Desvelando la represión en Venezuela: Un legado de vigilancia y control estatal

Guest Author and Jillian C. York ⫶ 6-8 minutes ⫶ 9/18/2024

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This is part two of a series. Part one on surveillance and control around the July election is here.

Over the past decade, the government in Venezuela has meticulously constructed a framework of surveillance and repression, which has been repeatedly denounced by civil society and digital rights defenders in the country. This apparatus is built on a foundation of restricted access to information, censorship, harassment of journalists, and the closure of media outlets. The systematic use of surveillance technologies has created an intricate network of control.

Security forces have increasingly relied on digital tools to monitor citizens, frequently stopping people to check the content of their phones and detaining those whose devices contain anti-government material. The country's digital identification systems, Carnet de la Patria and Sistema Patria—established in 2016 and linked to social welfare programs—have also been weaponized against the population by linking access to essential services with affiliation to the governing party.

Censorship and internet filtering in Venezuela became omnipresent ahead of the recent election period. The government blocked access to media outlets, human rights organizations, and even VPNs— restricting access to critical information. Social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and WhatsApp were also targeted—and are expected to be regulated—with the government accusing these platforms of aiding opposition forces in organizing a "fascist coup d'état" and spreading "hate" while promoting a "civil war."

The blocking of these platforms not only limits free expression but also serves to isolate Venezuelans from the global community and their networks in the diaspora, a community of around 9 million people. The government's rhetoric, which labels dissent as "cyberfascism" or "terrorism," is part of a broader narrative that seeks to justify these repressive measures while maintaining a constant threat of censorship, further stifling dissent.

Moreover, there is a growing concern that the government's strategy could escalate to broader shutdowns of social media and communication platforms if street protests become harder to control, highlighting the lengths to which the regime is willing to go to maintain its grip on power.

Fear is another powerful tool that enhances the effectiveness of government control. Actions like mass arrests, often streamed online, and the public display of detainees create a chilling effect that silences dissent and fractures the social fabric. Economic coercion, combined with pervasive surveillance, fosters distrust and isolation—breaking down the networks of communication and trust that help Venezuelans access information and organize.

This deliberate strategy aims not just to suppress opposition but to dismantle the very connections that enable citizens to share information and mobilize for protests. The resulting fear, compounded by the difficulty in perceiving the full extent of digital repression, deepens self-censorship and isolation. This makes it harder to defend human rights and gain international support against the government's authoritarian practices.

Civil Society's Response

Despite the repressive environment, civil society in Venezuela continues to resist. Initiatives like Noticias Sin Filtro and El Bus TV have emerged as creative ways to bypass censorship and keep the public

informed. These efforts, alongside educational campaigns on digital security and the innovative use of artificial intelligence to spread verified information, demonstrate the resilience of Venezuelans in the face of authoritarianism. However, the challenges remain extensive.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and its Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (SRFOE) have condemned the institutional violence occurring in Venezuela, highlighting it as state terrorism. To be able to comprehend the full scope of this crisis it is paramount to understand that this repression is not just a series of isolated actions but a comprehensive and systematic effort that has been building for over 15 years. It combines elements of infrastructure (keeping essential services barely functional), blocking independent media, pervasive surveillance, fear-mongering, isolation, and legislative strategies designed to close civic space. With the recent approval of a law aimed at severely restricting the work of non-governmental organizations, the civic space in Venezuela faces its greatest challenge yet.

The fact that this repression occurs amid widespread human rights violations suggests that the government's next steps may involve an even harsher crackdown. The digital arm of government propaganda reaches far beyond Venezuela's borders, attempting to silence voices abroad and isolate the country from the global community.

The situation in Venezuela is dire, and the use of technology to facilitate political violence represents a significant threat to human rights and democratic norms. As the government continues to tighten its grip, the international community must speak out against these abuses and support efforts to protect digital rights and freedoms. The Venezuelan case is not just a national issue but a global one, illustrating the dangers of unchecked state power in the digital age.

However, this case also serves as a critical learning opportunity for the global community. It highlights the risks of digital authoritarianism and the ways in which governments can influence and reinforce each other's repressive strategies. At the same time, it underscores the importance of an organized and resilient civil society—in spite of so many challenges—as well as the power of a network of engaged actors both inside and outside the country.

These collective efforts offer opportunities to resist oppression, share knowledge, and build solidarity across borders. The lessons learned from Venezuela should inform global strategies to safeguard human rights and counter the spread of authoritarian practices in the digital era.

An open letter, organized by a group of Venezuelan digital and human rights defenders, calling for an end to technology-enabled political violence in Venezuela, has been published by Access Now and remains open for signatures.