

Introduction: Authoritarianism and Violence in Venezuela

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After 22 years of Chavismo-Madurismo rule, Venezuela is now in its deepest crisis since the transition to democracy in 1958 (Bull and Rosales, 2020). The country is ranked as the least peaceful country in the region and one of the least peaceful countries in the world (ranked 152 out of 163 countries). Above all, the increase in political terror is seen as the main driver of the deterioration of peace in Venezuela over the past year (IEP, 2021).

Already, back in 2012, Scott Mainwaring introduced his review essay with the statement: ‘[c]ontemporary Venezuela raises fascinating questions about the collapse of a highly institutionalised party system and the erosion or breakdown of what had been the third-oldest democracy outside of the advanced industrial democracies’ (Mainwaring, 2012: 955). Since then, decisions at the highest levels of government have resulted in the Venezuelan regime now being classified as a hardliner autocracy (Donner, 2020; Corrales, 2020a). The principle of political pluralism has been distorted and destroyed and political coercion and election rigging have become the rule (Briceño León, 2021; Corrales, 2020a, 2020b; Jiménez and Hidalgo, 2014; Landau, 2018: 161–162; OEV, 2020; OEV, 2021). Yet, these regressions and grievances did not occur suddenly, but had been ongoing since Chávez’s time in office (Brewer-Carías, 2010; Guerra, 2013; Walsh, 2019). The ongoing process of institutional erosion, which included the judiciary, has paved the way for violence and corruption. This development has serious implications. Among the most striking features of the current regime, in addition to its deliberate disregard for democratic institutions and the rule of law, are blatant crimes against humanity, including systematic extrajudicial executions and torture (HRC, 2020; ICC, 2021; IEP, 2021: 19).

This special issue is dedicated to deepening the reader’s understanding of the multi-dimensional scope of the entanglement of authoritarianism and violence in Venezuela. Starting from different theoretical approaches to the explanation of authoritarianism and violence, the individual contributions of this special issue focus on subsequent topics:

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- (i) autocracy and democracy promotion - the role of extra-regional actors,
- (ii) authoritarian gravity centres,
- (iii) state, criminal actors and mining, and
- (iv) autocratisation and police counter-reform.

The first article by Susanne Gratius examines the importance of extra-regional actors in the current political power struggle in Venezuela. A distinction is made between the promotion of democracy versus autocracy by external actors. Through a comparative analysis of the supporters of democracy (EU, US) and the promoters of autocracy (China, Cuba, Russia), Gratius creates a deeper understanding of the role and interests of each actor, as well as interactions with the Maduro regime and the relationship with the opposition faction under Guaidó.

Also looking at autocracy promotion, but with Latin America in focus, Marianne Kneuer examines the role of Venezuela during Chávez's rule. Kneuer provides a crucial contribution to the broader contextualisation and understanding of the so-called Left Turn in the region during the first decade of the 21st century in Latin America. While there are numerous studies on Venezuela as an example for a supposed 'promotion of participatory democracy', there is little specific research and publications on Venezuela as an autocracy promoter. This research gap is filled by this in-depth researched and detailed article, which makes important empirical and theoretical contributions to the topic.

In 2016, President Maduro enacted the Orinoco Mining Act, which opened 12 percent of the country to mining interests. While Venezuela's economy continues to free-fall, the illicit trade in rare earths and gold generates enormous illicit wealth that not only enriches violent criminal actors, but also supports corrupt state officials, and is crucial in propping up the regime as a whole. Bram Ebus and Thomas Martinelli explore this topic and provide insights into the extent to which violent disputes between groups competing for control over mineral-rich areas cause conflicts at the local and regional level. On the basis of their empirical findings, they show that in these conflicts, state and criminal actors often clash violently, but can also get along.

Finally, Stiven Tremaria examines the links between police counter-reform and autocratic consolidation from Chávez to Maduro. Through an in-depth examination using the indicators of politicisation, militarisation and outsourcing of policing after the 2006 police reform, Tremaria concludes that counter-reform went hand in hand with autocratic consolidation of the Venezuelan regime.

In their totality, the articles in this special issue point to the need to examine more closely content that has so far been treated predominantly separately in the literature. Accordingly, we have highlighted selected central features of the current authoritarian regime and its violence-promoting effects.

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