

SECONDARY SCHOOLS' UNITED NATIONS
SYMPOSIUM 2016

Venezuelan National Assembly

Chairs:

Michelle D. Montilla

Jorge Luis Flores

Vice Chairs:

Isabel Albee

Leon Perez

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Venezuelan National Assembly

Dear delegates,

It is our pleasure to welcome you to SSUNS 2016's Venezuelan National Assembly. This committee will start on January 5th, 2016, following the parliamentary elections of December 6th, 2015 which resulted in a majority of members from the opposition occupying the assembly. As delegates in the National Assembly of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, you will face the challenge of developing a legislative structure that will help promote the establishment of a more sustainable economy, bring social cohesion and find solutions for the skyrocketing crime rates in the country. We are excited to see the innovative solutions and rich debate that each one of you will bring to this committee.

We have the honour of working alongside two remarkable vice-chairs, who will bring their experience to the table to make your experience an unforgettable one.

First, I would like to introduce Isabel Albee. Isabel is an International Development student at McGill with an interest in global perspectives and systems. Through McGill, she studied in Cuba in May of 2014. Since then, she has been back to the country five times to live, study, and work. In the past three summers, she has worked for the ONE Campaign, the Centre for Democracy in the Americas, and Engage Cuba.

Your second vice chair, Leon Perez, comes from Barranquilla, Colombia. This is his last semester at McGill as an undergraduate and he chose to spend a good amount of it working on this committee. Passionate about international politics and human rights, he decided to enrol in Honours Political Science and International Development. Coming from Colombia, he has acquired a good



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amount of knowledge of South America and has focused his degree on the region. He has participated in several MUN conferences in different positions, and has enjoyed every single one. Leon is excited to participate in SSUNS as one of your vice-chairs, since he loves political topics of debate and hopes that every delegate will learn from this experience to move aside from fixed positions and bring innovative solutions.

Our names are Michelle D. Montilla and Jorge Luis Flores, and we will be your co-chairs for this conference. Michelle is currently in the last semester of her Honours Political Science degree and International Development minor. She discovered Model UN in high school at the age of 15 and was an active member of debate clubs in both her high school and college years. She has participated in MUN conferences as delegate, committee director, vice-chair, and chair. As a political science student, passionate about world politics and a Venezuelan, the topics of discussion in this committee are extremely close to her heart. She wishes to learn from every input that you, the delegates, will bring to the table and to see you further develop your diplomatic skills from day 1 of the conference.

Your other co-chair, Jorge Luis Flores, is a second-year student in Microbiology and Immunology. Despite being in the Faculty of Science, Jorge has a deep interest for local and international politics and history. He is especially passionate about issues in Latin America. Born in Venezuela, Jorge moved to Montreal at age thirteen and started doing Model UN when he was seventeen, in his first year of CEGEP. He now has four years of MUN experience, having covered roles from delegate and staffer to crisis director. In his first chairing experience, Jorge is looking



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forward to hearing the wide range of innovative and creative ideas you will bring to the table to solve the issues afflicting the Venezuelan people.

The current complex and unstable situation of the country has brought much suffering upon Venezuelans. Across ideological lines, all have suffered from economic mismanagement and security issues. The political climate of Venezuela has also produced strong social polarization, which has made it difficult for the Venezuelan people to unite and demand the change they want. We encourage you to truly place yourself in the position of your assigned character, with all their beliefs and limits, in order to understand the complexity of this governmental institution and the difficulty that parliamentarians have in discussing change.

We look forward to meeting you,

Michelle Danelys Montilla & Jorge Luis Flores,

Co-Chairs, Venezuelan National Assembly



Introduction

The Venezuelan constitution and the National Assembly

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has had over 20 constitutions over the course of its 150-year history, owing this mainly to changes in territory and to the necessity of reforming political institutions over the years. The current constitution of Venezuela was authored in 1999 by a Constituent Assembly that was mandated by referendum and whose members were democratically elected¹. This was one of the main pillars of Chávez's revolution, as it ushered many changes to Venezuelan political society. Amongst them was the formation of the National Assembly, a new legislative body that merged the two chambers of the Republic's Congress, the chamber of deputies and the senate, into a unicameral legislative body².

The mandate of the National Assembly is mainly to draft laws and amendments to the constitution, to appoint committees to study certain issues, and to authorize budgets, treaties, and external missions involving the Venezuelan military³. Most of these procedures require a two-thirds majority to be passed. Although the Assembly is the highest legislative body in the country, it needs to be in agreement with the other governmental branches for laws to come into effect without roadblocks. For instance, after a draft law is passed in the National Assembly, it is then sent to the President of the Republic, currently Nicolás Maduro, who then has the opportunity to discuss it with his Ministers and change it before promulgating the law, but the deputies of the Assembly can

¹ Gregory Wilpert, "Venezuela's New Constitution," *Venezuelanalysis.com*, August 27, 2003, <http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/70>.

² Ibid.

³ Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, December 1999, art. 186-203.



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promulgate it themselves if the president fails to do so in the stipulated time⁴. The *Tribunal Supremo de Justicia* (TSJ), being the highest judicial authority in the country, also holds the last word where it pertains to the constitutionality of legislation.

Additionally, the Assembly has power to hold some members of the executive accountable. An example of this is the ability to remove Ministers and Vice-Presidents from office, should they show serious faults in the exercise of their functions. This motion requires a three-fifths majority⁵. Finally, the Assembly has the power to call a referendum to revoke the mandate of any publicly elected official, including the President. This is a complicated process that, in its final voting stage, requires an amount of voters equal or greater to the amount that elected the official to vote for the revoking motion⁶. Although some argue that revoking Maduro's presidency would help solve the political crisis in Venezuela, undertaking such a task would be a long-drawn political battle between the opposition and those loyal to Maduro's government, called Chavistas.

Current composition of the National Assembly

In the early 1990s, Venezuela was considered the third oldest and most stable democracy outside the advanced industrialized democracies, with the most stable party system of the region. However, 1998 marked the rise of the Bolivarian movement, which was followed by two decades of major national politics being dominated by the official party of the government, currently the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV). Their platform promises

⁴ Ibid., art. 214-216.

⁵ Ibid., art. 240-246.

⁶ Ibid., art. 72.



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to rescue the country from the current economic crisis, which they claim is produced by capitalist attacks from within and outside Venezuela. Their goal is to reassure the Venezuelan majority that the Bolivarian movement is the only way to complete the revolutionary project started by former president Hugo Chávez. This was accompanied by a gradual consolidation of power around President Chávez and an erosion of Venezuela's democratic institutions, according to some observers.

A decade of the opposition failing to mount a significant challenge to the Bolivarian movement exposed the people's dissatisfaction with the previous political system. However, in 2008, the opposition managed to unify itself under an umbrella party called *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD), producing a more unified voice for Venezuelan dissent. Their promise is to improve the democratic system, protect human rights, and end the division that characterizes the Venezuelan society. Moreover, their goal is to balance up the executive power and gradually demonstrate that this new political organization is a sustainable, viable, and appropriate alternative to the Bolivarian regime. After years of hard work, it seems this coalition has finally brought the opposition back in the game. Historic elections brought an astounding majority of opposition members to the National Assembly, with a seat count of 109 seats out of the total 167, giving them the two-thirds majority necessary to pass laws. This demonstrates the power of a unified opposition, which could potentially bring a wave of political and social change. Only the actions of the National Assembly will dictate if a majority of Venezuelans will believe again on party representation, or if they are relics of the last century.

Topic 1: Safety and Security in Venezuela

Background

Crime and safety in Venezuela are a pressing and complicated problem, compounded by rising inequality levels, the presence of drug and gang violence, and a government which refuses to recognize the severity of violence in the nation. The problem is threefold: Venezuela has both the most violent cities in the world with the highest homicide rates in Latin America; the government of Venezuela has been accused of perpetrating violence against civilians; and accurate data on violence is disputed. Freedom House, an American NGO that advocates for political rights and free press around the world, gave Venezuela 5 out of 7 (7 being the worst) on its



By Irene Ramirez. "Death and Danger in Venezuela," from stashmedia.tv.

freedom rating, civil liberties and political rights, stating that the country was "convulsed in 2014 by widespread protests that featured violence on the part of both police and demonstrators"⁷.

The Venezuelan NGO Venezuelan Violence Observatory (VVO), which tracks violence in Venezuela, published a 2015 report stating that Venezuela had over 27,875 homicides in 2015, which

⁷ "Venezuela Country Report," *Freedom House*, 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/venezuela>.



is a rate of 90 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, up from 82 per 100,00 in 2014⁸ meaning that the homicide rate rose dramatically in a single year. The unfolding economic and oil crisis could be to blame. In Caracas, the capital and largest city, “the rate is even higher, with a Security Justice and Peace report reflecting a rate 115 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants”⁹. Four Venezuelan cities are among the top 25 most violent cities in the world: Caracas is 2nd, with a rate of 115 per 100,000; Valencia’s is 7th, with a rate of 71 per 100,000; Ciudad Guyana is 12th, with a rate of 62 per 100,000; and Barquisimeto’s is 21st, with a rate of 46 per 100,000¹⁰. No neighbourhood is immune, no government official too powerful. In 2015 “even relatively affluent residential Caracas neighbourhoods in Chacao, Baruta, and El Hatillo (where many government leaders, professionals, businesspeople, and foreign diplomats reside) saw regular incidents of kidnapping, home invasion, and armed robbery”¹¹. Safety and security issues impact all Venezuelans, rich poor, white, black, male, female, and state and non-state.

Organized crime and drug violence

Additionally, the struggle with drug violence in northern Latin America continues to harm Venezuela today. Venezuela shares a border with Colombia, where the guerrilla groups Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) have a

⁸ RISC, “Venezuela 2016 Crime & Safety Report,” *Bureau of Diplomatic Security*, Web document, February 12, 2016, <https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=19065>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.



massive and influential presence. Kidnapping, smuggling, homicides, and corruption are all part of the problems Venezuela must deal with at the border, as it is now “one of the biggest drug-transit countries in the region”¹². This demands an international counter-narcotic effort and cooperation in Venezuela – and a culture in which national and international laws are respected instead of disregarded – in order to begin to ameliorate the problem. There is also evidence of “involvement in the drug trade by some high-level Venezuelan government officials”¹³.

A culture of lawlessness, violence, drugs, and gangs is not new to Latin America – murder rates have been rising exponentially since 1998 in various countries of the continent. And with Venezuela’s recent economic crisis, violence in the country has only worsened. Multiple NGO’s have reported that 2015 was one of Venezuela’s deadliest years on record. Multiple factors are asserted to have been at play, amongst them the fact that “with the change of political regime in 1999 and the initiation of the Bolivarian Revolution, a period of transformation and political conflict began, marked by a further increase in the number and rate of violent deaths” revealing an increase in the homicide rate from 25 per 100,000 in 1999 to 44 per 100,000 in 2003¹⁴.

Issues of drug and gang violence are intensified in the poorest areas of Venezuela, known as *barrios*, which “frequently provide safe haven for criminal gangs that utilize these neighbourhoods as bases of operations”¹⁵. As a result, a “majority of violent crime in Caracas – and Venezuela in general

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gareth A. Jones and Dennis Rodgers, *Youth violence in Latin America: gangs and juvenile justice in perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) pp. 84–85.

¹⁵ RISC, “Venezuela 2016 Crime & Safety Report.”

– occurs in barrios, and criminal ‘ownership’ of some of these neighbourhoods often prevents police from entering”¹⁶. A lack of police power and accountability in barrios – due to high levels of power and coordination of violent gangs – is likely at fault. Additionally, “high levels of vehicle ownership and the negligible cost of fuel permit criminals the mobility to operate more widely in affluent areas so that wealthier victims may be targeted”¹⁷.

The role of police bodies and civil unrest

The Venezuelan police force is simply unable to effectively control crime levels across the nation. Policemen are slow to arrive to crime scenes, and perpetrators of violence are rarely caught¹⁸. This problem continues for multiple reasons. On the governmental and police level, “corruption, inadequate police training/equipment, insufficient central government funding, and rapidly deteriorating economic conditions [that] dramatically reduce the effectiveness of security forces” are all factors limiting the effectiveness of law enforcement. Additionally, complaints against police



Tensions run high between protesters and policemen. By Miguel Gutiérrez. “Garantizar la seguridad sin violentar los derechos”

corruption have increased in 2015. The option of raising the police budget has been proposed by government officials, but “government critics remain wary that it can deliver on the promise to better fund the military and police especially in a time when the Venezuelan economy continues to

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.



undergo rapid inflation and an inability to secure foreign currency in order to import goods”¹⁹. In other words, the economy has other priorities.

General crime prevention in Venezuela is under the jurisdiction of the *Policía Nacional Bolivariana* (Bolivarian National Police, PNB) – which is an arm of the Ministry of Popular Power for Interior Justice and Peace. However, the PNB only operates in a handful of states within Venezuela: Anzoátegui, Aragua, Carabobo, Lara, Táchira, and Zulia²⁰. Though it is a national police force, its geographical reach is limited. The government intends to “increase the size of the PNB so that it can operate across the country, but there is no clear timeline for the proposed expansion”²¹.

Recent protests have brought to light many grievances currently gripping the country. Lack of safety, inflation, and a resulting scarcity of goods, along with deteriorating civil liberties, affect Venezuelan society at the moment. The government has “blamed opposition leaders for the unrest and encouraged both the official security forces and armed pro-government civilian groups to forcibly prevent the opposition’s alleged goal of a ‘soft coup’”²². Protests in June of 2015 left 40 dead, 900 injured, and 3,100 arrested²³.

As the authorities are incapable, and in some cases unwilling, to deal with the severe spike in crime in Venezuela, the economic downturn will only compound the damage. A lack of safety in a

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.



country has measurable negative economic effects, and an economy in crisis fosters violence and the gangs which perpetrate it. Although the government has made efforts to curb violence in Venezuela, it also spends a significant amount of time blaming the country's problems on external sources. In an example of this, President Maduro argued in a 2014 speech that violence and crimes are “due to the ‘anti-values’ of individualism, consumerism, and a quest for easy wealth, which were ‘planted by capitalism’ in Venezuela”, in addition to the influence of the drug traffic and an adoration of guns and violence²⁴.

Recent policies and government actions

Some of the government's efforts to address this problem include a motion to increase police funding and a disarmament plan, both launched in 2014. The government's intention was to reduce violence by making it harder for people to obtain guns. Notably, the government outlawed private gun ownership in 2012, on the International Day of Peace, September 20th. This US\$ 47 million program aimed to establish 50 centres where citizens could voluntarily surrender their firearms. Security forces were also ordered to destroy weapons seized during the police operations – but this only increased interest in owning guns. Eliseo Guzmán, the general commissioner of the Miranda state police force (which borders the *Distrito Capital*, where Caracas is situated), stated that “[t]here are now fewer deals in black market arms but that has made anyone in uniform a more popular target for criminals than before. They will identify a police officer and take away his life just to take his gun”²⁵.

Regardless of the mixed results of this attempt at reducing violence, it is a policy that searches to fix a

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Alicia Hernández, “Murdered for their guns, Venezuela's police are now victims of crime,” *The Guardian*, November 4, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/nov/04/murdered-for-their-guns-venezuelas-police-are-now-victims-of>.

symptom of the problem rather than the cause, and as such it could only have, at best, a temporal effect on safety in the country.

Most recently, a “National Pacification Plan” was announced in 2015. The goal was to take suggestions from citizens in order to increase security and reduced violent crime. According to President Maduro, over 150,000 proposals have so far been submitted by citizens for possible incorporation into the plan.” However, it is unclear how effective these measures will be, when they will be implemented, or whether they can even be implemented, given the current social and political climate of Venezuela.

Causes of violence in Venezuela

In an April 2016 interview, Caracas city councilman Jesus Armas identified three roots and sub-issues of the city’s violence. The first, he said “is associated with levels of poverty and inequality that we see in the city”²⁶. In part due to the decrease in global oil prices, Venezuela currently has the



A typical *barrio* in the capital Caracas. From commons.wikimedia.org.

highest inflation in the world, which causes extreme food and electricity shortages. Additionally, now, “more than 50 percent of the city's population lives in places where houses are built with low-quality materials, and where they don't formally have access to basic public services and are without roads or consolidated public

²⁶ AQ Online, “Life in Venezuela’s – and the World’s – Most Violent City,” *Americas Quarterly*, April 7, 2016, <http://www.americasquarterly.org/content/life-capital-violence>.



spaces”²⁷. The lack of basic human resources, like food and housing, is a major cause forcing individuals to perpetrate crimes in order to secure basic resources for themselves. If more citizens were able to access basic resources, there would be less of a need to commit crimes. The second element involves a “culture of lawlessness.” In Venezuela exists “a habit of disrespect for most basic laws,” including those related to transit, shoplifting, and the manner the population and authorities react to laws. This indifference towards lower-level crimes has caused an increase in the culture of indifference for larger crimes.

Thirdly, the actions and reactions of national, state, and local governments have created issues in managing the violence. The mayor of Caracas, for example, has been accused of exhibiting “excessive permissiveness toward huge criminal groups”²⁸. which dominate vast swaths of the city – through drugs, violence, or illegal activities. Councilman Armas accuses the state of “using crime as a way to maintain power and control of the population.” He claims that “the state has implemented a policy that has nothing to do with protecting life, liberty and property of citizens, but on the contrary, has driven a socialist model that seeks to limit those freedoms”²⁹. This committee must thus also address the role that government officials and public servants have played in this culture.

Conclusion

Violence in Venezuela is a part of a cycle of underdevelopment in what has become Latin America’s most violent country. Many crimes are committed because basic resources, including

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.



housing, food, clean water, and electricity, are not available. This is a result of an economic crisis with a corrupt and violent government which does not do enough to protect and provide rights to its citizens. The economy is further harmed as citizens fear for their safety walking outside, taking public transportation and driving alone. This committee must discuss the roots of the epidemic of violence in Venezuela, figure out ways to address the sub-issues in order to ultimately tackle the main issue of violence and lawlessness.

To address the issue of violence and security in the country, this committee should focus on whether the different aspects of the crisis require either a top-down or bottom-up approach. The causes and roots of violence should definitely be addressed to indirectly reduce crime, but it is important to recognize that some solutions to food and electricity shortages, inequality, and inflation can only be effectively implemented when a certain level of safety is guaranteed.

Questions to consider

1. What is more important for the government to deal with first – the lack of basic resources or the direct issue of crimes and violence in Venezuela?
2. What is the history of Venezuelan violence? Has it always been this way? Why does Venezuela currently have a culture of illegal economic activities, drug violence, and gun violence?
3. Would increasing *political* and *civil* rights (increasing voting rights, eradicating corruption, increasing checks and balances on the government, etc.) help decrease crime rate?
4. What steps can be taken to reform police bodies in Venezuela? How can they restore their authority in the country?

Topic 2: Venezuela's economic crisis

Background

As an essential part of the 21st Century Socialist Project implemented by Hugo Chávez in the early 2000s, several interventionist economic practices were put into place. Through the establishment of price controls with the aim of stabilizing the economy, the situation has worsened and economic mismanagement has led to material scarcity during the last four years.

During the last decade, Venezuela, the country with the largest oil reserves in the world, has also become the country with the highest inflation rate (near 500% this year and estimated to rise to 1600% in 2017),³⁰ and has experienced a devastating economic decline. The recent



By Quartz. "Venezuela's black market rate for US dollars just jumped by almost 40%," from quartz.com.

dwindling of oil prices have only exacerbated the situation, since the country depends on oil revenues for more than 95% of its foreign income³¹. Highly indebted to countries such as China and Russia, it has often chosen to pay its debts with oil. It has, however, been forced to give away much more than it actually owed as a result of the declining oil prices. Bondholders are increasingly worried that Venezuela will fail to service its debts and consequently most investors have turned their eyes away from the country, refusing several loan demands from the state as a result of the economic downturn.

³⁰ "Venezuela Economic Outlook," *Focus Economics*, Web, June 14, 2016, <http://www.focus-economics.com/countries/venezuela>.

³¹ Miguel Tinker Salas, *Venezuela: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 23.



Two of the most influential economic policies of the Chávez government are foreign exchange controls³² and price controls of certain basic necessities, such as milk, rice, cooking oil, sugar, and others³³. These price controls, which have the aim of stabilizing the prices of essential necessities and keep them affordable, consist in setting a fixed rate at which stores can legally sell the items. These policies have received mixed reactions from both Venezuelans and from the international community.

Moreover, the policies have fuelled certain aspects of the current crisis. Although Venezuela has been congratulated by the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization on reducing child malnutrition by half in 2013 (compared to the 1990's)³⁴, the prize attracted the ire of Venezuelans who struggled to find basic items in grocery stores shelves. The foreign exchange controls (which consist of a policy in which individuals and companies can only obtain foreign currencies legally through a government body)³⁵ have created a booming black market for the exchange of US dollars, where individuals can freely buy and sell this and other foreign currencies, albeit at a highly inflated price when compared to the official one (called the "parallel dollar"). Even though it had started at a slightly higher exchange rate than the official one, the parallel dollar has skyrocketed in price in

³² "CADIVI, Una medida necesaria," *Comisión de Administración de Divisas*, Web, 2003. <https://web.archive.org/web/20080604174230/http://www.cadivi.gov.ve/cadivi/cadivi.html>.

³³ Will Grant, "Chavez boosts food price controls," *BBC News*, March 4, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7923073.stm>.

³⁴ Manuel Rueda, "UN Congratulates Venezuela for Reducing Hunger," *ABC News*, June 17, 2013, http://abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/News/congratulates-venezuela-reducing-hunger-widespread-food-shortages/story?id=19421963.

³⁵ "CADIVI, Una medida necesaria," *Comisión de Administración de Divisas*.

respect to the Venezuelan bolívar (plural bolívars, Bs.) in the past ³⁶ According to a report from FocusEconomics, “The parallel dollar has lost just over half its value this year alone as recession, runaway inflation and the sharp fall in oil prices have combined to push Venezuela into its worst economic crisis since former President Hugo Chávez came into power”³⁷.

Driven by falling oil prices and extreme pressure on the official exchange rate, Maduro’s government has focused on addressing the symptoms of the crisis rather than addressing the root causes. To help eliminate hoarding and panic buying, he recently announced a plan to install 20,000



A grocery store in Venezuela. By AFP. “Escasez de alimentos en 47.7 % Venezuela,” from taringa.net.

finger scanners at his country’s super markets and simultaneously increasing interest rates. Allegedly, this was a response to a high number of citizens who, for fear of not finding basic products, were buying more than one of each, an action that was perfectly

normal and acceptable a couple of years ago. As

a result of the scarcity of resources, citizens are forced to stand long market lines for hours and hours, every time they need to buy a product. They not only have to go through a process of ID recognition to buy even a roll of toilet paper or soap, but they also have to justify why they are buying it³⁸.

³⁶ Roberto A. Ferdman, “Venezuela’s black market rate for US dollars just jumped by almost 40%,” *Quartz*, March 26, 2014, <http://qz.com/192395/venezuelas-black-market-rate-for-us-dollars-just-jumped-by-almost-40>.

³⁷ “Venezuela Economic Outlook,” *Focus Economics*.

³⁸ Ibid.

The Oil Curse or Dutch Disease

“The overwhelming presence of oil did act, indirectly, to deform the economy and national life. Privileged sectors of the population began to acquire the mining mentality of newly rich spendthrifts. The uninterrupted flow of dollars encouraged imports and expanded commerce to such a degree that the nation became primarily a consumer of foreign products. We began to appear too much like that chaotic California — the paradise of adventurers and thieves — during the days of the gold rush.”

Romulo Betancourt, Former President of Venezuela 1945-1948, 1959-1964³⁹

Venezuela is one of the many countries around the globe that have suffered from what is known in the field of international development and in political science as the “oil curse,” or the “Dutch Disease”. In fact, the oil wealth rent that has accrued to Venezuela has acted as a double edge sword, contributing to move the country into a renter and unproductive society.

As a result of the rapid increase in oil revenues from the beginning of oil discovery in Venezuela, the nation's currency became stronger compared to currencies of other nations (manifested in exchange rates)⁴⁰. This resulted in the nation's other exports becoming more expensive for other



PDVSA

PDVSA is the state-owned oil company. By PDVSA. From pdvsa.com.

countries to buy, and imports became cheaper, making those sectors less competitive and causing them to shrink⁴¹.

Amongst the effects of this paradox of plenty on the Venezuelan economy are the following: 1) it has overvalued the national currency and weakened the

³⁹ Carlos A. Rossi, “Oil Wealth and the Resource Curse in Venezuela,” *IAEE Energy Forum*, 3rd Quarter (2011): 11-15, <http://www.iaee.org/documents/2011SummerEnergyForum.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Carlos A. Rossi “Oil Wealth and the Resource Curse in Venezuela.”

⁴¹ Arthur D. Redfield, “Our Petroleum Diplomacy in Latin America” (Ph.D. dissertation, The American University, Washington, 1942), p. 17.



competitive edge in the production of other staple goods that used to be made and are now imported;

2) given that oil related activities are much more lucrative, many entrepreneurs have chosen to abandon their traditional areas in the rural sectors and have moved their businesses to the urban cities in search of a piece of the “oil pie”⁴². For example, in the 1970’s, the government decided to cancel all agricultural related debt in the hopes of eliminating this financial burden and increasing agricultural production⁴³. However, the result was the opposite given that landowners simply chose to sell or close their *latifundios* (vast agricultural properties) and moved into the construction business or other urbanite ventures. Moreover, the oil curse also resulted in massive internal migrations and foreign immigrations to the urban core of principal cities, creating the infamous poverty belts, collapsing all social services and resulting in rampant crime. Finally, this resource curse has made the country totally dependent on the Government for all economic activity, including both public and private production since it is the state that controls foreign currency for imports of spare parts and finished goods⁴⁴.

Today, oil accounts for over 95% of Venezuela’s exports, 30% of GDP and 50% of government revenues⁴⁵. The country now imports most of the consumer goods and is highly indebted. If the Venezuelan government wishes to put into place innovative policies in an attempt to remedy the economic crisis, it will have to diversify the economic sectors by expanding the agricultural sector,

⁴² Steve C. Topik and Allen Wells, *The second conquest of Latin America: coffee, henequen, and oil during the export boom, 1850-1930* (University of Texas Press, 1997), pp. 140-142.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 143.

⁴⁴ Miguel Tinker Salas, *The enduring legacy: oil, culture, and society in Venezuela* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 51.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 65.



and so on. Nonetheless, such action is easier said than done given that Venezuela has for so long being highly dependent of oil revenues, revenues that are at a historic all-time low, making those necessary diversifying investments all that much harder.

Foreign exchange controls and their impact on the economy

Venezuela's current policy of foreign exchange controls, which allows the government to dictate how much foreign currency Venezuelan individuals and companies can spend outside the country, is implemented by the *Centro Nacional de Comercio Exterior* (National Center for Foreign Commerce, CENCOEX), which inherited the responsibility after the *Comisión de Administración de Divisas* (Comisión de Administración de Divisas, CADIVI) was abolished in 2014⁴⁶. Initiated in 2003 by President Chávez's government, the main goal of this economic policy is to prevent companies and individuals from fraudulently funnelling money out of the country⁴⁷. Notably, it was a reaction to a loss of over US\$ 500 million in the last month of 2002, which was about 5% of the country's international reserves⁴⁸. With such a sharp loss of capital, the government decided to implement these regulations to avoid undergoing a similar situation in the future, as they could jeopardize the country's finances.

⁴⁶ "Decretada supresión de Cadivi," *AVN*, April 15, 2014, <http://www.avn.info.ve/contenido/decretada-supresi%C3%B3n-cadivi>.

⁴⁷ "CADIVI, Una medida necesaria," *Comisión de Administración de Divisas*.

⁴⁸ Mercedes Anato and María Alejandra González Agra, "Efectos del control cambiario en la actividad turística. Caso Venezuela," December 2006, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/4828185_Efectos_del_control_cambiario_en_la_actividad_turistica_Caso_Venezuela.



This economic measure has been one of the most controversial policies of President Chávez. Government officials have often touted the policy as a success,⁴⁹ but their very political character, admitted even by government officials,⁵⁰ has been widely criticized by the opposition and by some experts, the two main concerns being that the foreign exchange can be used to indirectly hold companies hostage, and that it poses a serious roadblock to the development of new businesses that need to work with foreign entities.

Furthermore, the exchange controls mean that companies that operate on an international scale must convert their income in bolívars to other currencies, such as US dollars, through the Central Bank of Venezuela and the government-controlled agency⁵¹. Without this currency exchange, the companies' profits are essentially “stuck” inside the Venezuela market. This has been at the root of various crises that had far-reaching consequences for the population. For instance, in the “airline crisis” that started in 2014, many airlines drastically reduced the amount of flights or outright cancelled all coming in and out of Venezuela, because the government owed these companies around US\$ 4,000 million,⁵² essentially isolating many Venezuelans from the rest of the world. This has been particularly hard on the increasing number of citizens in the country who have relatives living outside

⁴⁹ “Ramírez: Venezuela culminará 2013 con nivel óptimo de reservas internacionales,” *AVN*, October 10, 2013, <http://www.avn.info.ve/contenido/ram%C3%ADrez-venezuela-culminar%C3%A1-2013-nivel-%C3%B3ptimo-reservas-internacionales>.

⁵⁰ Noticiero Venevisión, “Aristóbulo Istúriz reconoce que control de cambio es una medida política y no económica” (filmed July 2014), YouTube video, 1:07, <https://youtu.be/z71VnIhtnFI>.

⁵¹ Valentina Lares Martiz, “Deuda con aerolíneas 'desconecta' a Venezuela del mundo,” *El Tiempo*, March 23, 2014, <http://www.eltiempo.com/mundo/latinoamerica/suspension-de-vuelos-desde-y-hacia-venezuela/14024337>.

⁵² Valentina Lares Martiz, “Deuda con aerolíneas 'desconecta' a Venezuela del mundo.”



of the country. And although some of this debt was cancelled through an agreement between the airlines and the Venezuelan government, there still remains over US\$ 3,000 million to be paid to the companies⁵³. With the current economic and social crisis, the government has more pressing issues than paying its debt to these airlines, but it is likely that the companies resort again to pressure tactics affecting those flying to and from Venezuela.

Aerial transport is only one example of the many industries that have been severely affected by foreign exchange controls, as both the food industry and the manufacturing sector also depend heavily on getting foreign currency to pay for the imported materials they use in their products. For instance, Empresas Polar, one of the biggest food manufacturers in the country, has stated that its producing capability has been severely affected by a lack of access to foreign currency,⁵⁴ which it needs to purchase the ingredients for its products, since agricultural production in the country has suffered in the past 15 years. Because of this, some argue that foreign exchange controls, along with the price control on certain food items, have been a driving force in the current scarcity plaguing the country.

In short, although the economic policies adopted under Chávez's government have had some success in reducing inequality and jumpstarting some social programs, they have negatively impacted the private sector, causing many companies to leave the country and placing those that have stayed in a very precarious situation. With dwindling international reserves and the price of oil at a historic low,

⁵³ AFP, "Aerolíneas están preocupadas por situación en Venezuela," *El Nacional*, February 12, 2015, http://www.el-nacional.com/economia/Aerolineas-preocupadas-situacion-Venezuela_0_573542744.html.

⁵⁴ EFE, "Polar advierte riesgo en producción por falta de divisas," *Portafolio*, January 22, 2014, <http://www.portafolio.co/internacional/polar-advierte-riesgo-produccion-falta-divisas-54400>.



it is only to be expected that more international companies cease operations in the country, worsening the current crisis.

Conclusion

Despite having massive oil reserves that brought back enormous revenues during the high prices of the oil barrel, Venezuela's economy has always been fragile due to its over-dependence on this resource. The previous oil boom effectively discouraged other economic activities, driving the country away from diversification and slowly building the current economic and social crisis. With dwindling international reserves and lack of basic staple products due to minimal internal production, Venezuela is now feeling the true price of an oil-centred economy. With the country's limited financial capabilities, this committee must search for policies that will address both the current socioeconomic crisis and Venezuela's oil addiction.

The government's economic policies, which were already putting a strain on private enterprise, have now brought essential industries, like transportation and food production, to an almost halt. At this moment, outright dropping measures like foreign exchanges could bring a severe shock to the country's situation, but measures must be adopted to reconcile policy with realism. Regardless of party affiliations, delegates should look to work together to find solutions that will improve the economic condition of Venezuelans, solutions that hopefully also improve the other aspects of the crisis.



Questions to consider

1. What kinds of measures can be taken to diversify the economy, given the current oil prices and the country's limited margin of action?
2. Who are the possible economic allies if Venezuela were to seek international help? What are the possible demands that these countries or bodies would ask?
3. Should measures be taken to reduce the current restrictions in foreign currency exchanges? What would be the possible challenges if such steps were to be taken?
4. What kinds of arrangements can be made between the government and its creditors, to prevent more companies from leaving the country?

Topic 3: Social Division and Venezuelan Politics

Background

Today, Venezuela is characterized by a polarized society, conflictive politics, and an unstable democratic system. There is strong and clear division amongst the different socioeconomic classes. Different political movements represent the different and often conflicting interests of the various Venezuelan social classes. While a large number of Venezuelans continue to support the Bolivarian government of Nicolás Maduro, there is an increasing number of Venezuelans who strongly criticize the performance of the leftist regime, demanding a change of policies and even a new government. This division has manifested itself by the mass protests that have come to characterize the nation in the last years. Mass rallies have constantly filled the streets of Venezuela with tens of thousands of protesters on one side and pro-governments rallies on the other. The tension of Venezuelan politics



“Al menos tres muertos en una nueva jornada de protestas en Venezuela,” from rtve.es.

and society are felt in the explosions of violence that have characterized some of these protests, unfortunately causing the death of many individuals, including young adults and children.

The division between Venezuelans of different socioeconomic status is clearer than ever, being the result of a social and political process that has gradually affected the Venezuelan society over the years⁵⁵. From 1958 until 1998, in contrast with

⁵⁵ Scott Mainwaring, “From Representative Democracy to Participatory Competitive Authoritarianism: Hugo Chávez and Venezuelan Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2012): 956.



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some other Latin American countries, Venezuela enjoyed an uninterrupted stable democratic system. Two major political parties competed for the Venezuelan vote, *Acción Democrática* and *Copei* (*Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente*). However, by 1998, to a large extent, political parties saw a huge drop in support from the population, becoming weak and unstable organizations. Anti-party and anti-system political groups led by highly charismatic leaders came to the front of Venezuelan politics⁵⁶. The rise of the *Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement*, which brought Hugo Chávez to power, was largely based on the dissatisfaction of Venezuelans with the performance of the parties and the rampant corruption that plagued them⁵⁷. From 1998 to 2008, the opposing parties remained largely divided and unable to gather significant support to challenge the Bolivarian government. As a result, Venezuelans who did not support the government have been very limited in expressing their opinion and producing change through the political system⁵⁸. Nonetheless, in 2008, most opposition parties came together to form the *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD), producing a more unified voice for the Venezuelan dissent. The 2015 National Assembly Election in which the opposition won the majority of seats shows the power of a unified opposition, potentially bringing a wave of political and social change⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ Scott Mainwaring, "From Representative Democracy to Participatory Competitive Authoritarianism: Hugo Chávez and Venezuelan Politics," 957.

⁵⁷ Rickard Lalander, "Venezuelan Politics and Society in Times of Chavismo," *Política y sociedad en la Venezuela del Chavismo* 1 (2006): 6.

⁵⁸ Roberto Lovato, "Venezuela's opposition is united against Maduro but internally divided," *Aljazeera America*, March 5, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/3/5/venezuelaa-s-oppositionisunitedagainstmadurobutinternallydivided.html>.

⁵⁹ Daniel Pardo, "Que cambios puede impulsar la oposición de Venezuela con su victoria parlamentaria," *BBC Mundo*, December 8, 2015. http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/12/151207_analisis_venezuela_oposicion_elecciones_parlamentarias_amv.



Venezuelan Politics and the newly elected National Assembly

The 1999 Venezuelan Constitution is the legal and political centre of debate. It is the *Magna Carta* of Venezuela, adopted on December 15th of 1999 through a national referendum. This constitution recognizes fundamental political, civil, social, and environmental rights. It is the basic instrument that introduces the principles of participatory democracy and emphasizes social justice as part of its economic principles. Amongst others, it outlines the role of the National Assembly, which is composed of deputies elected by simple majority within the various municipalities across the country. As such, it allows Venezuelan citizens to have a proportional representation in the legislative body of the country, whose role is to draft laws, authorize decrees of the executive, and work jointly with this latter branch to study and execute international treaties⁶⁰.

In 2008, two major political groups were formed. The MUD, an umbrella political organization composed of almost all opposition parties, and the current party in power at the executive level, the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV). The MUD was created as a coalition of various opposition political parties. They wanted to unify their criticisms against the government, with the ultimate aim of defeating the Bolivarian movement. The party claims to represent the interest of an increasingly large number of Venezuelan who are dissatisfied with the work of the Chavista government, in power for 18 years⁶¹. They consider many of the actions of former president Hugo Chávez an unconstitutional centralization of power, violation of constitutional rights and detrimental to the stability of the Venezuelan economy and society. The PSUV, meanwhile,

⁶⁰ Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, art. 186-203.

⁶¹ “Mesa de la Unidad Democrática,” MUD, <http://unidadvenezuela.org/sobre-la-mud>.

was founded as a medium to institutionalize the Bolivarian movement. It operates as a political party that incorporated the different pro-Bolivarian leftist parties and presents a unified vision of the revolutionary movement in Venezuela⁶².

With the newly elected National Assembly largely composed by members from the MUD, the official opposition that claims to bring democracy back to Venezuela, a vivid political debate has been once again raised: how democratic is Venezuela truly? The debate on the legitimacy of the Bolivarian government and its policies and the potential alternatives offered by opposing political leaders have come to divide the Venezuelan people in half. This is illustrated by the highly questioned victory of President Nicolás Maduro with 1.5% of votes above his rival and opposition leader Henrique Capriles, a result that has been questioned with allegations of fraud against the CNE (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*, the body that oversees elections in Venezuela). With the National Assembly being the first major political victory for the opposition in years, Venezuelans currently look anxiously at the body as holding the key to the future of the country.

Striking the right democratic balance: Participatory democracy vs liberal democracy



“Tribunal Supremo de Justicia de Venezuela anula parcialmente poderes de control del Parlamento,” from hispan.tv.com.

One of the main criticisms of the Bolivarian government is the lack of efficient check and balances for the executive branch. The opposition has consistently claimed that the president has encroached the other branches of government, making them ineffective and centralizing power

⁶² “Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela,” *PSUV*, <http://www.psuv.org.ve/psuv>.



around the PSUV. For instance, some investigations have exposed that the Supreme Court (*Tribunal Supremo de Justicia*, TSJ) has not produced a single ruling against the government. Nonetheless, the Bolivarian government has clearly produced a very strong sense of empowerment and political participation at the local level through its program of communal councils which allow individuals to directly decide local issues for themselves under the support of the government. A new policy approach is needed which will ensure an effective democratic national government while not disempowering politically active locals.

The Bolivarian government, previously led by Chávez and now Maduro, has been simultaneously praised as democratically innovative by many political scholars and criticized as anti-democratic by world leaders. On one hand, the Bolivarian government developed a system of communal councils which allow “ordinary citizens” to directly access government funding and direct projects and services in their community, such as state owned enterprises in which workers decide schedules⁶³. On the other hand, the executive has centralized power in the hands of the president through the devising and implementation of alternative mechanisms. By being the direct provider of funds to local communal councils who leads such organizations, the president is capable of bypassing local governments and other branches of the national government⁶⁴. There is a clear tension due to the centralization of power in the president’s hands and the power now enjoyed by the Venezuelan poor.

Political motivated arrests and imprisonments

⁶³ Mohadesa Najumi and Omar O. Campo, “Participatory Democracy and Communal Councils in Venezuela: The Popular Experience,” *Participedia*, <http://www.participedia.net/en/cases/theorising-participatory-democracy-and-communal-councils-venezuela-popular-experience-0>.

⁶⁴ Scott Mainwairing, “From Representative Democracy to Participatory Competitive Authoritarianism: Hugo Chávez and Venezuelan Politics,” 961-963.

Perhaps the most well-known issue in current Venezuelan politics is that of politically motivated arrest and imprisonments. Increasingly, the Bolivarian government has been criticized by world leaders and NGOs for its infringement of civil and political rights. With the heightening of protests, massive arrests and undefined imprisonments have taken place. The government claims it has only arrested violent individuals among the protesters. However, several independent reports argue that the state actions were arbitrary and politically motivated to deter the protests from continuing. Furthermore, key political leaders such as Leopoldo López, Antonio Ledezma and Daniel Ceballo, among others, have been arrested and convicted, or are waiting judgement, for claimed conspiracy against the government as well as for promoting violent protesting.

The local rights group PROVEA, which promotes and defends economic, social and cultural human rights, reported that during the 2014-2015 protests more than 3,100 arrests took place in Venezuela. The arrest and imprisonment of many was characterized by physical abuse⁶⁵. Although most were liberated, crucial opposition leaders remain imprisoned, such as Leopoldo López, who has been held in a military facility since February 18, 2014.



By AP. "Venezuela opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez sentenced," from bbc.com.

After becoming one of the main faces of the

opposition and playing a leading role in the protests of 2014, he was prosecuted and sentenced to 13 years in prison for inciting violent protests that led to several deaths.⁶⁶ His imprisonment was met

⁶⁵ "Venezuela Country Report," *Freedom House*.

⁶⁶ Paul Paranaguea, "Leopoldo Lopez, prisonnier politique numéro un au Venezuela," *Le Monde*, September 11, 2015, http://www.lemonde.fr/ameriques/article/2015/09/11/leopoldo-lopez-prisonnier-politique-numero-un-au-venezuela_4753074_3222.html.



with strong criticism by several political figures from different nations and international organizations who considered his detention a case of arbitrary imprisonment⁶⁷. Policies specifically addressing this situation must be produced in order to have impartial justice in the country.

Conclusion

The members of the National Assembly largely fall within two categories. Firstly, there are the delegates of the PSUV (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*), members of the pro-Bolivarian movement and supporters of Maduro's presidency. They run their campaign under promises of rescuing the country from the current economic crisis and of continuing the Chavista revolution. There is also the opposition, represented by the members of diverse political parties united under the MUD (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*) coalition. They promised the Venezuelan people to improve the democratic system, to protect human rights, and to finish the division that characterizes Venezuelan society. Moreover, their goal is to balance up the executive power and gradually demonstrate that this new umbrella organization is a sustainable, viable, and appropriate alternative to the Bolivarian regime.

Currently, the MUD occupies 109 of the 167 seats in the National Assembly, just holding the two-thirds majority necessary to pass laws in this parliament. Despite the strong differences between the PSUV and the MUD, members of both parties do have some common interests, such as strengthening the party system, solving the current socioeconomic crisis, and fighting criminality and violence. Their approach differs in how they aim to tackle these issues. This committee must discuss

⁶⁷ "Venezuela: UN Working Group on arbitrary detention demands immediate release of Leopoldo López," *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, September 18, 2015, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16466&LangID=E#sthash.u7Cd8HBz.dpuf>.



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the socio-political issues that have affected Venezuela in the past two decades. Democracy and equality form the base of the political debate which increasingly shapes the future of all Venezuelan families within and outside this country.

Questions to consider

1. What can this Assembly do to ensure the respect for human rights guaranteed by the Venezuelan constitution?
2. What measures can be taken to reinstall the party system without causing a backlash from the now directly empowered Venezuelans? What other political avenues could be explored?
3. What are the necessary structural changes that will make of the Venezuelan government and stable democratic one? What sort of checks-and-balances are necessary?



List of deputies in Venezuela's National Assembly

Opposition – *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable)*

1. Henry Ramos Allup (Distrito Capital)
2. Freddy Guevara Cortez (Miranda)
3. Julio Borges (Miranda)
4. Miguel Pizarro (Miranda)
5. Enrique Márquez (Zulia)
6. Delsa Solórzano (Miranda)
7. Tomás Guanipa (Distrito Capital)
8. Antonio Barreto Sira (Anzoátegui)
9. Tamara Adrián Hernández (Distrito Capital)
10. Ismael Concepción García (Aragua)
11. Alfonso Marquina (Lara)
12. Williams Dávila (Mérida)
13. Dinorah Figuera (Aragua)
14. Melva Paredes (Aragua)
15. José Guerra (Distrito Capital)
16. Adriana D'Elia (Miranda)
17. Rafael Guzman (Miranda)
18. Jony Rahal (Nueva Esparta)
19. Juan Requesens (Táchira)



20. Timoteo Zambrano (Zulia)
21. Omar Barboza (Zulia)
22. Virgilio Ferrer (Representante Indígena, Región Occidente)
23. Gladys Guaipo (Representante Indígena, Región Oriente)
24. Romel Guzamana (Representante Indígena, Región Sur)
25. Maribel Guédez (Barinas)
26. Francisco Sucre (Bolívar)
27. Ylidio de Abreu (Carabobo)
28. Eliezer Sirit (Falcón)
29. Milagros Eulate (Vargas)
30. Armando Armas (Anzoátegui)
31. Luis Florido (Lara)
32. Milagro Valero (Mérida)
33. Gaby Arellano (Táchira)
34. Juan Pablo Guanipa (Zulia)
35. Nora Bracho (Zulia)
36. María Gabriela Hernandez (Monagas)
37. Juan Miguel Matheus (Carabobo)

Pro-Chavista members – *Gran Polo Patriótico Simón Bolívar (Great Patriotic Pole)*

1. Diosdado Cabello (Monagas)
2. Cilia Flores (Cojedes)



3. Asdrúbal Chávez (Barinas)
4. Elías José Jaua (Miranda)
5. Héctor Rodríguez Castro (Bolívar)
6. Carmen Teresa Meléndez (Lara)
7. Pedro Miguel Carreño (Delta Amacuro)
8. Haiman El Troudi (Miranda)
9. Earle Herrera (Anzoátegui)
10. Nora Delgado (Miranda)
11. Óscar Ramón Figuera (Guárico)
12. Roque Valero (Aragua)
13. Hugo Carvajal (Monagas)
14. Darío Vivas (Vargas)
15. Héctor Orlando Zambrano (Apure)
16. Luis Soteldo (Portuguesa)
17. Yul Jabour (Yaracuy)
18. Hugbel Roa (Trujillo)



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