

Venezuela's Tyrannical Governance

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Executive Summary

Since 1999, Venezuela has been ruled by Chavismo, first under Hugo Chávez and then Nicolás Maduro, creating one of the most entrenched authoritarian regimes in the region. Under the guise of “Bolivarian” socialism, the regime has concentrated power, undermined democratic institutions, and relied on illegal armed groups and transnational criminal networks to maintain control.

Human rights abuses—including arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, and systematic repression—are pervasive, driving over eight million Venezuelans to flee the country.

Maduro's government aligns closely with Colombian President Gustavo Petro and the El Pacto Histórico coalition. Both regimes share structural similarities: populist narratives, dependence on armed actors, and consolidation of political power through networks that undermine democracy. In Colombia, initiatives such as the “Total Peace” process have legitimized criminal actors, further blurring the line between governance and coercion.

Venezuelans face little hope of democratic restoration from within. After more than 25 years of dictatorship, external intervention may be the only viable path to protect human rights, restore democratic institutions, and enable the nearly nine million refugees to return safely.

Immediate, decisive action is essential to counter the convergence of authoritarianism, criminal influence, and foreign complicity that sustains Venezuela's tyranny.

Since 1999, Venezuela has been under the uninterrupted rule of Chavismo, a political movement launched by Hugo Chávez through the so-called “Bolivarian Revolution.” Chávez's rise, following his December 1998 election victory and February 1999 inauguration, marked the beginning of a new era in Venezuelan

politics. While presenting itself as a movement rooted in the ideals of Simón Bolívar and “21st-century socialism,” Chavismo's endurance reflects far more than ideology. It has relied on centralized authority, coercive mechanisms, and populist strategies that have systematically hollowed out Venezuela's institutions.

Chávez established a left-wing populist model that concentrated power around his office, undermining judicial independence, legislative oversight, and other democratic checks and balances. Inclusion was framed as participation, yet genuine democratic accountability was absent.

Recent elections have *reinforced* this pattern: they were marred by irregularities, lack of transparency, and restrictions on opposition participation, with independent observers reporting fraud, manipulated results, and voter repression. This further deepens the institutional crisis and erodes public trust in the possibility of democratic change.

Following Chávez's death in 2013, Nicolás Maduro assumed leadership and escalated this authoritarian trajectory. Under Maduro, institutional autonomy has eroded further, human rights violations have intensified, and extrajudicial practices—including reliance on illegal armed groups and cross-border criminal networks—have become embedded in state functioning.

Reports suggest links to regional criminal organizations and, in some cases, transnational terrorist networks, illustrating the regime's dependence on illicit power structures to maintain control.

Chávez and Maduro cultivated strategic political alignments abroad, notably with Colombian President Gustavo Petro and his coalition, El Pacto Histórico. Between 2018 and 2022, Petro and several of his allies, including former mayors of Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín, openly supported Maduro's government—a stance they continue to maintain.

Both regimes exhibit striking similarities: reliance on populist narratives, engagement with illegal armed groups, and consolidation of political influence through criminal networks.

In Colombia, initiatives such as the “Total Peace” process have granted these groups unprecedented political legitimacy, blurring distinctions between governance and criminality. Petro’s public characterization of certain armed actors as “brothers” echoes Maduro’s rhetoric, effectively minimizing the recognition of Venezuelans and Colombians as victims of state and criminal violence.

The humanitarian toll in Venezuela is severe. The state’s reliance on armed groups has entrenched repression as a central policy. More than nine million Venezuelans have fled the country, while three million reside in Colombia, often registered only as “tourists” by official statistics.

Human rights abuses under Maduro are *systematic*, including arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, and suppression of free association. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights’ 2025 report highlights ongoing violations, including politically motivated arrests of opposition figures and human rights defenders, denial of basic services in detention, and systemic discrimination against women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and victims of gender-based violence.

Internationally, the Maduro regime has received support from allies including Colombia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and, to some extent, Spain.

This alignment, coupled with the regime’s entrenchment in criminal and armed networks—both domestically and across borders—reinforces authoritarian control and precludes meaningful political negotiation.

In Colombia, Petro’s engagement with these networks has strengthened his political

coalition and positioned it as a dominant force ahead of upcoming elections, while simultaneously undermining institutional independence and democratic norms.

For nearly a quarter of a century, Venezuela has lived under a dictatorship. The convergence of political power, organized crime, and foreign alignment leaves Venezuelans with few internal remedies.

Democratic restoration will require decisive action, including potential international intervention, to protect the rights of millions of citizens who desire a secure and legitimate democratic transition.

History demonstrates that enduring authoritarian regimes rarely relinquish power voluntarily, underscoring the urgent need for external engagement to restore freedom, accountability, and the rule of law.

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