



Venezuela's crushing collapse offers lessons for outsiders drawn to big-government systems that can't deliver BY JAMIE DEAN

STARVATION

WHEN SAMUEL OLSON BUMPS INTO ACQUAINTANCES OR colleagues he hasn't seen in a few weeks, the Venezuelan pastor often notices an obvious difference: His friends are losing weight.

Olson's friends aren't alone.

A recent study reported 3 out of 4 Venezuelans say they've lost weight in the last year. Nineteen pounds is the average. The losses don't come from trying to slim down. They come from struggling to find food, as the country with the world's largest proven oil reserves descends into pitiful hunger.

Venezuela was once a stable democracy and the wealthiest country in Latin America. These days, thousands of citizens flood the streets to protest a corrupt government, and scores wait in daylong lines for limited food supplies that often sell out.

The country's triple-digit inflation rate last year was one of the highest in the world, a figure some economists estimated at more than 400 percent. Local currency is nearly worthless.

Medicines are scarce, and surgeons often urge patients to bring their own sheets, toilet paper, and gauze. In one city, physicians used seltzer water to wash their hands when the hospital's water supply shut down. They operated in blood-soaked rooms because no soap was available for cleaning.

What happened to Venezuela?



ECONOMY

*A shopper looks at what's left on the shelves
of a grocery store in La Vela, Venezuela.*

MERIDITH KOHUT/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

'WE'VE SEEN THIS MOVIE THE WORLD, AND IT IN

Olson offers a concise answer. "We have slowly slipped out of democracy into a false democracy, and we are now becoming a radicalized socialist nation," he says. "The general saying is that we are becoming the next Cuba."

Is there a way to stop the spiral?

Thronges of Venezuelans hope so, even as their daily street protests meet brutal security crackdowns: At least 48 have died during clashes with police in the last few weeks. In May, an armored tank plowed into demonstrators in the capital city of Caracas.

Many protesters want regime change, but Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is defiant. The protégé of former socialist dictator Hugo Chávez denies the unfolding calamity, and he refuses outside humanitarian aid, even as his own people starve.

As street protests grow, Maduro has shut down opposition leaders, vowed to rewrite the constitution, and promised to crush "brutal, fascist attacks." He declares to critics, "I am no Mussolini."

Maduro may not be Mussolini, but his regime is a disaster, and the tragedy offers a warning to Americans with romantic notions of socialism. "We've seen this movie played out all over the world," says Latin American expert José Cárdenas. "And it invariably fails miserably."

VENEZUELA WASN'T ALWAYS FAILING.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, Venezuela experienced democratic reforms and improved living conditions across the country. Farms prospered and oil production rose.

Economic downturns in the late 1980s led to turmoil, and a group of leftist military officers attempted a coup led by Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez. The government thwarted the takeover, but Chávez's popularity soared, as Venezuelans grew disgruntled with their leaders.

Chávez won the presidency in 1998, promising to improve economic conditions and provide for the poorest citizens. With oil prices booming, Chávez undertook vast social welfare programs, and he paid for them with the country's oil profits. Many struggling Venezuelans revered him as a modern-day Robin Hood, and the largess cemented Chávez's political support.

Meanwhile, Chávez consolidated power. His efforts abolished the upper house of parliament, eliminated term limits for the presidency, packed courts with cronies, censored critical media, formed an ironclad alliance with Cuba, and pushed through what he called an "anti-capitalist" constitution.

(He also famously loathed America. During a speech at the United Nations in 2006, Chávez called President George W. Bush "the devil" and told the assembly that the spot where Bush had stood earlier "smells of sulfur still today.")

In 2001, Chávez began seizing land. "This land is not yours," he told landowners in a televised speech. "The land is not private, but the property of the nation."

Seized farms languished, along with other companies Chávez nationalized, as the government parceled out profitable farms to inexperienced workers. Government price



(1) People line up outside a supermarket to buy basic food and household items in Ciudad Bolívar, Venezuela. (2) Chávez (left) and then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Maduro in 2007. (3) Patients lie on beds in the emergency room of a hospital in Barquisimeto, Venezuela.

controls meant many farmers couldn't make a profit. Production plummeted, and the country grew more dependent on food imports.

By the time Chávez died of cancer in 2013, his handpicked successor won by less than 1 percent of the vote. But President Nicolás Maduro vowed to continue *chavismo*—Chávez's crum-

bling system of dictator-based socialism.

In 2014, the system imploded.

Oil prices sank, and the government couldn't pay for the unsustainable subsidies and welfare programs it had created under Chávez. The country's other gutted industries couldn't respond, says Cárdenas, a foreign policy official



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—José Cárdenas



but many of those goods are out of reach for plenty of Venezuelans as well.

That doesn't mean food isn't arriving. Imports have plunged as the government runs out of money, but the items that do arrive in Venezuelan ports often languish in a web of corruption.

Maduro placed military officials in charge of the country's food system, and an Associated Press investigation in December reported widespread corruption and waste.

For example, when local grocer Jose Campos ran out of food supplies for his store, he says he visited an illegal market in the middle of the night to buy flour from military officials. He paid 100 times the government-set price. "The military would be watching over whole bags of money," Campos told the AP. "They always had what I needed."

Luis Pena, a director at a Caracas-based import business, told the AP he has to pay off military officials to bring food imports into the country: "It's an unbroken chain of bribery from when your ship comes in until the food is driven out in trucks." If he doesn't pay the bribes, the food sits and spoils.

Daniel Arteaga, a crane operator, told the news agency he watched as workers at a state-run warehouse buried hundreds of boxes of spoiled meat imported by the government. The report said photos showed men in military fatigues burying beef and chicken at a local dump. Residents at a nearby slum said they dig up food when the military leaves to see if they can find something for their children. (In a study of Venezuelan children under the age of 5, the Catholic relief agency Caritas found that 11 percent suffered from acute malnutrition.)

But hunger isn't just a problem for the poor.

The extreme shortages mean Venezuelans across classes struggle to find food. Samuel Olson, the Venezuelan pastor, says middle-class members of the large church he leads in Caracas are sometimes embarrassed to admit their families are hungry: "You can see the hurt and sense of shame on their faces."

A church elder with a stable income recently told Olson he couldn't feed his family of five.

"One can hardly believe it," says the pastor.

"That this person has been going hungry for a week or two weeks, but has said nothing until the hunger becomes too great!"

Meanwhile, government officials deny the severity of the calamity, and they refuse to allow outside assistance. "The humanitarian corridor assumes the existence of a humanitarian crisis," declared Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez. "It's a theory constructed by the Pentagon so that the U.S. can intervene."

Hunger isn't theoretical for the Venezuelans seeking help from Olson's church. The members of Las Acacias Evangelical Pentecostal Church—the largest evangelical church in Caracas—pool resources and try to help others. Olson, who is also head of the Evangelical Alliance of Venezuela, says God has provided items for the church to share.



during the George W. Bush administration: "It laid the whole bankruptcy of the system bare."

Maduro doubled down. The new president printed more money, and the value of currency plummeted. Basic goods became unaffordable. Price-controlled items grew scarce.

These days, many Venezuelans line up at grocery stores before dawn, hoping to buy scant quantities of items like sugar, oil, or eggs. A national identification number dictates the single day each week a shopper may queue for price-controlled goods. Some people miss work to wait for items they can't find. Flour is a rarity. Toilet paper is a luxury. Bread shelves are barren.

Some items in stores aren't price-controlled, but they're often too expensive for many shoppers. Black markets flourish,

Each week, the congregation distributes food parcels to families with no supplies. Every other week, congregants make soup for members of the community and offer a gospel-based message. They call the midday gatherings the “Lord’s Lunch.”

For smaller churches, resources are even more limited, and efforts are often entirely grassroots. David Berkey, an evangelical missionary in Caracas since 1992, says the few dozen members of his church help each other with basic networking. If a member finds an unexpected stock of items at a store, he’ll sometimes buy as much as he can to share or trade with others.

“It’s given people lots of opportunities to help each other, which is what we’re supposed to do as believers in Christ,” he says. “We’re having to make that very practical these days.”

Berkey and his wife have avoided long lines by purchasing items that aren’t price-controlled. But those items are limited too, and Berkey says they make meals out of what they can find at the store. Like many Venezuelans, they’ve lost about 20 pounds. Supporters have offered to send funds to buy food for those in need, but Berkey says it’s complicated when items just aren’t available: “This is not a problem that money can solve.”

Not all losses are physical. The church is losing people as well. Members who grew up in the congregation have left Venezuela to find work elsewhere. They’ve studied in universities, but can’t find jobs in their home country. They’ve scattered to Spain, Canada, the United States, Peru, and China. Their parents watch their children leave and raise families in another country.

“These are people who have a lot to offer as Venezuelans,” says Berkey. “But they are being squeezed out.”

Some 2 million Venezuelans have left the country since Chávez took office in 1999, according to Venezuelan migration expert Tomás Páez. The country’s population is 31 million. Venezuela now leads the world in asylum requests to the United States, surpassing China last year.

Even if Venezuelans can find enough to eat, they face another major hurdle: finding decent healthcare. The country has had socialized medicine, but without sufficient supplies, doctors can’t treat basic illnesses.

Over the last year, infant mortality has jumped 30 percent. Maternal mortality is up 66 percent. Most of the deaths are preventable: Mothers sometimes get infections because hospitals don’t have soap for cleaning. They die from infections because hospitals don’t have access to antibiotics.

According to the Venezuelan group Doctors for Health, 64 percent of hospitals reported having no baby formula. Last year, the Pharmaceutical Federation of Venezuela reported 85 percent of all drugs are either difficult or impossible to find.

When a member of Berkey’s congregation went to the hospital with heart problems, physicians told him he needed a stint. The hospital didn’t have one. If he could find a stint and pay for it, they’d operate. From his hospital bed, the patient tracked down a way to order the stint, and borrowed money to buy it.

“People say we just don’t have the luxury of getting sick right now because you could die,” says Berkey. “Even in a hospital.”

Some sick patients do die. They die waiting on medications, or even waiting on oxygen in hospitals without working equipment. Some Venezuelans flee to Colombia, desperate for dialysis, cancer treatments, or maternal care.



In one border town, a Catholic organization that once served Colombians displaced by violence now helps Venezuelans displaced by hunger or illness.

For some of the people most vulnerable and forgotten, conditions are deplorable. Last fall, *The New York Times* published a series of harrowing photos from a state-run psychiatric hospital in the city of Barquisimeto.

The hospital had limited food, and some patients were withering. Water was running only a few hours a day. The hospital had no soap, no toothpaste, and no toilet paper.

Patients without medications for severe mental illnesses sometimes posed a danger to others, and nurses had no access to sedatives to calm down distressed patients. “In courtyards,

(1) A man scavenges for food in the streets of Caracas. **(2)** A National Guard soldier watches over cargo trucks at Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, the port city that handles most of the country’s food imports. **(3)** Demonstrators clash with the National Guard in Caracas.



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International pressure mounts: President Donald Trump called Venezuela's humanitarian crisis "a disgrace to humanity," and the United States placed sanctions on eight members of the country's Supreme Court in May. Maduro responded by taunting Trump: "Get your dirty hands out of here."

Even as security forces fire tear gas into crowds and crack down on protesters in violent clashes, the president appears in bizarre propaganda videos, dancing to hip-hop music and planting a tree. He promises peace will prevail, but offers no explanations for when Venezuelans will vote in elections, or how they will find their next meal.

"This is a purely Cuban response," says expert José Cárdenas. He notes Maduro relies on Cuban counsel: "You never devolve power to sectors of society that you can't control.... The message from Havana is the people can always absorb more hardship."

As Venezuelans absorb crushing hardship, a significant group is beginning to join the protests: the poor. Initially, street demonstrations largely included students and middle-class citizens, but poorer residents fed up with grinding hunger are slowly joining some of the protests as well.

It's a risk for them: Some say they're afraid to lose what little help the government still distributes in some of the poorest neighborhoods. But Cárdenas says the growing number of poverty-stricken demonstrators may prove a turning point in Maduro's efforts to retain power, as they grasp the futility of a system they once trusted.

The futility of Venezuela's system offers a stark lesson for Americans enamored with socialism. When presidential candidate Bernie Sanders proposed \$18 trillion



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women who are functional while medicated are now curled on the floor hallucinating, crying, screaming, rocking back and forth for hours," the *Times* reported.

In some cases, nurses locked patients in rooms alone or tied them with restraints to keep them from hurting themselves or others. The head nurse said most patients had been abandoned by their families and had no one else to help them: "God have mercy on us."

WILL MADURO SHOW MERCY?

The leader hasn't shown signs of backing down. Instead, he's attempted to strip power from the opposition-controlled legislature, and says he'll rewrite the country's constitution.

in government spending over a decade, his socialistic message gained substantial traction.

In 2015, a Gallup poll found nearly 70 percent of U.S. millennials would be willing to elect a socialist president. It's a notable contrast with another statistic: In Venezuela, nearly 70 percent of young people living under a socialist regime say they want to leave the country.

Others say they will stay. Pastor Olson says it's unclear where the crisis is heading, but says he's thankful for Venezuelans committed to staying under worsening conditions.

"We do believe in this God who gives us the strength to go through one tragedy after another tragedy," he says. "We do believe in this God who provides. We do not know the hows and the whens, but we know that the Lord is faithful." ☺

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