

VENEZUELA

The Erosion of Security Capacity

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Venezuela exhibits dramatically low security capacity for a country not at war. The autocratic government no longer holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force across its national territory, fails to enforce border control, and offers little protection to its citizens from organized criminal groups or street crime. Moreover, its ability to carry out these functions has fallen markedly since the early 2010s, as a consequence of the country's unprecedented economic collapse and the central government's reliance on non-state actors to govern. Worryingly, Venezuela appears to have evolved from a weak state in the early 2010s into a failing one by 2021.

The country is beset by threats. Although it has long been one of the most violent countries in the world, things have gotten worse, as it suffered what is probably the world's highest homicide rate between 2017 and 2019.² Further, the economic and political crises under the Nicolás Maduro government (2013–present) have weakened state security forces' operational power and territorial presence while simultaneously incentivizing and empowering non-state organizations. Consequently, many of these irregular groups have filled or displaced the state and its security apparatus in urban and rural areas. Dozens of foreign non-state armed actors operate in the country as well, including insurgent groups like the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* or the ELN), dissident structures of the demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* or FARC), Colombian paramilitary groups, and Brazil's First Capital Command (*Primeiro Comando da Capital* or PCC).³ Worse, Venezuela's Bolivarian National Armed Forces (*Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana* or FANB) has shown itself, at best, unwilling or incapable of combating these groups, and at worst, has collaborated with them.

The country's weak administrative capacity also contributes to citizen uncertainty. Massive shortages of basic necessities have resulted in a humanitarian crisis and public health epidemic. Low vaccination rates have led to the return of previously eradicated diseases such as polio and diphtheria, and the collapse of the public school system has forced teachers to emigrate and students to look for work or food.⁴ At the same time, oil production, the country's economic engine, has collapsed to levels not seen in more than 70 years.⁵ Indeed, Venezuela's socioeconomic decline in recent years is unprecedented. As a result, studies suggest that at least 82 percent of Venezuelans now live below the poverty line.⁶ Tragically, these conditions have resulted in the world's largest refugee crisis.⁷

Further, the Venezuelan state has not merely failed to combat threats to its power but has done so, in part, by consciously abdicating its role as sovereign and delegating power and

territorial control to pro-government paramilitary groups, criminal gangs, and other predatory non-state actors throughout the 2000s and 2010s.⁸ These decisions, in turn, reflect weaknesses in governance as well as misguided government policies.

Low state capacity and the specter of state failure have numerous consequences. Domestically, the dramatic fall in security capacity threatens citizens' well-being, the state's ability to guarantee public security and national defense, and even the country's sovereignty, as the central government's territorial control increasingly fragments. Similarly, state weakness and the absence of a monopoly over the legitimate use of force may also threaten regional order, from impeding the demobilization of guerrillas in Colombia to challenging other governments to integrate waves of displaced migrants to facilitating the spread of disease.

Weak state capacity also poses a test to any re-democratization process. As Marcella, Pérez, and Fonseca argue in the introductory chapter to this volume, much of the academic discussion on Latin American democracy focuses on the quality of procedural and substantive performance while overlooking the role of state capacity and security. Yet, high levels of crime and corruption pose a risk to fragile state institutions and civil society, and consequently, to democracy. Unlike other countries in this volume, Venezuela is not a liberal democracy. As such, weakened sovereignty and low-security capacity are impediments to successful and enduring re-democratization.

This chapter begins by defining and assessing state and security capacity and differentiating strong, weak, and failing states. Venezuelan security capacity is then evaluated across four different dimensions – external threats, internal threats, human security, and the rule of law and courts – to provide evidence of the Venezuelan state's increasing inability to control its borders, guarantee its citizens' safety, or even exercise a monopoly on the use of force within its territory. The third section argues that part of the decline in state security capabilities owes to the government voluntarily surrendering some of its security functions to non-state actors. Following this, the primary threats to public security and national defense that extreme state weakness poses are described, focusing on the implications for domestic and regional security and the challenges this poses to re-democratization.

State Capacity

The meaning of state capacity varies considerably,⁹ but it generally refers to the ability of the state to effectively exercise authority and implement policy throughout its national territory or to administer the provision of some basic set of services.¹⁰ Robert I. Rotberg argues that strong states can be distinguished from weak ones, and weak states from failing, failed, or collapsed states according to how effectively they deliver these crucial services.¹¹ In this hierarchy of public goods, the first and most critical is security.

One of the state's primary functions is to protect its citizens: to eliminate external rivals and prevent cross-border invasions and infiltrations, to eliminate domestic threats to or attacks on the state, to prevent crime and any related dangers to domestic human security, and to enable citizens to resolve their disputes with the state and their fellow inhabitants without recourse to arms or other forms of physical coercion.

According to Rotberg, the delivery of a range of other desirable services – secondary goods – only becomes possible when a reasonable measure of security has been sustained. These include health care; education; roads, railways, harbors, and other physical infrastructure; communications and telecommunications infrastructure; a trustworthy monetary and banking system; an institutional context within which citizens can pursue entrepreneurial goals; the promotion of civil society; and methods of regulating the sharing of the environmental commons. Together, this bundle of goods establishes a set of criteria to classify nation-states as strong, weak, or failed.

Briefly, strong states control a monopoly on the use of force across the entirety of their territories and deliver a full range of high-quality goods to their citizens. On the other hand, weak states are tremendously varied and may, in some cases, combine fragile governance structures with substantial regional influence and wealth. A subcategory of a weak state is a *failing* state, in which:

Public facilities become increasingly decrepit and neglected. Teachers, physicians, nurses, and orderlies are paid late or not at all, and absenteeism increases. Textbooks and medicines become scarce. X-ray machines break down and are not repaired. Reports to the relevant ministries are ignored. Citizens, especially rural parents, students, and patients, slowly realize that the state has abandoned them to their own devices and to the forces of nature.¹²

It follows that in these scenarios, the coercive power of the state is so weak that it can no longer ensure the security of its borders or territory, may be weaker than internal rivals in some parts of the country, and rarely, if ever, delivers political goods. Lastly, a failed state is one where opposition movements have destroyed the central government but have been unable to reconstitute a new order, leaving no entity with a monopoly on violence.

In all cases, analyses must make a crucial distinction regarding the two dimensions of state capacity that Rotberg highlights: that between coercive state capacity (i.e., a monopoly on violence) and infrastructural capacity (i.e., administrative effectiveness). Although this chapter focuses on security capacity, Venezuela fares poorly along both dimensions, probably placing the country in the “failing” category, with the real risk of becoming a failed state.

Dimensions of Security Capacity

Security is the most critical public good that a state provides, and it refers to the state’s ability to (1) defend itself from external threats, (2) eliminate internal rivals and domestic threats to the state, (3) protect citizens from crime and any related dangers to domestic human security, and (4) adjudicate citizens’ disputes without recourse to arms or other forms of physical coercion. In Venezuela, security capacity along all of these categories decreased markedly throughout the 2000s, reaching its nadir under the Maduro government. This is borne out by the data. In their 2015 analysis of 23 countries in the Americas, Luna and Soifer found the Venezuelan state had the poorest territorial reach of any state.¹³ As shown here, things have worsened considerably since that time along all four subdimensions, dragging the country from a weak state to a failing one.

External Threats

Defense from external threats rests with the Venezuelan Armed Forces (FANB). Based in part on troop numbers, equipment, and budget, the Global Firepower Index ranked the FANB the 41st-strongest military out of 138 countries in the world in 2020.¹⁴ Nonetheless, this ranking belies significant changes since 1999 – and especially since 2013 – that have conspired to weaken operability and performance of the military, including a decrease in cohesion, increasing top-heaviness, politicization, intimidation of the rank and file, fragmenting of the overall command, and desertions.¹⁵ As such, the FANB no longer possesses the capacity to defend its borders fully or repel many external threats. Even small operations have gone awry. To wit, in April 2020, the ANBV Naiguatá, a Venezuelan naval patrol vessel, opened fire and then rammed the RCGS Resolute, a Portuguese-flagged cruise ship, near the Caribbean island of La Tortuga.

Embarrassingly for the Venezuelan Navy, the ice-breaking *Resolute* and its strengthened hull suffered only minor damages, while the *Naiguatá* sank.¹⁶

Venezuela also suffers from extremely weak border security. The Army and the Bolivarian National Guard (*Guardia Nacional Bolivariana* or GNB) are largely unable – or unwilling – to regulate the flow of irregular armed groups, contraband, and especially large numbers of migrants who regularly cross the borders with little transparency or control. Between Venezuela and Colombia, smugglers and migrants use hundreds of informal crossings called *trochas* to move back and forth, or in other cases, simply bribe Venezuelan officials. Meanwhile, Brazil's notorious PCC, the country's largest criminal organization, has increasingly gained a foothold in Venezuela's Bolívar state and is invested in the trafficking of narcotics, arms, and humans between Venezuela and Brazil.¹⁷ There are even fewer maritime controls to stop human trafficking between Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago.¹⁸ Worse, sometimes, the military itself is involved in this smuggling; some Venezuelan military cells and corrupt officers are responsible in conjunction with Colombian groups for the purchase, storage, and movement of cocaine from Colombia to Venezuela and onward.¹⁹

Beyond capacity, the Venezuelan government has shown a selective will to confront external threats to its sovereignty. This is especially true with Cuba. Ex-President Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) shared an ideological kinship and friendship with Fidel Castro, and the two leaders signed a number of bilateral cooperation agreements in 2000. But after a failed coup against Chávez in April 2002, the nature of this relationship changed, and the Venezuelan leader began to seek the Cuban government's strategic political and security assistance. Specifically, Chávez turned to the Cuban intelligence service to help him fortify power and stave off internal opposition. If anything, this dependency has grown over time, as Cuban intelligence officers embedded in the FANB have helped maintain the Maduro government in power since 2013 in exchange for Venezuelan oil.²⁰ This situation points to a willing erosion of sovereignty on the part of the Venezuelan government.

Chávez and now Maduro have shown a similar tolerance for Colombian guerrillas within their national borders that also now threatens the state. As early as the late 1990s, Chávez permitted the FARC to establish training camps in the western border states of Zulia, Táchira, and Apure, while it was engaged in (unsuccessful) peace talks with the administration of Colombian President Andrés Pastrana. Chávez even ordered Venezuelan military officers to provide logistical support to FARC guerrillas launching raids into Colombia.²¹ At that time, Venezuela possessed the military force, organization, and resources to combat these groups.

However, since the peace agreement was signed between the FARC and the Colombian government in 2016, Colombian armed groups in Venezuela have multiplied, grown in strength, and fanned out from the border states into the interior, especially the states of Amazonas and Bolívar.²² In addition to drug trafficking, extortion, and smuggling, these groups are heavily involved in the illegal mining of gold and other minerals.²³ In other places, non-state armed groups usurp state functions: In 2017, local non-governmental organization (NGO) *Fundación Redes* denounced three Venezuelan FM radio stations in Táchira, Apure, and Barinas that allegedly served as platforms for the ELN,²⁴ as well as the explicit (and officially sanctioned) involvement of the ELN in distributing government-sponsored food rations to citizens.²⁵ In Apure state, Human Rights Watch has documented how the ELN and the Martín Villa 10th Front, a FARC dissident group, impose their own rules and enforce compliance through coercion, enacting punishments for noncompliance that range from fines to killings. The 2020 report quotes a police officer who suggested that in rural border areas, the guerrillas had effectively become a police force.²⁶ Given their penetration, non-state armed actors represent an active threat to Venezuelan sovereignty that even an engaged military would have great difficulty dislodging.

Internal Threats

Even more than foreign powers, Venezuela is beset by internal threats to its sovereignty, including pro-government *colectivos* (collectives) and numerous organized criminal groups, like the often intertwined *pranes* (prison gang leaders), *megabandas* (megagangs), and *sindicatos* (syndicates). In most cases, these groups have actively preyed on the state's absence or displaced the state in urban and rural areas. In other cases, such as with the Venezuelan penitentiary system and certain violent urban areas, the government voluntarily ceded sovereignty to groups it could not control.

Often referred to as a single, coherent actor, *colectivos* represent a wide variety of groups, some of which have long exercised influence and carried out social functions in their communities and offered protection against local criminal gangs, especially in the slums and low-income neighborhoods of Caracas, where they act as a state within a state or serve a coercive function at the behest of the state. Of course, it is important to recognize that their level of support and motives vary greatly. Velasco maintains that there are three types: a long-standing and rather autonomous set that traces its origins and inspiration to the guerrilla movements of the 1960s; a second set of groups that formed between 2007 and 2012 that is ideologically committed to twenty-first-century socialism and loyal to *Chavismo*; and so-called disguised collectives, groups made up of special forces and police units that sprang up during the protest cycle of 2014 and who act in name and tactics like armed civil groups, dress as civilians, and ride in motorcycle groups.²⁷ Depending on the group, *colectivos* may perform public safety, intelligence, and repressive functions in conjunction with state security forces, and in some areas, they even control highly lucrative food sales. Since the mid-2010s, however, *colectivos* are most notorious for their role as para-police or para-military forces, committing violence against anti-government demonstrators. Journalists and film evidence document *colectivo* members killing and beating protesters, destroying vehicles, vandalizing homes and businesses, and even impeding opposition politicians from entering the country's National Assembly.²⁸

A second internal threat to sovereignty consists of organized gangs, especially *megabandas* and *sindicatos*. The *megabandas* are criminal organizations of 50–200 members that engage in drug trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping in primarily urban areas. Unlike traditional gangs, they are based on the criminal model developed in Venezuela's penitentiary system, where prison leaders called *pranes* hold sway over hierarchically organized structures.²⁹ Furthermore, *megabandas* are controlled from within prisons by *pranes* and tend to be much more heavily armed than a typical gang, relying on such weapons as assault rifles and fragmentation grenades. Moreover, as the government's pursuit of infamous *pran* Wuileisys Acevedo (aka "Wilexis") in the slum of Petare in April and May 2020 demonstrates, some communities retain greater loyalty to these gangs and their leaders than the state itself.

Similarly, *sindicatos* challenge the state in southern Venezuela's rugged mining arc (*Arco Minero*), home to vast mineral resources, including bauxite, coltan, diamonds, and, especially, gold.³⁰ Despite its economic importance and supposed oversight by the military, an estimated 91 percent of the region's gold is mined illegally.³¹ The *sindicatos*, which controlled illegal mining before the government opened the *Arco Minero*, now also extort local communities, business owners, and miners, usually demanding payment in gold. There are other dangers, including the ELN's growing presence, which since 2018 has resulted in intensifying violence in the region. These groups have increasingly preyed on the state's absence, fissures, or weakness, providing them with power and economic stakes and directly threatening the country's long-term stability.

Reflecting these challenges, Venezuela's "monopoly on use of force" indicator from the Bertelsmann Transformation Index has decreased from 8 (1–10 scale, where 10 is the highest) in 2006 to 4 by 2020 (see [Figure 11.1](#)). As two of the four constituent elements of Venezuela's

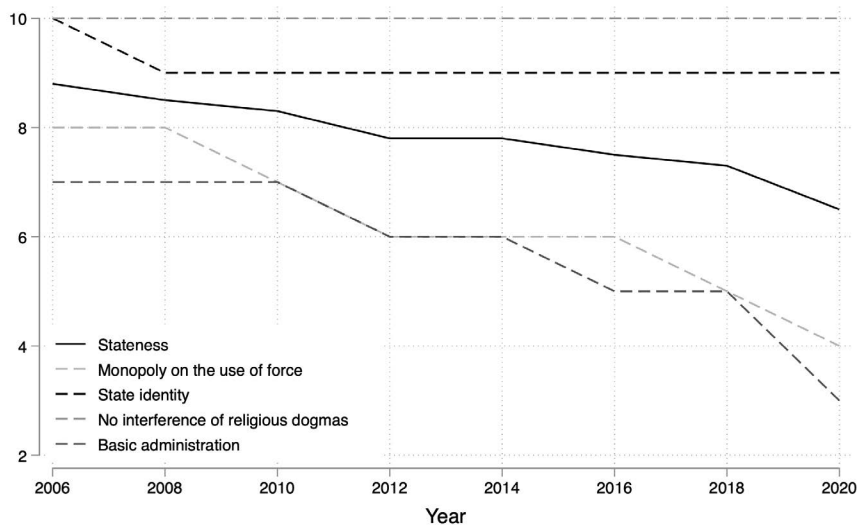


FIGURE 11.1 Stateness and constituent components

Source: Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020.

“stateness” score, “monopoly on use of force” and “basic administration” both drag down the latent *stateness* variable, especially from 2016 to 2020. Venezuela’s 2020 score places the country lowest in the Americas and lower than all but nine other countries in the world out of a sample of 137.

Similarly, Figure 11.2 illustrates how institutionalized government presence across Venezuelan territory has fallen. Overlaying Venezuela’s “state authority over territory” score from the “Varieties of Democracy” dataset over those from the rest of Latin America shows how the percentage of territory the state effectively controls has declined over 20 years. It went from 91 percent before Chávez came to power to 88 percent during his time in office and has dropped to nearly 85 percent under Maduro. In 2019, it was ranked 17th from the bottom,

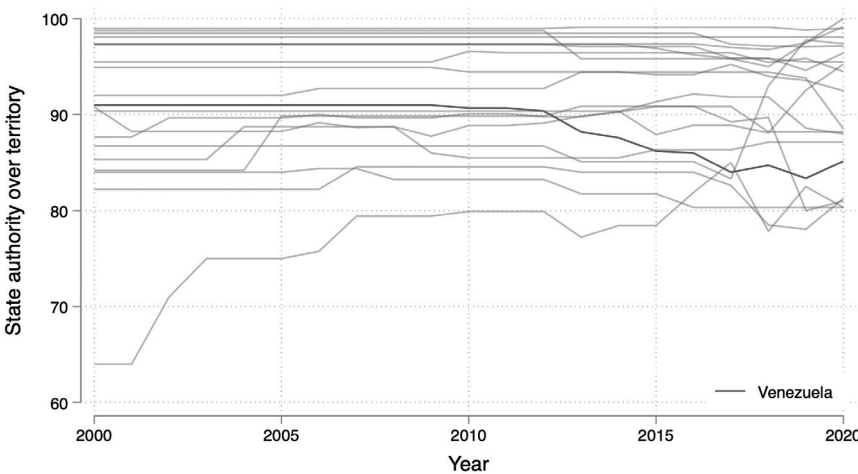


FIGURE 11.2 State authority over territory in Latin America (2000–2020)

Source: Variety of Democracy v11.

before rising slightly in 2020. This is not just an academic concern: Ungoverned spaces pose threats to national and international security, as they can attract and sustain illegal activity from street criminals, organized criminal groups, and even terrorists.³²

Human Security

Following a troubling inability or unwillingness to confront external and internal rivals to state sovereignty, Venezuelan security forces have also failed to protect citizens' physical integrity. Between 1990 and 2012, Venezuela's violent death rate quintupled, with homicide rates increasing precipitously after Chávez came to office, and kidnapping – especially the short-term “express kidnapping” – becoming increasingly common.³³ Despite a lack of official statistics, which the government fails to collect or withholds, Venezuela likely suffers one of the highest homicide rates in the world, with the number of murders probably more than doubling since 1999.³⁴ In 2017, there were 26,616 homicides in Venezuela, a rate of 89 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to the Venezuelan Violence Observatory (*Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia* or OVV). This marked a 3 percent decrease from 2016, yet still left Venezuela as the second most violent country in the world to El Salvador.³⁵ Although the numbers dropped to 16,506 homicides and a rate of 60.3 per 100,000 in 2019, the OVV speculates that this reflects the deterioration of living conditions, massive emigration, and possibly lower police-reporting numbers.³⁶

State security forces have consistently proven incapable of meeting the challenges of these security problems and instead may be a cause of the country's weakened security capacity. In fact, Venezuela fared the worst of 23 countries in a 2014 *Americas Barometer* survey question asking respondents to estimate how long it would take the police to arrive at their home if called to respond to an emergency. In it, 44 percent of Venezuelan respondents said that, in the case of a crime or emergency, either police would take more than 3 hours to appear or did not exist – the lowest of the five possible options for respondents.³⁷

Nor does the public trust state security forces. As Figure 11.3 shows, according to public opinion survey data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), in the 2016–2017

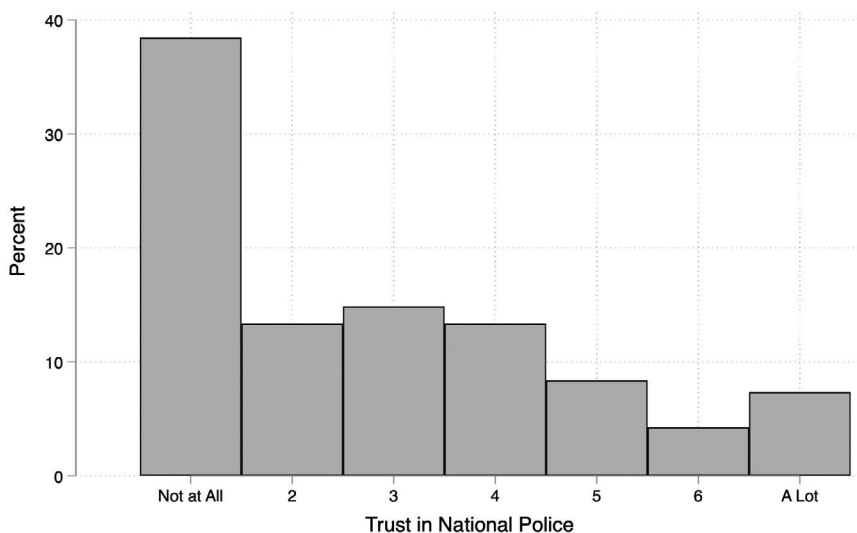


FIGURE 11.3 Trust in national police

Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project 2017.

cycle, nearly 40 percent of respondents had “no trust at all” in the national police, while just 8 percent had “a lot” of trust. This should not be surprising: police are poorly trained, have inadequate equipment, and carry out extrajudicial killings, kidnapping, and arbitrary detentions. In 2012, the then-Minister of the Interior and Justice, Tarek El Aissami, even speculated that police were responsible for one of every five crimes in the country. In all cases, impunity remains the norm, as prosecutors charged individuals for their alleged abuses in less than 4 percent of the cases investigated in 2011.³⁸

If anything, government policies have exacerbated state security abuses and citizen mistrust. This internal state security apparatus includes the GNB, the Bolivarian National Police (*Policía Nacional Bolivariana* or PNB) and its Special Action Forces (*Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales* or FAES), the Bureau for Scientific, Criminal, and Forensic Investigations (*Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales, y Criminalísticas* or CICPC), the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (*Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional* or SEBIN), and the Directorate General of Military Counterintelligence (*Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar* or DGCIM). As the United Nations’ (UN) 2019 report on human rights in Venezuela notes, the GNB and PNB have been responsible for excessive use of force in anti-government demonstrations since at least 2014, while the FAES – a rapid-response unit created in 2017 – and the CICPC are allegedly responsible for numerous extrajudicial executions in security operations.³⁹ Meanwhile, the SEBIN and DGCIM intelligence services are credibly accused of arbitrary detentions and the ill-treatment and torture of political opponents and their relatives.

Between 2015 and 2017, security forces, including the PNB, GNB, SEBIN, CICPC, and state police, conducted hundreds of operations, including sweeps through low-income communities, as part of a program known as the “Operation to Liberate and Protect the People” (*Operación de Liberación y Protección del Pueblo*). Although these sweeps are ostensibly meant to combat criminal gangs or paramilitary groups, Human Rights Watch has found “considerable evidence” that the security forces themselves are guilty of committing serious abuses, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, forced evictions, destruction of homes, and the arbitrary deportation of Colombian nationals.⁴⁰ A UN report found that police and soldiers killed at least 505 people between July 2015 and March 2017 and asserted that security forces were conducting a “campaign of extrajudicial murder” under the guise of crime-fighting operations.⁴¹ Indeed, the OVV found that, of the 26,616 homicides registered in 2017, nearly 20 percent (5,335) came at the hands of the police or the security apparatus.⁴² Human Rights Watch reported that, between 2016 and 2019, Venezuelan police and security forces killed 18,000 people in instances of alleged “resistance to authority.”

The low effectiveness of public security forces and the weak rule of law means that Venezuelans have had to look elsewhere to guarantee their safety. Those who can afford it have turned to private security forces. According to Ungar, private security in Venezuela grew an estimated 509 percent in the early 2000s as violence and crime increased.⁴³ At the same time, armored car companies in the country grew from just 1 in 1999 to 22 by 2011.⁴⁴ This growth is a red flag for low-security capacity since it reflects societal actors’ perceptions about the extent of the threat to their safety and their attempt to secure what the state has failed to provide.

In other cases, communities have turned to self-defense groups, *colectivos*, and vigilantism to combat violent crime and “take back” security. There are other worrying signs. Civilian lynchings began to appear in the 1990s but occurred only sporadically until around 2015 when the OVV recorded 20 of them.⁴⁵ In 2016, however, that number spiked to 126, as angry crowds attacked suspected murderers, rapists, and even petty criminals.⁴⁶ As with the growth in private security, a belief in or reliance on non-state “street justice” against criminals is a direct reflection of the weakness of the state and its inability to confront rampant insecurity.⁴⁷

Rule of Law and Courts

Lastly, the high degree of impunity that state security forces enjoy and the justice system's failure to hold them accountable for their abuses suggests that the rule of law has virtually disappeared in Venezuela – or is wielded as a political tool by the government.⁴⁸ The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' 2019 report on human rights in Venezuela found that:

Institutions responsible for the protection of human rights, such as the Attorney-General's Office, the courts and the Ombudsperson, usually do not conduct prompt, effective, thorough, independent, impartial and transparent investigations into human rights violations and other crimes committed by State actors, bring perpetrators to justice, and protect victims and witnesses.⁴⁹

There is little legal recourse for citizens since the court system is slow, corrupt, and inefficient, and suffers from a severe case backlog. Moreover, beginning with Chávez and continuing with Maduro, the government has filled the Supreme Court (*Tribunal Supremo de Justicia* or TSJ) with pro-government loyalists. The TSJ's Judicial Commission, in turn, possesses the power to appoint and remove lower court judges, effectively politicizing them.

The numbers reflect the weak rule of law and the poor quality of justice. Using data from the Varieties of Democracy dataset, Figure 11.4 shows how far the rule of law fell between the 1990s and early 2000s. The slope has also fallen in recent years as the values approach zero, falling from 0.01 to 0.008 between 2018 and 2020. Likewise, in the World Economic Forum's *Global Competitiveness Report 2019* for judicial independence, Venezuela ranked last out of the 141 countries surveyed, consistent with its rankings throughout the 2010s.⁵⁰ Citizen disillusionment is also high. In LAPOP's 2016–2017 survey wave, 55 percent of Venezuelan respondents had no confidence that the judiciary would punish a hypothetical guilty party, while just 11 percent had “a lot” of confidence. In that same survey, only 7 percent of respondents were convinced that the courts guaranteed a fair trial, with 30 percent answering, “not at all.” In sum, the rule of law is weak, while impunity for criminals is high.

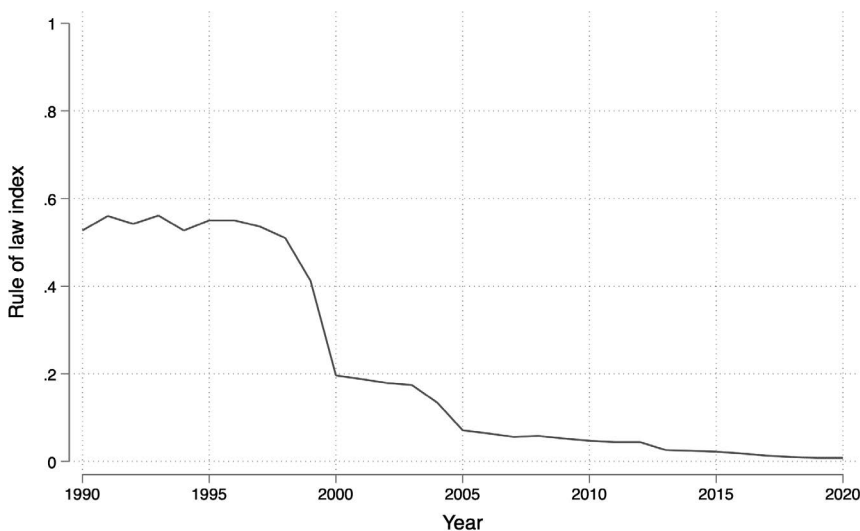


FIGURE 11.4 Rule of Law Index in Venezuela (1990–2020)

Source: Variety of Democracy v11.

The State's Voluntary Abdication of Power

It is easy to imagine state failure as the result of internal conflict or civil war, natural or environmental disaster, or economic crisis. However, Rotberg argues that state failure is largely human made, not the consequence of some exogenous shock.⁵¹ He notes that failing and failed states share institutional fragilities and structural flaws but that these problems are nearly always exacerbated by leadership errors. This appears to be the case in Venezuela, where the erosion of security capacity is the product of the country's (human-made) economic crisis as well as a deliberate government strategy to delegate security and administrative functions to non-state actors.⁵² In other words, weak security and administrative capacity in Venezuela are partially consequences of the state voluntarily relinquishing those functions in what Gan Galvis calls the "state promotion of civilian armed groups."⁵³

The emergence of *pranes* and *megabandas* is one example. Faced with the inability of prison authorities to properly control (and even protect) inmates in its overcrowded and brutal prison system, Penitentiary Minister Iris Varela (2011–2017; 2018–2020) handed over de facto control to incarcerated gang leaders known as *pranes* with the understanding they would keep violence to a minimum and prevent disorder within the penitentiary system.⁵⁴ Consequently, *pranes* became responsible for managing the prisons' black markets and overseeing the internal order among inmates. To an even greater degree than other inmates, *pranes* can easily obtain weapons and luxury goods such as televisions or throw extravagant parties. This *pran* system represents a clear abrogation of the state's responsibility and a rescission of its monopoly on the use of force.

Similarly, the government has relinquished its right to the use of force in other places, such as the "Peace Zones" (*Zonas de Paz*). In response to rising homicide rates and increased urban street violence, Deputy Minister of Internal Policy José Vicente Rangel Ávalos negotiated a tenuous truce between state security forces and armed gangs in September 2013 by denominating these special geographical areas.⁵⁵ Since state security forces had supposedly become instrumental in driving violence in those places, the government – or at least Rangel Ávalos – thought that voluntarily withdrawing these forces would decrease conflict. Consequently, the police and military could not enter these areas unless they had a specific court order, ceding the use of force to criminal or vigilante groups.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, criminal groups began using these zones as places to hide kidnap victims, engage in racketeering, and pursue their criminal activities. They also grew in strength and geographic coverage until some extended their criminal operations to places that were not even protected by the ministerial program.⁵⁷

And while the government did not create *colectivos* or *sindicatos*, many are empowered by or operate in tandem with state actors. The case of *colectivos* is instructive. After the 2002 coup that briefly ousted him from power, Chávez made key changes to the state security apparatus to act as a counterweight to the military, including removing the state's monopoly on carrying arms and devolving state functions to collectives through training, weapons provision, and even financing.⁵⁸ Acting as a militia in defense of the government's Bolivarian revolution, the *colectivos* then served as shock troops for the government while simultaneously gaining greater autonomy. In 2020, the government reportedly turned to civilian collectives to help enforce the COVID-19 quarantine in some urban areas.⁵⁹

The government also aids criminal groups in the Mining Arc. After Maduro formally opened this territory for extractive industries in 2016, the area has become a hub for illegal mining, often with implicit or explicit government consent. Indeed, Maduro has used the Army and GNB to legitimize otherwise criminal mineral extraction, using state security to collaborate with criminal groups to mine, process, and transport minerals to places like Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.⁶⁰ Some of the profit from this mineral extraction and trade goes to the

FANB, while another part provides the government the money needed to circumvent international financial pressure. In other words, the Venezuelan government depends, in part, on this illicit industry and non-state armed actors to stay in power.

In sum, the state is not only incapable of meeting security threats and possesses increasingly limited control over its territory but, in some cases, may depend on these non-state actors to maintain its own hold on power.

Threats to Public Security and National Defense

This evidence suggests that Venezuelan state capacity is so low, it can no longer ensure the security of its citizens, borders, or large parts of its territory. As such, even an economically stable, democratic government would have a hard time confronting the myriad security challenges the country faces. First, threats to public security are likely to remain extremely high. Without adequate policing and the rule of law, violent street crime will continue to plague the everyday life of Venezuelans. Second, domestic organized criminal groups will attempt to expand their reach in ungoverned spaces and, in some cases, violently confront one another. Controlling and displacing these groups – especially the *colectivos* – will present a Herculean task for the state. Similarly, foreign groups like Colombian guerrillas and paramilitaries or even Brazilian narco-trafficking groups will aim to expand their territorial presence and criminal activities in Venezuela, increasing the likelihood of violent confrontations with Venezuelan organized crime. Under such circumstances, even the most well-organized government would have difficulty delivering political goods and services to its constituents – from electricity, water, gasoline, and education, to medical services during a global pandemic. COVID-19 represents a dire threat for Venezuela, which already suffers massive shortages of medicine and medical supplies.⁶¹

The first domestic threat is unorganized criminality and violence. Economic crisis and poor policymaking have weakened the state, strengthened illegal economies, and fed the growth of criminals engaged in homicide, extortion, kidnapping, and drug and contraband trafficking. The level of street crime poses a constant risk to citizens. In 2019, the Mexican NGO, Citizen's Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice (*Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal*), listed three Venezuelan cities among the world's top ten most dangerous: Caracas was third, with Ciudad Guayana and Ciudad Bolívar listed as numbers seven and ten, respectively.⁶²

Unsurprisingly, Venezuela placed third-to-last of 142 countries in the Gallup 2020 *Global Law and Order Index*, ahead of only Gabon and Afghanistan, with its citizens being the third-least likely people in the world to feel safe walking alone at night (29 percent) and to trust local police (28 percent).⁶³ Shockingly, both of these are improvements from the 2017 report, which reported the lowest scores (12 percent and 14 percent, respectively) that Gallup had measured worldwide since 2005. Things are so bad, in fact, that in 2017, the head of the Venezuelan Armed Forces' Strategic Operational Command ordered soldiers to avoid such things as traveling at night, using cellphones in their cars, and showing their military IDs.⁶⁴ In short, street crime is a constant threat to public security that threatens to deteriorate further.

Second, low-security capacity provides incentives for the growth of organized crime. Charles Tilly argued that the state is a type of "protection racket" in which citizens voluntarily relinquish certain rights and pay taxes in exchange for protection from other citizens and external threats, as well as things like contract enforcement.⁶⁵ In the absence of a strong sovereign – or in ungoverned spaces where the state is weak, ineffective, corrupt, or simply absent – other domestic rivals can fill that role.⁶⁶ In this case, organized crime becomes another type of racket

that provides protection to citizens in the form of contract enforcement, dispute settlement, and competition deterrent.⁶⁷ This is especially true of the aforementioned places where trust between the government and citizens is weak or nonexistent because of the corruption, absence, or ineptitude of government officials and state institutions. Taking control of or displacing these groups will not be easy, in part because of their numbers and firepower, and in part because of citizens' distrust of the government and state security forces.

The third threat to public security and national defense is the growth of irregular armed groups from Colombia and Brazil. The security breakdown in Venezuela means that the country offers guerrillas, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers safe haven, allowing them to survive, expand their reach, and sustain themselves economically. In the early 2010s, Colombian groups were largely confined to Venezuelan border states while Brazilian organized crime had not yet reached Venezuela. By 2020, more than two-dozen bands of irregular armed groups operated across the country, including dissident factions of the now demobilized FARC and rebels from the ELN in 13 of 23 Venezuelan states. In Amazonas and Bolívar, Colombian guerrilla groups arrived and "socially cleansed" mining zones previously controlled by Venezuelan criminal groups, like the *sindicatos*. As a result, these guerrillas are now heavily involved in the illegal mining of gold and other minerals in addition to drug trafficking, extortion, and smuggling.⁶⁸ If low state security capacity persists in Venezuela, not only will criminal groups' strangleholds on territory become stronger, but violent confrontations between them are likely to grow more common.

Risks to Regional Security

In addition to the risk it poses to domestic security, low state capacity combined with high criminality and the minimal rule of law bode poorly for regional security. As the editors of this volume write, frailty in state capacity may create an inversion of the security dilemma in which state weakness resulting from the absence of the monopoly of force threatens regional or international order. In Venezuela's case, the state's inability to protect its citizens or its sovereignty means it is likely to become one of Latin America's regional crime hubs. This would represent an obstacle to the full demobilization of Colombian guerrilla groups, and Colombia's fragile peace and could also have a spillover effect on regional stability through such things as the massive migration and refugee crisis that has already spread across the region.

First, a weak state is attractive to transnational organized crime and gives it a place to flourish. Roughly half of all illicit transactions in the world occur in countries experiencing a range of weak enforcement mechanisms, low levels of economic well-being, insufficient government capacity, and significant societal divisions.⁶⁹ In these contexts, transnational criminal networks further erode state legitimacy by incentivizing corruption, infiltrating state structures, and competing with the state to provide services.

Venezuela is a strategic transit zone for drugs, arms and ammunition, gasoline smuggling, and human trafficking. There is already evidence that the country has become a global center for cocaine and money laundering.⁷⁰ The transit of illegal narcotics through the country affects production centers in Colombia – and to a lesser extent, Bolivia and Peru – as well as upstream transit markets and drug destinations, ranging from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Honduras to the United States and Europe.⁷¹ Criminal gangs in the form of both *megabandas* and *sindicatos* can use Venezuela as a springboard for illegal activities in neighboring countries as well, exporting violence and insecurity to Brazil, Colombia, and, increasingly, Guyana.⁷² Other types of transnational organized crime can include terrorist networks, including groups headquartered outside of the Americas, like Hezbollah.⁷³

Along these lines, the presence of dissident Colombian paramilitary and guerrilla groups in border areas is likely to have regional effects by impeding full demobilization and implementation of peace accords in that country. The Colombian government and the FARC signed a historic peace agreement in 2016 under which the guerrillas agreed to disarm. However, the ex-FARC members' successful reintegration into civilian life has been rocky, and illicitly governed border states have become ideal places for dissident groups to retreat, reorganize, strengthen, and eventually cross back into Colombia. Venezuela's economic depression may also strengthen supposedly demobilizing groups; news reports suggest that the ELN and the Popular Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Popular*) have begun to recruit poor Venezuelans who often join out of economic necessity.⁷⁴ This expansion could have disastrous consequences for the implementation of the accords and peace efforts.

A third way in which Venezuela's failing state threatens the region is through the difficulties associated with the massive migration of Venezuelans, including sex work and criminal activities, integration into the licit workforce and society, and providing social welfare to these refugees. The wave of emigration that began in 2014 has displaced at least 4.3 million people by the onset of the global pandemic in 2020, representing the fastest-escalating mass movement of people in Latin American history.⁷⁵ The International Organization for Migration's numbers in Table 11.1 illustrate the scale of Venezuelan migration, with the numbers of emigrants climbing from some 600,000 in 2015 and 2016, to nearly 1.3 million in 2017, to more than 4.3 million in 2018 and 2019. The recipient countries with the largest increases in migrants include Chile (288,000), Ecuador (330,000), Peru (853,000), and, of course, Colombia (1.4 million).

The inflow of Venezuelans poses a significant challenge to regional governments, from providing social services to integrating migrants into formal economies. One 2018 survey suggested that 33 percent of Venezuelans in Colombia and 56 percent of Venezuelans in Brazil were unemployed, although more than 80 percent of employed respondents in these two countries indicated they worked in the informal sector.⁷⁶ This is problematic insofar as commerce is unregulated, incentivizing illegality, which represents a form of tax evasion. Prostitution and crime have

TABLE 11.1 Estimated Venezuelan migrant stock (2015–2019)

Country	2015	2016	2017	2018/2019
Canada	17,898	20,775	N/A	N/A
United States	255,520	290,224	351,144	N/A
Mexico	15,959	23,734	32,582	46,072
Costa Rica	6,437	7,692	8,892	25,700
Panama	9,883	20,999	36,365	94,400
Ecuador	8,901	23,719	39,519	330,414
Peru	2,351	4,665	26,239	853,429
Chile	8,001	34,623	119,051	288,233
Colombia	48,714	N/A	600,000	1,408,055
Argentina	12,856	25,960	57,127	145,000
Uruguay	1,855	2,762	6,033	8,589
Brazil	3,425	5,523	35,000	168,357
Trinidad and Tobago	1,732	N/A	1,743	40,000
Dominican Republic	5,417	N/A	25,872	28,500
Spain	165,895	180,289	208,333	323,575
Portugal	24,174	N/A	24,603	N/A
Italy	48,970	N/A	49,831	N/A
TOTAL	637,988	620,190	1,289,798	4,326,330

Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM). 2018; 2019. "Migration Trends in the Americas: Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela." New York, NY: United Nations.

already risen in border areas and parts of Colombia and Brazil with Venezuelan migrants and refugees, as the influx of people without residence permits and work visas has grown.⁷⁷ This has fueled insecurity as well as local resentment.

Mass migration from such a weak state can also threaten the health of vulnerable populations in receiving countries. Since medical shortages began in Venezuela, the country has suffered from low vaccination rates and the reemergence of previously eradicated diseases, like malaria, measles, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and polio.⁷⁸ With thousands of Venezuelans fleeing the country daily, there is a risk that sick Venezuelans may “export” these highly infectious diseases to more countries in the region. Immigrants are less likely to use health services in their new countries, creating disease blind spots that make it harder to contain outbreaks. A Venezuelan measles outbreak spread to Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador, which had an estimated 1,033 cases between them; all 798 cases investigated in Brazil were in the two states that border Venezuela.⁷⁹ Clearly, the Venezuelan state’s weaknesses represent a threat not only to Venezuelans, but to other countries and populations as well.

Threats to Re-democratization

Beyond security, low state capacity may pose an obstacle to re-democratization. There is no general theory of the relationship between the state and democracy.⁸⁰ However, the conventional wisdom is the “no state, no democracy” proposition, which holds that a secure state is necessary before a country can enjoy democracy or economic development.⁸¹ The logic is that states endowed with a monopoly on the use of force over their territory, coherent institutions (e.g., a functioning bureaucracy), and the elements needed to construct a sound legal system can democratize more successfully than those without these tools.

As such, many scholars suggest that democratization follows a sequence, whereby states first construct the ability to effectively exercise authority and implement policy throughout their national territory, build institutions, and then encourage competitive mass elections.⁸² For them, democratizing in the wrong sequence risks bloodshed in the short term and puts democracy at risk in the long term. Even the more cautious Thomas Carothers agrees that states require a minimal functional capacity and something resembling a monopoly of force before they can pursue sustainable, pluralistic political development.⁸³ Empirically, this proposition has been borne out in ex-communist states,⁸⁴ as well as Asia.⁸⁵ In one large-N, cross-national analysis, Møller and Skaaning show that “*stateness*” is a necessary condition for the four democratic attributes of electoral rights, political liberties, the rule of law, and social rights and is especially critical in the case of the latter two.⁸⁶

It may also impact the likelihood of regime change. Ham and Seim suggest that state capacity may be a crucial factor in conditioning the democratizing power of elections in authoritarian regimes.⁸⁷ A dataset of 460 elections in 110 authoritarian regimes between 1974 and 2012 show that if the new incumbent has limited capacity to deliver public services and make policy changes after coming to power, sustainable democratic change is unlikely. Likewise, Cruz shows that high levels of common violence and crime in post-war Central America represent a threat and obstacle to democratization by eroding citizens’ support for new regimes and the legitimacy of the political system.⁸⁸

The implications for transitologists in a place like Venezuela are grave and suggest that even a president wholly committed to democratic reforms may find it difficult to establish and sustain such a regime. Attempting re-democratization without first attending to the myriad weaknesses in the country’s state and security capacity may prove imprudent. Threats to state sovereignty posed by guerrilla groups, *pranes*, *megabandas*, and *sindicatos*, and the government’s inability to

guarantee the protection of its citizens bodes poorly for political development. Venezuela, of course, is not starting from a tabula rasa like Afghanistan or Iraq in the 2000s. It was one of the hemisphere's longest enduring democracies, from 1958 until the 2010s, but as low stateness undermined its democracy then, it undercuts re-democratization now. It will be important for politicians, policymakers, and foreign donors seeking to help rebuild Venezuela to focus on institution building and state capacity along with electoral democracy and social protection.

Venezuela's Future

Venezuela's state security capacity is likely the lowest in the Americas and is perhaps lower than it has been at any point since the late nineteenth century. In many ways, the country may best be classified as a failing state at risk of becoming a failed or collapsed one. This has myriad negative implications for both the country and the region.

Domestically, Venezuela's security weaknesses reflect the state's inability or unwillingness to control street gangs, organized criminal groups, and foreign guerrillas and paramilitaries – all groups whose continued existence and growth will further erode state capacity. Beyond Venezuela, state weakness threatens to turn the country into a regional crime hub, potentially impedes the demobilization of armed groups in Colombia, and has helped provoke a massive wave of migration that may cause problems throughout Latin America. Lastly, weak state capacity in Venezuela is not a threat to the survival of democracy, as it might be in places like Mexico or countries of the Northern Triangle, but rather an impediment to democracy's *recovery*.

This suggests that it will be necessary to build state and security capacity to ensure the protection of Venezuelan citizens, improve regional security, and better guarantee the success of re-democratization. Of course, successfully overcoming these weaknesses requires Venezuelan policymakers (and foreign governments and donors) to invest in reforming public security forces, commit to fighting irregular armed groups in poor urban areas and remote rural ones, and improve the quality of justice while insulating the judiciary from politics. Failing to regain a monopoly on the use of legitimate force across its territory will push Venezuela closer to places like Somalia or Afghanistan, where the state has collapsed, and regional warlords often wield more power than the central government.

Notes

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