

Cuba Has Hijacked Venezuela

By Julio Borges

The New York Times, April 10, 2019

Venezuelans are not victims of a single dictatorship, but of two.

A mural of Fidel Castro in Caracas, Venezuela. Carlos Becerra/Anadolu Agency, via Getty Images



A mural of Fidel Castro in Caracas, Venezuela. Carlos Becerra/Anadolu Agency, via Getty Images

[Leer en español](#)

BOGOTÁ, Colombia — I was a member of the opposition coalition that participated in the talks with Nicolás Maduro’s government between 2017 and 2018. For more than a year [we tried to work out](#) a deal that would put an end to the chaos deepening in Venezuela. But no solution is viable as long as the country remains tethered to Cuba.

The communications minister and government representative in the talks, Jorge Rodríguez, reiterated Venezuela’s desire that it receive the same treatment as Cuba. This declaration laid bare the pretension of the regime: a dictatorship that is accepted and ultimately gets its way, like the one Raúl Castro inherited from his brother and passed on to Miguel Díaz-Canel.

But Cuba is more than an inspiration and a role model for the Chavismo government. The island nation has hijacked Venezuela and is effectively holding it hostage. Important government decisions are being made in Havana, not in Caracas. The Castro regime's tentacles extend to several Venezuelan governmental institutions, including the armed forces and the offices of immigration and health services.

In a speech at the United Nations in October, the secretary general of the Organization of American States, Luis Almagro, [said that](#) at least 22,000 Cubans have infiltrated Venezuela's government and its institutions. They have done so, he explained, holding important positions in government agencies and in the national security and intelligence services.

In the past few years Mr. Maduro's regime has moved to consolidate power and dismantle democratic institutions. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, opposition parties [won a majority of the seats in the National Assembly](#), but Mr. Maduro [stripped it](#) of its powers. The next year, the regime illegally postponed regional elections and suspended the process of calling for a presidential referendum. In 2017, we took to the streets to protest the illegitimate [sentences imposed by the Supreme Tribunal of Justice](#) against the National Assembly, and we chose to not participate in the rigged regional elections.

Civilian demonstrations against Maduro's dictatorship that year left [at least 120 people dead](#), thousands wounded and hundreds imprisoned. According to Foro Penal, a prominent Venezuelan human rights organization, 911 political prisoners are being held in Venezuela. In the past year, seven attempts by the military to re-establish the Constitution and our sovereignty, today partially controlled by Cuban leadership, have been aborted. More than 100 military officers have been imprisoned.

In the mediated talks with the Maduro regime, conducted in the Dominican Republic, we sought to agree on conditions for presidential elections with democratic guarantees, but the regime refused an electoral process that reflected the will of the Venezuelan people. We declined to sign the agreement, and the talks dissolved on January 2018. For years the opposition has tried to negotiate with the regime to find a democratic solution to this mess.

Instead, Mr. Maduro pushed on with a sham presidential election on May 20, 2018, which was not recognized by Venezuelans and many of the world's democracies. Mr. Maduro's approach echoes the Cuban model, where a single party rules and elections aren't competitive.

The inextricable relationship between the Castro dictatorship and the Chavista regime began 25 years ago, when Hugo Chávez visited Havana just after being released from prison. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and set in motion the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fidel Castro's Cuba lost its great economic benefactor. Mr. Chávez's rise to power in Venezuela a decade later allowed Mr. Castro to find a

replacement. The relationship between the two countries was cemented between 2004 and 2014, when Venezuela experienced an [oil windfall](#).

The relationship has proved lucrative for the Cuban government. Between 40,000 and 50,000 barrels of Venezuelan oil [are sent to Cuba daily](#), despite the fact that Venezuelan oil production has declined more than 60 percent in recent years. Venezuela's economic subsidy reached its peak at about [12 percent](#) of Cuba's gross domestic product.

During the boom years, around 90,000 barrels of crude oil daily, representing \$9 billion annually, were sent to Cuba. Some estimate that over approximately 15 years, Venezuela has subsidized \$35 billion in oil to Cuba.

The country was brought further into debt when Mr. Maduro bought [\\$440 million in foreign crude](#) and sent it to Cuba between 2017 and 2018. The problem, therefore, is not a potential invasion of Venezuela by a foreign power; for over a decade, Cuba has been a parasite, stripping us of our resources.

But unlike Cuba, we are not an island. We have land borders, and our tragedy has spread throughout the region, adding pressure to neighboring countries. To stabilize the region and restore democracy, we must cut off the authoritarian germ rooted in Cuba and Venezuela. Democracy cannot be restored until the two regimes are decoupled.

Mr. Maduro has shown that he will not leave power of his own volition. Those of us who oppose his rule are not armed, nor do we seek to oust his regime violently. We have offered amnesty but it has been rejected. However, we will never accept the normalization of this de facto dictatorship. As long as Mr. Maduro remains in power there will be more deaths, prisoners, persecution and compatriots forced to migrate. The international community has exhausted its diplomatic arsenal because there is no precedent in Latin America for a situation similar to that of Venezuela's. When it comes, Mr. Maduro's exit will be equivalent to the fall of the Berlin Wall for the region.

It is a mistake to ask those seeking democracy in Venezuela to distance themselves from their United States and Latin American allies at this juncture. They represent the only opportunity to counterbalance a regime with unlimited power and no institutional oversight, that is armed and willing to exercise violence. Democratic countries must direct pressure toward Havana as well to bring about change in Venezuela.

The call of the National Assembly and the country's acting president, Juan Guaidó, for Venezuela to stop sending oil to Cuba is a first step. Companies trading with Venezuelan oil must comply if they want to avoid secondary sanctions derived from those already imposed against our state-owned oil and gas company, P.D.V.S.A., by the United States. For its part, the Lima Group must ensure that previously agreed-upon investigations into corruption and human rights violations are carried

out, which could involve citizens of its countries, as well as Venezuelans and Cubans.

Finally, the international left wing must understand that Venezuelans are not victims of a single dictatorship, but of two: Mr. Maduro's and Cuba's. They must withdraw their solidarity and support for Nicolás Maduro.

Julio Borges was president of the National Assembly of Venezuela and is Juan Guaidó's ambassador to the Lima Group. This article was translated from the Spanish by Erin Goodman.

The Times is committed to publishing [a diversity of letters](#) to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some [tips](#). And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#) and [Instagram](#).

Sign Up for The Privacy Project Newsletter

As technology advances, will it continue to blur the lines between public and private? Explore what's at stake and what you can do about it.

Readers in Europe get 4 weeks free, then 50% off. Ends soon.

You have **2 free articles** remaining.