

# International Conflicts

## Venezuela

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### **Introduction**

Venezuela is dealing with a difficult internal political conflict. The two sides are made up by President Hugo Chávez and his supporters, called chavistas and the opposition, made up by the conservative parties with supporters from mainly high and middle class.

### **Aim and main questions**

My aim is to understand the situation and complications in Venezuela in depth. I will focus on finding reasons and patterns for the conflict and I will try to understand the views of both the chavistas and the opposition.

- What impact has media and the oil industry had in the course of events in the conflict?
- Is Chávez the right man to lead Venezuela out of its problems?
- What measures needs to be taken in order to achieve political stability?

### **Background and Summary of the conflict**

The political history in Venezuela has been dominated by conservative rule for decades. Then, in 1998 the newly founded left party, MVR (The Fifth Republic Movement) won the election with 60% of the votes. Their leader Hugo Chávez became president.

Venezuela is the fourth largest oil producing country in the world and still 80 % of the population is poor. Chávez wanted to improve the conditions for the poor and wanted the country's wealth to be equally distributed between the social classes.

In 1999 Chávez was re-elected in and a new constitution was accepted in a referendum.

In February 2002 Chávez announced that he was going to change the management in the oil company into his own people.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of April a big demonstration against Chávez derailed and the crowd was told to walk towards the president palace Miraflores. At the same time chavistas had gathered outside Miraflores to show their loyalty for Chávez. The army tried to go in between. Then suddenly hidden snipers started to shoot at the crowds. People in the crowds started to shoot back. Over 10 people were killed and many people injured. The chavistas were blamed for the shooting but there is no valid evidence of that.

The day after the shooting, some generals that worked in the presidential palace who supported the opposition turned against Chávez and performed a coup d'état. They tried to force him to resign, otherwise they threatened to shoot at the presidential palace. But Chávez refused. They didn't succeed in making him sign the papers but they arrested him and took him to house arrest.

The leader of the opposition, Pedro Carmona, became the new president in the interim government that was quickly established. Carmona fired all the people that worked for Chávez and appointed new ministers from the opposition.

But Chávez supporters didn't give up. They demonstrated outside Miraflores and the pressure on the opposition increased. So the following day, pro-Chávez militaries and generals turned against the new government. By the time that the military had stormed the building, Carmona had left. The military and former ministers returned to Miraflores and people from the opposition that was still in the building were arrested. After a few hours Chávez was released and returned to continue to his work as President of Venezuela. The coup failed and a few months later, the Supreme Court let the arrested oppositionists go because they didn't have enough evidence to prove them guilty.

During the autumn the conflict got worse and in December 2002 the opposition started a general strike to get Chávez to resign. The strike resulted in an increased level of unemployment and gradually, the oil started to run out since there was such a low production. In the spring of 2003, many people had to go back to their work in order to survive economically. The opposition and the government negotiated about an agreement with help from other countries and organizations, but couldn't reach an agreement.

Eventually, they decided that they were going to hold a referendum about whether or not Chávez should continue as president.

The date of the referendum was scheduled for autumn 2003, but was delayed.

They couldn't have a referendum until Chávez had done half his time as President, which was in 19<sup>th</sup> of August. But in order to have a new referendum before the mandatory period is finished, you have to collect signatures from 20 % of the people who are entitled to vote. The opposition have turned in names that exceed those figures, but the names are suspected not to be all original ones. They have now reached an agreement that says that if the collection of names is correct, then the referendum will take place on March 27<sup>th</sup> in 2004. The opposition needs to get more votes than Chávez got in the last election, which was 3,8 million votes.

## **Hugo Chávez**

Hugo Chávez has a history in the military, but by time he got interested in politics and was involved in a coup towards the government that ruled in 1992. The coup failed and he served time in prison – but it made him a national hero amongst the poor. When Chávez came to power, his main goals were to fight corruption and criminality.

Chávez also wanted to educate people in Venezuela about their rights. He printed small brochures with the constitution, which are sold in all small kiosks. This has led to a large number of people than before knows their own laws and rights.

He started a land reform that would involve poor people getting a paper that certified their ownership of the land they inhabit. This way, the police can't tell them to leave and they would finally have something of their own. This reform would also make it possible for the poor to borrow money, because in order to do that you have to have some security.

Some of the other new laws were free education up to university, free medical care and a law that said that the government should get more money from the oil company.

In theory, the oil company was run by the state, but in reality it was run like a private company by people from the opposition.

But all of these changes haven't led to any huge differences in the society. This is due to the fact that there is a widely spread corruption, so the money doesn't go to the right places. This is because the administration is the same as before Chávez and they don't support him.

Another thing that causes problems for the Chávez government is the lack of information available to the people. There's no information centre people can go to and get information about things that concerns the government.

So how does Chávez get his message out to the people?

Every Sunday there is a tv-show at channel 8 (the only tv-channel owned by the state) called Aló Presidente where Chávez is the host. The show goes on for several hours, until Chávez says stop. The longest one lasted for 7 hours, but it's normally around 4-5 hours.

People can call in to the tv-show and ask questions for him to answer.

He has been criticized by both his own people and the opposition for using way too brutal language when he accuses and criticize the opposition.

There are a lot of oil and gas resources in Latin America and in the future, Chávez wants to start a Latin American alliance to work together against organizations like Opec and of course, the US. Chávez have had good relations with the dictator of Cuba, Fidel Castro and and this proposition has only been supported by him. Although Chávez has been said to be too auctorial, if you look closer at his politics there is nothing that binds him to communism.

## **The opposition**

The opposition is all members of the umbrella organization "Democratic Coordinator" who it's made up by the political parties that ruled before Chávez came to power. The largest ones are COPEI and AD. But the highly placed leaders of the opposition don't come from the political parties involved. They are representatives from the trade union CTV and the employers association Fedemarcas.

The director of CTV lives in asylum in Costa Rica at the moment to escape from being taken into custody for being accused of crimes in connection with the strike in December. The former director of Fedemarcas, Pedro Carmona, who performed the coup in April have fled the country and have also been granted asylum, in Colombia. He has been replaced by a man called Carlos Fernandez. Fernandez was accused of crimes in connection with the strike too, but he was free to go in March due to lack of evidence.

The opposition doesn't have a specific candidate to fight against Chávez in the future referendum because they are afraid that if they choose someone, they will have conflicts

concerning the chosen candidate within the opposition. They want to keep strong against Chávez and that's why the nomination of a candidate takes time. The people they are choosing from don't all have a political history either, so that makes it difficult too. The opposition sees Chávez as a threat against democracy and they are afraid that he will turn Venezuela into a new Cuba. They think of him as too auctorial and they dislike the fact that the military is so involved in society. The opposition feels as though Chávez is giving away too much power to the poor and uneducated and they don't want those people to get more power. The opposition also claims that Chávez reforms haven't lead to any changes for the better. Chávez says that he needs more time in order for things to change. They also fear that Chávez will destroy the economical development in the business sector and they don't feel that they have his support. When given the question what they will do if they eventually come to power the opposition don't have a good answer. They say that they are focusing on getting rid of Chavez and that they will focus on "reestablish democracy" when they managed to do that.

## **Analysis**

The media has contributed a great deal to the conflict. All radio and tv-stations are owned and run by the opposition, except one radio-station and one tv-channel that the state owns and controls. The opposition has much more money than the state and this creates a huge imbalance in the media. The opposition started going out with propaganda against Chavez in their news and tv-shows after he announced that he was going to make changes within the oil company. On all the news the days before the coup they were encouraging people to go out and demonstrate against Chavez. When they had performed the coup the private tv-channels all lied and said that Chavez had resigned voluntarily. The day after the failed coup they blacked out all news about the chavistas that had demonstrated for Chavez and that Chavez was back as president.

Many people watch tv in Venezuela and most people watch the private channels. People believe what is said on tv to be true and this is how the opposition has brainwashed the people and gained support.

The state owned tv-channel hasn't had any chance to reach out with the real information to the public. They are really bad at information and this has been one of the government's problems. Chavez couldn't do anything against this false information from the private media. If he would have increased the state control over them, he would have been accused of violating the freedom of speech law. He is now starting to talk about doing that anyway and that makes human rights defenders all over the world upset and of course, the opposition only hates him more. This is a large problem. Of course there should be functioning freedom of speech in a country, but where do you draw the line? Should people have the right to write actual lies? And who decide this? It's indeed a difficult issue with a non-easy given answer. When Venezuela found oil in the 1920s the economy went up in the country and Venezuela became the richest country in Latin America. Although they have these fantastic nature assets, the money they have gained from it has been handled wrong. It made the people who work with this rich, but the people in the country haven't got any money from it.

This has created a society where people have to think only about themselves to be able to survive and they don't trust the government to do what's best for them.

The opposition don't think about the consequences of their actions. Take the oil strike for example. It resulted in a major economical setback and they don't feel that they should have any responsibility for it either. They should try to work against Chavez in a democratic way, but that don't seem to be an alternative for them. They seem to have no hope to reach a result in that way.

Looking back in history, Venezuela hasn't been a truly functioning democracy either. Right before Chavez was elected, there had been a scandal in the then ruling government. They had done illegal actions and corruption had eaten up the money.

Chavez came at the perfect time in the Venezuelan history. There were an increasing number of poor people that hadn't cared about voting before, but now they had a reason to vote- because someone had their best interest in mind.

Chavez basic ideas are brilliant. To teach people about their own constitution, their own laws and their own rights- that is the foundation of a functioning democratic society. He built schools for poor children and gave them food three times a day. Extra effort was put into teaching children about computers and having exercise on the schedule. I think his way of building the country from the bottom is what the country really needs in the long term. The oppositionists have been impatient and have wanted to see immediate result- but a project like this will and have to take time.

Both the opposition and Chavez are really passionate about their view and no one wants to surrender and give in. The coup and the strike have provoked Chavez and have made him become crueler towards the opposition. This is very negative for him, because instead of paying back with the same methods he should prove that he is better and wiser than them. I think that it will be hard for Chavez to remain as president in the future. He can't make his reforms with the opposition constantly ruining things and working against him. When Chavez takes one step forward, the opposition drags him one step back, and that way they don't get anywhere. Chavez has to become less controversial and he has to listen more, he has to become more humble towards the world. He has to be careful of what he says and he can't continue to use such brutal language as he has done. What Venezuela really needs is a fresh start. All this old grudge has to be forgotten about and they need to start fighting against corruption and working on building up the trust again. Independent journalists and the human rights organizations in the country should be able to carry through with their important jobs without being threatened.

An important issue is the problems with the oil industry. That should be worked out to a good agreement for both the oil industry and the state. Another important issue is the involvement from the US, they have to stop thinking about their own interest all the time and leave Venezuela alone. That such a large country as the US should have to rely on importing 60 % of the oil they consume is insane. The US should use all the energy they put into fighting about oil – to try to come up with more complementary energy sources in addition to oil. One politician in Venezuela once said that “People steal because there's no reason *not* to steal”. That statement summarizes what the deeper problem in Venezuela is all about and that attitude needs to be changed.

Finally, I would like to say that I think the opposition has used undemocratic, dirty methods to achieve what they want. Chávez is not perfect either and has things that he needs to improve too. So none of the two sides are perfect but in my opinion Chávez seems to be the best one of the two.

It is worrying although that Chávez has good relations with Castro. Is Chávez doing the same campaign as Castro did when he first came to power? To first gain the peoples support and then seize control of the country and become a dictator? When thinking in these terms, one can suddenly start to understand the opposition much better.

But Chávez is Chávez and Castro is Castro – and we need to remember that. The opposition doesn't have any evidence that this is going to happen, so their actions can not be made legitimate because of that.

## **Criticism of sources – “The revolution will not be televised” by Kim Bartley and Donnacha O’Brian, 2002**

This documentary aired at the tv-channel SVT1 at the tv-programme “Dokument Inifrån” in September 2003. SVT and “Dokument Inifrån” both have a respectable reputation in Sweden. This indicates an amount of respect from the start; SVT are more considerate of what they show than for instance the commercial tv-channels in Sweden.

The documentary is made by two Irish filmmakers that were in Venezuela to make a film about president Chávez, when they were trapped inside the president palace when the coup took place in April 2002. They manage to get a lot of footage from the inside during these days of chaos.

The documentary was made in order to show the world what really happened at the coup and it also contains criticism against US foreign policy.

In the end of the documentary they show a list of the executive producer, the producer, the photographer and researcher. They also state that the documentary is a collaboration between tv-channels BBC, RTE (Ireland), ZDF (Germany), ARTE (France) and NPS (Holland).

They have an extensive list of tv-channels who they have borrowed footage from. Those include tv-channels from both Venezuela, USA and Europe. They also say specifically that they have taken clippings from private Venezuelan tv-channels RCTV and Venevision. They don’t have any telephone numbers to call or an address to write to for information, but that doesn’t usually occur in documentaries.

The documentary is a touching story that uses emotional language and pictures to get the audience hooked. And it doesn’t show both sides of the conflict, they are clearly pro-Chávez and the opposition is viewed as utterly evil. They haven’t interviewed any reasonable opposition supporters. This gives us an indication that there aren’t any.

Chávez on the other hand is seen as a loved and adored man by the struggling poor population of Venezuela. He is portrayed as a man with really good intentions that just wants what’s best for the people and the opposition just try to destroy everything for him. The documentary makes the audience detest the opposition and feel sympathy for Chávez.

Right after they have made interviews with a poor woman who says that Chávez was the one that made her interested in politics (which must be every politician’s dream to have accomplished), rich beautiful women are interviewed at a party that are for the opposition. They say that they don’t want Chávez to take away everything they have fought so hard to accomplish. They are portrayed as spoiled people that don’t want to give up their luxury lives. This can’t show the whole reality; there must be some people that don’t fit in to this stereotypical way of showing the two fighting sides?

One thing that strikes me when watching the documentary is the way they seem to have had cameras everywhere and they seem to have been at the right time *all* the time.

This made me want to find out more information about the people behind the movie – Kim Bartley and Donnacha O’Brian. I searched at Google by simply typing in their names and I found an interview made by Brian Forrest from Znet (an American periodical and web community that are fighting for social change) at their website [www.znet.com](http://www.znet.com).

In the interview the two directors explain how they can have so much footage from seemingly everywhere. They have received footage from independent photographers and other tv-stations from all over the world – so it’s not only their own footage – which explains a lot.

The interview was made on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2003 in connection to an American film festival where the film was going to be showed at.

I also found the movie’s official website called [www.chavezthefilm.com](http://www.chavezthefilm.com) where they refer to Znet that has done the interview, so I find the interview to be trustworthy.

On the official website they have an even more extensive list with people who have been involved in the film, but there are no contact numbers, addresses or e-mail addresses. This might be due to the fact that the directors and producers of the film don't have that time to answer questions. It's a website to inform about the film, they have articles written about the film, rewards it has won and links to alternative press in English, Spanish and French. All in all, the documentary is really good and well done. One of the things that make me feel this way is the evidence showed that can't be faked. The pictures from inside the palace during the coup and the clipping from the private tv-channels – this was important evidence that was important to show the world. The best thing would have been to make a more balanced documentary, but it's hard to make a documentary without having a political standpoint. One forms an opinion automatically, sometimes even subconsciously.

### **Criticism of sources - "LA – Tidskriften från Latin Amerika"**

I have chosen to evaluate La since that is the source that I have used the most.

The periodical LA is published by the Swedish organization UBV (education for aid work) and it comes out seven times a year. It doesn't have any affiliation to a political party or religion. They have journalists in both Sweden and foreign correspondents in Latin America. There are addresses, (both post address and visiting address) and telephone numbers if you want to get in touch with them. This is of course obvious as it's a periodical and not a website. In the end of any longer article they have sources and links which is admirable. LA doesn't contain much commercial at all and it's usually smaller companies that advertise. The articles written are reliable, they are not biased and contain balanced information from both sides. They had a Venezuela special and had two different articles, one telling the opinion of the chavistas and one of the opposition. They don't tell their own personal opinion; they leave that for the reader to decide. They don't hide behind difficult words and the language they use is easy to understand and they explain expressions and difficult words. This is a really good periodical that is under threat of shutting down due to problems with financing it. I really hope it will survive, because it's a really important contributor to good Swedish journalism.

### **Search strategy**

Since this conflict is such a pressing issue there's obviously no books written in the subject. There's mostly articles available and they are from different newspapers and periodicals with different political standpoints.

So I started to search for articles in "Artikelsök" in the city library and found loads of articles from newspapers like DN, The Nation, Newsweek and Tempus for example.

It wasn't possible to borrow all those magazines, so I had to copy them at the library.

I wanted many so that I could read different magazines standpoints and after that create my own opinion.

I also went to the Dag Hammarsköld – library in Uppsala and spent at least two hours reading and printing articles from "La-tidskriften Latin Amerika".

I also used the school library's advice on links and searched through them for good information. The websites [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org) and [www.landguiden.com](http://www.landguiden.com) were particularly good for general basic information. To find good information I think it's important to think about when your conflict took place and adjust your search strategy after that. It's also

important to try to avoid only searching on Google for information, but you can do that later on to find unknown websites. The key is to try to find information from different sources- both the Internet, from books and newspapers.

## Sources

### Articles from:

DN

The Nation

Newsweek

Tempus

New York Times

La – tidskriften Latin Amerika

Internationalen

### Websites:

[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)

[www.landguiden.com](http://www.landguiden.com)

[www.znet.com](http://www.znet.com)

[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

[www.chavezthefilm.com](http://www.chavezthefilm.com)

[www.casavenezuela.com](http://www.casavenezuela.com)

[www.coordinadorademocratica.com](http://www.coordinadorademocratica.com)

[www.venpres.gov.se](http://www.venpres.gov.se)

### Documentary:

“The revolution will not be televised” by Kim Bartley and Donnacha O’Brian, 2002

## Checklist - Criticism of sources

This was the checklist I made for evaluating websites, but I found it useful when evaluating other sources too.

- What **first impression** do you get?
- **Who** has **written the information**?
- **Why** has it been done and **who is it aimed for**? Is it propaganda/business/news/information/entertainment/personal/ or something else?
- Is the information **reliable**, free from **errors** and **updated**?
- Responsible **webmaster**? Is it possible to **contact** him/her?
- Do they mention **sources** or **links**? Are the links reliable?
- Is the webpage/newspaper **well structured**? Does it give a **professional** impression?

- Does the website contain **advertising**? What effect might sponsoring have on the information given?
- Does the website have its own **server** or not?
- Do you have any **personal feelings** that might interfere with your evaluation?
- Good **reputation**? Is the information coming from an organization/ political party/ university/ business company/ the government/ NGO/ private person? How does that affect the information?
- Is anything **left out** in the information? Is there **balance** between the different views of the information given?
- Do they use **emotional language** to take advantage of your feelings or do they use **difficult words** as a disguise? Do they make **generalizations**?
- Are the **arguments relevant**? Do they admit their own **uncertainty**? Do they pretend to speak the truth when they're only saying what they think about the issue?
- What **level** is the information on? In depth or not?