ This economic catastrophe caused the nation to turn against the democratic institution as the government failed them by neglecting healthy economic values. While the democratic institution was ultimately responsible for the economic downturn, turning to socialism was not a wise solution to the problem.

The vast economic frustration gave rise to extreme political parties and eventually led to the election of Hugo Chavez, who supported implementing 21st century socialism. The success of Venezuela's democracy and oil economy began to decline following the end of the oil boom in 1978, and eventually crashed under the leadership and socialist regime of Chavez. The nation succumbed to socialism because of the state of economic disappointment at the time Chavez was running for office.

Hugo Chavez

⁵ Brian F. Crisp, *Democratic Institutional Design: the Powers and Incentives of Venezuelan Politicians and Interest Groups*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁶ Wilpert, "Chavez's Venezuela and 21st Century Socialism."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wilpert, "Chavez's Venezuela and 21st Century Socialism."

Hugo Chavez was a controversial and extreme political figure that won the presidency by an overwhelming margin, receiving 56% of the votes.¹¹ Chavez ran as a complete outsider and advocated for 21st century socialism. Chavez, however, did not define the bounds or conditions of his socialist ideals. Instead, he glossed over a vague explanation of his version of socialism and appealed to the emotions of the Venezuelan people.¹² Chavez promised change through “the transformation of the economic model, increasing cooperativism, collective property, the submission of private property to the social interest and to the general interest.”¹³ He also made strong claims about the connection between Christianity and socialism, claiming that “Christ was the world’s first socialist.”¹⁴ His appeals to the pathos in his speech caused the Venezuelan public to quickly relate to and trust Chavez. “Given the foregoing explanations for the decline of Venezuelan pacted democracy,” an outsider like Chavez promising to “overhaul Venezuela’s corrupt political system” appealed to the nation.¹⁵

Chavez was a poor military man that came from humble beginnings. His background allowed him to relate and allure the majority of Venezuelans, as many Venezuelans were living in poverty. In fact, lower class military men were the demographic that was repeatedly attempting a coup on the former democratic government and was ready for a change towards a better economy and government. At a critical time, Chavez “took a giant step towards winning the leadership” through embodying the symbol of the “daily struggle of all poor Venezuelans.”¹⁶ Chavez stepped into an escalating state of disappointment in Venezuela and promised change, unity, and prosperity.

Rather, his presidency “provoked deep divisions, or rather exposed divisions that had already existed.”¹⁷ Chavez’ initial momentum and popularity quickly faded when he introduced 49 new laws in accordance with socialism that completely overstepped the bounds of the former beacon of democracy in Latin America.¹⁸ When elected, Chavez began to implement far-reaching changes to the entire Venezuelan government. His extreme changes were able to pass and come to fruition as “by the end of 2000, Chavez had consolidated his control over the country’s executive, with his supporters controlling the other four branches of government: the judiciary,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Barry Cannon, *Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution Populism and Democracy in a Globalised Age*, (Oxford: Manchester University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Wilpert, “Chavez’s Venezuela and 21st Century Socialism.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mike Gonzalez, “Introduction: A Man for Difficult Times.” In *Hugo Chavez: Socialist for the Twenty-first Century*, 1-8, (London: Pluto Press, 2014).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Wilpert, “Chavez’s Venezuela and 21st Century Socialism.”

the legislature, the electoral power, and the “moral” power.”¹⁹ Chavez eventually died in 2013, and was succeeded by a corrupt and power hungry socialist: Nicolas Maduro.

Nicolas Maduro

Nicolas Maduro took over as the president of Venezuela in 2013, after the death of Chavez. Maduro was chosen as vice president during the presidency of Chavez, and was expected to succeed Chavez. Maduro continued and deepened Chavez’ socialist ideologies, but lacked the charisma and oil revenue that Chavez possessed. In 2015, oil prices dropped significantly which accelerated a declining economy and “caused subsidies for food and social programs to dwindle.”²⁰ Due to the “declining petroleum output, high production costs, debt service obligations, an accumulation of adverse legal judgments from past expropriations,” the economy is in a disastrous state with massive amounts of debt.²¹ This has led to “increasing reluctance of creditors,” including China and Russia who are politically supportive of Venezuela’s socialist government.²²

Maduro escalated an already unstable situation and “accentuated the authoritarian and patrimonial tendencies already present in Chávez’s governments.”²³ Additionally, Maduro worsened corruption by working “together with his relatives and close friends as well as with military colleagues of Chávez, outside the rule of law, making use of public goods for the benefit of his private interests.”²⁴ Any remnants of democracy were utterly destroyed under Maduro, with a complete absence of checks and balances. This corruption led to the emergence of a criminal state, fostered by organized crime groups encouraged by Maduro. It is difficult to “anticipate when or how the Maduro regime in Venezuela will collapse, yet it is clear that its current course is both economically and politically unsustainable.”²⁵ The effects of the nation under Maduro’s socialist regime have destroyed an already declining country.

Economic and Social Effects of Socialism in Venezuela

Prior to Hugo Chavez, Venezuela was well known for one thing: oil. Venezuela was the fifth largest petroleum producer in the world, and the third largest exporter of oil to the United States.²⁶ Venezuela’s oil reserves are both the best and worst factor of the Venezuelan economy. The economy in Venezuela is centered around the oil industry and is over-reliant on oil prices for domestic economic prosperity. If oil prices decrease, the economy in Venezuela crashes.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Xina M. Uhl and Jesse Jarno, *Socialism*, (New York, NY: Rosen Publishing Group, 2019).

²¹ Evan Ellis, “The Collapse of Venezuela and Its Impact on the Region,” (The Professional Journal of the U.S. Army, July 2017).

²² Ibid.

²³ Margarita López Maya, “Populism, 21st-Century Socialism and Corruption in Venezuela,” (Thesis Eleven 149, no. 1, December 2018).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ellis, “The Collapse of Venezuela and Its Impact on the Region.”

²⁶ Raby, *Democracy and Revolution : Latin America and Socialism Today*.

While the oil economy was unhealthy, it was the implementation of socialism in Venezuela ultimately destroyed the economy and political infrastructure of the nation. Socialism transformed an example nation into arguably the most unstable nation in all of Latin America. Out of Venezuela's 32 million people, an estimated 1.5 million people fled the country "since the government of Hugo Chavez came to power in 1999."²⁷ One of the main reasons for leaving the country other than crime and political instability was the extreme downturn of the economy. Maduro instituted destructive government policies over the economy including "expropriations, price controls, and currency controls, in combination with rampant corruption and mismanagement in government enterprises, have progressively eliminated the capacity of the Venezuelan economy to produce even the most basic goods required by the people of the country to survive."²⁸

The reliance on a central economy through socialist economic policy paired with government corruption and the plummeting oil economy has led to widespread scarcity. Venezuela is unable to produce needed goods domestically, and does not have enough money to import goods either. As a result, "store shelves are empty," and a common citizen spends "significant portions of their day seeking food and other necessities."²⁹ Maduro has attempted to solve the food shortages by tasking the military with distributing food rations. The military in Venezuela operates in corruption and only distributes food to themselves or citizens in support of the Maduro regime.³⁰ The Maduro regime has demonstrated determination to maintain power and control at any costs, and disrespects constitutional processes.³¹

Crime and South American Terrorist Groups in Venezuela

Venezuela has always had issues with violence and crime, typical of Latin American countries.³² However, there was a dramatic increase in violence and a rise of terrorist groups following the election of Hugo Chavez in 1999. In fact, Chavez was immediately in contact with several terrorist groups right after he took office. These groups included the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), a "Marxist insurgency that has been fighting a war against the Columbian government since 1964" and the National Liberation Army (FLN), which is a smaller but similar minded group.³³ Chavez vocally defends the FARC and has consistently lobbied for the groups to be removed from international terrorist organization lists.³⁴ The facilitation of terrorism through the government was so severe, that in 2008, a handful of United

²⁷ Ellis, "The Collapse of Venezuela and Its Impact on the Region."

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jesús Manuel Ares Mújica. *The Dramatic Increase of Violent Crime in Venezuela since 1999: The Relationship between Homicide and the Country's New Role in Drug Trafficking*. (Institut Barcelona D'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI), 2015).

³³ Sean Goforth, "Axis of Unity Venezuela, Iran & the Threat to America," (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012).

³⁴ Goforth, "Axis of Unity Venezuela, Iran & the Threat to America."

States congressmen called for Venezuela to be labeled as a “state sponsor” of terrorism.³⁵ This label was never created, as it would necessitate trade sanctions to the source of 10 percent of American oil, and “needlessly feed tensions” between Colombia and Venezuela.³⁶

In addition to organized terrorism through the government, the internal crime rate skyrocketed under the Chavez regime. The homicide rate increased by 63.22% from 2000 to 2012, and is still steadily increasing under Maduro’s criminal state.³⁷ Venezuela currently has the second highest homicide rate worldwide.³⁸ Venezuela has responded to criminal activity with militarized policies, which in turn, has led to the highest rate of civilians killed by military officials in all of Latin America.³⁹ The repression of violence from the military and police has generated far more violence within the nation. Furthermore, after the election of Maduro, crime has become increasingly rampant. Maduro encourages and facilitated organized crime intertwined with the government, military, and police. This uptake in crime and corruption has made common Venezuelans live in constant fear and danger, and “people avoid being out of their homes past 6:00 P.M.”⁴⁰

Some argue that the vast issues in Venezuela are not principally political or economic in nature, but are best described as a “criminal act” that involved the “the capture and systematic looting of a state, achieved by first capturing its institutions through mass mobilization and bureaucratic machinations, then increasing control of the state through military force.”⁴¹ The criminalization of Venezuela has “become apparent to the nation’s citizens” since Maduro has taken office and amped up the ideals of 21st century socialism.⁴²

Venezuela-Iran partnership

In addition to Chavez reaching out to neighboring terrorist groups, Iran has won favor with Venezuela through large aid packages, and the nation has become a strong foothold for wide-reaching terrorist groups such as Hezbollah.⁴³ Hezbollah has a large following worldwide, and operates in criminal-infested pockets throughout various nations. Venezuela was an

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Goforth, “Axis of Unity Venezuela, Iran & the Threat to America.”

³⁷ Mújica, *The Dramatic Increase of Violent Crime in Venezuela since 1999: The Relationship between Homicide and the Country’s New Role in Drug Trafficking.*

³⁸ Galavís, “Rule of Law Crisis, Militarization of Citizen Security, and Effects on Human Rights in Venezuela.”

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ellis, “The Collapse of Venezuela and Its Impact on the Region.”

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ellis, “The Collapse of Venezuela and Its Impact on the Region.”

admirable location for terrorism and Hezbollah as it is characterized by instability, crime, and anti-American political sentiments.

Following the attacks on 9/11, Iran found itself in a vulnerable position, as the United States sat as “bookends” on its borders, fighting the war on terror in both Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴⁴ Iran and Venezuela were both in desperate need of allies, as both nations were friendless with their self-proclaimed revolutionary governments. Brought together by “anti-American fervor,” Iran and Venezuela formed an “axis of unity” in 2007, so each country “did not need the United States to survive.”⁴⁵ This partnership is incredibly dangerous to the United States for several reasons. First, the common ground in the alliance is the hatred of American ideologies and Iran supports vehemently anti-American terrorist groups in Venezuela. Second, the “axis of unity” also threatens the security of Colombia and Israel, which are both “key U.S. allies that are located on the front lines of the Western security blanket” and weakens the “effectiveness of UN and Western-backed sanctions against Iran.”⁴⁶ Lastly, the partnership is troubling because Iran and Venezuela could easily leverage oil reserves for political and economic gain.

The Iranian partnership has a direct correlation with the increase of terrorist groups in Venezuela. Iran is heavily involved with Hezbollah, which has an increasing and notable presence in Venezuela. Iran uses Venezuela as its main operating base within South America for terrorist advance.⁴⁷ This partnership is highly concerning and jeopardizes Western security. Furthermore, the support of terrorism and extreme socialist ideals in Venezuela are not only encouraged by Iran, but also “receives critical political and security support from Cuba, Russia, and Turkey.”⁴⁸ This foreign support is vital for the advancement of terrorist groups in Venezuela.

Influence of Hezbollah in Venezuela

Hezbollah, arguably the most dangerous and advanced terrorist group in the world, has gained a substantial influence in South America and uses Venezuela as a hotbed for training and recruitment. While Hezbollah is of Lebanese origin, Iran “uses Hezbollah as an extension of its own power.”⁴⁹ This entanglement increases the danger of Hezbollah in the region, because if “the United States and Iran ever enter a war, South American members of Hezbollah plan to attack the United States.”⁵⁰ The combination of anti-American sentiments, Iranian support, and

⁴⁴ Goforth, “Axis of Unity Venezuela, Iran & the Threat to America.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Miryekta, “Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Area of South America.”

⁴⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, “Stabilizing Venezuela: Scenarios and Options.”

⁴⁹ White, “Terrorism and Homeland Security 6th Edition.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

geographical proximity to the United States proves the presence of Hezbollah in Venezuela to be highly dangerous to American interests and national security.

Impact on Surrounding Region

The increase in terrorism due to poverty and economic desperation is a vicious cycle. Extreme poverty as seen in Venezuela in the past two decades leads to a humanitarian crisis. This gives terrorist groups opportunities to exploit and demand violent control over Venezuelan citizens, leading to a refugee crisis. The refugee crisis, partially caused by the violent guerrilla groups in the nation has greatly affected all of South America, especially Colombia. Additionally, terrorist recruitment and violence has recently increased at the Tri-border area (the intersection of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina), which is a traditionally violent region. The tri-border region has become a hotbed for terrorism recruitment, especially for Hezbollah and Iranian terrorist groups.

Iran has had arguably the largest impact in influencing and supporting terrorism in South America. Iran has already carried out several terrorist attacks in South America. In 1992, Hezbollah “proxy bombed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires,” murdering 29 civilians.⁵¹ In 1994, “Iranian-backed terrorists detonated a car bomb outside the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) Jewish center in Buenos Aires, murdering eighty-five people.”⁵² Tehran claimed responsibility for both of these attacks and show no remorse or signs of ceasing an aggressive anti-American agenda. Through historical implication and public agendas, it is clear that Iran is opposed to democracy, the United States, and any entity or country that is in alignment with democratic ideals or the United States. Iran will continue to leverage terrorist power in South America until the United States intervenes and democracy is achieved and stabilized in Venezuela.

Implications for the United States

The collapse of Venezuela and spreading refugee crisis not only has implications for the bordering nations, but for the United States as well. The support of terrorist groups in Venezuela from nations such as China, Iran, and Russia make potential U.S. involvement complicated and risky. Furthermore, the United States should tread carefully on intervening in the situation to avoid imperial overstretch or failed nation-building. From a biblical viewpoint, it is the duty of Christians to defend the weak and needy. In Isaiah 1:17, God commands to “Learn to do right; seek justice...” (New International Bible, 2005). The United States leads the world in the direction of moral compass and social justice and the nation has a duty to intervene.

The question that policymakers and the U.S. government needs to ask is how should the United States seek justice? American military is not a wise option with Russian troops present in Venezuela, as a “U.S. military led operation would escalate geopolitical tensions.”⁵³ Christians are commanded to help the sick and needy, but overwhelming Venezuela with humanitarian support will only temporarily alleviate poverty. Solving the humanitarian crisis and unrest permanently is only possible through drastic internal political change.

The United States should apply aggressive political and economic pressure on Venezuela to encourage political change and promote democratic ideals. First, the United States could apply

⁵¹ Andrade, “Iran’s Advances in Latin America.”

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Council on Foreign Relations, “Stabilizing Venezuela: Scenarios and Options.”

democratic pressure by officially “declaring Venezuela a state sponsor of terrorism.”⁵⁴ Once Venezuela is declared a state-sponsor of terrorism, other economic pressures can be applied such as boycotting Venezuelan oil exports to the United States and placing select Venezuelan banks and affiliates on a sanctions list would provide economic pressure. In addition to applying democratic pressure to Venezuela, the United States should monitor Iranian activity closely in Latin America, specifically Panama, as Iran uses the country to funnel funds into the Latin American terrorist network.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Venezuela, a once prosperous nation, was ultimately destroyed by socialism. The political theory behind socialism accelerates inefficiency and economic decline. Venezuela was too reliant on oil for all economic prosperity, and when the oil prices declined worldwide, Venezuela’s economy plummeted. This economic downfall caused poverty rates to rise. The economic state of the nation made citizens turn against the current democratic institution, cornering the government in a vulnerable position that was susceptible to dramatic change. The military uprisings and coups eventually led to the election of Hugo Chavez, running on the principles of 21st century socialism and promising to change the old government system. Chavez accelerated the economic downturn and increased corruption and instability throughout the nation. Although Chavez was the focal point of government change in Venezuela, Maduro escalated the instability when he took office in 2019. The instability has invited terrorist groups such as Hezbollah to use Venezuela as a hotbed for training, recruitment, and violent crime. Venezuela always had internal political issues. The economic issues induced social uproar, which led to socialism. Socialism is inevitably flawed and will consistently worsen the state of a nation in economy, standard of living, and political stability.

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⁵⁴ Miryetka, “Hezbollah in the tri-Border area of South America.”

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