



In the challenging landscape of democratic resilience, 2019 will be remembered as a failed opportunity for Venezuela in its struggle for a transition. The negotiated solution to the crisis brokered by the Norwegian government was at a stalemate, leaving room for other approaches to pressure Nicolás Maduro. The Trump administration-imposed oil sanctions on the state-owned company PdVSA. A measure welcomed as strong support for the newly constituted Interim Government led by Juan Guaidó, unleashing a series of moves in the region intended to pressure Nicolás Maduro to agree on an electoral solution to the crisis.

Amid a profound humanitarian catastrophe worsened by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the *maximum pressure* policy adopted by the White House, with its ambiguous promise that *all options were on the table*, became a heavy burden for the Opposition. The Interim Government, hamstrung by outsourcing its duty to represent Venezuelans, became dependent on foreign governments to fulfill their representation duties. What was seen as an opportunity for a breakthrough turned out to be another source of frustration in a country suffering a wide-ranging humanitarian catastrophe. The much-expected cracks in the Maduro coalition never came to fruition, instead, it was the Interim Government and the coalition that supported it that started to show signs of exhaustion, given the lack of success of the strategy.

The consequences of the failed strategy can be measured not only in the Opposition's further fragmentation but also in the more than 7 million Venezuelan migrants that have flooded the region from neighboring countries all the way up to the Southern Border, triggering a crisis that has required more engagement from those governments incapable of managing increasing numbers of desperate immigrants. On the other side, the Maduro government has tirelessly claimed the situation results from the economic sanctions imposed by the United

States, demanding its relief. Initially, this was their motivation to accept joining the conversations brokered by the Norwegian government, although without committing to guaranteeing electoral conditions for a peaceful resolution of the political crisis. However, the conditions set by the new Biden administration did not diverge completely from the previous administration, leaving the Maduro government with few options to push for lifting the sanctions.

Then Russia invaded Ukraine, and the geopolitical map changed, opening opportunities for a different approach to the Venezuelan crisis, especially in light of the growing influence of Russia and China, as Venezuela turned to these illiberal powers for support after the U. S. isolation punishment. The backlash the Biden administration received after signaling an interest in easing sanctions in exchange for electoral conditions had domestic and international repercussions. It was seen as a weakness and motivated solely by an interest in securing the oil supply during the war. Nevertheless, this was not immediate, given the distrust between the Opposition and the Maduro government that also extended to the U. S. government.

As we close this special issue, “*Venezuela at a Juncture*,” the country finds itself at another crossroads in its multidimensional crisis. A breakthrough for the Opposition and the Maduro government with an agreement to restart negotiations that include guarantees for the Opposition to participate in free and fair elections has renewed hopes for a peaceful solution to the crisis. However, the commitment between the two sides has a long road ahead, given the need to specify the conditions outlined in the October 2023 Barbados meeting. The lack of clarity on the operationalization of the agreement has led to skepticism among the Opposition, especially given the track record of the Maduro government in following through these accords in previous instances.

This special issue builds upon the notion of a *critical juncture*<sup>1</sup>, where both political actors face a defining moment to shape the country’s future for the coming years. In this spirit, we have gathered seven perspectives on how Venezuela reached this point in an effort to characterize the stages in the evolution of democratic erosion. A first and timely contribution is provided through the debate on authoritarian consolidation in *Political Survival and... Authoritarian Consolidation? The Maduro Government and Venezuela’s Political Crisis* by John

Polga-Hecimovich and Raúl Sánchez Urribarrí. The authors analyze the correlation between crisis survival and consolidation. They provide a multi-dimensional conceptual framework to assess the intricated process of authoritarian consolidation that explains how the regime has neutralized internal threats while deepening its hold on power.

In another perspective, we find the authoritarian nature of the Venezuelan regime approached through the lenses of deinstitutionalization, extreme polarization, and democratic erosion. In *Party System Collapse and Democratic Decay in Venezuela: From Ideological Convergence to Institutional Polarization*, Jana Morgan claims that the deterioration of Venezuelan democracy became an indicator of the democratic decay in the region. The author argues that the origins of democratic erosion in the country can be traced back to the crisis of representation in the 1990s that led to the breakdown of the party system, paving the way to the rise of Hugo Chávez and the institutional polarization that has contributed to the democratic decay.

One of the key elements in the democratic backsliding of Venezuela can be found in the warning signs many recognized as anti-democratic sentiments taking shape in Venezuela. The emergence of an outsider, Hugo Chávez, was neither an accident nor inevitable. In *“Chávez Did Not Come from Mars”: An Overview of De-democratization Processes in Venezuela from a Multi-Faceted Perspective* Andrés Cañizález and Andrés Ramos delve into the support of an anti-establishment candidate with the backdrop of a de-democratization process. A broad theoretical discussion to provide context for the depth of the deconstruction of democracy in Venezuela.

The events that preceded the election of Hugo Chávez laid the ground for an institutional takeover that included a new constitution, in what *Venezuela: Times of Depolarization* by Ingrid Jiménez and Piero Trepiccione consider deepened the political divides, with the media amplifying these tensions. The failure to establish a socialist state exacerbated the polarizing environment, continuing the political and economic crisis. The authors argue that exhaustion and distrust in political elites have moved Venezuelans towards a more pragmatic approach to ideology.

A critical factor in democratic resilience is the existence of a free press. The continued attacks against and censorship of the Venezuelan media are well within the experiences of other authoritarian regimes in Latin America. In *Disinformation in Venezuela: Media Ecosystem and Government Controls*, Mariela Torrealba and Ysabel Viloría present a broad review of the decline in freedom of information in the country, especially with the serious limitations in the media ecosystem. The initiatives fostering disinformation through the emergent social media platforms while the government controls information by suppressing independent media and dissident voices create the conditions for information gaps that prevent Venezuelans from exercising their right to be informed.

Another consequence of democratic erosion can be found in the regional context. In *The roller coaster of disruptions and Rapprochements between Venezuela and Colombia: A brief prospective reflection*, Francisco Sánchez argues that in a spillover crisis, the tensions between Colombia and Venezuela turned sour a historical bilateral relationship. The disruption in 2019 continued until 2022 when the ideological alignment with the newly elected left-leaning Gustavo Petro opened the door for a reset between the neighboring countries. The disagreements between Chávez and Maduro with previous right-leaning Colombian presidents significantly impacted border dynamics, with bilateral trade suffering a steep decline. The crisis worsened due to the increasing migration influx through the Colombia-Venezuela border, making the case for a strong diplomatic relationship focused on democracy, human rights, and sovereignty for a lasting and harmonious relationship.

Finally, we close this special issue on Venezuela with a crucial topic: *Back to the Andean Community: A Temporary Solution towards the Migratory Regularization of Venezuelans?* by Claudia Vargas Ribas. The Andean Community (CAN) gathers Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. Venezuela effectively withdrew from it in 2011 after Hugo Chávez made the announcement in 2006. The Venezuelan exodus in the region has faced challenges, given the limitations from countries like Peru and Ecuador that have implemented visa requirements, creating an opportunity for mistreatment and discrimination against Venezuelan migrants. The author argues that based on data about the inconsistencies in regularization processes, the reintegration

of Venezuela into the CAN could be an opportunity for economic benefits, providing a framework for the rights of Venezuelan migrants, although stressing that a long-term solution continues to be the resolution of the country's crisis and re-democratization.

This special issue aims to provide context for an English-speaking audience on the conditions that brought *chavismo* into the Venezuelan political landscape and allowed its advance into an authoritarian model that seems to have strengthened after a series of failed attempts at reigning it. In this sense, our goal was to provide a thorough profile of the Venezuelan socio-political crisis, describing the rise and consolidation of *chavismo*, and the political processes that have unsuccessfully attempted to promote a transition with the help of the international community and the Latin American region. This is an academic contribution to the debate amid extremely uncertain circumstances for Venezuela, in a defining juncture that could probably determine the future of millions of Venezuelans at home and abroad.

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## NOTES

1. “A critical juncture is (1) a concentrated, macro episode of innovation that (2) generates an enduring legacy.” Collier, D., & Munck, G. L. (2022). In *Critical junctures and historical legacies: Insights and methods for comparative social science* (pp. 33–52). chapter, Rowman & Littlefield.