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Authoritarian Survival

WHY MADURO HASN'T FALLEN

Javier Corrales

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The autocratic regime that began forming in Venezuela under the late President Hugo Chávez two decades ago, and which has hardened under his successor Nicolás Maduro, has been by world standards both a typical and an unusual case of democratic backsliding. It has been typical in that the erosion of democracy has been led by the executive branch, and has happened via an incremental process that was ambiguous at first and has been polarizing all the way. It has been atypical, however, by dint of the sheer extent of the democratic backsliding that has taken place.¹ The drop in level of “democratic-ness” from where Venezuela was a quarter-century ago to where it is now has been profound. It is hard to find recent cases of democratic decline anywhere in the world that can match Venezuela’s fall, though perhaps Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega might bear comparison.

The process of democratic backsliding has not been without opposition. Maduro, who took office as designated successor when Chávez died of cancer in March 2013, has faced political resistance from opposition parties, the media, civil society, elements of the military, and international actors. He came to office not through a primary, but because Chávez had handpicked him to be the next leader of what Chávez called “Bolivarian socialism.” Maduro won the April 2013 presidential election by a slim margin amid conditions of questionable electoral integrity, suggesting a weak mandate. He has presided over one of the most devastating national economic crises seen anywhere in modern times. His approval ratings have sagged consistently, while the opposition’s electoral fortunes have surged, as exemplified by its victory in the 2015 National Assembly balloting. Massive street protests broke out in 2014

and 2017. Since 2019, Maduro's regime has had to cope with heightened financial sanctions levied by the United States, the European Union, and most countries of the Americas. These pressures, indeed, have been such that one could argue Maduro should have fallen by now.

“Function fusion”—granting existing institutions the ability to perform a variety of functions traditionally reserved for other institutions—gives autocratizing presidents an added means of surviving and possibly overcoming resistance.

The regime could still unravel at some point, but its seven-year survival is impressive. How has it managed to hang on? The most obvious answer is that Maduro has survived because he has turned more authoritarian. He inherited a semi-authoritarian regime, and he has hardened it. But to make this point analytically useful, we need to specify the authoritarian practices that have allowed Maduro to survive as long as he has.

Here we might take a step back and look at the global context. Over the past decade, more democracies have been acquiring features of autocracies, and more autocracies have been hardening their authoritarian practices.² As they attempt to autocratize, these regimes, like Maduro's, often confront political resistance. Some autocratizing presidents manage to survive and neutralize this resistance, thus becoming more authoritarian. Others, by contrast, lose the battle, which can interrupt, slow down, or even reverse the process of democratic backsliding. What explains the survival of autocratic practices in the face of resistance?

Part of the answer is that new autocratic-survival tools are appearing. These need more study. One that is particularly noteworthy in connection with Venezuela is what I call “function fusion.” This particular authoritarian tactic consists of granting existing institutions the ability to perform a variety of functions traditionally reserved for other institutions. Function fusion gives autocratizing presidents an added means of surviving and possibly overcoming resistance.

We have long known that autocracies commonly try to ride out economic and political shocks with such time-tested survival tactics as reinforcing control of institutions, turning more repressive, attacking civil society, intensifying surveillance, harassing opposition leaders, channeling resources to regime cronies, and deepening ties with other autocratic states.³ All these means remain available to autocrats today. Function fusion is a new arrow in the autocratic quiver, however.

In essence, this maneuver consists of taking existing institutions and assigning them roles typically associated with other institutions. Thus it “fuses functions” in novel ways, as when groups in civil society are turned into paramilitaries, and armed forces into economic actors. Function fusion

appeals to autocratizing states because it allows them to lean less on traditional methods—especially naked military repression—that are now seen as likely to bring too many negative consequences down on the regime. Because function fusion allows more sparing use of traditional autocratic methods, it has rising appeal as a survival tool.

Function fusion has been the hallmark of Venezuela's transition from semidemocracy under Chávez to full-fledged authoritarianism under Maduro. Chávez was famous for turning PDVSA, the country's state-owned oil company, into a multitask organization dedicated to financing the ruling party, rewarding loyalists, funding welfare programs, acting as an employer of last resort, and securing trade deals with foreign allies. Maduro has continued this tactic, but has taken function fusion to new heights, applying it to the military, which has been allowed to diversify its portfolio of activities; organized civilian groups, which have been given the function of conducting quasi-military operations as well as criminal activities; a constituent assembly, which has acquired the function of legislature and ruling party combined; and foreign armed forces, to which Maduro has given a share of Venezuela's sovereignty.

Traditional Autocratic Practices

From the start of his administration, Maduro has faced a number of severe crises. While none on its own seems lethal, in combination they have added up to more than most democratically elected governments could likely handle. One way in which Maduro has responded to the multiple crises has been to adopt or reinforce conventional autocratic practices.

The first crisis was Maduro's declining electoral competitiveness. He barely won the 2013 presidential election, and then went on to a stunning defeat in the 2015 legislative election. His popularity dove. Maduro dealt with the problem by expanding the number of electoral irregularities. He blocked a call for a recall referendum, and held fraudulent elections for a constituent assembly. In 2019, his government manipulated the presidential-election timetable and voting centers, used government handouts to coopt voters, banned candidates and parties, and refused to do real audits in response to vote-fraud charges.

Another crisis was triggered by loss of control over the legislature in the 2015 election. Maduro responded with two classic authoritarian moves: He illegally packed the courts before the newly chosen lawmakers could sit, and then relied on these courts to back him when he refused to recognize any of the legislature's acts. He raised blizzards of technicalities, fabrications, and court rulings, backed by his friendly judges at every turn.

Then there was the crisis inside the military. Chávez had been briefly unseated by an April 2002 putsch, and Maduro has long claimed to be under threat from a "continuous coup." There is no doubt that Maduro has faced significant discontent across the 160,000-strong armed forc-

es. This has prompted him to crack down hard. There are reports that any officer “in touch with the opposition” can be arrested, with threats against family members in turn.⁴ By mid-2019, the regime held 217 active and retired officers (including twelve generals) in prison, many of them without trial. Since 2017, there have been at least 250 cases of torture committed against military officers, their relatives, and opposition activists.⁵ Reports suggest that Cuban security forces were in 2008 specifically directed to train a government unit, known as the Directorate General of Military Counterintelligence, devoted to spying on the armed forces.⁶

Operation Gideon, the armed assault that failed to unseat Maduro in early May 2020, illustrates the extent of both military disaffection and state-sponsored surveillance. This plan by about three-hundred exiled Venezuelan military officers based in Colombia called for invading Venezuela by sea and toppling Maduro. The endeavor was aided by a U.S. security firm and had some support from civilian opponents of Maduro. The landing attempt, which in the end consisted of around sixty people, would not have been possible without military defections. Among the reasons it failed was the degree to which Maduro had managed to infiltrate it. His forces were ready and intercepted the two invasion boats.

Next on the list of troubles is Venezuela’s grave economic contraction. Ongoing since at least 2014, it has been the worst economic crisis that Latin America has seen since 1945, with deprivations resembling wartime conditions. To survive, Maduro has wielded a typical authoritarian’s tool: rampant cronyism. He has granted economic elites and close associates privileges such as access to the best foreign-exchange rates, contracts to import food for the government’s distribution programs (known as CLAP), significant degrees of impunity, and most recently, control of gold mines (placed in the hands of regime-friendly governors).⁷

Finally, Maduro has had to outlast rising street protests. To deal with the massive nationwide protest waves of 2014 and 2017, his government reached for those most traditional forms of repression—brute force and censorship. Venezuela saw levels of repression not seen in Latin America (with the possible recent exception of Nicaragua) since the early 1980s. The Venezuelan human-rights group Foro Penal reports that by the end of July 2017, the number of people who had been killed while protesting was 133. (Of these, 101 had been “directly assassinated” during demonstrations.) The regime had also made 5,061 arbitrary arrests, and held 620 political prisoners as of July 31.⁸ Censorship has risen, aided by Chinese technology. In 2017, the government hired a Chinese telecom company (ZTE) to develop a national identity card, named *Carnet de la Patria*, capable of tracking citizens’ social and political behavior. Everyone must have one of these cards to qualify for food assistance as well as access to pension benefits and subsidized oil. The government also offers cash prizes

to encourage citizens to apply for the card. As many as eighteen-million Venezuelans are cardholders.⁹ It appears that since the onset of the covid-19 pandemic, media censorship has intensified. Internet-content and access blockage now extends to portals covering the spread of the disease, including even websites maintained by the World Health Organization.¹⁰

The Uses of Fused Functions

To his conventional authoritarian expedients, Maduro has added the more novel method of function fusion. This concept is not new to the social sciences, nor is it necessarily something that goes on only under authoritarianism: Democracies too have seen institutions manipulated and distorted to serve goals other than the ones that they were originally established to serve. For instance, democratically elected governments often use social spending to buy votes; “fine tune” the instruments of macroeconomic policy to affect electoral outcomes; and manipulate information to deflect criticism. Likewise, authoritarian regimes often incorporate or “mimic” democratic practices, for instance by allowing the use of elections to fill some offices, or by permitting certain aspects of media independence to survive.

Function fusion is related to but also different from this type of institutional blending. It is related in that the state deliberately blends institutional functions that one typically does not expect to go together. It is different in that the fusion takes place not by importing institutions from other regime types, but by blending the functions of institutions within the same regime type. Let us consider some examples. The first involves the military.

Every authoritarian regime needs military support. Maduro’s regime has it, but with some unconventional twists. In Venezuela today, “the military” means not only the standard military establishment (comprising both professional and ideologically oriented soldiers), but also four other groups, each with its own interest in supporting Maduro. Beyond the standard military there are first the military politicians who fill high civilian posts. As of 2020, eight members of Maduro’s 33-member cabinet, as well as seven of the nineteen governors who belong to the ruling party, are active or retired military. Then there are the generals who are running at least sixty state-owned corporations. Until April 2020, these included PDVSA, which is the world’s largest oil concern in terms of proven reserves and until recently was one of the few enterprises in Venezuela capable of earning export income.

Alongside the soldiers, the soldier-politicians, and the soldier-managers, Maduro has created two classes of profit-seeking soldiers. One is involved in legal business activities; the other pursues illicit as well as licit gains. Since taking power in 2013, Maduro has founded fourteen business concerns that the military owns outright (as distinguished from state-

owned civilian firms that military officers manage). These are not the first such enterprises in Venezuelan history, but the number before Maduro was small. Maduro's military businesses are involved in car sales, banking, clothing, printing, construction, farming, the media, mining, subsidized foods, transport, and even water distribution.

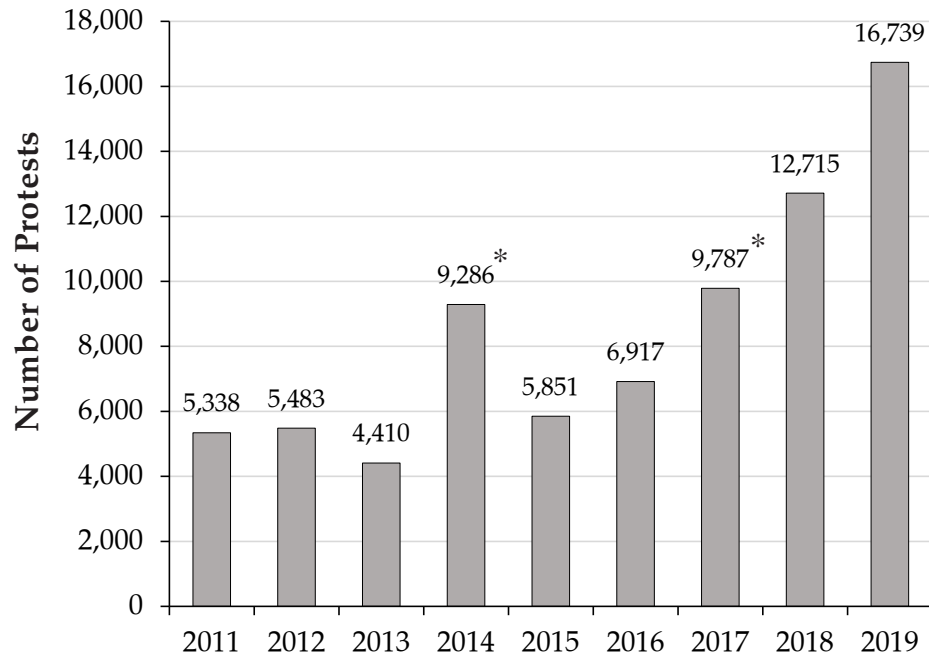
In addition, soldiers have been encouraged to establish their own private firms to do business with the state. The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) estimates that the family of General Vladimir Padrino López, who is the uniformed head of the military as well as the defense minister, owns two-dozen companies in the United States and Venezuela as well as U.S. real estate worth millions of dollars. The OCCRP has also reported on what it calls "The 35 Club," a group of Venezuelan generals who since 2004 have founded 41 private companies and secured 220 state contracts.¹¹

On the illegal side, Maduro has allowed the military to engage in lucrative illicit dealings.¹² These include controlling informal domestic markets, smuggling consumer goods such as gasoline into Brazil and Colombia, and working with the Andean drug trade (it is estimated that a quarter of Colombian drug exports pass through Venezuela).¹³ More recently, members of the military appear to have become involved in the illegal export of gold.¹⁴ While some analysts find U.S. charges concerning the Venezuelan military's illicit dealings overstated, few experts deny that the military is involved in such activities, or that officers take part in them without much fear of punishment.

Civilians as Soldiers—and Gangsters?

Another institution that has become fodder for function fusion is the network of civilians whom the ruling party has organized into what are known as *colectivos*. In Venezuela, this term signifies groups of civilians whom the government encourages—and even pays—to terrorize political dissidents. These armed bands have become a hallmark of Maduro's rule. The regime began using them in the early 2000s under Chávez. As the government's popularity has decreased under Maduro, the state's need to rely on *colectivos* has increased.¹⁵ Today, the *colectivos* comprise mostly ruling-party followers, paid civilians, moonlighting police officers in plain clothes, delinquents, and assorted thugs, sometimes even former convicts.¹⁶ The government hires them informally to carry out some of the dirtiest forms of repression. Distributed across low-income neighborhoods throughout the country, these groups can be sent into city streets quickly. Altogether, *colectivos* may control as much as a tenth of the country's urban space.¹⁷

Deployed mostly to handle protests, *colectivos* are especially good at intimidating people who gather for small neighborhood demonstrations or rallies. In Venezuela, street protests have been nationally organized

FIGURE—PROTESTS IN VENEZUELA, 2011–19

*Approximately 68 percent of protests in 2014 and 82 percent in 2017 formed part of national-level protests.

Source: Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social (various years).

and coordinated (as in 2014 and 2017), but also small and dispersed, occurring in neighborhoods throughout the country and not necessarily coordinated by national-level politicians. These smaller protests have included street meetings, marches, and labor strikes. A study by a Venezuelan NGO documents their dramatic proliferation (see the Figure). Maduro has preferred to deal with these protests via the *colectivos* rather than uniformed police or soldiers.¹⁸ The *colectivos* show up unannounced and armed. They ride motorcycles and their faces are often covered. Their street clothes make it hard for reporters to certify that they are government-backed operatives. This gives the state “deniability” when the *colectivos* threaten (or use) violence.

Colectivos have thus become the unofficial “sheriffs” or gangs in particular neighborhoods, especially low-income ones. In return for suppressing protests, they have freedom to commit ordinary felonies such as armed robbery, burglary, drug dealing, smuggling, and extortions of both businesses and private persons.¹⁹ In the economy of “twenty-first-century socialism,” where scarcity is severe and business opportunities are few, the chance to engage in criminality with near-total impunity has turned out to have an appeal for many civilians. This is especially so when all that is needed to earn such impunity is doing the job that the state wants done against protesters.

Why does the state give to civilians certain functions associated with, on the one hand, the military, and, on the other, criminal syndicates?

The reasons are likely two: The *colectivos* spare the government embarrassment, and they ease the minds of officials worried that ordinary soldiers (who face the same hardships as others who dwell outside favored regime circles) are not loyal enough to Maduro to be trusted with the task of repressing fellow citizens.

Before the 2000s, books on the military hardly discussed the possibility of institutional and functional diversity within the state's security apparatus. The standard view was to agree with Max Weber that states pursue a *monopoly* of violence within their respective territories. Today, however, the diversification of state coercion, or what political scientists are calling the new *oligopoly* of state violence, is the preferred norm among undemocratic regimes and failed states.²⁰ Maduro's regime is a good example of it.

When a legislature refuses to go along with an executive branch, the most autocratic solution is of course the *autogolpe* or self-coup: The executive closes the legislature and seizes all governmental power. But self-coups, like instances of sending "the uniforms" to assault civilians, are embarrassingly high-profile and bring a lot of negative publicity. Alberto Fujimori tried one in Peru in 1992 and got away with it for a time, but eventually ended up in jail. Maduro's alternative to a self-coup has been the Constituent National Assembly (ANC).

Maduro acquired the problem of a nonsubservient legislature after voters in December 2015 gave the opposition a 109-seat supermajority in the 167-seat unicameral National Assembly. Initially, the government began reducing the legislature's powers through the Supreme Court. Four opposition deputies had their elections challenged, thus stopping the supermajority. Then came a ruling that no legislation can affect any other branch of government, thereby blocking most bills. The Court also ordered the arrest of several deputies, and finally, in March 2017, took over legislative functions completely, on the claim that the National Assembly was in violation of the Constitution.

Then, in May 2017, Maduro came up with the idea of using a constituent assembly to bypass the legislature. Invoking the 1999 Constitution's Article 347, which grants the people the right to convene a constituent assembly, Maduro organized a highly irregular constituent-assembly election. He carried out no consultations before making his announcement, and there was no referendum (there had been one in 1999) on whether to call a new constitution-writing body into being. According to one poll, 85 percent of respondents favored sticking with the existing constitution.²¹ On election day, some citizens, mostly regime loyalists, were allowed to vote for multiple candidates, and opposition participation was restricted. Everything took place, moreover, in a context of massive unrest. Forty countries refused to recognize the new body.

To no one's surprise, once the ANC came into being, it gave itself power to make laws. Perhaps more surprisingly, albeit in line with

function fusion, it also began acting as a national supreme court, an election authority, a foreign ministry, and a politburo. As a court, the ANC barred opposition candidates from running for office and stripped National Assembly president Juan Guaidó of his parliamentary immunity. As an electoral body, the ANC has made decisions about elections, including announcing that there will be no 2020 presidential election despite demands from the opposition and most Western countries. As a foreign ministry, the ANC has made pronouncements about policy toward the United States and toward other Latin American countries. As a politburo, the ANC has handed down political principles and policy directives to the entire ruling party. For instance, the ANC has fired a cabinet member (Prosecutor General Luisa Ortega Díaz) who criticized the administration, created truth commissions to investigate human-rights charges, and offered opinions on tax policy and military affairs.

In addition to the opportunity to carry out a self-coup through other means, function fusion as it relates to the Constituent Assembly has allowed Maduro to give a fiefdom to one of the ruling party's most important leaders, Diosdado Cabello. Considered by Chávez as a possible successor and long seen as Maduro's top internal rival, Cabello wields influence with crony capitalists, Bolivarian ideologues, and various sections of the military. Function fusion has allowed Maduro to keep Cabello within the fold. As ANC president since 2018, Cabello stands at the head of a national-level political organ with extraordinary powers. Like Cabello, many other ruling-party members—Maduro's wife, Cilia Flores, among them—hold seats in the ANC, an outcome achieved through electoral tricks.

As of June 2020, the ANC has been in place for three years and still shows no sign of producing a new constitution. In 1999, when he was keen on giving the country a new basic law, Chávez accomplished the entire process in less than eight months. Under Maduro, having the ANC act variously as a legislature, a court, and a party organ has taken precedence over the work of drawing up a new constitution.

Sharing Sovereignty

Authoritarian regimes have been known to host and support foreign armies within their territories. Maduro has gone further by also sharing sovereignty with such armies. This has been Maduro's approach to elements of two radical-leftist guerrilla groups from neighboring Colombia. One group is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the other is the smaller Army of National Liberation (ELN). Each came into being in 1964 and long waged war against the government of Colombia, which has a border with Venezuela more than 2,200 kilometers long. In 2012, Colombia sought an end to the guerrilla

conflict by opening peace talks, which produced an accord with FARC in late 2016. Talks with the ELN continue.

The forces that Maduro and various subnational authorities have been sheltering in Venezuela are dissident FARC and ELN splinter groups. They have rejected the peace process, and claim to be continuing their operations against the government of Colombia from within that country's neighbor. Maduro has not only permitted them to stay, but has been allowing them to wield powers similar to those of sovereign governments.

This sharing of sovereignty with foreign guerrillas is most visible in the gold-mining industry. With world oil prices declining and Venezuela's oil sector collapsing around the time Maduro became president, the government began looking to gold to make up the gap. Exports other than oil were few, and Venezuela has large gold reserves, especially in the vast Orinoco Mining Arc that covers 112,000 square kilometers (about an eighth of Venezuela's total area) stretching across the country from west to east south of the Orinoco River. In November 2018, Maduro estimated that his "Gold Plan" could yield as much as US\$5 billion in profit.²² Maduro has given dissident FARC and ELN factions freedom to operate in the Cuba-sized Mining Arc.²³ These guerrillas have access to illicit export channels through which at least some of the gold can be sold abroad despite U.S. sanctions.²⁴

Dissident FARC and ELN groups are allowed not only to run their own mines and keep substantial revenues (a type of privatization), but also to control a range of related activities. These include selling gold both within Venezuela and abroad; deciding which other groups, legal or illegal, also get to mine; collecting unofficial taxes from both legal and illegal miners; and most important, controlling the people who live in these areas. Inside their mineral fiefdoms, it is up to FARC and ELN elements to provide security (or not), to control borders, to decide who can work in the mining sector, and even to provide local citizens with social services. Some reporters have documented similar "state" services being provided by foreign guerrillas in the interior states of Amazonas, Apure, and Táchira.²⁵ These foreign guerrillas also are known to commit human-rights abuses with impunity.

In controlling large portions of Venezuela's extractive industries outside the oil sector, these foreign armies (and by extension, the Venezuelan state) are also sharing sovereignty with *colectivos* and even criminal syndicates that also mine and market gold. Human Rights Watch reports that each mining enterprise in the state of Bolívar has its own violent criminal syndicate.²⁶ Local citizens engaged in private mining have reported preferring "to sell to the syndicates because the soldiers often take part or sometimes all of their gold."²⁷

Criminal syndicates and foreign armies are now the dominant armed forces in these regions, and hence what passes for the law there. The gangs and the guerrillas are de facto quasi-states operating within a na-

tion-state. Maduro can count these nonstate groups as coopted; they give him a means of bypassing U.S. sanctions while also freeing his government from the need to patrol and service these remote regions. That the foreign armies are a thorn in the side of Colombia is a bonus, for that country has since 2016 been one of Maduro's more vocal critics.

From Petro-State to Narco-Mining State

In addition to relying on classic autocratic tools and more novel function fusion, the Maduro regime has survived by adjusting its foreign economic relations. Venezuela now relies more on Russia than China, and more on gold and drug exports than oil sales.

The turn to Russia was prompted mostly by the dramatic decline in financial support from the People's Republic of China (PRC) that began in 2013. During Maduro's time in office, the PRC first started buying less and less Venezuelan oil and then, after 2016, stopped extending new credits in view of a Venezuelan debt to Beijing that was already totaling around \$18 billion. Until the set of sanctions that the United States imposed in 2019, China's financial distancing was the gravest external economic challenge that Venezuela had seen since the early 2000s.

Before 2016, Russia's involvement in Venezuela had not been politically consequential. Venezuela was a significant buyer of Russian arms, but little more. After the China shock, however, Maduro faced the need to make Russia more invested in Venezuela's economy and his regime's survival. As a political sponsor, Russia offers one advantage over China: Moscow is more out front than Beijing about challenging the United States. Within Kremlin walls, the idea of siding with Venezuela—the country in the Americas (save perhaps Cuba) that is most hostile to Washington—was an easy sell.

Russia, however, has slimmer financial resources than China, not to mention vast hydrocarbon reserves of its own that make Moscow less interested in buying oil or seeing Venezuela's oil industry thrive. Consequently, attracting Russian *economic* investment has been tougher for Maduro.

To gain that investment, Maduro's answer has been to semi-privatize Venezuela's oil industry, with Russia as the "private" partner. In 2016, Venezuela obtained a \$1.5 billion loan from Russia by offering the Russian oil giant Rosneft 49.9 percent of Venezuelan-owned Citgo as a guarantee. Citgo, which operates U.S. refineries and gas stations, had at the time a value of around \$12 billion. Rosneft, the beneficiary of this highly favorable deal, is one of the world's largest energy concerns and Russia's second most important state-owned company, with strong ties to Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin. Maduro has also allowed Russian firms to buy Venezuelan assets outside the energy sector. These barely scrutinized deals have become fountainheads of massive corruption. In

essence, Venezuela is granting Russian private and state interests both local assets and legal impunity.

Even so, Russia has been unable to provide all the financial support that Venezuela needs to replace falling oil revenues and China's help. In addition, like China before it, Russia now seems to be losing interest in Venezuelan economic assets in part because doing business in Venezuela is difficult.

To compensate for insufficient and fading Russian financial support, Maduro has had to rely increasingly on narco-trafficking and mining. Annual cocaine flows through Venezuela have risen under his rule from 124 metric tons in 2013 to 210 in 2019.²⁸ Most of the drugs come from Colombia, where production has been surging. The problem with Venezuela is not so much the volume: Colombia's flow, at 1,844 metric tons in 2019, dwarfs it. The problem is the involvement of the Venezuelan state, and in particular its military. In return for a share of profits, the armed forces are at the very least condoning the activities of international drug lords.²⁹

The second new export is gold, along with other metals. Turkey is a leading buyer. Since October 2017, Caracas and Ankara have signed ten agreements, most focusing on metals. In 2018, Turkey reported imports of approximately \$900 million in metals from Venezuela, up from nearly zero in 2017.³⁰ Iran and other Gulf autocracies have bought Venezuelan gold as well. All these trading partners have helped Venezuela to bypass U.S. sanctions.

As Venezuela turned increasingly to Russia, corruption, drugs, gold, and more repression at home, and as the United States became less reliant on oil imports, the U.S. government as well as Canada and many European allies began hardening sanctions on Venezuela. Initially, U.S. and Western measures were mostly "smart sanctions," meaning penalties targeting individuals and corporations rather than the government as a whole. President Donald Trump extended smart sanctions to cover more individuals (144 by the latest count) and launched new sanctions targeting the Venezuelan government itself. The state, including PDVSA, was barred from accessing U.S. financial markets as of 2017, from marketing Venezuelan debt instruments in the United States as of 2018, and from selling oil to any U.S.-related individual or corporation as of 2019.

These sanctions should not be seen as the cause of Venezuela's economic crisis. The collapse of the oil sector, and indeed of Venezuela's economy as a whole, dates back to before Maduro became president, and his policies were making things worse before U.S. sanctions hardened. The hardened sanctions, however, have complicated the politics of regime transition. On the one hand, the sanctions have pushed the Maduro government into an economic corner from which it will not easily escape. On the other hand, as long as the government can count on at least some Russian support plus continued access to gold and illicit drug exports, there is breathing space. Within that space, as long as the

regime can continue to pursue function fusion along with classic autocratic practices, the regime might very well continue to survive.

One Autocracy, Two Toolkits

Since 2015, Maduro has faced a cluster of political, institutional, military, and economic crises that likely would have brought down any democratic government. He has survived by responding to each crisis autocratically. Such responses are by definition unavailable to democracies. Through his autocratic responses, Maduro has transformed an inherited semi-authoritarian regime into a full-blown dictatorship.

Internationally, Maduro has switched great-power sponsors (at a price), and has developed new, mostly illicit exports. Domestically, he has used two authoritarian toolkits. The conventional one features brutal repression, election cheating, assaults on the separation of powers, bans and attacks on opposition leaders, and grants of impunity to buy the support of economic elites. The more novel one contains various forms of function fusion. These include giving the military economic roles; giving organized civilians paramilitary and criminal roles; turning a fraudulently elected constituent assembly into a multipurpose political machine with judicial, legislative, military, and policy powers; and sharing sovereignty with a list of nonstate actors that includes criminal gangs and foreign guerrilla armies.

Such forays into function fusion help an authoritarian regime in a number of ways. First, the executive engages in some form of power sharing with other components of the ruling coalition, thereby expanding that coalition's reach. Second, function fusion allows the state to either save on the use of traditional authoritarian tools or at least to deny its involvement in traditional authoritarian practices such as outright repression, cronyism, smuggling, and brutal environmental and labor practices.

No doubt, function fusion is risky. Every time the executive branch shares powers and sovereignties with other state and nonstate actors, these groups become more powerful and thus grow as potential challengers to the president. Nevertheless, the Venezuelan case shows that an authoritarian president in constant danger of falling may conclude that function fusion, whatever its possible pitfalls for the regime, is less risky than either relying exclusively on conventional autocratic practices or standing idle as resistance mounts from below.

NOTES

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