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## **The Authoritarian Resurgence**

*Lilia Shevtsova* on Russia ■ *Javier Corrales* on Venezuela  
*Abbas Milani*/*Alex Vatanka* on Iran ■ *Frederic Wehrey* on Saudi Arabia

## **Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement**

*Michael C. Davis* ■ *Victoria Tin-bor Hui*

## **The Freedom House Survey for 2014**

*Arch Puddington*

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*Zoltan Barany* on Transitions from Military Rule  
*Yun-han Chu* & *Bridget Welsh* on East Asia's Millennials  
*Elisabete Azevedo-Harman* on Mozambique  
*Pierre Englebert* on Zimbabwe  
*Harley Balzer* on Vladimir Putin

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## **Transitional Justice and Its Discontents**

*Duncan McCargo*

# The Authoritarian Resurgence

## AUTOCRATIC LEGALISM IN VENEZUELA

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The concept of hybrid regimes—those that exhibit both democratic and authoritarian features simultaneously—is by now well established in the field of comparative politics. Hybrid regimes are sometimes called “competitive authoritarian” because, while the ruling party competes in elections (usually winning), the president is granted an array of autocratic powers that erode checks and balances. Such regimes are now common across the developing world. If we use Freedom House’s classification of Partly Free as a proxy for hybrid regimes, then in 2014 they were slightly more common than classic authoritarian regimes.

The dynamics of hybrid regimes—why some remain stable over time while others become either more democratic or more autocratic—are less well understood. Venezuela under Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) is a case of a hybrid regime that rapidly moved toward increasing authoritarianism. In the *Freedom in the World* report for 1999–2000, Freedom House lowered Venezuela’s rating from Free to Partly Free. Venezuela’s turn toward greater autocracy accelerated over the years, reaching new levels under Chávez’s successor Nicolás Maduro (2013–present). Today, Venezuela ranks as the least free of all Partly Free regimes in Latin America.

This raises two questions. First, what are the *mechanisms* by which a competitive authoritarian regime turns more autocratic? By definition, a hybrid regime is one in which the executive branch concentrates powers to the detriment of nonstate and opposition actors. But what else needs to happen for us to say that it has turned more autocratic? This essay examines Venezuela since 1999 to show how such a transformation can

take place. My argument focuses on the use, abuse, and non-use of the rule of law.

Second, what were the *causes* of Venezuela's rapid move toward greater authoritarianism, especially in the last five years of *chavismo*? Drawing from my previous work (often in collaboration with other authors), I offer two basic arguments. One focuses on domestic factors: The ruling party's declining electoral competitiveness since the late 2000s, together with path dependence, helps to explain Venezuela's turn toward greater authoritarianism. The other focuses on foreign policy: By 2010, Venezuela had succeeded in creating a foreign policy that shielded it from international pressures. Although other factors were no doubt at play, these two served as the most essential drivers.

During Chávez's presidency, Venezuela became the paradigmatic Latin American case of competitive authoritarianism. The ruling party, known since 2007 as the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), competes in elections against a legal multiparty opposition, as one would expect in a democracy. At the same time, the PSUV helps the executive branch to weaken checks and balances, treat the opposition unfavorably, and reduce the autonomy of civil society. Over the years, the regime's autocratic practices have become more pronounced.

### Three Key Elements

The primary mechanism facilitating Venezuela's increasing authoritarianism could be termed "autocratic legalism." Autocratic legalism has three key elements: the *use*, *abuse*, and *non-use* (in Spanish, *desuso*) of the law in service of the executive branch.

Let us begin with the *use* of autocratic laws. Since it first came to power, the ruling party has taken advantage of its dominance in the country's legislative bodies (the 1999 Constituent Assembly, the 1999–2000 "small congress" or *congresillo*, and the 2000–present national legislature), in conjunction with its total control of the Supreme Court since 2005, to enact laws that empower the executive branch at the expense of other branches of government. By the time of Hugo Chávez's death in March 2013, there were many such autocratic laws on the books:

- 1) The *1999 Constitution*, despite many democratic innovations, increased the power of the president: It eliminated the Senate (an important veto player); banned public funding for political organizations (which is interpreted to mean political parties); and empowered the president to call for referendums to recall legislators, dissolve the legislature under certain conditions, and propose constitutional amendments and rewrites.

- 2) *Enabling laws* grant the president the right to rule by decree. The *chavista*-dominated legislature passed enabling laws four times under

Chávez—in 1999, 2000, 2007, and 2010—and one time (so far) under Maduro—in 2013.

3) The *Organic Law of Telecommunications* (2000) allows the government to suspend or revoke broadcasting concessions to private outlets if it is “convenient for the interests of the nation, or if public order and security demand it.” This law was modified in 2011 to include all audiovisual production (including cable TV) and to reduce concessions to radio networks from 25 to 15 years.

4) The *Law for Social Responsibility* (2004) bans the broadcasting of material that could incite or promote hatred and violence. It was extended in 2010 to apply to the Internet. Accordingly, electronic media may not transmit messages that “foment anxiety in the public or disturb public order,” “incite or promote disobedience to the current legal order,” “refuse to recognize legitimately constituted authority,” or “incite or promote hatred or intolerance.”

5) The *2005 penal-code reform* expanded the *desacato* (insult) law, which makes it illegal to be “disrespectful of government officials,” to cover an even greater number of officials to whom this law applies. It also seriously restricted the use of public spaces for protesting.

6) *Laws governing “communal councils”* (the Organic Law of Popular Power [2010], the Organic Law of Public Planning [2010], the Organic Law of Social Auditing [2010], and the Organic Law of Comunes [2010]) provide public funding and legal prerogatives to these ill-defined bodies, which are required to work with the state to offer services, carry out public works, and participate in community development. In doing so, they often supersede the roles of elected mayors and municipal councils. None of these laws requires the councils to hold competitive elections for their representatives.

7) The *Law for the Defense of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination* (2010) blocks Venezuelan human-rights defenders from receiving international assistance. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that “defend political rights” or “monitor the performance of public bodies” are barred from receiving any foreign funding. Foreigners invited to Venezuela by such groups can be summarily expelled from the country if they express opinions that “offend the institutions of state, top officials or attack the exercise of sovereignty.” The NGOs could face stiff fines, and their directors could lose their right to run for public office for up to eight years.

8) The *Law Against Illicit Exchange Transactions* (2010) grants the government a monopoly over all currency trades, including government bonds. Foreign currency from exports must be sold to the Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV) at the official exchange rate. The law also bans “offers” in foreign currency made between Venezuelan entities or individuals for the sale of goods and services.

9) The *Law of Partial Reform of the Law of Political Parties, Meet-*

*ings and Protests* (2011) bans deputies from any conduct that departs from the “political orientation and positions” adopted by their party during election times. This law is intended to deter legislators from voting in opposition to the party line.

10) The *Organic Law of Fair Prices* (2014) is an update to the 2011 Law of Fair Costs and Prices, which legalized the regime’s broad system of price controls and essentially did away with the price system. The 2014 version stiffened the earlier law, expanding the number of infractions to include the reselling of “essential” merchandise and the commission of acts causing “economic destabilization.” It also bans profits over 30 percent. Sanctions include fees, imprisonment, confiscation of assets, and the like. Furthermore, with the addition of “economic destabilization”—which can be interpreted to mean even the spreading of a rumor—the law expands the subjective justifications that the state can invoke in order to sanction private agents. Since 2011, this law has also been one of the main causes of shortages and informal markets, and an often used justification for cracking down on the private sector.

Venezuela’s arsenal of autocratic laws exhibits two features. First, the autocratic aspect of these laws is not always overt. It is often buried among an array of clauses or articles that empower citizens or other political groups, and these surrounding clauses encourage empowered groups to support these laws, at least initially. But there is always one clause that ends up empowering the executive branch far more than other actors, which is what makes these laws so autocratic. Second, these laws have been enacted in a constitutional manner, at least insofar as they have been duly approved by constitutionally sanctioned processes. This paradox poses a twofold problem for the opposition: 1) Such laws bolster the state’s capacity to control nonstate actors, and 2) they cannot be easily challenged because they have emerged through constitutional channels.

### **Abusing the Law: “Communicational Hegemony”**

The second element of autocratic legalism is the *abuse* of the law, meaning the inconsistent and biased implementation of laws and regulations. In Venezuela, this has occurred in many domains, but is especially salient in the media world, and it helps to explain how, under Chávez, the balance between private independent media and government-controlled media shifted in favor of the latter. Today, an ordinary Venezuelan with little access to the Internet is more likely to be exposed to public or pro-PSUV media, which is usually more easily available and economically accessible than private independent media. The consequence has been a significant decline in press pluralism. This shift in the media, known locally as “communicational hegemony,” has been a deliberate strategy of *chavismo*.<sup>1</sup>

**TABLE 1—INDEPENDENT PRINT AND TV MEDIA (PERCENTAGE)**

	1998	2014
<b>Print</b>		
All newspapers nationwide	100%	56%
Of which, local and regional newspapers	100%	49%
<b>Television</b>		
All television channels nationwide	88%	46%
Of which, local and regional channels	50%	39%

*Note:* Independent means 1) privately owned; 2) covering politics; 3) not communitarian; and 4) not systematically censoring information that is favorable to the opposition. Source: See endnote 2.

By 2014, through the use and abuse of the law, communicational hegemony was extensive in both print media and television. For instance, in 1998, there were 89 newspapers in Venezuela.<sup>2</sup> All were private and independent. By 2014, Venezuela had 102 newspapers, of which 56 percent were privately owned; 8 percent were state-owned; 15 percent were “not independent,” meaning that they systematically leaned pro-PSUV; and 22 percent were “undetermined,” meaning that they were either too small or unavailable online to determine their orientation.<sup>3</sup> State-owned newspapers are atypical in democracies. In Venezuela, they are also overtly biased. While the private press is often criticized for being too prone to *denuncias* (accusations)—seen as both a sign of its non-neutrality and proof of the presence of democracy in Venezuela—a state-owned press that systematically censors positive information about actors other than the state is no indication of democratic vitality. The Maduro administration is committed to continuing the policy of expanding the public press. It has already established public newspapers in the cities of Valencia, Maracay, Cojedes, Guárico, and Petare, and in 2014 the president stated that he wanted to have one in every town.

The shrinking of independent media is even starker in the realm of television. In 1998, there were 24 television channels nationwide, of which only 3 were public (and they were nonbiased). In 2014, there were 105 TV channels, but only 46 percent were private. (If one looks at local channels alone, the decline in the share of independent media is less steep, from 50 percent in 1998 to 39 percent in 2014.) State-owned channels now account for 17 percent of all television channels (14 percent if one looks only at local and regional television channels). In addition, under *chavismo* a new category emerged—“communitarian channels,” located mostly in smaller cities, accounting for 37 percent of television stations in 2014. Communitarian channels technically are supposed to be independent, and many of them struggle to assert some autonomy vis-à-vis the state.<sup>4</sup> But only progovernment channels receive state funding and support. Given that there are few other funding sources, communitarian channels inevitably end up complying with state directives.

Venezuela's rising communicational hegemony has come about as a result of both the *use* and *abuse* of the law.<sup>5</sup> The government has used existing regulations to set up public newspapers. Several of these circulate free of charge, easily displacing private competition—a practice that is within the law, but is meant to crowd out the independent media. The state also abuses the law by harassing many independent newspapers, imposing legal fines based on allegations of corruption or violation of the media law, or arbitrarily denying access to foreign exchange, which is necessary to buy paper. According to Reporters Without Borders, at least 37 newspapers have had to reduce circulation due to lack of paper.<sup>6</sup> Other tactics have included preventing state agencies from buying ads in targeted private newspapers; informally pressuring editors to publish the “right” stories; and banning reporters from covering government events. The regime's goal is to abuse the law to force private independent newspapers into financial distress, thereby encouraging cutbacks (as in the case of the daily *Tal Cual*, which had to scale back to weekly publication in early 2015) or even the sale of a paper to new owners (as with *El Universal*). If a newspaper's editorial line changes, the government will forgive the fines and grant it foreign exchange.

The same use and abuse of the law has been applied to television. The big decline in pluralism started in 2003, when Diosdado Cabello, the second most powerful *chavista* politician today and president of the National Assembly, took charge of the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel), the agency that regulates broadcast television and radio, and restructured media regulations. Conatel is now in charge of determining whether a station qualifies as a communitarian channel (and thus also whether it is eligible for state funding). Conatel has also targeted private television channels by arbitrarily refusing to renew their licenses (as with RCTV in 2007) or by levying excessive fees for supposed violations of the media law (as with Globovisión until 2013). In Venezuela, the only way that a television station can guarantee its financial survival is by staying out of politics—that is, by self-censoring (as Globovisión has done since it was sold to new owners in 2013) and refraining from coverage of political events (as Venevisión and Televén normally do).

This rise of state-owned and nonindependent media has had a clear effect on information availability. In January 2015, for example, the opposition held a major march in downtown Caracas. No television channel broadcast the march or speeches, continuing instead with regular programming. Later that day, Globovisión reported on the opposition leaders' statements, but for no more than five minutes. In contrast, most public television stations broadcast the one-hour-plus speech that Maduro delivered the same day. Globovisión showed Maduro's speech live for fifteen minutes. Venevisión and Televén did

not televise Maduro's speech, due to their tacit agreement with the state not to cover politics.

### The Non-Use of the Law: Electoral Irregularities

The third element of autocratic legalism is, paradoxically, reliance on illegality. This has been especially significant in electoral politics. One of Chávez's most important authoritarian legacies is an electoral environment plagued by irregularities and governed by a biased regulatory agency, the National Electoral Council (CNE). Indeed, in the sixteen elections held during the *chavista* era, by my count there have been more than 45 types of electoral irregularities, usually involving biased enforcement of electoral laws and often outright violations—for example, the government allows the PSUV to exceed spending or airtime limits; allows polling centers to stay open past their scheduled hours; arbitrarily bans candidates or observers; manipulates voting rules to the ruling party's advantage; cajoles state employees or welfare recipients to vote a certain way; harasses voters at the polls; threatens to deny funds to districts that elect opposition candidates; and conducts cursory audits of results.<sup>7</sup> Over time, some irregularities get corrected for good—often due to pressure from the opposition—but other types persist, and new irregularities tend to emerge with each new election.<sup>8</sup>

This irregularity-prone electoral environment has only deteriorated since Chávez's death in March 2013, beginning with the election for his successor the following month. In that contest, Maduro, who was then acting president, prevailed over his opponent, Henrique Capriles Radonski, by a mere 235,000 votes (a 1.5 percent margin). The opposition claimed that, in the run-up to the election and on election day itself, there were repeated and new irregularities (for example, PSUV sympathizers were seen escorting voters to polls under the pretense of assisting them; harassing electoral observers and voters; paying citizens to bring people to the polls; and maybe even engaging in fraud at a few polling centers), which gave Maduro his narrow victory. After the results were announced, protests broke out in Caracas and several other cities. The government put down the demonstrations; in the end, seven people were killed and dozens were injured. The opposition called for a full audit, which was refused (although the CNE did conduct an audit of the electronic tallies versus the paper ballots), and then—for the first time since 2005—the opposition challenged the election, formally calling for the election either to be annulled or done over in roughly 5,700 voting tables (in Venezuela, each voting table or *mesa electoral* is associated with a particular touchscreen voting machine).

That request was also denied, so the opposition made a futile attempt to take its fraud complaint to the Supreme Court. Venezuela's courts are a key element in the regime's *non-use* of the rule of law. High-

level judges have been overtly partisan since the government packed the courts in 2004, and many lower-level judges are untenured and are often penalized for ruling the wrong way. Furthermore, according to a recent study, not one of the 45,474 rulings issued by the Supreme Court since 2005 has gone against the government.<sup>9</sup> So it was no surprise that the Court dismissed the opposition's fraud suit.

While municipal elections the following December saw fewer cases of irregularities at the ballot box, they did see the full force of state power being leveraged in favor of PSUV candidates during the campaign period, including overspending and the illegal use of public funds and state media. Moreover, at the time of the election, the terms of three of the five members of the CNE—a body with only one nongovernment representative—had expired. With the 2013 elections, the Maduro administration showed that it had not only inherited Chávez's semi-authoritarian legacy, but was building on it.

The heightening of autocratic legalism under Maduro has proved destabilizing.<sup>10</sup> To begin with, in early 2014 the opposition split over how to respond to the faulty electoral process and the government's refusal to address irregularities, with one faction calling for and carrying out street protests. The outbreak of popular demonstrations led to the worst repression ever under *chavismo*, and perhaps under any elected government in the country's history.

Between February and April 2014, Venezuela was engulfed in demonstrations, first launched by university students in the small western cities of San Cristóbal and Mérida. The government harshly repressed the initial round of protests, which only triggered more—this time coordinated via social media, using the hashtag “#lasalida” (“the way out”). Opposition hard-liners, including Leopoldo López (a former mayor of the Chacao municipality of Caracas), María Corina Machado (an MP at the time), and Antonio Ledezma (the mayor of metropolitan Caracas), soon joined the fray, and the protest issues broadened to include the economic slowdown, food shortages, and unreliable public services, as well as rampant crime.

All told, roughly 800,000 people in at least sixteen states and 38 cities participated in protests for at least three months. Protesters set up street barricades in mostly middle-class neighborhoods; some demonstrators threw bottles, stones, and petrol bombs. The government sent in the National Guard and the national police to put down the demonstrations, and may have encouraged armed progovernment civilians (known as *colectivos*) to intimidate protesters.<sup>11</sup> According to a report by leading human-rights organizations, the government forcibly broke up 34 percent of these protests, far more than the most intense repression under Chávez (7 percent in 2009), and detained more than 3,100 people.<sup>12</sup>

More surprisingly, the government went after opposition leaders, not just ordinary protesters. López was arrested for “inciting violence,” de-

spite a lack of any evidence other than his writings in support of a change in government, which allegedly had “subliminally” incited the protesters. Machado was accused of treason for speaking at the OAS about human-rights abuses in Venezuela and was subsequently expelled from the National Assembly. She and other opposition leaders have even been accused of plotting to kill the president, and in December 2014 Machado was officially indicted for conspiracy and treason. Ledezma was arrested in late February 2015 on charges of plotting to overthrow the government.

### Domestic and International Factors

If the use, abuse, and non-use of the law account for the mechanics of Venezuela’s shift toward greater authoritarianism, what are the causes behind it? The main domestic driver is a combination of path dependence and declining electoral competitiveness, as Michael Penfold and I argue in our forthcoming second edition of *Dragon in the Tropics*. By path dependence, we mean that once sufficient domestic institutions are established to permit the state to govern in authoritarian ways, these institutions become the preferred instruments for making policy choices. Given that Chávez had already erected the framework and acquired the tools to facilitate government repression, the Maduro administration—because it had the necessary institutions, legal instruments, and a political ideology—naturally used them to crack down harder on the opposition.

But a second important reason for the heightening of authoritarianism is more systemic—namely, the decline in the ruling party’s electoral competitiveness. In the 2006 presidential election, Chávez defeated the opposition overwhelmingly with 63 percent of the vote. Since then, however, the opposition has been steadily gaining ground on the PSUV at the polls. The PSUV’s electoral decline slowed in the 2012 presidential election, the last one in which Chávez competed (he won 55 percent of the vote), but intensified immediately after Chávez’s death. In the April 2013 presidential election, Maduro won just 51 percent of the vote. Even though the PSUV performed much better in the December 2013 municipal elections, its gains were not substantial: If the votes for all the opposition parties are tallied together, the PSUV’s margin of victory was a mere 2.7 percentage points, a far cry from the double-digit margins that it enjoyed in the mid-2000s.

As the ruling party in a competitive authoritarian regime loses its ability to compete electorally, it has greater incentives to stress its authoritarian side as a means of survival. It should come as no surprise that a hybrid regime would opt to become more authoritarian when the traditional voter enticements that it needs to compete for the vote (ideological appeal, economic resources, policy innovation, and competent governance) are unavailable or are becoming exhausted. Together with the availabil-

ity of the tools of autocratic legalism, the PSUV's electoral decline is the most important cause for the intensification of repression under Maduro.

The second reason that Venezuela has managed to turn more authoritarian is the creation of an international shield.<sup>13</sup> During Chávez's presidency, Venezuela began using its foreign policy to build an "alliance of tolerance"—that is, an alliance of countries unwilling to criticize Venezuela, let alone join any international effort to sanction it for domestic wrongdoings. In essence, Venezuela used its oil resources to expand this alliance across Latin America and beyond. Between 2003 and 2012, the country's oil revenues vastly exceeded those of any other country in the region—accounting for more than 30 percent of Venezuela's GDP during that time.<sup>14</sup> But Venezuela has also experienced a steep decline in oil production since 2000.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, since then Venezuela has been one of the two OPEC members that have most strongly advocated maximizing oil prices, much to the frustration of oil-importing countries. In order to improve its reputation among oil importers and build Venezuela's "soft power," Chávez expanded foreign aid, which he touted as promoting a more pro-poor form of development than Western aid.<sup>16</sup>

### **Building an "Alliance of Tolerance"**

Chávez's best-known foreign-aid program is Petrocaribe. Formed in 2005, this trade deal allows seventeen small Caribbean and Central American countries to purchase subsidized oil from Venezuela under favorable financial terms. Compared to similar earlier agreements, Petrocaribe increased the number of country beneficiaries as well as the volume of oil that they receive, raised the price subsidy, and made repayment terms even more favorable for recipient countries. By 2013, Petrocaribe was supplying 59 percent of Cuba's total oil consumption, 93 percent of Haiti's, 70 percent of Nicaragua's, and 13 percent of El Salvador's.<sup>17</sup> Venezuela has similar oil-subsidy and soft-finance agreements with Argentina.<sup>18</sup>

Chávez's expansive economic aid extended beyond Petrocaribe in at least four additional domains: 1) allowing debt retirement, forgiveness, or tolerance for countries that have trouble paying their debts; 2) making Venezuela a major importer of goods and services (to the great benefit of Brazil and Colombia); 3) opening the oil and energy sectors to allied countries such as China, Brazil, Russia, and Iran; and 4) expanding international information services (namely, Telesur).

The flow of petroproducts, petrosubsidies, petrodollars, and petrocontracts from Venezuela to foreign countries won Chávez remarkable diplomatic support. Even though many countries disliked Chávez's policy of keeping oil prices high and frowned on the restriction of civil liberties inside Venezuela, his generous foreign economic aid was welcomed by recipients as well as ideologues who saw the aid policy as another example of the regime's commitment to anticapitalism.

Venezuela has also been known to threaten cutting economic ties with developed nations as a way to secure support. For example, in 2014 Venezuela was rumored to have pressured the Netherlands into blocking the extradition of Hugo Carvajal, the former head of Venezuelan military intelligence, from Aruba (a Caribbean-island country that is part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands) to the United States by threatening to ban Royal Dutch Shell and Unilever from operating in Venezuela. In February 2015, a Spanish daily reported that the Venezuelan government officially threatened several large Spanish multinationals with expropriation if they did not pressure the Spanish government to adopt a more pro-Venezuela policy.<sup>19</sup>

The establishment of Venezuela's alliance of tolerance was facilitated by the reluctance of Latin American governments, despite their commitment to human rights, to censure sitting presidents for their failings. Due in part to this regional reticence, the United States decided to take a stronger stand, declaring Venezuela a "national security threat" in March 2015, thereby paving the way to put sanctions on seven key Venezuelan officials. But Maduro will probably use this so-called U.S. aggression to his advantage in order to justify further state encroachments.

Not all of Venezuela's foreign-policy aims have been achieved. With Venezuela's foreign largesse, Chávez set out to do more than just establish an alliance of tolerance. He wanted not only to preempt foreign critics, but also to expand the number of like-minded regimes in the region. Venezuelan foreign aid has contributed directly to the electoral campaigns of *chavista*-like movements across Latin America (Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and El Salvador) and even outside the region (Spain), often with success. A recent study of Venezuela's influence in El Salvador shows how this petrodiplomacy works. Venezuelan aid helped El Salvador to establish Alba Petróleos, a state-owned company that distributes oil within the country. Alba Petróleos, which is run almost entirely by El Salvador's ruling party and therefore rarely audited, provides funding mostly to municipalities governed by ruling-party mayors and also spends heavily on social projects during electoral campaigns. The company does not always pay back its debts to Venezuela, which Venezuela condones (the alliance of tolerance works both ways).<sup>20</sup>

Despite some early successes (notably in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua), the strategy of using foreign aid to create clone regimes has backfired. In recent years, Venezuelan efforts to support particular political factions abroad have generated virulent counterreactions in countries such as Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Honduras, and Paraguay. Anti-*chavista* leaders became all the more popular, and leftist candidates began to disavow ties to *chavismo*. Furthermore, a number of Latin American notables, including five former Latin American presidents, have criticized Maduro's 2014–15 crackdown. In sum, Venezuela's effort to mold clone regimes has had mixed results at best, but its attempt to create an alliance of toler-

ance has been a major success, enabling Chávez to rule more autocratically without having to face much international criticism.

### **Beyond the Neighborhood**

One of Chávez's most important foreign-policy initiatives was the creation of the television news channel Telesur. Founded in 2005, Telesur is based in Caracas but broadcasts internationally. Its mission is to compete with "imperialist" news sources such as CNN and provide a "Latin American" and "south-oriented" perspective. Telesur offers a free-to-air signal, which means that it can be picked up by anyone with the appropriate equipment. According to the Venezuelan government, the channel is interested in acquiring a mass audience, not profits. Telesur, whose annual operating budget is estimated to be in the range of US\$10 to 15 million, claimed to have 7.7 million "subscribers" worldwide in 2014.

Like Chávez's other foreign-policy initiatives, Telesur has a mixed record. On the one hand, Telesur has secured international partners who have helped to fund the enterprise, including Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Uruguay. In addition, Telesur has information-sharing agreements with numerous organizations including Al-Jazeera, the BBC, Russia's RT, Iran's IRIB, and China's CCTV, among others. Initially launched solely as a Spanish-language channel, it began broadcasting in Portuguese in 2008 and in English in 2014.

On the other hand, Telesur's actual viewership is probably low. Venezuela's information minister recently admitted that he does not know how many people are actually watching the channel, claiming that Telesur lacks the resources to collect data on viewership.<sup>21</sup> The private firm AGB Nielsen, which does collect viewership data in Venezuela, reports that between 2008 and 2012 Telesur had an average share of 0.48 percent, making it one of the least-viewed channels in the country (by comparison, *Venevisión's* share ranged from 23 to 36 percent).<sup>22</sup> Although there are no data on Telesur's international viewership, we can use Twitter to get an idea of the channel's popularity. Compared to its competition, Telesur is enormously aggressive on Twitter, at least in terms of tweets posted per month (see Table 2). At the same time, however, Telesur is significantly underperforming in terms of Twitter followers: Its average increase in number of followers per month pales in comparison to that of CNN en Español.

Telesur is emblematic of the Venezuelan regime's efforts to disseminate its worldview as widely as possible: The government pushes hard for modest returns, but seems not to be too worried about this poor investment-to-return ratio. In the battle against "imperialism," Venezuela is committed for the long haul.

Venezuela's active foreign policy extends well beyond its neighborhood. The regime has established fairly close ties with nondemocracies across the globe, including China and Russia, as well as such pariah states

**TABLE 2—TELESUR AND COMPETITORS ON TWITTER**

Account	Joined Twitter	Avg. No. of Tweets/Month	Avg. Increase in Followers/Month
CNN en Español	April 2009	794	165,038
BBC Mundo	November 2007	698	15,316
Telesur	June 2009	8,570	16,236
NTN24 (Colombia)	April 2010	2,602	47,254

Source: Tabulated by author based on [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com).

as Iran, Syria, and Libya under Qadhafi. These extrahemispheric partnerships have been motivated by general goals as well as specific bilateral ones.<sup>23</sup> In terms of the former, the regime has sought to forge opaque (and therefore insulated from public scrutiny) economic and business relationships, something that is easier done with nondemocracies, and to create more diplomatic complications for the United States by teaming with its adversaries. It is widely known that Venezuela’s regime under both Chávez and Maduro has partnered with countries such as China, Russia, Iran, and Syria on lucrative deals and economic investments.

The specifically bilateral goals are numerous. Venezuela hopes to find a reliable alternative market for its oil in China, and to further increase the more than \$50 billion that China has already invested in the Venezuelan economy. Meanwhile, the regime is a huge buyer of Russian weaponry; Venezuela is estimated to have purchased about three-quarters of the \$14.5 billion that Russia earned from arms sales in Latin America between 2001 and 2013.<sup>24</sup> Finally, Venezuela had hoped that Iran would join it in a subgroup within OPEC to counterbalance Saudi Arabia’s efforts to keep oil prices down. The United States feared for some time that the Venezuelan-Iranian partnership would lead to nuclear projects in Venezuela as well as Iran-sponsored terrorism across Latin America, though Western concern over Iranian influence in the region appears to have subsided somewhat since 2012.

Today, with Venezuela facing a severe economic crisis that makes it a less lucrative business partner and a less attractive role model, the regime’s ability to project power globally is dwindling. So Maduro has had to change tactics. Rather than trying to reshape the outside world, his main goal now is to convince Venezuela’s global partners that, in terms of their economic interests in Venezuela, a change in the status quo is likely to be harmful to them. This is just another way of using economic ties abroad to promote regime survival at home.

During sixteen years of *chavismo*, and especially since 2006, Venezuela’s regime has steadily moved toward harsher authoritarian practices. This trajectory was not preordained. Not all hybrid regimes move in this direction. Many factors contributed to Venezuela’s rising authoritarianism: high oil prices in 2003–2008 and 2010–2012, which gave the state vast resources with which to coopt and repress opposition; the decline in Western democracy-promotion initiatives; the growing influence of

new nondemocratic powers such as China and Russia; the intensification of U.S. unilateralism between 2001 and 2008, which provoked Venezuela's nationalist impulses; the global shift toward greater tolerance for statism after two decades of neoliberalism; and even the errors and weaknesses of the Venezuelan opposition.

All these factors no doubt played a role. But in hybrid regimes, state officials also have at their disposal the necessary instruments to steer their countries toward deeper forms of authoritarianism. In the case of Venezuela, such instruments have included the clever use of electoral majorities at home and petrodollars abroad. Now that both of these are scarcer, the regime is under unprecedented strain. It is facing newer pressures from international critics (though still too few from Latin America) and from a reenergized domestic opposition determined to reverse the regime's course. Economics and elections have left Maduro cornered to a far greater degree than Chávez ever was. Will Maduro yield to these pressures or will he counterattack? Based on his presidency so far, Maduro appears to be confident that he has enough institutional control at home and support abroad to stay the course. So it is entirely possible that one of Latin America's most politically restrictive regimes could turn even more restrictive in the years to come.

## NOTES

1. See "Grandes Objetivos Históricos y Objetivos Nacionales," Programa de la Patria 2013–2019, <http://blog.chavez.org.ve/programa-patria-venezuela-2013-2019/independencia-nacional/#.VPmcVuGLiJ8>.

2. This figure for Venezuelan newspapers is based on Juvenal Mavares's annual media directory, *Directorio de relaciones públicas y medios de comunicación social* (Caracas: J&M Asociados, 1998); see also Prensa Escrita's list of Venezuelan newspapers at [www.prensaescrita.com/america/venezuela.php](http://www.prensaescrita.com/america/venezuela.php).

3. I am grateful to Franz von Bergen and Juan Gabriel Delgado for their research assistance. In order to determine if a private newspaper was independent, we checked whether former staff reporters or other news media reported cases of censored information in the coverage of news that was favorable to the opposition. No doubt, some qualitative judgments were employed. But leaving aside my count of nonindependent print media, the evidence is still clear: The size of private independent print media has declined considerably under *chavismo*.

4. See Sujatha Fernandes, *Who Can Stop The Drums? Urban Social Movements in Chávez's Venezuela* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

5. Philip Bennett and Moisés Naím. "21<sup>st</sup>-Century Censorship," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 5 January 2015, <http://moisesnaim.com/columns/21st-century-censorship>.

6. "Unos cuarenta periódicos, afectados por la escasez de papel en Venezuela," *Reporteros Sin Fronteras*, 12 September 2014, <http://es.rsf.org/venezuela-unos-cuarenta-periodicos-afectados-12-09-2014,46951.html>.

7. Javier Corrales, "Electoral Irregularities Under Chavismo: A Tally," *Americas Quarterly*, 11 April 2013, [www.americasquarterly.org/electoral-irregularities-under-chavismo-tally](http://www.americasquarterly.org/electoral-irregularities-under-chavismo-tally).

8. Miriam Kornblith, "Latin America's Authoritarian Drift: Chavismo After Chávez?" *Journal of Democracy* 24 (July 2013): 47–61.
9. Edgar López, "En nueve años el TSJ no ha dictado ni una sentencia contra el gobierno," *El Nacional*, 1 December 2014, [www.el-nacional.com/politica/anos-TSJ-dictado-sentencia-gobierno\\_0\\_529147208.html](http://www.el-nacional.com/politica/anos-TSJ-dictado-sentencia-gobierno_0_529147208.html).
10. This section draws from Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics: The Legacy of Hugo Chávez*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Brookings Institution Press, forthcoming).
11. International Crisis Group, "Venezuela: Dangerous Inertia," *Latin America Briefing*, No. 31, 23 September 2014.
12. Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA), "Venezuela 2014: Protestas y derechos humanos," *Informe*, February–May 2014, [www.derechos.org/ve/pw/wp-content/uploads/Informe-final-protestas2.pdf](http://www.derechos.org/ve/pw/wp-content/uploads/Informe-final-protestas2.pdf); "Maduro supera a Chávez en represión," *Hoy* (Quito), 8 July 2014, [www.hoy.com.ec/noticias-ecuador/maduro-supera-a-chavez-en-represion-609719.html](http://www.hoy.com.ec/noticias-ecuador/maduro-supera-a-chavez-en-represion-609719.html).
13. Javier Corrales and Carlos A. Romero, *U.S.-Venezuela Relations Since the 1990s: Coping with Midlevel Security Threats* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
14. Francisco J. Monaldi, "Oil and Politics: Venezuela Today," paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association Congress, Washington, D.C., 2013.
15. U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Venezuela: Country Analysis Brief Overview," available at [www.eia.gov/countries](http://www.eia.gov/countries).
16. Javier Corrales, "Using Social Power to Balance Soft Power: Venezuela's Foreign Policy," *Washington Quarterly* 32 (October 2009): 97–114.
17. Andres Schipani and John Paul Rathbone, "Oil Price Rout Forces Venezuela to Rethink Petro-Diplomacy," *Financial Times*, 14 January 2015.
18. For a more precise look at Venezuela's petro-aid in its neighborhood, see the table "Venezuela's Petro-Aid: Subsidized Oil Shipments Within Latin America" at [www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/supplemental-material](http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/supplemental-material).
19. See "Amenazan con expropiar a empresas españolas," *El Nacional* (Caracas), 16 February 2015, [www.el-nacional.com/economia/Amenazan-expropiar-empresas-espanolas\\_0\\_575342576.html](http://www.el-nacional.com/economia/Amenazan-expropiar-empresas-espanolas_0_575342576.html).
20. Agustín E. Ferraro and Juan José Rastrollo, "¿Clientelismo político en El Salvador? Estudio de caso de Alba Petróleos y sus empresas relacionadas," Salamanca University, [www.slideshare.net/FUSADESORG/clientelismo-politico-en-el-salvador-estudio-de-caso-de-alba-petroleos-y-sus-empresas-relacionadas](http://www.slideshare.net/FUSADESORG/clientelismo-politico-en-el-salvador-estudio-de-caso-de-alba-petroleos-y-sus-empresas-relacionadas).
21. See "Telesur celebra cinco años de vida 'haciendo mejor periodismo que CNN,'" *Correo del Orinoco* (Caracas), 1 August 2010, [www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve/comunicacion-cultural/telesur-celebra-cinco-anos-vida-haciendo-mejor-periodismo-que-cnn](http://www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve/comunicacion-cultural/telesur-celebra-cinco-anos-vida-haciendo-mejor-periodismo-que-cnn).
22. See AGB Nielsen Media Research, "Share por canal inter anual 2008 al 2012: Total individuos," [www.agbnelsen.com.ve/libro2012/SHARE/TOTAL\\_INDIVIDUOS.html](http://www.agbnelsen.com.ve/libro2012/SHARE/TOTAL_INDIVIDUOS.html).
23. Corrales and Romero, *U.S.-Venezuela Relations*, 162.
24. Ilan Berman, "Russia Pivots Toward Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua," *Washington Times*, 26 March 2014.