

## The crisis in Venezuela: Drivers, transitions, and pathways

*Benedicte Bull*  
University of Oslo

*Antulio Rosales*  
University of Oslo

### Abstract

In this introduction, we present the main contributions of this special collection, which aim to open the analysis to the broader political and economic processes that underpin Venezuela's recent crisis. We highlight the transition from a limited democracy to an authoritarian regime and some of the potential pathways to democratization. We further explain how the political transition that occurred in the last decade was influenced by structural conditions of the Venezuelan economy, elaborating on the collapse of the Venezuelan rentier economy and some of the emerging processes that feed the strengthening of authoritarianism. Lastly, we analyse how these transformations have been affected by a changing international order with emerging actors and dynamics in a global order upheaval. The articles in this special collection locate in Venezuela's crisis on broader theoretical discussions rooted in comparative and historical perspectives. *Keywords:* Venezuela, democratic backsliding, authoritarianism, rentier economy, global order, Nicolás Maduro, Bolivarian Revolution.

Resumen: Crisis en Venezuela: Actores, transiciones y vías

En esta introducción, presentamos las principales contribuciones de esta colección especial, cuyo objetivo es abrir un análisis a los amplios procesos políticos y económicos que sustentan la reciente crisis de Venezuela. Destacamos la transición de una democracia limitada a un régimen autoritario y algunas de las posibles vías hacia la democratización. Explicamos además cómo la transición política que ocurrió en la última década estuvo influida por las condiciones estructurales de la economía venezolana, explicando el colapso de la economía rentista venezolana y algunos de los procesos emergentes que alimentan el fortalecimiento del autoritarismo. Por último, analizamos cómo estas transformaciones se han visto afectadas por un orden internacional cambiante con actores y dinámicas emergentes en una agitación del orden global. Los artículos de esta colección especial sitúan la crisis de Venezuela en debates teóricos más amplios enraizados en perspectivas comparativas e históricas. *Palabras clave:* Venezuela, retroceso democrático, autoritarismo, economía rentista, orden global, Nicolás Maduro, Revolución Bolivariana.

## Introduction

In the second half of the 2010s, Venezuela has been undergoing the most profound crisis of any society in modern Latin America, and on many accounts, the deepest crisis of any non-war-ridden country in recent times. In economic terms, the country lost 62 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) between 2013 and 2019. In the same period, it went from being a limited democracy to an authoritarian regime. Mortality on a range of diseases skyrocketed, as did child and infant mortality (Page et al. 2019). Public services severely deteriorated, if not collapsed. Over 4 million people have fled the country in the past few years as a result of this crisis. The Venezuelan crisis has been described as a multidimensional one, stemming from its political system and economic structures but also touching on significant social and even cultural dynamics (see Legler, Serbin Pont & Garelli-Ríos 2018). Civil society organizations both inside the country and abroad have labelled the situation a complex humanitarian crisis that requires urgent multilateral attention and resources (PROVEA 2018; UCAB 2018). This also has a strong human rights dimension, as confirmed by the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (UNHCHR 2019). The Venezuelan situation has prompted policy debates and attracted increasing media attention. Recently, detailed studies on the crisis have begun to emerge, which try to explain its effects on the country while also shedding light on some of its implications both for the region and globally (Legler, Serbin Pont & Garelli-Ríos 2018; Zubillaga, Llorens & Souto 2019).

While the social and humanitarian effects are significant, this special collection does not focus on these effects but rather aims to open the debate to broader political and economic processes that underpin the crisis. The academic research as well as the public debate on this evolving crisis have been affected by a deep political polarization similar to the polarization that has long affected the country itself (see Hawkins 2016). This polarization has influenced the characterization of the situation as well as the interpretation of causes and possible solutions. On the one hand, some critical scholars and analysts emphasize the role of international actors, especially the United States' stakes in the region and its long history of meddling in internal affairs, which has often caused more ill than good (Gill 2019). This line of argument also stresses some structural features, such as dependence on oil revenues as an explanation (Buxton 2019) rather than policy decisions and transformations undergone during the Bolivarian Revolution led first by Hugo Chávez and later by Nicolás Maduro. On the other hand, institutionalist and liberal scholars see the crisis mainly as a result of the deterioration of governance mechanisms that have undermined checks and balances, the independence of institutions and ultimately turned the country into an autocracy (Polga-Hecimovich 2019; López Maya 2016).

The depth and uniqueness of the crisis has prevented broader comparisons and made it difficult to find useful theoretical frameworks for analysing its

many dimensions. The crisis in Venezuela poses deep challenges to various theories in contemporary social sciences, but at the same time it may also inform them. In this special collection, we seek to take this debate forward both by collectively contributing to explaining the multiple aspects of the crisis but also engaging in theoretical discussions with more ample ambitions. Thus, the purpose of this special collection is threefold. First, we seek to accurately analyse key dimensions of the transformations that Venezuelan society, economy and political system have gone through, with a focus on the 2010s but within a longer historical context. Second, we seek to understand the main drivers of those transformations: What actors are involved both domestically and internationally? What global and domestic institutions and structures are interacting in driving the different aspects of the situation? Finally, we have a normative goal of contributing to finding solutions. What changes are necessary for a more desirable transition towards a democracy and a prosperous economy? How can theory help us clarify those possibilities?

In the remainder of this introduction, we succinctly develop several analytical uptakes that the different pieces and the special collection as a whole provides. Throughout, we seek to place the developments in Venezuela into a historical and comparative context. Some of the aspects that are most contentious about Venezuela's crisis are that it displays both important continuities but also clear breaks with the past. We start with an analysis of the political transition that the country has undergone, explaining some of the assumptions that underpin the arguments developed by authors. We highlight here the transition from a limited democracy to an authoritarian regime and some of the potential and complicated pathways to democratization. Later, we explain how the political transition that occurred in the last decade was largely influenced by structural conditions of the Venezuelan economy. We thus elaborate on the collapse of the Venezuelan rentier economy and some of the emerging processes that feed the retrenching of authoritarianism. Lastly, we analyse how these transformations have been affected by a changing international order with emerging actors and dynamics in a global order upheaval. We conclude by seeking to point a way forward.

### **Attacked by all fronts: a hijacked democracy**

Defining the Venezuelan case from a perspective of regime type is not an easy task, nor is it a task that is void of political implications. For this reason, we believe that it is important to define some of the concepts. Much has been written about what a democracy is. Put simply, as Leiv Marsteintredet states in this volume (2020) drawing on Przeworski: democracy is a system where incumbent parties lose power through elections. In addition, it is a system where the majority governs, but rules and institutions that safeguard the rights of minorities bind governments. In essence, power is not absolute. This definition faces important challenges when it encounters the Venezuelan case. Initially, the

Bolivarian Revolution through the Constitution of 1999 largely supported the principles of liberal representative democracy. While the Constitution strengthened some aspects of presidential powers, it also maintained principles of checks and balances and the autonomy of powers, and obliged the state to uphold multilateral human rights commitments. However, the leadership of the Bolivarian Revolution pushed the boundaries of these constitutional principles from the outset of the political process and attempted to bring about a new form of participatory democracy, also included in the Constitution. In theory, participatory democracy did not contradict the principles of liberal democracy but sought to complement them through mechanisms of direct participation such as recall referenda and civil initiatives in the legislative process. Nevertheless, in the process the political leadership built what Alfaro Pareja (2020) labels “an illiberal-revolutionary coalition”.

In trying to push back against some authoritarian attempts by the Chávez government and protect the status of the previous elites, some sectors of the Venezuelan opposition sought to unseat the president through non-institutional means early on in this process. This happened first via a military coup in 2002 and an oil strike in 2002-2003, undermining the very principle of majority rule and electoral processes to challenge incumbents. Further, the opposition withdrawal from parliamentary elections in 2005, for example, allowed the Chávez government to hijack other public powers and undermine the autonomy of institutions. From that point onward, the authoritarian ambitions and practices of *chavismo* became clearer and the economy was increasingly centralized as socialism became a guiding principle. In a wider historical context, the Constitution of 1999 represented a break from the recent past of representative democracy in Venezuela. The mixed representative and participatory democracy replaced the previous system of party representation and “elite conciliation” that characterized Venezuela’s democracy in the previous four decades (Ellner & Hellinger 2003). Nonetheless, the new regime retained, at least normatively, basic principles of democratic governance. As mentioned, from the outset of the Bolivarian Revolution, challenges to democracy came from both sides of the spectrum, but from 2006 onward, the lion’s share of the responsibility in undermining the constitutional rule came from the government. The government silenced dissent in the media, punished opponents through judicial processes and undermined the autonomy of institutions to build a personalistic form of rule (Hawkins 2016; Corrales & Penfold 2007; Brewer Carías 2010). Furthermore, as Corrales (2020) explains, different electoral irregularities became more common, undermining basic principles of democratic rule. For this reason, political scientists labelled the government of Hugo Chávez, especially since his re-election in 2006, a “hybrid regime” or “competitive authoritarianism” (Mainwaring 2012; Corrales & Penfold 2011; Cameron 2018). As Francisco Alfaro Pareja (2020) explains, this meant a system that maintained basic electoral norms but the political field was severely swayed in favour of the rul-

ing elite and checks on power were significantly undermined (see more in Levitsky & Way 2002).

As detailed in the articles by Marsteintredet (2020), Corrales (2020), Alfaro Pareja (2020) and Legler (2020) and documented by a number of other authors, Venezuela transitioned from democracy to authoritarianism in the 2010s (Camero 2016; López Maya 2016; Corrales & Penfold 2011; Levitsky & Luxton 2013). Marsteintredet stresses that from 2016 Venezuela became a form of autocracy. Referring back to the basic definition we provided at the outset, during this time, the majority could no longer exercise its right to elect or recall the government, as per constitutional norm. In 2016, the government through subsidiary regional courts impeded the organized political opposition to make a signature drive to call a recall referendum that would most probably put an end to the government of Nicolás Maduro via the ballot box. This decision signalled the government's unwillingness to allow the majority of the electorate to decide its government. After winning a super-majority in the National Assembly in 2015, the Venezuelan opposition designed a roadmap to force a transition via elections, having the recall referendum as its ultimate goal. While some factions of the opposition also engaged in street protests, mostly peaceful but also some violent, the opposition was largely unified around the leadership of centrist parties and the National Assembly's strategy. Nevertheless, the government side-lined or nullified the parliament systematically, including creating a supra-constitutional entity, the National Constituent Assembly (ANC for its acronym in Spanish) in 2017 after an intense wave of protests.

With the withering away of democratic governance, the rule of law has been fractured. The collapse in the rule of law has, as Natalia Gan (2020) explains in this volume, occurred in parallel to an increasing militarization of security policies, and jointly created a public security crisis. Citizen security has fallen prey to the heightened power of the military in government, turning it into a tool to eliminate perceived enemies. Gan disentangles some of the structural conditionings of these developments, such as the long-standing fragility and impunity of the justice system. She further illustrates medium to short-term factors, including the undermining of checks and balances and the use of repressive forces to ensure discipline to the ruling elite. As a result, the very population that the Bolivarian Revolution sought to protect from marginalization has been victim of extra-judicial killings and gross violations of human rights. In this context, there is also the notable emergence of paramilitary groups that exercise armed violence as well as territorial control. What emerges is both a militarization of civil society and a "paramilitarization" of the state. Furthermore, as Zubillaga, Llorens and Souto (2019) recently explored, victims of armed violence and some of the most vulnerable populations, in poor urban *barrios*, particularly women, seek refuge, collaborate, and often negotiate directly with gang members in forging temporary cease-fires in the absence of state authority.

The particular features of the dismantling of the rule of law and democratic backsliding make a transit toward democracy especially challenging. As discussed by Marsteintredet (2020), there are several experiences of successful transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy to draw on from the region, but we have few examples of transitions similar to the kind of backsliding seen in Venezuela. The country is going through a process of authoritarian hardening rather than a gradual liberalization, which has been the case in most successful democratic transitions elsewhere. Most importantly, the mechanisms that can incentivize a negotiation are not present, namely a system of power-sharing, and rules where the winner does not win all and the loser coalition can retain some claim to power and recognition. Such “counter-majoritarian” institutions are more difficult to establish when the regime’s autocratic mechanisms have taken root and, as Alfaro Pareja (2020) argues, the different coalitions behave as archipelagos with divergent islands representing diverse interests that are difficult to galvanize around negotiated solutions. However, as we will come back to further below, it is perhaps precisely this rather fragmented nature of both coalitions that may also be the starting point for thinking about future paths to a democratic transition.

### **The decay of the rentier economy**

Together with the deterioration of democracy in Venezuela, there was a parallel process of productive decay in the country’s economy. Venezuela has long been labelled a rentier economy (Mommer 2002; Baptista 2010; Hellinger 2017). In accordance with this vast literature, Buxton (2019: 4) recently characterized Venezuela as a “landlord”, highly dependent on rents from foreign-led trade of a single commodity rather than from domestic productive chains. As the resource curse theses emphasize, oil rent dependence tends to brew social dynamics of dependence on the distributive state, fuelling corruption, nepotism and authoritarian practices (Peters 2019; Ross 2015). There is a virtual consensus around the fact that the Bolivarian Revolution, rather than moving away from rentier practices, actually deepened them (Monaldi 2018; Rosales 2018; Buxton 2019; Hellinger 2017). Nevertheless, there is still much debate about whether the Bolivarian Revolution has generated new features in the political economy of the rentier state that provoked the current predicament or rather that the current collapse was an inevitable result of a crisis of accumulation that began in the 1970s.

In his seminal work on Venezuela’s rentier capitalism, Asdrúbal Baptista (2010) explains that from the late 1970s, the Venezuelan productive apparatus could no longer absorb rents to increase productivity. Instead, surpluses were more profitable when invested abroad and different crony-capitalism dynamics were developed in protected and largely inefficient sectors (see also Di John 2009). An initial strategy to salvage the oil industry’s productive capacity came in the 1990s with internationalization and opening policies, both of which co-

incided with broader market reforms that became the norm globally. Internationalization sought to vertically integrate the oil industry and bring PDVSA closer to buyers' markets (Mommer 2002). Simultaneously, the oil opening brought about foreign investment in oil extraction, under an attractive framework to investors (Urbaneja 2013). The goal of these policies was to reduce state dependence on rent and expand market share, increasing the industry's productive capacity. The Bolivarian Revolution put an end to these plans and returned to a rentier notion of the industry by increasing royalties and tax burdens, in order to stimulate an inward-looking development model. However, resource nationalist policies were accompanied by continued alliances with and even dependence on foreign investors (Rosales 2018). Most importantly, the government managed to take control over PDVSA after the company's rebellion to Chavez's policies.

Crucially, increasing oil prices allowed the Chávez government to slush spending, keep otherwise unsustainable price and currency controls, and expropriate land and businesses in different sectors. A consumption boom was largely sustained by cheap imports and new alliances, especially with China (Dachevsky & Kornblihtt 2017; Purcell 2017). During high oil prices, the government engaged in profuse borrowing from both bond markets and allies, especially China, through commodity-backed loans (Rosales 2016). There are important ruptures in the Bolivarian model of rentierism that, despite long-lasting structural conditions, modified the structure of the Venezuelan rentier state. First, the government managed to do away with PDVSA's autonomy, something that previous governments had chosen not to do or failed with in their pursuit (Hults 2011). This "subservient" company allowed the government to utilize PDVSA to carry out alternative social programs, finance the government directly without oversight and accountability. PDVSA's spending largesse turned out to be costly for the company's capacity to extract oil once financial markets closed to the country and oil prices declined (Rodríguez 2018). Second, the government built new alliances and connections rooted on a transformation of the global economy and state-capital nexuses that significantly impacted the energy market (Van Apeldoorn et al. 2012). Until approximately 2012, the government was able to exert higher control and extract increasing rents from companies without jeopardizing investments. In addition, new lending acquired in exchange for untapped oil translated into new dynamics of mortgaging underground resources (Purcell & Martínez 2018). Third, surplus rents channelled through direct spending or currency subsidies were used politically to benefit a new model of authoritarian governance, closely associated with the figure of the president, rewarding loyalty and punishing dissent (Ellner 2018).

The current crisis of the rentier economy is the result of these new features implemented during the Bolivarian Revolution. Policy decisions that kept unsustainable currency controls made it impossible for oil companies, including PDVSA, to maintain production, pay workers and reinvest in the fields. The

industry relied increasingly on debt, but with a widening fiscal deficit and macroeconomic distortions external financing became more onerous and, according to Rodríguez (2018), the country's debt became toxic. Maintaining internal fuel subsidies and a distorted currency market were the initial causes of the recession that began in 2013, before the oil price collapse. The decline in prices extended this crisis. Financial toxicity was accentuated with the 2017 financial sanctions, driving production further down.

Sanctions imposed by the United States on Venezuela landed on the context of a decaying rentier economy. In Bull and Rosales (2020), we explain how different sectors have been responding to both government policies and sanctions. The main uptake is that different sectors have shielded from sanctions and government harassment by protecting themselves in the shadows of informality, meaning the ad hoc adoption of the US dollar, the use of backchannel and unofficial sales, and the under-declaration of profits for the sake of avoiding tax payments. The government has also transferred control of key businesses such as in the agrifood sector and the oil company to military officials. Lastly, new sectors have emerged with the expansion of informal and illegal actors. The state has largely formalized illegal mining, for example, compromising its own control over land and undermining its authority in labour and environmental governance. Consequently, the government and key constituents, especially military officials, can harness new rents in the midst of closing avenues to hoard or leverage rents due to international hostility. As will be discussed further below, sanctions have also drawn Venezuela closer to contending powers, especially China, Russia and Turkey. These strengthened alliances provide a space for patrimonial practices rooted on corruption. Institutional weakness, argue Cardozo Uzcátegui and Mijares (2020), allows for the strengthening of authoritarian governance and transnational alliances based on, among other factors, corruption.

Taken together, informalization, the increase in criminal activity, and predatory alliances based on corruption complicate further the possibility of return to democracy. These dynamics suggest a complicated interplay of actors, many of which are informal and illegal, which exercise significant influence and control. Moreover, the access and use of strategic resources, such as oil and minerals, remains a central point of departure for any discussion of economic development and political transition. Lastly, Venezuela's complicated alliances with Russia, China, Turkey and others, as well as the increasing antagonism with respect to the United States and regional partners, is both a signal and a consequence of broader fractures in the regional and global order.

### **Venezuela in the regional and global order upheaval**

The first decades of the twenty-first century have been characterized by significant international changes: Power has shifted away from the West and created competition for global leadership; dominating norms of multilateral principles

are challenged; and authoritarianism is on the rise. Venezuela's transformations are deeply entangled in a transition of the regional and global order, as well as a shift in the dominating principles and norms of the multilateral cooperation underpinning it. However, despite the country's democratic backsliding and economic decay, Venezuela's crisis has also contributed to the transformation of regional relations in several ways, perhaps even with global implications. Articles in this special collection shed light on these entangled domestic and transnational processes.

There is little agreement on how to characterize the current changes of the global level. One way of framing them is as a crisis of the liberal international order. An international order can be considered a political formation in which settled rules and arrangements exist between states to guide their interactions (Ikenberry 2011). The liberal order consists of a set of global institutions upholding essentially liberal norms. This is by some considered to have emerged gradually through efforts by principally European states and non-state actors from the nineteenth century onward (Mazover 2012). Others associate it more clearly with the post-WWII hegemony of the United States, and link its weakening with the declining power of the United States (Ikenberry 2018). This is not just expressed in the increased competition from illiberal states (principally China and Russia) but also the withdrawal of the United States from international organizations and responsibilities, and its frequent direct violations of the very norms the system defends (Boyle 2016). It is also associated with a crisis of the liberal globalization (Sanahuja 2018). While few dare to conclude on what kind of order we are moving toward, there is a clear consensus that multilateralism and international norms are weakened due to frequent contestations and states' lack of willingness to invest in institutions that may support them. Some also point to a geopolitical shift in the centre of gravity of the international order from the United States and Western Europe to Eurasia. This is an increasingly integrated geographical area led by China and Russia, which, in spite of differences, are cooperating for strategic and pragmatic reasons. As argued by Serbin: "Russia needed China as an investor and commercial partner. China needed Russia's natural resources and military capacity. They coincided in their worries about the regional stability and terrorist threats in Eurasia; their questioning of the global liberal order and United States' hegemony; and in their critical acceptance of globalization" (Serbin 2019). While the formation of a Eurasian region is an uncertain process, Eurasia has already become a significant counter-pole to a United States-led world order.

Latin America has largely been ignored in studies of the international liberal order (Long 2018), as well as in studies of its transformation and decline (Maull 2019). A dominating current argues that the shifting global order leaves more space for regional orders and domination (Acharya, Estevadeordal, & Goodman 2019). However, at this point, the shift in global order is most clearly reflected in what Tom Legler in this volume (2020) calls a "regional order upheaval", consisting both in a shift in leadership within the Western Hemi-

sphere and in the institutional architecture supporting the hemisphere's norms and rules. In the past decade, the regional order in the Western Hemisphere has gone through important transformations. It was precisely with the strengthening of the global liberal order in the 1990s that its architecture for democracy support was established, resting on the support of the United States as well as a regional consensus around the principles of liberal democracy (Legler 2012). These institutions have never been particularly strong as protectors of democracy. As discussed by Legler in this volume (2020), they are by design suited for supporting incumbent governors against possible coup-attempts or other destabilizing factors, but not to protect against democratic backsliding or executive aggrandizement. However, the historical order that allowed a region-wide consensus around principles of liberal democracy to emerge was historically-contingent rather than exceptional. This order was increasingly contested over the course of the following two decades, both from within the region and by extraregional powers. Thus, the norms and principles underlying the liberal order in addressing democratic deterioration have been further weakened along with the shifting distribution of powers between regional actors.

The crisis in Venezuela has become the clearest prism for the uncertainty and fluidity of the current regional order. Legler discusses in depth how both the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Organization of American States (OAS) have fallen short of contributing to a return to constitutional democracy in Venezuela. The main reason has been the impossibility of reaching a complete regional consensus on how to implement the democratic charters and the norms that formally underpin the organizations. One of the consequences has been, as discussed by Smilde and Ramsey in this volume (2020), the proliferation of ad hoc initiatives seeking to influence in the search for a solution, including the Lima Group, the Montevideo-mechanism and the International Contact Group (consisting of European and Latin American states).

It is not only the shift in the distribution of powers between regional actors that has led to a weak international response. The strategy of the United States towards Venezuela has been shifting and erratic, and for the most part of the period treated here it has been characterized by a willingness to dominate but not to lead. In few other cases have the permanent tensions in United States' foreign policy towards Latin America been exposed to the extent that they have been in the case of Venezuela. United States' engagement in Latin America has always occurred in a tension between imperialist inclination, expressed in the newly reactivated Monroe doctrine; the acceptance of principles of sovereignty and social rights upheld by Latin American states; and a common general, although often side-lined, consensus on the principle of democracy (Long 2018). With the entering of the Trump administration, short term domestic political concerns received priority over long term strategic visions. This is clearly expressed in the ambiguities and contradictions in the Venezuelan strategy. The United States preference for a regime change in Venezuela has been clear for

many years, and Venezuela was declared a threat to the United States' security already in 2015 under the Obama administration. However, during Trump administration, the United States has taken an even more confrontational stance, and a more proactive role in supporting the opposition. At the same time, it vacillates between threats (including of military intervention) and more conciliatory approaches, while sanctions were gradually ramped up, against both regime supporting individuals and sectors of the economy, as discussed by Bull and Rosales in this volume (2020).

This strategy stands in stark contrast to the one pursued by China, as discussed by Smilde and Ramsey. Venezuela's debacle has put China's principles of non-intervention, win-win and long term strategic planning to a severe test. With its insistence in pursuing economic rather than political goals, it has withdrawn from engagement, but nevertheless contributed to counterbalancing United States-pressure. Russia has been a more vocal supporter of Maduro, while also frequently displaying its limitations in terms of economic support of the regime. For the Maduro regime, Russia represents a crucial lifeline in terms of credit and symbolic willingness for transborder defence. Russia has both geopolitical and commercial interests in Venezuela (Blank & Kim 2015). As argued by Cardozo Uzcátegui and Mijares in this volume (2020), Venezuela and its natural resources represent an important asset that allows disguising the former's collapse as a global power. However, this strategic interest is not the only factor keeping Russia committed to Venezuela. Cardozo Uzcátegui and Mijares (2020) point to a different logic, namely the increasingly strong ties between illicit business in Venezuela and Russia. The close linkage between corruption and the striking of deals between the countries, make Russia and Venezuela mutually irreplaceable in the two countries' foreign policy strategy, at least in the short term.

In this context, the staunchest supporters of national and regional dialogue initiatives aimed at a transition in Venezuela have been the different European states, as discussed in the articles by Alfaro Pareja, as well as Legler and Smilde and Ramsey (2020). The direct support came first from the Vatican, and later from Spain and then Norway. The International Contact Group established by the European Union and Latin American countries has provided consistent support. Yet, what has become clear is that their efforts have not only been limited by the deep and long-lasting domestic polarization, but also by the lack of consensus and rivalry of external powers, first and foremost Russia, China, and the United States.

Moreover, the crisis in Venezuela is not only a prism for an ongoing global and regional order upheaval; it contributes to a change in the regional and global order. The article by Cardozo Uzcátegui and Mijares (2020) sets out to enrich current realist political thinking with a focus on how corruption-relations change a state's security considerations. Further, it sheds important light on how the Venezuela crisis has contributed to a transformation of the global order that goes beyond formal geostrategic strategies by the major pow-

ers. Some of the corruption ties that Cardozo Uzcátegui and Mijares (2020) discuss are results of attempts at bypassing the sanctions imposed on both Russia and Venezuela. This is particularly true for the operations in the financial sector, and those related to the establishment of cryptocurrencies. Russia's decision to move its focus away from Western Europe in its strategic visions started in the early 2000s, and strengthened with the 2008 conflict over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, the imposition of sanctions against Russia due to its annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014 could be considered a breaking point. As discussed by Bull and Rosales in this volume (2020), the arms embargo against Venezuela in 2006 first led to a strengthening of Venezuela's relations with Russia, as Russia became Venezuela's main arms supplier. With the imposition of financial and oil sanctions later, the two countries have joined in seeking to bypass sanctions through, among other strategies, the mining and use of cryptocurrencies. Yet, as Bull and Rosales (2020) point out, the sanctions-regime has also led to an increasing deformalization and partly criminalization of the economy conducted in part with ties to Russian banks and firms. The individual sanctions imposed on over 150 persons associated with the regime also create strong incentives for engaging in corrupt activities. Several journalistic articles have shown how sanctioned individuals continue their business outside formal channels through widespread corrupt practices (see for example Deniz & Solera (2019), Crisis Group (2019)). The increasing use of sanctions by the United States, not only towards Venezuela, but also a number of other states, can be interpreted as a result of a declining power's ambitions to dominate, but unwillingness to lead or to invest in the use of force, and at the same time seeking to appear as a defender of values such as democracy and human rights in the face of its home audience. The result may be to further undermine the liberal order by strengthening a global shadow economy.

Although the Venezuelan crisis has so far principally contributed to the global disorder, in the long term it will not only be shaped by, but also contribute to shaping, the regional and global order for at least two reasons. First, the massive migration of Venezuelans to Latin American neighbours is already reshaping refugee and migratory governance and the social fabric of the hemisphere. Second, as the country with the largest reservoir of oil and an important oil industry that attracts capital from around the world, the future of Venezuela's oil industry will continue to be important for global markets. Several historians have shown how the liberal norms to a significant degree have been shaped from the margins, including Latin America (Grandin 2012, Long 2018, Helleiner 2019). This has occurred both through the active promotion of specific norms by Latin American states (including human and social rights), but also through being what Grandin has called an "empire's workshop" (Grandin 2006). It is still very early to judge exactly how the situation in Venezuela will affect the further evolution of the regional order, the global order, or the strategies by world powers. The "Venezuela issue" has already created an almost

insuperable polarization in regional politics, becoming a centrifugal force, ripping regional cooperation apart. What several articles in this volume render clear, however, is that no matter how domestically produced the Venezuelan crisis is, its solution is closely entangled and interlinked in several ways to changes in the regional and global political order and political economy. Indeed, as Legler (2020) rightly demonstrates in his contribution to this collection, few other situations illustrate to the same extent the contestation over the values, leadership and influence of regional and global institutions, and the usefulness of multilateralism in protecting democracy.

### **Removing conceptual stumbling blocks in the path to transition**

As difficult as it may be, it is easier to describe and analyse recent Venezuelan political and economic transitions than to prescribe a route to a transition out of the economic abyss and democratic backsliding. Clearing the way towards a transition is way beyond the ability of this special collection. However, it does seek to contribute to removing some conceptual stumbling blocks. The most obvious of these is a failure to move beyond the conceptual models underlying the discourses of the most extreme parties in the conflict: on the one hand, a Marxist conceptualization of class-conflict and imperial interventions as being the principal driver of the crisis, and on the other hand, a narrow pluralist focus solely on the violations of the norms embedded in liberal democratic institutions. The articles in this volume bring in a variety of additional perspectives, seeking to analyse various dimensions of the conflict in conjunction – the democratic, the economic, the international, and that of the rule of law – while never losing sight of historical perspectives.

Four of the articles (Marsteintredet, Legler, Alfaro Pareja, and Smilde & Ramsey) focus explicitly on the potential and perils of a negotiated solution. A horizontal (across cases) comparison to other cases of negotiated transitions toward democracy allows Marsteintredet to warn against a negotiated solution that fails to mend two main institutional features: “the majoritarian bias” in the Venezuelan constitution of 1999, and the weakness of state institutions. Even if a negotiation succeeds in allowing free and fair elections, any incoming government will inherit a constitution that gives disproportional power to “majoritarian institutions” (first and foremost the executive) and an electoral system biased towards the largest party, something that can generate new conflicts. The gradual deterioration of state capacity also makes electoral promises hard to fulfil. Based rather on a vertical (across time) comparison, the main message that Smilde and Ramsey, and Alfaro Pareja purvey is that external actors, whether facilitators or otherwise interested parties, contribute wittingly or not, to a transformation.

Alfaro Pareja focuses on how different rounds of negotiations in which external actors have been involved influence the *composition* of the opposing coalitions. Smilde and Ramsey focus on how they change the *calculations* by

the parties and their willingness to enter into different solutions. The implications of Bull and Rosales' study of the impact of sanctions is similar. Sanctions were imposed in part as a means to tilt the highly unequal power relations between a government controlling the state apparatus and all institutions except the National Assembly, and the opposition, with its weak institutional power only compensated by its connection to domestic and international capital, in favour of the latter. Nevertheless, they seem to further diminish a main source of power of the opposition, namely the control over a privately held production apparatus.

Even though the articles in this special collection are cautious about the potential success of negotiations, they jointly make a case that the question is less about whether or not to negotiate and more about how, when and about what to negotiate. They further call for broader lenses of analysis, in part along the lines of what Smilde (2017) has called a "full conflict theory". Building on the neo-Weberian perspective of Mann (1993), this theory focuses on how social power emanates from multiple sources, including, but not limited to capital, and how power monopolies can be generated in multiple spheres. A full conflict perspective avoids the presumption of equality between different actors as implicit in a pluralist perspective. Such a perspective allows a focus on the linkages between social and territorial implications of control for the functioning of democracy (O'Donnell 1993). Applied to transitions in Venezuela, it would serve as reminder that it is not only the central democratic institutions and the composition and balance of power between different political parties that have changed over the twenty years of the Bolivarian Revolution; but also the groups controlling the state and the state's ability to impose its agenda, and to regulate and control other social forces.

Adding a perspective that critically engages with the power and capacity of different actors broadens the focus on the transformation (and deterioration) of democratic institutions. Such perspective further considers shifts in control of capital occurring throughout the last twenty years aiming at analysing the institutional manifestations of the shifts in the sources of social power of changing governing coalitions. The gradual deterioration of Venezuelan state institutions has been produced both through the establishment of parallel institutions to existing ones, in what has been called "collateral institutionalism" (Pismataro 2017), and by years of populist discourses and politics, including what Pratt calls "penal populism" or the conditioning of a country's judicial system on the part of a political power (Pratt 2006).

A focus on the changes in the institutional make-up and power-relations opens new avenues for debates on urgent matters in Venezuela, not least the unfolding crisis of the rule of law. In Francis Fukuyama's seminal work on political order, he shows how historically the middle classes have been most concerned with the rule of law, while the lower classes fought hard for electoral democracy (Fukuyama 2014). The primacy of class power and electoral democracy has also been a strong narrative in defence of the Bolivarian Revo-

lution. However, Venezuela has become a glaring testimony to the deep dangers of this narrative without a parallel concern for the rule of law. As Corrales (2020) demonstrates, electoral irregularities can become so ubiquitous that in the context of fragility in the rule of law it is difficult to counter the practices that undermine electoral democracy. Moreover, as detailed by Gan in this volume (2020), while the legal protection of the human rights of marginalized groups has never been particularly strong in Venezuela, it is precisely marginalized groups that are the main victims of the increasing arbitrariness and brutality of the Venezuelan state apparatus and militarized civil groups.

Finally, by broadening our perspectives beyond the rule of law, it is possible to consider an impending environmental crisis and ecological transition in large parts of the territory. This transition rests on the deep crisis of the rentier model, but it is also deepened by the ongoing institutional deterioration that has left the management of vast natural resources (including mineral, forests and biodiversity) in the hands of illicit and para-state actors, and out of reach for the public debate, democratic institutions or national law. With the political crisis absorbing all other serious public debates, including that of how to confront the ecological and climate crisis, Venezuela is showcasing a new “civilization crisis”, in the words of Edgardo Lander (2019). This crisis is of urgency to resolve, not only for Venezuela but for the planet as a whole, and it requires new approaches to those traditionally applied by the left or the right.

## **Conclusion**

The crisis in Venezuela will, for many years to come, be a seminal case for understanding the consequences of populism, democratic backsliding, the unravelling of a rentier economy, and how development can be put on reverse with informalization of the economy and dwindling economic growth. It will also be studied for how actors leverage alliances as well as resist pressure from outside powers in spite of internal economic and political crisis.

It would be a mistake to attempt generating long term solutions to the Venezuelan crisis just as an institutional fix based on agreements among the main contending actors alone. Any efforts to bring about solutions to the crisis, whether a transition to democracy or economic recovery, need to take into consideration its diverse origins and ramifications. Such efforts further need to include transnational actors that may have fundamental strategic disagreements, while also being cognizant of emerging local and informal actors disaggregated in the territory who exercise control over productive activities and labour. The reconstruction of Venezuelan institutions and economy rests on the learned processes of partially successful and failed attempts over two decades, on the institutional memory of an imperfect democracy, and the emerging actors and interests at play. Moreover, possible electoral and institutional solutions need to emerge in consonance with productive arrangements that incentivize formal activities and the protection of livelihoods and the environment.

This special collection seeks to situate the crisis in Venezuela into some important broader debates. Its main contributions consist in bringing together the political mechanisms and dynamics of democratic backsliding and the political economy processes and structures of rentier state decay. These two largely domestic processes are integrated into a broader transnational discussion of bilateral and multilateral transformations. In this case, the Venezuelan crisis is not only examined from the lens of shifting domestic factions and processes but also their interactions with foreign actors and international institutions. Venezuela's crisis is also a microcosm of wider dynamics, such as the rise of authoritarian politics, the declining power of the United States and of multilateralism, the rise of emerging powers, and the transformation of global economy dynamics such as the expansion of extractive frontiers. In these processes, Venezuela has not been a passive bystander or agentless victim but, in many occasions, an active participant.

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**Benedicte Bull** is professor of political science at the Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM) at the University of Oslo, where she leads the Norwegian Network of Latin America Research and the Oslo Academy of Global Governance. Her research focuses on the role of business and elites in development and environmental governance in Latin America and international institutions.

Address: Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM), Sandakerveien 130, 0484 Oslo, Norway.

Email: benedicte.bull@sum.uio.no

**Antulio Rosales** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Centre for Development and the Environment in the University of Oslo. His research focuses on the political economy of natural resource extraction, especially oil and mining in South America.

Address: Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM), Sandakerveien 130, 0484 Oslo, Norway.

Email: antulio.rosales@sum.uio.no

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