



In the shadow of the virus

Varieties of power in the COVID-19 crisis in Venezuela

Peder Østebø

KEY TAKE AWAYS

- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Venezuela was suffering from one of the deepest societal crises in recent history.
- The crisis response of the Venezuelan government cannot be isolated from its overarching project of authoritarian consolidation, exemplified by the recent parliamentary elections.
- The case of Venezuela illustrates not only the constraints of a state in crisis when dealing with a pandemic, but also how power strategies under the guise of crisis management are employed to consolidate political control

Introduction

While all states face massive challenges when responding to COVID-19, some are in a more precarious position than others. In Venezuela, the pandemic arrived at the worst possible time for its citizens. Facing one of the deepest economic crises outside of wartime in recent years, its consequences have spilled over to all aspect of social life.¹ However, the timing seems to have suited the leaders of the Venezuelan regime well. Rather than constituting a threat to the stability of a regime that has lost both democratic legitimacy and the capacity to provide services and security, the government of Nicolás Maduro (2013-present) has seemingly managed to consolidate itself after several years of instability.² The starting point of the discussion is an apparent paradox: how can a regime with neither legitimacy nor capacity, two commonly invoked criteria for effective crisis management, strengthen itself during a crisis such as that spurred by COVID-19?

The brief presents an overview of how the Venezuelan regime has responded to COVID-19, and how the government of Nicolás Maduro has applied different strategies to consolidate a favorable political status quo. It takes as its starting point three concepts, namely “state capacity,” “legitimacy,” and “power,” all of which are frequently upheld as fundamental for understanding the varying ways in which states have responded to the pandemic. It highlights how relative power relations have shifted in recent years, and how the pandemic has contributed to skewing the balance of power further in favor of the Maduro government.

COVID-19 in Venezuela

The first two cases of COVID-19 were confirmed on March 13, with the first death being confirmed two weeks later, on March 26.³ This implies that the virus arrived somewhat later in Venezuela than in neighboring countries, a likely effect of the country’s increasing isolation from the rest of the region. As reliable data was one of the first victims of mismanagement and the ongoing crisis in the country, presenting an overview of the spread of COVID-19 is a formidable challenge. Official data may nevertheless give us some idea of how the spread of COVID-19 progressed. In the first two months, the government claimed that the number of confirmed cases had not yet reached 500, and that the disease had caused 10 deaths. From June until December, this rapidly changed. As of December 12, 2020, the government had recorded 102 289 cases, and 949 deaths. The spread reached its peak in the first two weeks of September, when over 1000 new cases were confirmed each day. By mid-October, the official number had dropped significantly, to 300-500 confirmed cases per day.

While most countries have a gap between recorded and actual number of cases, Venezuela stands out for at least two distinct reasons, compared to neighboring countries. Firstly, testing capacity has been both low and unreliable. Secondly, as patients have been subject to harsh measures, such as being forced into isolation centers, many who suspect that they have contracted the virus choose not to be tested. Authoritative sources have suggested that the number of cases is likely to be many times higher than official data suggests.⁴

On March 12, the national government declared a public health emergency, which was quickly followed

up by a string of strict measures to prevent a further spread. This included a quarantine that was quickly expanded to the entire country and held in place until a reopening process started in May. In the following months, the government pursued different strategies of opening and closing. As the health system had already collapsed prior to the spread of COVID-19, the capacity of the country's health system to treat patients during a pandemic was virtually non-existent. In February 2020, there was only 102 ventilators in Venezuela. Hospitals and health clinics have long suffered from chronic shortages.⁵ Moreover, crippling, recurring outages in both water and electricity supply severely affect both health services and the broader containment effort.

Taking the state of basic services into account, the swift and draconian measures implemented by the government were not surprising. However, neither the Venezuelan government's response nor the dynamics of citizen-state relations can be isolated from the overall political situation in the country. From March until the present moment, the struggle of the Venezuelan government has been a dual one, as it has simultaneously faced a pandemic and worked to consolidate its grip on political life, which in years prior had been fundamentally challenged.

Framework: Capacity, legitimacy, and varieties of power

As it became clear that the spread of COVID-19 would develop into a global pandemic, scholars from a wide array of disciplines have attempted to interpret the ways its spread affects the relationship between citizen and state. In an essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Francis Fukuyama outlines three determinants for succeeding in the "political stress test" that is the short- and long-term handling of the pandemic, namely state capacity, legitimacy, and leadership:

Countries with capable, legitimate governments will come through relatively well and may embrace reforms that make them even stronger and more resilient, thus facilitating their future outperformance. Countries with weak state capacity or poor leadership will be in trouble, set for stagnation, if not impoverishment and instability. The problem is that the second group greatly outnumber the first (Fukuyama 2020).

Since Max Weber introduced a framework of understanding the legitimacy of states, the concept has been considered a normative-subjective one; a political regime is legitimate when its authority is recognized as the appropriate one (Weber 1978, 212–14). However, as argued by David Beetham, the sources of legitimacy may vary greatly with regime type, and the modes of popular consent vary with the regime's claim to authority.

Applying the lens of domination of James C. Scott (1990), Beetham argues that compliance may not primarily be a result of beliefs in the regime's rightful authority. Rather, the regime can achieve subordination through an "impression of impregnable power, which it is pointless to resist" (2001, 108). If successful, the regime may reap a key benefit associated with legitimacy – compliance – without closing the legitimacy gap.

In Fukuyama's argument, there is also a presumed connection between regime legitimacy and another determinant factor, namely state capacity.⁶ This connection has been highlighted in evaluations of the pandemic response, both in polities with high and eroding legitimacy. In democratic societies where trust is high, a successful management may not only stem from high capacity, but also from the ability to balance the legitimation of strategies with the employment of resources. In societies where institutional capacity is high but legitimacy low, other types of capacity, such as that of civil society, may replace key containment functions at a time when governmental initiatives are lagging behind.⁷

Given that neither legitimacy nor state capacity are monolithic concepts, it becomes necessary to apply a framework for understanding such dynamics in various political contexts. One much-discussed framework is found in the works of sociologist Michael Mann (1984, 1986; 1993; 2012a; 2012b), who distinguishes between ideological power, economic power, military power, and political power. Furthermore, recognizing that the state may have the capacity both to impose its will both on and through civil society, Mann applies a distinction between "despotic power" and "infrastructural power." While the former refers to the ability of the state to impose its will through distributive, often

repressive mechanisms, infrastructural powers refers to the ability to penetrate societal sectors and impose its will through them.

This distinction is highly relevant for the discussion on legitimacy and state capacities. Drawing on very different sources, the two meanings of power enables an analysis on differentiated degrees of state capacities, and on how legitimacy underpins them. Despotic power may be applied regardless of a regime's legitimacy. The ability of a state to implement decisions through civil society, on the other hand, is contingent on questions of negotiation or compliance.

Venezuela before the crisis

Both the democratic credentials and the economic sustainability of the Venezuelan regime has been a source of debate since the ascendance of Hugo Chávez to the presidency in 1999. While his legacy is both many-faceted and contested, two overarching developments are particularly relevant for the following discussion. Firstly, the chavista order mixed elements of participatory democracy with centralization of political power to the executive branch, eroding the independence of other institutions. Secondly, following a massive increase in revenues from the country's oil sector, the Chávez government turned state institutions and the national oil company, PDVSA, into tools for the fulfillment of a social transformation.

The reforms allowed Chávez to draw upon a range of new sources of power, transforming the power networks that had been critical in Venezuelan political development.⁸ The chavista regime slowly eroded counterweights to the government, thereby consolidating political power. Chávez also ensured that the regime was a dominating actor in economic networks, controlling PDVSA, the Central Bank, and imposing a strict control of currency exchange.

In terms of military power, dissenting networks proved to be an early formidable challenge for the Chávez regime. Nevertheless, through a process of politicization of the upper echelons of the armed forces and expansion of the military's role in civilian life through a "civil-military alliance," the role of the military, and the regime's control over it, expanded.

Soon after the death of Hugo Chávez, after Nicolás Maduro's takeover in 2013, Venezuela entered what has become the worst crisis suffered by any country outside of wartime in recent history. Between 2013 and 2019, Venezuela saw a reduction in GDP of 60 percent, turning the country into one of the poorest in the hemisphere.

Although the crisis was spurred by a fall in oil prices, the depth and longevity of the crisis indicates that its cause cannot be explained by the global oil glut alone. A long history of mismanagement and an unwillingness to reform an ineffective management of the oil sector has also contributed to a dramatic fall in both production and income. From 2017, sanctions imposed by the United States have also had a profound effect on the Venezuelan economy.⁹

Aside from diminishing oil output, the combination of mismanagement, corruption, failed economic policies, and sanctions has also transformed the workings of the Venezuelan economy, contributing to its further straining and criminalization.¹⁰ Moreover, as the economic room of maneuver crumbled, the Maduro government transferred considerable economic power to military institutions and commanders, giving them an increasingly pivotal role in both legal and illegal economic activity.¹¹

Although the government has progressively seen its economic power worsen, the regime had, in the months prior the outbreak of COVID-19, managed to quell another fundamental threat to its existence, through the consolidation of its control over the country's political system.

As a result of the economic and social crisis, the electoral competitiveness of the Maduro regime quickly diminished, and its attempt to hold on to power increasingly involved authoritarian tactics to exclude the opposition from political life. This process culminated in May 2018, when the government applied a range of tactics to ensure Maduro's victory in an election boycotted by main opposition actors. The elections also spurred a reaction from the opposition culminating in January 2019, when the National Assembly, with an opposition majority, first declared Maduro's presidency to be illegitimate before appointing opposition leader Juan Guaidó as the rightful president.

While Guaidó's claim was recognized by both a majority of Latin American countries, the European Union, and the United States, the opposition strategy did not achieve its ultimate objective, namely to put enough pressure on the regime to ensure its disintegration. As months passed without more signs of internal division within the regime, the opposition's ability to mobilize for demonstrations and

strikes dwindled, as did the personal popularity of Guaidó.

When COVID-19 entered Venezuela, the Maduro government seemed to have acquired a peculiar amalgam of power resources. Its economic power had been decimated. Its military power is contingent on a powerful coalition that is for now loyal to the government, but with the capacity to operate independently from it. Its political power was, however, stronger than at any point in the last few years. This has not been because of rising legitimacy, as a vast majority of Venezuelans reject both the government and its claim to have won democratic elections. Nor was it because of increasing state capacity to deliver services. Rather, corresponding to Scott's argument detailed above, the vast majority of Venezuelans seemed to have recognized that political change seemed increasingly unviable in the short-term.

Varieties of power in Venezuela under COVID-19

As described above, the first suspected cases of COVID-19 in Venezuela were met with a range of draconian measures similar to other Latin American countries, including the declaration of a national emergency and a lockdown followed by partial liberalization. Its enforcement has demonstrated that the Venezuelan government, while having little capacity to provide services, is able to mobilize the resources to enforce preventive measures on a massive scale.

The measures have also been accompanied by considerable repression, which differed in nature from that of previous years.¹² In some cases, it has been broad, drawing on both security and para-governmental groups to maintain order.¹³ It is, however, noteworthy that the government also pursued strategies of more targeted persecution.

The government has, for instance, scaled up its efforts to control the information flow. This is in line with a policy going several years back. However, while previous attempts to bloc opposition and dissenting websites have been directed at news sites, the government have also blocked independent sites covering the spread of the coronavirus exclusively. This indicated that the primary motivation was not only directed at political dissent but rather to ensure that the government narrative was not contested. This interpretation is further strengthened by the regime's rhetoric and actions against health workers and independent research institutions. In May, chavista leader Diosdado Cabello accused the Venezuela Academy of Sciences of spreading public fear: "It is time for the security agencies to visit these people," he stated.¹⁴

The government's clearest advantage was only linked to a virtual monopoly over the response effort. It also managed to make use of the crisis to strengthen its infrastructural power without having to resort to repression campaigns often associated with despotic power. As pointed out by Félix Seijas Rodríguez, the containment efforts gave the government "the perfect excuse to exert even more control over public movement and keep any pressure contained."¹⁵

This was a clear advantage as new elections were nearing. On December 6, 2020, the government facilitated elections for the National Assembly, which in prior years served as the primary institutional counterweight to the regime. Internally divided and unable to mobilize in the, partly because of the pandemic and partly because of the lack of success when pressuring for regime change in years prior, the opposition was not in a position to effectively counter the challenge from the regime. A push from the government, through its grasp on the judicial branch, to coopt the party apparatus of several former opposition parties also created the appearance of an "official opposition," further complicated the political panorama.

The December elections were, like the May 2018 presidential run, considered illegitimate both by a large part of the international community and the vast majority of the electorate. Following a boycott by large parts of the opposition, the participation rate of 30.5 percent indicates that elections have become a consolidation tool for the regime coalition. As the new members take their seats in January 2020, the National Assembly will almost exclusively consist of regime loyalists.¹⁶

Lastly, although the economic situation of the government is a desperate one, its economic power vis-a-vis citizens seems to have been profoundly affected by the pandemic. As both income and remittances from family abroad have plummeted, an increasing number of people have turned to state programs for survival. Encovi, considered to be the most reliable survey over living conditions in Venezuela, notes that the share of Venezuelans dependent on programs in the first months of the pandemic doubled.¹⁷ The increasing reliance on government programs is an example of how the Maduro government may

convert infrastructural power into political capital. In previous elections, the regime has made use of different strategies to ensure participation in elections by linking food distribution programs to voting, a tendency also visible in the December 2020 elections.

Concluding remarks

As 2020 comes to a close, the Maduro government, through the application of a mix of despotic power and infrastructural power, containing both military, political and economic dimensions, will be in a stronger position vis-a-vis both the organized opposition and civil society than in many years.

The government, possessing very few means to provide an effective crisis response, has been able to exploit the pandemic to strengthen its position. It has done so without having had to resort, as in previous years, to large-scale violent repression. It has been possible because although the pandemic has weakened the government, it has weakened the capacity of other political actors, and of individual citizens, more.

Although an extreme case, observing developments in Venezuela should lead us to question some of the initial takes on state-citizen relations under a pandemic. Rather than operating with abstract concepts such as capacity or legitimacy as key determinants of how a pandemic will affect a country, applying a finely grained analysis of power structures, and the sources of power of actors, may provide a better compass to navigate through the tumultuous realities of citizen-state relations in 2020. This is especially true for authoritarian regimes, where legitimacy and capacity are contingent on the motivation of the regime.

Lastly, a key point of some observers commenting on COVID-19, the fear of instability, should be commented upon. While a successful handling of the pandemic may be contingent on political stability, it also represents an opportunity for some regimes to consolidate their power, despite a massive rejection by citizens. Political stability may, in some cases, prove to be a curse rather than a blessing.

Endnotes

1. For an in-depth overview of Venezuela's crisis, see Benedicte Bull and Antulio Rosales. 2020b. "The Crisis in Venezuela: Drivers, Transitions, and Pathways." *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, no. 109 (April): 1–20. For recent statistical surveys detailing the deteriorating living conditions, see the Encovi project, (<https://www.proyectoencovi.com/informe-interactivo-2019>).
2. See, for instance, Daniels, Joe Parkin. 2020. "Under Cover of Coronavirus, Maduro Is Consolidating Control." *Foreign Policy*. August 10, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/10/coronavirus-maduro-consolidating-control-venezuela/>.
3. For an overview of the trajectory of COVID-19 and response efforts in Latin America, see Gonzalez, Elisabeth, et al. 2020. "The Coronavirus in Latin America," AS/COA. November 18, 2020. <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/coronavirus-latin-america>
4. Assessing the actual scope of the abovementioned gap is a challenge. The Venezuelan academy of Physics, Mathematics and Natural Sciences (Acfiman) suggests that the number of cases was six times higher than the official count. See Pulgarín, Jovan. "Academia de Ciencias: en Venezuela se están infectando 7000 personas cada día por coronavirus," *El Estímulo*. September 9, 2020. <https://elestimulo.com/academia-ciencias-informe-coronavirus-venezuela-acfiman/>
5. See Paniz-Mondolfi, Alberto, Emilia Sordillo, Marlianna Márquez-Colmenarez, A Delgado-Noguera, and Alfonso Rodríguez-Morales. 2020. "The Arrival of SARS-CoV-2 in Venezuela." *The Lancet* 395 (10236): e85–86. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31053-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31053-9).
6. Despite being frequently invoked, state capacity nevertheless "remains a concept in search of precise definition and measurement" (Hendrix 2010). While some stress a state's ability to maintain control over its territory, other interpretations highlight the civilian aspects of "governance," i.e. a state's "ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services, regardless whether a government is democratic or not" (Fukuyama 2013, 350).
7. For the case of a democratic high-trust society, Norway, see Christensen, Tom, and Per Lægveid. 2020. "Balancing Governance Capacity and Legitimacy-how the Norwegian Government Handled the COVID-19 Crisis as a High Performer." *Public Administration Review*. For the case of a low-trust society with high capacity, see Chaskin, Robert J. 2001. "Building Community Capacity: A Definitional Framework and Case Studies from a Comprehensive Community Initiative." *Urban Affairs Review* 36 (3): 291–323.

8. For an analysis of power networks in Venezuela using Mann's framework, see Smilde, David. 2017. "From Partial to Full Conflict Theory: A Neo-Weberian Portrait of the Battle for Venezuela." *Latin America since the Left Turn*, 138–64. See also See Bull, Benedicte, and Antulio Rosales. 2020a. "Nuevo escenario global: COVID-19 y perspectivas para una salida negociada en Venezuela." *Análisis Carolina*, no. 31: 1.
9. The United States is not the only country that in recent years have imposed sanctions on Venezuelan officials or entities. However, the sanctions of most other countries are seen as less consequential for the economic situation in Venezuelan, as they primarily target individuals.
10. For a detailed overview of this development, see Bull, Benedicte and Antulio Rosales. 2020. "Into the Shadows: Sanctions, Rentierism, and Economic Informalization in Venezuela." *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, no. 109 (May): 107–33.
11. While multiple authors have described this tendency, an updated portrayal may be found in Corrales, Javier. 2020. "Authoritarian Survival: Why Maduro Hasn't Fallen." *Journal of Democracy* 31 (3): 39–53.
12. For an overview of government repression in Venezuela under COVID-19, see CEPAZ. 2020. "Persecución política en tiempos de pandemia." https://cepaz.org/documentos_informes/persecucion-politica-en-tiempos-de-pandemia-primer-trimestre-de-la-cuarentena-venezuela-2020-2/
13. During the lockdown in Caracas, government-sponsored armed groups ensured complacency in popular neighborhoods. See Contrapunto. 2020. "Provea denuncia que presuntos policias o colectivos les caen a batazos a quienes incumplen cuarentena en Caracas." July 22, 2020. <https://contrapunto.com/nacional/derechos-humanos/provea-denuncia-que-presuntos-policias-o-colectivos-les-caen-a-batazos-a-quienes-incumplen-cuarentena-en-caracas/>
14. Europapress. 2020. "Cabello amenaza a la Academia de Ciencias de Venezuela por un informe que dice la pandemia sería mayor." May 14, 2020. <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-cabello-amenaza-academia-ciencias-venezuela-informe-dice-pandemia-seria-mayor-20200514124409.html>
15. Rodríguez, Félix. 2020. "Amid Crisis, Venezuela's Maduro Deepens Control." *Americas Quarterly*. <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/amid-crisis-venezuelas-maduro-deepens-control/>
16. For a concise summary of the elections, see Martinez Gugerli, Kristen. 2020. "Is the Guaidó Coalition Fated to be a Government in Exile." December 10, 2020. <https://www.venezuelablog.org/is-the-guaido-coalition-fated-to-be-a-government-in-exile/>
17. See the Encovi project (<https://www.proyectoencovi.com/informe-interactivo-2019>).

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About the authors

Peder Østebø is a Graduate Research Fellow with the Global Order and Diplomacy Research Group at NUPI. He holds a master's degree in political science from the University of Oslo, and is currently a master student of global history at the Free University of Berlin and the Humboldt University of Berlin.



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Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
C.J. Hambros plass 2D
PB 7024 St. Olavs Plass, 0130 OSLO, Norway
www.nupi.no | post@nupi.no

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