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MA in International Relations

VENEZUELA’S CRISIS: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY AND REGIONAL STABILITY – WITH A FOCUS ON THE INFLUENCE OF THE “21ST CENTURY SOCIALISM”

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To my parents and brother
Thanks for your love, support and encouragement,
you three are the reason of my efforts and dreams.

To my fur-kids
For being my inspiration to finish this master
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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
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| ALBA    | Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas  
Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América |     |
| AD      | Democratic Action  
Acción Democrática |     |
| CELAC   | Community of Latin American and Caribbean States |     |
| CESPPA  | Strategic Center for Homeland Security and Protection |     |
| FARC    | Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia  
Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia |     |
| IADC    | Inter-American Democratic Charter |     |
| MERCOSUR| Common Market of South America  
Mercado Común de América del Sur |     |
| MUD     | Roundtable of Democratic Unity (opposition coalition)  
Mesa de Unidad Democrática |     |
| MVR     | Movement of the Fifth Republic (MVR)  
Movimiento de la Quinta República |     |
| OAS     | Organization of American States |     |
| PDVSA   | Petroleum of Venezuela (Venezuelan state-owned oil and natural gas Company)  
Petróleos de Venezuela S.A |     |
| PSUV    | The United Socialist Party of Venezuela  
Partido Socialista Unificado de Venezuela |     |
| UNASUR  | Union of South American Nations |     |
1. INTRODUCTION

Despite of being one of the countries with the highest oil reserves in the world, nowadays, Venezuela finds itself in the worst crisis that the country has experienced. In that respect, not only political leaders but also citizens challenge every day social, political and economic problems. The stability of Venezuela has been negatively influenced by several factors, such as the internal economic policies which basically have depended on the oil reserves, the inefficient management of the country, and the social and political policies which have been aligned to the idea of the “21st Century Socialism”. In other words, not only the price of the oil but the political goal has played a very large role in Venezuela’s crisis.

The internal tensions in the government, the citizen’s discomfort, along with the uncertainty of the countries in the region create multiple threats to the long-term stability of Venezuela. In this sense, there appears to be a crisis with many dimensions, which is permanently affecting the domestic and international environment of the country. Critics state that the country’s situation has seriously worsened and the government has become more authoritarian. Certainly, Chávez’s revolution and Maduro’s government left behind a legacy of repression and authoritarianism against politicians, private media and all who have opposed them. Unfortunately the crisis is seriously affecting important aspects of the society, such as health and nutrition, social security, and education. At the same time, Venezuela has become a society divided between those who identify with the government and those who identify with the opposition.

Another key point, is the fact that the Venezuela’ crisis is definitely having significant repercussions on the international community. In fact, some authors argue that Venezuela appears as a great threat to the stability of the whole Latin American region, impacting not only on the future of the regional organizations but also on the internal politics of the countries of the region. Equally important to realize is that some countries and regional organizations support Venezuela and some others condemn the human rights violation and deterioration of democracy.
Having this in mind, in order to answer the questions and to understand the statement previously mentioned this thesis will be divided into three sections. The first part provides a brief description of the theory of the “21st Century Socialism” in order to understand the experience of the concept in Latin America and especially in Venezuela. The second section has been designed to describe the Venezuela’s crisis and its impact on political and social policies; making first a revision of Chávez’s government and its successor, Nicolas Maduro. And finally, the third part of this thesis will be focus on the crisis’ implications for both democracy and regional stability.

1.1 General Objective and Research - Question

The aim of studying this topic is to understand the current crisis of Venezuela and its implications for democracy and regional stability, considering always the influence of the concept of “21st Century Socialism”. In this sense, in order to fulfill this aim it is also essential to know which the research-questions are.

1. How “21st Century Socialism” affects and causes the current crisis in Venezuela?
2. How has Venezuela’s crisis affected the domestic environment of the country?
3. To what extent has the Venezuela’s crisis affected democracy and regional stability?

1.2 Methodology – Collection of data

In order to answer the above-mentioned questions and fulfill the aim of this paper, a qualitative research method has been chosen. Since the Venezuela’s crisis is a current situation, which is still in development, the study is based on secondary sources such as textbooks, documentary analysis which involves information from newspapers, articles, government papers, journals, documentary analysis made from interviews and speeches, and finally from magazines and internet resources.
2. **“21ST CENTURY SOCIALISM”: WHAT IS IT?**

Our world is constantly changing and evolving. World powers come and go as well as their systems. Capitalism and socialism have been the two structures that have divided the world. These systems present two very different scenarios for the world, and both have strong supporters and opponents. Today, many capitalist countries play an important role in the global economy. However, at the same time several countries have also a dominant socialist participation in the international system. Thus, in the specific case of Latin American, socialism has become a new tendency aimed to correct economic inequalities by building a revolutionary socialism. In other words the so called “21st Century Socialism”

Having considered this system division and before answering the question, it is essential to clarify exactly what is meant by the term socialism. Hence, it will be given a brief description related to the meaning and characteristics of the theory.

It is important to mention that many scholars have tried to define what socialism is but there is not a general definition; it is stated that all the socialism definitions lack in precision and depth (Busky, 2000, p.1). Nevertheless, in order to have a general idea about the concept of socialism, it will be mentioned the following definitions.

Firstly, what socialism means for the socialist economic system is explained as follows:

What else does a socialist economic system involve? Those who favor socialism generally speak of social ownership, social control, or socialization of the means of production as the distinctive positive feature of a socialist economic system.” The main idea seems to be that an economic system is socialist only if control of the means of production is exercised in the interests of society at large or at least in the interests of the working class. The way this is usually explained is that just as private property serves private interests under capitalism, socialized property serves the public interests interest under socialism. (Arnold, 1194, p. 8)

On the other hand, it appears defined as a political and economic theory applied by regimes of the socialist system. It denotes the public ownership and cooperative management of the means of production and allocation of resources. (Badie, Berg-Schlosser, & Morlino, 2011).
Research by Busky supports, that there are many forms of socialism, so it is necessary to find a common element in all forms. This element includes the idea that socialism represents those movements for social ownership and control of the economy. The author also indicates that some of the main forms of socialism are democratic socialism, social anarchism and communism. (2000, p.2)

In this sense, after having looked into the notion of socialism and some of its main aspects, it is time to start talking about one of the new forms of socialism, “21st Century Socialism”. The origin of the term and its conceptual bases, have their formulation since the end of last century, from the contributions of the sociologist and political analyst Heinz Dieterich. (Roteta, 2015)

During the last years it has appeared an imperative impulse for mobilizations against neoliberalism and austerity, consequently a several number of leftist forces has been on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic. This new trend toward socialist policies has been discussed by people all around the world; in Europe for example they have called it the “New Left”, whereas in the American continent, with special focus on Latin America, most of the leaders of the new arising Left have defined the trend as “21st Century Socialism”. (Roos, 2015)

This theory appears as a reaction to the level of capitalist developments and the anti-imperialism that exists among the popular sectors. It constitutes a response to the cruel anti-people's policies implemented by political forces. (Karagiannis, 2009)

Moreover, it appears important to remark that “The state is not solely the government, nor does the government alone comprise the state, but using the “state for revolution” by using government power for revolutionary transformation is not only viable, it is a necessity for 21st century socialism.” In essence, the state is the institutionalized political mean for implementing and enforcing class relations. (Artz, 2012, p.539)

In addition, McAnulty says that “21st Century Socialism” emerge from the struggle to defeat and supplant existing leaderships and build a new movement. In the same way, it is said that it will be organized around a program leading the socialist transformation of society and not around a platform. (2010)

Given these points and having already mentioned different thoughts about this new socialism, it is important to know what “21st Century Socialism” exactly means and which some of its main elements are. In order to know this concept it will be better focus our attention in the author, above mentioned, Heinz Dieterich.
2.1 Heinz Dieterich: The Socialism of the 21st Century

2.1.1 Heinz Dieterich’ Biography

Heinz Dieterich Stefan, born in 1948, is originally a German citizen. He is a sociologist and political analyst. His studies were conducted in Frankfurt, where he obtained a PhD degree related to economics and sociology.

He has been living in Latin America for some years, but currently resides in Mexico, country where he has worked as professor for the Mexican Metropolitan Autonomous University.

Dieterich, is considered to be the godfather of the political ideas put in place in Chávez’s Venezuela and later in countries like Bolivia and Ecuador. Moreover, it is important to mention that he is better known for his leftist ideals. (Fox News Latino, 2013)

He has contributed to several journals and has published more than 30 books. All these books and journals are mostly concerned to conflicts in Latin America, global society and the ideological controversies that have characterized the 20th century.

His main activities have been to analyze social and political clashes in Latin America and to promote himself as the creator of “21st Century Socialism.” (Woods, 2015).

Since he has shown a lot of interest in politics and social movements in Latin America, he wrote books like “The Socialism of the 21st Century” and “Latin America: From Colonization to Globalization”.

The German sociologist Heinz Dieterich is a leading authority when speaking of Chavismo. Moreover, and important to notice is the fact that he was an advisor of the Venezuelan government. His term, “Socialism of the 21st Century” gave content to the Bolivarian Revolution. (Diario de Caracas, 2013. Original in Spanish).

On the other hand, he is considered one of the most important figures in the “New School of Bremen” in sociology, constituted by Arno Peters, Carsten Stahmer, and the Cuban physicist Raimundo Franco. This school implements principles of cybernetics, quantum mechanics and the “principle of equivalence” to sociology. (Revovy, n.d.)

Dieterich has been devoted to study Marxist principles with the purpose of presenting them updated, incorporating advances in knowledge, the experiences of the socialist attempts, describing its limitations, and offering theoretical proposals for both the

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1 Today Chavismo is one of the largest leftist political and social forces with one of the greatest impacts on the world, and it has become a reference point for the “poor of this earth”. Today Chavismo is Hugo Chávez and Hugo Chávez is Chavismo. (Jaua, E. in Venezuela: The real meaning of Chavismo, 2013)
political economy and the democratic participation of citizens to build a society free of exploitation, respecting the main axes of the vision of Karl Marx about the social dynamics and class struggle. (Roteta, 2015. Original in Spanish).

2.1.2 The Concept of Socialism of the 21st Century

The Socialism of the 21st Century is a concept that appears on the world stage in 1996, through the German sociologist and political analyst, Heinz Dieterich. The term gained worldwide diffusion from 2005 when the former Venezuela’s President, Hugo Chávez, mentioned it during a speech at the World Social Forum (Machado, 2012).

According to Dieterich “Socialism of the 21st Century” is a revolutionary program. He remarks that this revolution, however, should be a gradual process that does not employ violence but participative democracy in order to secure power, education, and scientific knowledge for society and international cooperation.

It is important to mention that his theory suggests the construction of some main basic elements. However, since the purpose of this research is to understand the Venezuela’s crises from a social and political perspective, we will focus on the following elements of this concept. 1) Participatory Democracy, and 2) Regional Democratic Developmentalism.

Speaking about democracy, he exactly states, “Democracy means that the majority rules…socialism cannot be imposed.” (Schiefer, 2006)

It is essential to mention that one of the basic principles of Dieterich’s analysis is that it is required to have certain objective conditions to have democracy. According to him democracy cannot be just a wish. He argues that, there has to be a certain level of material well-being, it is needed a certain quality of life. So, he proposes for example, the fact of having a very extensive educational system, which is open and free for all. Then, the people will have the willingness to have a democratic society. (Marcano, 2007)

As the economist Amartya Sen pointed out in his book, Education is crucial to give people capabilities such as literacy, confidence and attitudes that they need to participate in society. For example, providing education to poor and marginalized children and young people often means they are more likely to participate in meetings of local political bodies managing resources such as education, health and water. (Hans, 2012)
Dieterich states that democratic participation cannot be substituted by the rule of a surrogate force, capitalist elite, and, neither, state bureaucracy. To put it differently, these objective conditions include a real participatory democracy. (Marcano, 2007)

In addition, Heinz Dieterich (2005) argues that in a social system, formal democracy has to be measured by the existence and efficient functioning of some important institutions, such as the division of powers, Constitution with a clear formal democratic definition of the powers; rights and duties of the collective and individual entities of the nation, a formal democratic electoral system, the Parliament as the representative of the popular power’s sovereignty and the existence of media that is not owned by the State.

However, it is important to notice that this concept is directly contradicted by the same author when he asserts that the parliament and the electoral system of the “partitocracy” a pejorative form to refer to the party system, as we know them today, are controlled by the economic elites and won’t have a place in the future democracy. The same thing is valid for the great monopolies of the indoctrination (television, radio and press) and the production. The big private enterprise, which in organizational terms is a private tyranny with military structure, is incompatible with a real democracy and will vanish as so. (Dieterich, 2007, p.93)

This last statement contradicts the concept of the Participatory Democracy proposed by the Socialism of the 21st Century. Firstly, it is said that democratic participation cannot be substituted by the rule of a surrogate force or state bureaucracy, and that democracy allows people's protagonism. But, later this statement reveals that this participatory democracy, as it is called, is not inclusive at all because it is dismissing the involvement of many important sectors of the society, for example, enterprises or mass media groups.

It seems to me, to be a justification to limit the freedom of expression for the citizens’ interest. Moreover, this point is also applied to the idea that the parliament and the electoral system will not have place in this new democracy. In this sense, I believe that this fact opens a door for exploitation, oppression and exclusion. Likewise, it is also reasonable to think about corruption and abuse of power. It is highly probable, that by implementing such drastic reforms it can appear authoritarian regimes.

Let us now go on to consider how the model “21st Century Socialism” encourages a regional democratic developmentalism. The text speaks about the concept of the "Latin American Power Block, Regional Block of Power".
It should be pointed out that Dieterich promotes the economic and political integration among nations in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the words of Dieterich, "development of socialism in Venezuela is possible. It's possible only in the context of a Latin American regional block." (Schiefer, 2006).

Some of the main organizations encouraging this regional integration are the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA), Common Market of South America (Mercosur) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). However, ALBA is most explicitly related to “21st Century Socialism”. It promotes social, political, and economic integration among countries that subscribe to democratic socialism. I consider important to focus our attention on the fact that this organization was created in direct opposition to George H. Bush's attempts to establish a Free Trade Area of the Americas that included the United States. In fact, it is interesting to know that this integration excludes North American countries. (Gutenberg, 2002)

On the other hand, Dieterich describes that implementing this new socialism includes a regional transition through the Regional Block of Power. And explains that a regional block is necessary for any economic advance in Latin America (Abad, 2012)

Additionally, it is stated that Regional Democratic Developmentalism is an economic theory based in overcoming the inequality of the international trade terms. Dieterich says that this is another form of exploitation from the first world countries towards the third world ones, since the countries that produce raw materials are in a sort of disadvantage in front of those who process them into elaborated goods. Consequently, according to Dieterich, “the ladder towards Latin American greatness is regional democratic developmentalism.” (Guzman, 2014)

Finally, it must be said that Dieterich complements his theory by saying that the unemployment rate depends on the competitiveness of the national economy and this at the same time on the edge technology, which can be achieved only through the Latin American Regional Block. The author acknowledges that this regional integration is based on a protectionist capitalist model; however, he claims that unlike other regional economic blocks, Latin American power block must integrate elements of participatory democracy. (Dietreich, 2007, p.137)

It is essential to realize that this regional integration certainly promotes development for the region and suggests a new era of less domination and more cooperation. In fact, many Latin American problems can have solutions based on this
process of solidarity and cooperation. However, speaking about the role of US, in my opinion it is necessary to consider that there are issues which concern to the all continent. It must be acknowledged that problems such as the promotion of democracy, poverty alleviation, illegal narcotics, the environment, and human trafficking, definitely involve the US and Canada.

2.2 “21st Century Socialism” and the Experience of Latin America

As it was mentioned before, the term gained worldwide diffusion from 2005 when the former Venezuela’s President, Hugo Chávez, mentioned it during a speech at the World Social Forum.

“21st Century Socialism” in Latin America has typically been anti-imperialistic and directly challenges US hegemony in the Americas. In fact, it is important to mention that in response to the decades of neoliberal domination, the region have had a concrete orientation towards socialism. It is said that, the “21st Century Socialism” applied in Latin America is distinctly different from previous applications of socialism such as Marxism–Leninism or Maoism since it totally rejects authoritarianism and centralized planning.

The main idea about applying “21st Century Socialism” in Latin America is to deal with the failures of capitalism and twentieth century socialism in order to solve urgent problems of humanity, such as poverty, hunger, exploitation, economic oppression, sexism, racism, the destruction of natural resources, and the absence of a really participative democracy. (Gutemberg, 2002)

Added to that, it should be mentioned that the three main “socialist” Latin American nations are Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. They joined the ‘Pink Tide’ of the 21st Century Socialism movement. And, consequently, the twenty first century American leaders, Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, and Evo Morales of Bolivia.

Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador have followed a dual approach of uniting among themselves; however, they have also played active and leading roles in promoting broader continental unity. It worth to mention, that the leaders of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador define themselves as anti-capitalist and have often clashed with US. Nevertheless, they

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2 The so called Marea Rosada (Pink Tide) specifically refers to the turn that several Latin American governments took by the end of the 90s, in favor of public and social agendas that opposed the neoliberal order that characterized the region in the previous decades. (Villalobos, S. in The Chilean Case and the Latin American Pink, 2016)
also act in unison with moderate governments, such as Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay. (Whitt, 2010)

On the other hand, it must be said that the supporting institution of this movement is the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA). This Regional Block is a response to the US free trade agreements that seeks to promulgate throughout the hemisphere. “ALBA is explicitly anti-capitalist, providing an opportunity for mutually beneficial aid with purportedly less strings attached than the US’s austerity requirements. Additionally (and not unrelated), ALBA is anti-imperialist, stressing the importance of national sovereignty.” (Whitt, 2010) Though, it is necessary to say that this isn’t to say that market-oriented, free-trade institutions and policies have disappeared from the Latin American landscape. In reality, there are important projects that prioritize commercial integration, such as the Pacific Alliance, which includes Mexico, Chile, Colombia, and Peru. Similarly, there are those involving mainly actors outside the region, including Asia and Europe. (Bertucci, 2015)

Speaking about Ecuador, since January 2007, the country began a new era, in which it has been building a new economic model and a new project of inclusive human development. The Government of the Citizens Revolution, represented by the economist Rafael Correa Delgado, aims to change the productive structure of the country, from an extractive economy and essentially dependent on the export of raw materials, to one based on knowledge, biotechnology, diversification of production, among others. (Ministerio Relaciones Exteriores, 2014)

In order to achieve the goal of the “21st Century Socialism” it has been applied a new Ecuador's Constitution and the National Plan for Good Living. This Plan or “Plan del Buen Vivir” as it is called in Spanish, proposes changes for the construction of an Ecuadorian State that recognizes the primacy of human labor above capital, the need for collective action, the need for planning, the role of the state in the economy, the search for justice in all its dimensions, social justice, gender justice, ethnic justice, international justice. (LINKS, 2015)

Concerning to Bolivia, Evo Morales, who is the leader of the socialism movement in the country argues that there is a clear, global and urgent necessity for socialism. When Bolivia’s president, Evo Morales, was elected for a second term, he proclaimed Bolivia a plurinational state that would construct “communitarian socialism.” In his words,
If capitalism produces crises in the financial system, in energy, in food, in the environment, in climatic change, then what good is this capitalism that brings us so many crises? … What is the solution? I am convinced that it is socialism, for some socialism of the 21st century, for others communitarian socialism. (Burbach, 2010)

Regarding to Venezuela, the President Hugo Chávez announced at the 5th World Social Forum in 2005, that he would lead Venezuela firmly to the left. He clearly speaks about bringing social wellbeing to his people and hope for Venezuela. Despite the numerous cases of left-turns in recent years, Venezuela offers a unique and informative example of ‘post’-neoliberalism. The election of Hugo Chávez and his government’s subsequent policy changes are commonly perceived as representing a socially and economically left transformation from neoliberalism.

2.3 “21st Century Socialism” for Venezuela: Hugo Chávez Strengthens the Term

Firstly, it must be said that Hugo Chávez, the former president of Venezuela, has called the process of socialist reforms in Venezuela, “Bolivarian process”, name that represents the Latin American liberator, Simón Bolívar. (LINKS, 2015)

As it was mentioned before, the term of “21st Century Socialism” became well known because of Hugo Chávez. The first approach was on December 2004 at the closing ceremony of the World Meeting of Intellectuals and Artists in Defense of Humanity, held in Caracas. At that moment, Chávez gained the attention of the audience by announcing that “it is necessary to review the history of socialism and rescue the concept of socialism.” (Harnecker, 2010) Then, few weeks later, on January 2005, he spoke at the World Social Forum. Over there he restated the need to overcome capitalism and build socialism. Chávez exactly said “We have to reinvent socialism. It can’t be the kind of socialism we saw in the Soviet Union.” Moreover, he stated that there was no alternative to capitalism other than socialism. Nevertheless, he strongly argued that it is needed to invent a different socialism; he said “it had to be different than the socialisms we have known; we would have to invent twenty-first century socialism.” Therefore, this was the first time that the term was used in public. (Harnecker, 2010)

On the other hand, in another speech in 2016, Chávez mentions the bases of the term saying “We have assumed the commitment to direct the Bolivarian Revolution towards socialism and to contribute to the socialist path, with a new socialism, a socialism of the 21st century, which is based in solidarity, in fraternity, in love, in justice, in liberty
and in equality.” In the same way, Chávez notes that it is necessary to transform the mode of capital and move towards a new socialism that according to him had to be constructed every day. In this sense, for example in 2007, he decided to nationalize companies in the telecommunications and electricity industries and promised to seek greater control over natural gas projects. (Saul, 2007)

Additionally, it should not be forgotten that Chávez was determined to promote his leftist, Bolivarian Project not only in one country but instead reach out, across national boundaries.

Having considered some of the main Chávez’s thoughts, it is also essential to look at the key components of what constitutes socialism in Venezuela. However, before start talking about that, it is important to mention that the “Bolivarian Process” followed by Hugo Chávez have been influenced by two political theorist, Dieterich Heinz and Marta Harnecker. Both of them served as informal advisers to Hugo Chávez, but Harnecker had more participation in the process, since she was Chávez’s adviser between 2004 and 2011. (LINKS, 2015)

Marta Harnecker is originally from Chile. She moved to Venezuela and worked as a close ad hoc collaborator of Chávez in what she herself defines as the “revolutionary laboratory” (Cirio, 2005)

The “21st Century Socialism” led firstly by Chávez in Venezuela was built considering both, the elements before cited by Heinz and the five components stated by Marta Harnecker.

1. Socialism is “the development of human beings,” meaning that “the pursuit of profit” needs to be replaced by “a logic of humanism and solidarity, aimed at satisfying human needs.”
2. Socialism “respects nature and opposes consumerism – our goal should not be to live 'better' but to live well’.”
3. Socialism establishes a new “dialectic of production/distribution/consumption, based on: a) social ownership of the means of production, and b) social production organized by the workers in order to c) satisfy communal needs.”
4. “Socialism is guided by a new concept of efficiency that respects nature and seeks human development.”
5. Finally, there is a need for the “rational use of the available natural and human resources, thanks to a decentralized participatory planning process”.(Burbach, 2014)
3. VENEZUELA’S CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON POLITICAL AND SOCIAL POLICIES

Today, Venezuela is suffering the worst crisis in its history. The country is marked by an overwhelming political, economic and social polarization. The stability of Venezuela has been negatively influenced by several factors, such as the economic policies which basically have depended on the oil reserves, the introduction of currency exchange controls, excessive nationalization, political polarization, deterioration of democracy and many others political and social policies which have been aligned to the “Bolivarian Revolution” of Chávez or the so called “21st Century Socialism”.

The inefficient management of the country, the internal tensions in the government and the polarization between the ruling party and the opposition, along with the possibilities of an international intervention that may further aggravate these tensions and crises, pose multiple threats to the long-term stability and future prospects for Venezuela as well as the broader region.

The Venezuelan government has increased control over democratic institutions and has continuously supported an aggressive campaign against the opposition provoking a strong deterioration of democracy and generating an environment of government impunity in both the social and the political spheres. Venezuela today is a society divided between those who identify with the government versus those who identify with the opposition.

Added to that, Chávez’ reorganization of the military has brought their increased involvement in civil matters and contributed to the militarization of Venezuelan society. Moreover, the restriction on objective media reporting on situations not favorable to the image of the government has contributed further to the lack of transparency and monitoring of government decisions and policies.

Venezuela faces a critical crisis where the shortage of food and medicine, violence between opponents and supporters of the government, insecurity and corruption are just few examples of what people live every day. (Luzes, 2016)

Finally, the situation is worsening, while tension increases every day. It is important to say that President Maduro may not be able to govern the country in the future days and to manage the different conflicts that the Venezuelan society is facing as part of Chávez’ legacy.

In this sense, it will be seen in the next section some of the main political and social policies adopted by Chávez and Maduro, in order to understand the Venezuela’s crisis from a social and political point of view.
3.1 Venezuela under the leadership of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro - Building "21st Century Socialism"

3.1.1 Who is Hugo Chávez?

Hugo Chávez was born in 1954, in Sabaneta, Barinas, Venezuela. His parents were school teachers and were active in politics, especially in regard to educative policies. At the age of 17, Chávez joined the military. Then, in 1976, Chávez became likeminded to the guerrilla cause, and as a result, he created the “People's Liberation Army of Venezuela” with revolutionary aims. This original group became the basis for the “Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200”, which was created in 1982. Later on, this movement fomented one of the most well-known military coups in Venezuela. Consequently, because of his socialist ideology and revolutionary attempts became one of the most influential figures in Latin America. (Hira & Morden, 2004)

Chávez undertook a military coup in February 1992, and even though it was unsuccessful Chávez came to national importance. As a result of his actions he was arrested, and imprisoned between 1992 and 1994.

In prison, he met Luis Miquilena, a veteran democratic left-wing activist who advised Chávez to abandon the coup d’état and pursue his political ambitions through the electoral process. (Lapper, 2005). Subsequently, Hugo Chávez became politician and president of Venezuela (1998 -2013).

Finally, he died on March 5 2013, at the age of 58 after a secrecy battle with cancer.

3.1.2 The Historical Background of Chávez's Rise to the Venezuelan Presidency

Generally speaking, Venezuela is considered one of the richest countries in Latin America because of its abundant natural resources. In fact, Venezuela has one of the world’s largest proven reserves of oil in the world. However, Venezuela has been unable to transform its oil wealth into productive wealth or benefits for the majority of the population. During decades, oil reserves have dominated Venezuela’s economy. According to some critics, petroleum has financed state bureaucracy, massive corruption and inefficiency, and even it has limited other important industries. (Hira & Morden, 2004)

On the other hand, concerning politics, it must be said that until 1958, the country was totally characterized by a dictatorship period that built a poor Venezuela. It is since 1959, under the government of Romulo Betancourt, that Venezuela start living a democratic transition; where dominant parties agreed to establish a presidential democracy. (Bertelsmann, 2004).
During the 1970s, Venezuela was the richest country in Latin America. The country had the region’s highest growth rates and the lowest levels of inequality. Actually, it was also one of the most stable democracies in the Americas. Nevertheless, starting in the early 1980s, the things totally changed. Venezuela suffered three coup attempts and one presidential impeachment. The economic stability was completely vulnerable and it was a normal issue to have mass protests. (Spanakos, 2014)

It is important to mention that Venezuela has been called a “fair-weather democracy” because of its dependence on oil exports. The election of democratic governments increased state-owned shares, and the oil industry was nationalized in 1976. The state-owned oil company “Petróleos de Venezuela” S.A. (PDVSA) became one of the largest companies in Latin America. (Bertelsmann, 2004).

In the early 1980s, Venezuela not also faced a debt crisis because of the massive debt accumulated by the country during the 1970s, but also a decline in oil prices. As result, the Venezuelan debt payments and payments for expropriation of the oil fields created severe constraints on the political and economic system. (Hira & Morden, 2004). In this sense, the next years, Venezuela’s governments faced not only a harsh crisis but also a wave of protests, riots, robbing, shootings and massacres.

Under those circumstances, on February 1992, Hugo Chávez and a group of military officers directed a coup d’état to overthrow the government that, at that moment was led by President Carlos Andrés Pérez. Unfortunately for Chávez, the rebellion was unsuccessful. Chávez was unable to complete the operation, the capture of President Carlos Pérez. It is then, that Chávez truly appeared in the political scenario of Venezuela.

Chávez realized that it was useless to keep fighting, and he agreed to surrender on the condition that he can address his coconspirators on national television.

Chávez stood in front of the cameras and told his fellow “comrades” that regrettably—“for now,” he said—their goal of taking power could not be accomplished, and he beseeched them to put down their arms to avoid further bloodshed. Chávez spoke for less than two minutes, but this was essentially the beginning of his life as a politician. Many Venezuelans at that time were frustrated with their elected leaders, and they were inspired by Chávez and praised his bold ideas to reform the country. His address became known as the “por ahora” “for now” speech because many people took that specific phrase as a promise that one day Chávez would return. (Nelson, 2016)
Chávez was imprisoned without a court ruling for the attempted coup, so he was in prison between 1992 and 1994, but even there he continued to develop his ideas. Chávez founded the political party “Movement of the Fifth Republic” (MVR), enlisting many former socialist activists and military officers. And, finally in December 1998, he won the presidential election with 56 percent of the votes. (Nelson, 2016)

3.1.3 Hugo Chávez and the “Bolivarian Revolution” or “21st Century Socialism”

Firstly, it is interesting to know that Chávez mainly won the elections process by selling the idea of giving power to the people, and ending the corruption of the traditional political parties that had governed Venezuela. He was always ready for creating popular perceptions that his purpose and motivation were morally correct, and would allow a better life for all. (Carrillo, 2016)

After having appreciated some of the main aspects for Chávez goals, his full repudiation of inequality, poverty, and elitism both in Venezuela and in the world, and of course, his strong anti-Americanism, it is necessary now to know his project as President of Venezuela.

In April 1998, after have been elected as President, Hugo Chávez declared a general agenda for Venezuela. He emphasized the importance of having some objectives related to create a truly participatory democracy, and therefore the need for major structural changes. In this sense, in order to reach the main goal of this thesis, it will be presented in this part of the investigation some of the main Chavez’s social and political policies in a brief way.

In this Agenda, Chávez mainly stated the need for administrative reform, including transparency and flexibility. In addition, he discussed the need to address problems of youth; women; indigenous groups; education; communication; health and nutrition; social security; and housing. Added to that, Chávez declared a “war on social problems.”, saying that it is needed to establish goals referring to the huge problems of inequity in Venezuela, the high unemployment rate, the need for a new Constitution; the need for improvement in health standards; and other major problems. In fact, it is particularly interesting to mention that Chávez frequently used the word humanist to describe his orientation. (Hira & Morden, 2004)

Moreover, and it is necessary at this point to consider that he included the need to reduce “international dependency”.
As we have seen, Chávez established his Agenda based on different social, political and economic issues in Venezuela. Therefore, in order to know some main facts of his period, they will be divided as follows:

- **Political goals**, involving: a) a new Constitution, b) the role of the military, c) information, communication and media, d) popular and democratic participation, e) rule of law f) the reduction of corruption and improvement of transparency in public administration.
- **Social policy**, containing policies to improve the access to health care, education, housing and social security.
- **Foreign policy**, including an aggressively anti-imperialist policy and strong alliance with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

**Political goals**

In 1998, in his inaugural speech, Chávez announced that he would improve the political system and rewrite the constitution that he described as “destined to die.” The new political system would be tailored to his needs to be an election-based and democratic government. (Bertelsmann, 2004).

**a) New Constitution:** it is absolutely important to mention that Chávez managed the drafting of a new constitution that gave him unprecedented control over the three branches of government. Moreover, he also increased his power in the National Assembly. Although his party fell short of the two-thirds majority needed for absolute control, the pro-Chávez majority was enough to pass an enabling law that allowed the president to implement certain laws by decree. (Nelson, 2016)

In this sense, some critics argue that the new constitution, despite its advanced civil and political rights regulations, was an instrument framed to develop an authoritarian regime. This conclusion analysis has been based on the constitution’s provisions allowing the possibility of concentration of state power, state centralization, extreme presidentialism, extensive state participation in the economy, general marginalization of civil society in public activities, exaggerated state social obligations reflecting state oil-income, and extreme militarism. (Brewer, n.d.)

It is important to note however, which the main changes are and what they involve: (Wilpert, 2003).
1. Name Change
The new constitution changed the country’s name, from “Republic of Venezuela” to “Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.” The new name is supposed to signal that Venezuela is just one of the countries that its founder, Simon Bolivar, liberated and that it could, in the future, belong to a federation of “Bolivarian Republics”.

2. State of Law and Justice
In contrast to many other country’s constitutions, that simply say that its state is a state of law, the Venezuelan constitution underlines the difference between law and justice, implying that justice is just as important as the law. It makes reference to the concept of justice by saying, “the state promotes the well-being of Venezuelans, creating the necessary conditions for their social and spiritual development, and striving for equality of opportunity so that all citizens may freely develop their personality, direct their destiny, enjoy human rights and search for their happiness.” (Wilpert, 2003).

3. Human Rights
It should be noticed that, before Chávez came to power Venezuela formally guaranteed human rights, but in practice often violated them. With the election of Chávez as president, human rights had a central place in the constitution. The constitution incorporates not only civil rights, such as the freedom of expression, assembly, and political participation, but also those that include social human rights, such as the right to employment, housing, and health care. (Wilpert, 2003).

4. Right to Information
The new Constitution of Venezuela came to guarantee the right to information. It exactly states that citizens not only have the right to information, but that they have the right to information that is “timely, true, and impartial.” Additionally, it says that such information is to be provided “without censorship”, in accordance with the principles of this constitution. (Wilpert, 2003).

5. Social, Educational, Cultural, and Economic Rights
The new constitution states many more rights besides the usual human rights. Housing, health care, and employment, are established to be guaranteed by the state. For example, it is mentioned that “Every worker has the right to a sufficient salary that allows a life with dignity and covers his own and his family’s basic material, social, and intellectual necessities.” Moreover, in relation to economic
rights, the state is obligated to promote and protect economic democracy, such as cooperatives.

6. Five powers instead of three
In addition to the usual three branches of power, legislative, executive, and judiciary, the new constitution adds an electoral power and a citizen or public power. The citizen power is meant to act as regulator for the country, assuring the other four powers comply with their constitutionally determined functions. This power should “prevent, investigate, and sanction deeds that go against public ethics and administrative morality”. On the other hand, the electoral, is constituted by the national electoral council, which regulates and watches over proper electoral procedures. (Wilpert, 2003)

7. Office of the President
According to some critics, this is one of the most controversial topics in the new constitution. Chávez insisted on increasing the presidential term from five to six years and to allow immediate reelection. Previously the president was not allowed to run for immediate term reelection, but could eventually run again. “Chávez’ argument for extending the president’s term and for allowing immediate reelection was that the task of rebuilding Venezuela is so great that a single five year term is not enough.” (Wilpert, 2003).

8. State role in the economy
The new constitution assigns a much larger economic role to the state than the previous constitution did. In this context, the constitution outlines that the state is responsible for promoting national industry, agriculture, and various other smaller branches, such as fishing, cooperatives, tourism, small businesses, crafts, and others.

b) Role of the military in Venezuela’s politics: it must be said that the military’s role in Venezuelan society totally changed since 1999, as was stated in the new Constitution. This radical change places the military more directly at the service of the president and of his political program. According to some critics, Chávez is interested in a military that actively supports his political program and only those who do so are promoted.

Besides that, the new constitution has given the members of the military the right to vote, something that was previously denied to them. Similarly, he ordered the military to develop and implement plans for combating poverty, such as the “Plan Bolivar 2000”,
which provides food aid to the poor via the military’s infrastructure or the “Plan Avispa”, which puts soldiers to work in fixing houses in poor communities.

It is also well worth noting that Chávez argued that a key element of his political program is to revise the relationship between the population and the military, so that the military acquires a more useful function in society, one which goes beyond the merely military and takes advantage of its huge resources to help solve social problems. In the same way, it is important to mention that during his term, Chávez had many retired military officers in charge of administrative functions of the government (Wilpert, 2003).

It is interesting to notice that this military role have provoked different thoughts and attitudes. On the one hand, many people think that this is a positive change for the society, it is not anymore a close and oppressive force but is a more open and civic institution; on the other, critics of the government consider that the new role of the military in Venezuela represents highly problematic collusions between military, political and economic power, and that the military has turned into a potential repressive force in service of the government. (Stronen, 2016)

c) **Information and communication media:** it must be said that the media of the opposition have been progressively controlled or appropriated by the government, while government affiliated media and TV channels have proliferated and expanded.

It is important to notice that the government created the “Strategic Center for Homeland Security and Protection” (CESPPA) to monitor and neutralize potential threats from internal and external enemies. In fact, one of the first actions was to attack the privately owned popular “Newspaper 2001” for addressing the issue of shortage of goods. CESPPA not only has a censorship role in relation to the control of public information and, in particular, information published by the media; but also it was created to report to the President without any monitoring or control by the citizenship or civil institutions.

In addition, many radio stations, TV channels and several newspapers have been acquired by government supporters. Likewise, several independent newspapers that provide nonofficial or noncensored information have been affected because of the shortage of paper due to the currency controls - lack of access to US dollars - imposed by Chávez.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that online access to information is usually blocked when a crisis develops or when there are situations that compromise the government. (Serbin, 2014)

d) **Democratic Participation:** at this point, it is now important to know the significance of democracy in the political reform of Chávez. It was established that the “Bolivarian
Revolution” would be achieved based on the concept of democracy thought the following principles:

1) The new authority in the state must be a leader who communicates directly with the people, interprets their needs, and emphasizes “social expenditure” to guarantee the legitimate needs and desires of the people; 2) elections, Congress, and the courts will provide formal democracy and international legitimacy, but will have no real role in governance or the economy; 3) the state will continue to own or control the major means of national production and distribution; and 4) the national and regional political-economic integration function will be performed by the leader by means of his financial, material, and political-military support of people’s movements. (Manwaring, 2005)

Besides that, it must be noticed that the new Constitution states:

Article 62. "All citizens have the right to participate freely in public affairs, either directly or through their elected representatives. The participation of the people in forming, carrying out and controlling the management of public affairs is the necessary way of achieving their involvement to ensure their complete development, both individual and collective. It is the obligation of the State and the duty of society to facilitate the generation of optimum conditions for putting this into practice."

Additionally, Article 68 protects citizens by stating “citizens’ right to demonstrate, peacefully and without weapons, subject only to such requirements as may be established by law.” (TeleSuR, 2014)

e) Rule of law: Compared with other Latin American countries, Venezuela’s legislative and judicial branches historically played a relatively strong role in the government. However, Chávez implemented both personalization and centralization. The unicameral National Assembly replaced the previously bicameral legislature; so the executive branch was strengthened; and the legislative branch was weakened. (Bertelsmann, 2004).

f) Reduction of corruption and improvement of transparency in public administration: let us know about transparency in Chávez’s public administration.
As it was mentioned before, the constitution states that the public power should prevent, investigate, and sanction actions that go against public ethics and administrative morality. It is clearly mentioned that corruption will be sanctioned and that the state will look for the proper administration of public finances.

According to Coronel, Venezuela has been characterized by the persistent presence of political and financial corruption in public administration. In Coronel words, “…it has become evident that the Constituent Assembly primarily was a vehicle to destroy all existing political institutions and replace them with a bureaucracy beholden to his wishes. Poverty and social exclusion remain as prominent as before, while the levels of government corruption are higher than ever.” (2008)

It is said that, Chávez’s policies have promoted corruption rather than combating it, the total absence of accountability and transparency in the government has been the result of the concentration of power in Chávez’s hands and the lack of institutional checks and balances. Moreover, even though the corrupt bureaucrats have been identified, none of them have been punished. Not one single person is in prison in Venezuela for corruption. (Coronel, 2008)

**FIGURE 1**

**CORRUPTION INDEX 2007: VENEZUELA**

*Source: Transparency International, 2007*
It is argued that his policies not only failed to eliminate existing deficiencies, they further aggravated inefficiency and corruption. According to Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index-2007, it can be seen that in Latin America and the Caribbean, Venezuela is one of the 16 most corrupt countries in the world (See Figure 1) 

Some examples of corruption derived from major policy decisions made by President Chávez presented in “The Corruption of Democracy in Venezuela” by Coronel (2008) are the following:

In the nine years since Chávez came to power, an estimated $300,000,000,000 of oil income has entered the national treasury. The exact number is uncertain due to the poor transparency of the government accounts, and because the national petroleum company no longer presents financial results to the Venezuelan people.

During Chávez’s tenure, national debt has increased from $22,000,000,000 to about $70,000,000,000. Together with income tax revenues, the total income of Venezuela during Chavez’s presidency has been approximately $700,000,000,000. This formidable amount of money is nowhere to be seen in terms of public works or effective health and education programs.

**Social Policy**

“Venezuela's failure to develop an effective strategy to reduce its economy's dependence on gas and oil threatens the social successes and future viability of the Bolivarian project.” (Lander, 2015) 

As it was mentioned before, Venezuela has the world’s largest estimated oil reserves. It is because of this that Venezuela’s economic profile has been characterized by an overwhelming dependency on petroleum exports. “Petroleum still accounts for around 25% of Venezuela’s GDP and over 80% of its export revenue.” (Hira & Morden, 2004)

It is important to mention that for decades oil has benefited mostly the richest people in Venezuela, and the poor people have seen very little of that wealth. Consequently, Chávez coined a slogan, “Venezuela now is for everyone,” that symbolized his use of petroleum wealth to help the poor. (Maheshvarananda, 2015)

In fact, when he took office, Chávez nationalized privately owned oil fields under PDVSA, the state-owned oil and natural gas company. This gave the Venezuelan
government direct access to oil profits, which increased dramatically during Chávez’s rule from just under $10 per barrel in 1999 to a peak of $126 per barrel in 2008. (Perez, 2013)

In this sense, Chávez totally funded his social program using oil revenues. Many social welfare missions begun in his term: subsidized food stores, free health care, educational programs, and the building of several houses for the homeless.

Two of the main social programs he developed were the so called, “Plan Bolivar 2000” and “Central Social Fund”, both of them administrated and managed by the armed forces. The former, for example was implemented for combating poverty by providing food aid to the poor via the military’s infrastructure. In fact, it has been stated that the execution of these programs left much to be desired. (Coronel, 2008)

The military “became a vehicle for the personal benefit of its managers and officers”. “Some $700,000,000 was put into these programs and, at least half of it remains unaccounted for.” (Coronel, 2008)

In this context, it is essential to realize that social development in Venezuela under Chávez’s government did not have a real change due to the historical oil dependency and political corruption. In other words, it is clear that not only the price of oil but political instability played a very large role in Venezuela's social policy.

**Foreign Policy**

Latin American and Caribbean Integration was definitely one of the key factors of Chávez’s foreign policy. In fact, the Constitution states as follows:

Article 153 reads, 'The Republic shall promote, and encourage Latin American and Caribbean integration, in the interest of advancing toward the creation of a community of nations, defending the region's economic, social, cultural, political and environmental interests. The Republic shall have the power to sign international treaties that implement and coordinate efforts to promote the common development of our nations, and to ensure the welfare of their peoples and the collective security of their inhabitants. (TeleSuR, 2014).

As we have seen earlier, Chávez followed a strongly anti-imperialist policy. His policy has been aimed to build a Bolivarian Alliance in Latin America in order to contain US influence in the region. In this sense, Chávez forged deep alliances with enemies of US, for example with Castro, president of Cuba.
Chávez was always concerned about possible US attacks and direct invasion of Venezuela; so that, he made military preparations in order to avoid such threat. It is known for example, that in 2005 Chávez announced the acquisition from Russia of 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles. “A military reserve or militia of approximately 20,000, under Chávez’s direct control, has been established, which the president would like to become two million-strong force in the near future.” (Lapper, 2005)

On the other hand, his most important goal was the building of an alliance among the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean in order to achieve the South American independence. The first step towards the Bolivarian dream was “Petrocaribe”, a foreign scheme to provide cheap oil to the countries of Central America and the Caribbean that depend on imports. (Bulmer, 2013)

Moreover, as it was mentioned before, it was created ALBA, a regional integration scheme based on the ideas of social, political, and economic integration of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. The eleven member countries are Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Grenada, Nicaragua, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Venezuela. The agreement was proposed as an alternative to the Free Trade Area of the Americas, an agreement proposed by the United States.

It is also interesting to notice that in his term, he also got closer to other heads of state like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran; he bought advanced weaponry from Russia, and started closer relations with China. (World Future Fund, 2014)

Finally, it is important to notice that much of what Chávez has done both domestically and internationally has depended on the availability of abundant oil revenues. In other words, it would have been possible neither to finance domestic social programs nor the extensive relationship with Cuba without the incomes from oil. (Lapper, 2005)

### 3. 1.4 Venezuela’s Situation since Maduro’s Election in 2013

Nicolás Maduro Moros, was born in 1962, Caracas Venezuela. His own early interest in left-wing politics led Maduro to pursue training as an organizer in Cuba rather than a university education. He worked as a bus driver in Caracas. But later on, in 1999, he started his political life supporting Chávez’s interests as member of the National Constituent Assembly. (Wallenfeldt, 2016)

Nicolás Maduro, current president of Venezuela, was an unconditional follower of Chávez. In return, Chávez appointed him as a member of the National Assembly, the
secretary of state, vice president and then his heir. Nicolás Maduro gained a marginal victory in the presidential elections in April 2013 against the opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles. Since then, Maduro has tried to continue Chávez’s political line and strongly focused on intensifying the process of building the "21st Century Socialism", currently influenced by Cuban advisors. (Wallenfeldt, 2016)

During Chávez’s period, Venezuela faced a strong political polarization between the government and the opposition that was mainly caused not only by the excessive control of the government over the main institutional and economic resources of the country but also by the systematically persecution against the opposition. In this context, it is important to mention that Maduro’s election was totally challenged by the opposition, which alleged fraud in the electoral process. However, their claims before electoral organizations went unheard.

Besides that, it is interesting to notice that Maduro’s support was mainly concentrated in rural areas and smaller towns where the government is the principal source of employment and revenues. In contrast, the opposition represented by the “Roundtable of Democratic Unity” (MUD), obtained votes from the major urban municipalities including the capital city of the State of Barinas, Hugo Chávez' hometown. (Serbin, 2014)

In this sense, it can be seen how people from the middle-class, upper class, and generally speaking owners of the private sector and national industry of Venezuela do not support the ruling “United Socialist Party of Venezuela” (PSUV), formerly the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR).

On the other hand, it must be said that one of the main objectives in Maduro’s presidential term has been to bring the divided country together. However, his administration has been marked by unstoppable demonstrations. In 2014, middle-class citizens and hard-line oppositional sectors in many Venezuelan cities took the streets demanding the government’s exit. These riots provoked the death of 43 people, including protestors, passers-by, government supporters and security personnel. Simultaneously, and partly as consequences of the global fall in oil prices, the country was thrown into a constant economic crisis that have caused an increased poverty and a fortified political opposition. (Stronen, 2016).

Moreover, it is needed to mention that during his term the situation of the country has become worse. This has been partly caused by the government’s failure to adequately invest in the industrial sector and its ideologically driven nationalization of industries such as electricity and steel. Added to that, it must be said that today the inflation rate in
Venezuela registers among the highest levels in the world. “Venezuela has an unenviable record - the highest inflation rate in the world, a staggering 470%.” The International Monetary Fund has predicted that, “if current trends continue, this time next year inflation could reach 1,700%”. (Keane, 2016).

Equally important to mention is that, Venezuelan oil production has been declining every month and is now down from more than 3 million barrels per day to just above 2 million. PDVSA has no money to invest and its rig count is falling, which means that production will continue to decline. The decline in the price of oil has totally cut the resources available to the state, making it impossible to import basic goods and creating growing social discontent. (Tulchin, 2016)

Consequently, on 6 December 2015 Parliamentary elections were held in Venezuela in order to elect the 164 deputies of the National Assembly. The result was a decisive defeat for the “United Socialist Party of Venezuela” (PSUV) which lost control of the Assembly for the first time since 1999. The Roundtable of Democratic Unity, composed of politicians opposed to the government of both Chávez and his successor, won 112 seats against 55 won by the PSUV. As a result of this, the opposition majority raised the possibility of a recall referendum on Maduro’s presidency once it reached its halfway point. (Wallenfeldt, 2016)

On May 2, the opposition alliance led by Enrique Capriles, submitted petitions with some 1.85 million signatures demanding a recall election. (Nine times the roughly 200,000 required to move the recall process along). Under these circumstances Maduro’s supporters in the judiciary and regulatory agencies are currently trying to kill the measure. (Spivak, 2016)

On the other hand, Maduro has been doing everything to delay the referendum. Firstly, he responded by claiming that a deadline for the initial petition had passed and that the petitions contained falsified signatures, actions considered as Maduro’s attempts to delay the movement toward a recall. According to the country’s constitution, January 10 2017, is the last date at which the results of the referendum could generate new elections. In other words, if a successful recall were held in 2016, it would result in a presidential election. (Tulchin, 2016)

According to Wallenfeldt, Maduro declared a renewable 60-day state of emergency, on May 13, in order to increase his ability to work around the legislature. In addition, Maduro granted the army and police additional powers to keep order in the country by
declaring that he had taken this step in the interest of national security because the opposition was plotting with foreign elements to destabilize Venezuela. (2016)

It must be said that both police and military, play an essential role in the penetration and growth of organized crime in Venezuela, which is reflected in alarming crime statistics. For example, there have been cases of security force members providing weapons and information to criminal groups.

In summary, Venezuela is facing not only an economic, but also a social, political, and public safety crisis. The population suffers from shortages of food, basic goods, medicine as well as from the permanent risk of violence.

3.2 Main Current Effects of Venezuela’s Crisis

3.2.1 Humanitarian Emergency: Food and Public Health Crisis

Food Crisis

“This is what’s happening in Venezuela. We’re starving. We’re struggling, thanks to this government. It’s the Maduro diet.” (Halverson, 2016).

Today, there is an overwhelming humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, where citizens don't have enough food to eat. “Venezuelans can't buy bread and meat and all you can really get is cereals -- the really, really basic stuff,” (Gillespie, 2016). As it was mentioned before, the country has been affected by a deepening economic crisis, corruption, crime, all of which have contributed to a worsening food shortage.

According to the facts, it seems that the government has prioritized its debt payments over food shortages. Unfortunately, Venezuelans wait in lines outside supermarkets often for hours to find some food, since it is complicated to find bread, eggs and other basic things.

It is essential to notice that this food crisis has its roots in the economic policies implemented under the presidency of Hugo Chávez. Policies related to price controls, arbitrary expropriations, overvalued exchange rates and overregulation of the private sector destroyed Venezuela’s capacity to produce goods domestically, including food. At the time that oil prices were high, from 2004 to 2013, the government ignored the collapse of domestic production because it could spend petrodollars on imports. However, when oil prices started declining in 2014, the government adjusted by reducing the money available for imports. Consequently, this reduction affected food, fertilizer and agricultural equipment. (Corrales, 2016)
On the other hand, it is needed to say that none of the policies implemented with Chávez that led to the food crisis have changed. In fact, Nicolás Maduro has reinforced the model and all the policies before used. The only change has been the introduction of a rationing system. This policy involves consumption quotas, giving people permission to buy certain quantities of certain products on certain days of the week, but no more. (Corrales, 2016)

In this context, it is also interesting to see the shocking declines in exports of certain food. According to Panjiva, a global trade analytics firm, the export data from the United States, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Chile to Venezuela can be listed as follows: (Gillespie, 2016).

- Bread shipments to Venezuela fell 94% in the first half of 2016 compared to the the same period last year. That's $216,000 worth of bread this year, versus $3.5 million last year.
- Meat exports declined 63% to $127 million, from nearly $350 million last year
- Fish exports dropped 87%
- Sugar fell 34%

It must also be mentioned that the food shortage has allowed a new way of corruption in Venezuela since food imports meant for the state sector are being diverted onto the black market by government officials. The incentive to make quick dollars, at all levels, is undeniable. And as long as dollars and imports remain scarce, and prices controlled, it is hard to see the Maduro government being able to take control of the situation. (LATIN AMERICAN NEWS, February, 2016)

Besides that, this food crisis is causing some other issues. People are not only having health and nutrition problems but also the consequences go beyond that. Education crisis is appearing to the scene. Teachers are taking time off from school to stand in line for food and families take the children with them to stand in line since they are unsure if schools are providing adult supervision. Empty shelves are producing empty classrooms (Corrales, 2016)

Concerning International Aid, it is known that Venezuela has rejected food and humanitarian aid from groups like Amnesty International and the United Nations. According to some Amnesty officials, the government doesn't want to accept aid because that would make the government look inadequate. (Gillespie, 2016)
**Public Health Crisis**

Equally important, is the fact that the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela not only involves a food shortage but a serious public health crisis. Medical centers are in crisis since there is no power electricity, food and water. Moreover, the country is short on basic medicines, leaving some to die in hospitals and many to suffer without proper treatment. It is easy to find hospitals without soap, antibiotics, gloves and x-rays.

The Venezuelan Constitution defines health as a fundamental social right and guarantees a free national universal health care system. (GHNGN, 2016) In this sense, in the country’s public hospitals, treatment should be free, but medicine and equipment are more and more not available. Consequently, patients in several cases have to buy what is needed for their treatment privately. Likewise, the shortage of radioactive materials is threatening medical services such as cancer treatments.

In addition, it is important to mention that every day; doctors have to fight trying keeping patients alive. For example, according to the Health Ministry, the death rate among babies under a month old increased to just over 2% in 2015, up from 0.02% in 2012. In addition, the death rate among new mothers increased by about five times. (GHNGN, 2016)

**3.2.2 Immigration and Security Crisis**

**Immigration**

The Venezuela’s crisis has caused a significant wave of immigration out of the country. Because of the current situation, the earning and purchasing power of most Venezuelans has been ruined. In addition, their reasons to leave the country have been mainly the shortages of several goods and the widespread crime.

“Venezuelans have migrated en-masse ever since the “Bolivarian revolution” brought instability to the country. In the period between 2005 and 2010, the number of Venezuelan residents abroad climbed from 378,000 to 521,000.” (Medina, 2016)

It is important to notice that Mexico is one of the principal destinations for Venezuelans. Some of the reasons are: Mexico’s proximity to the US, the language and culture, the relatively stable economy and no restrictions on tourist visas. According to figures from “Mexico’s National Institute of Immigration”, between 2012 and 2015, the number of Venezuelans going to Mexico on temporary visas has tripled. Nevertheless, those figures don’t account the number of Venezuelans who are entering Mexico illegally. (CCTV America, 2016)
Another key point that needs to be mentioned is the fact that the number of Venezuelans seeking asylum in the United States has risen as the crisis get worse. According to the “US government’s Citizenship and Immigration Services”, in March 2016, Venezuelans climbed to second place among nationalities submitting asylum requests, with 1,345 applications during that month. However, it is important to mention that the vast majority asking for asylum are from the middle-class, since the process is complex and expensive. (The Guardian, 2016)

In addition, it can be seen that Venezuelans have been immigrating to the US since the early 2000s, after radical leftist leader Hugo Chávez came to power. However, it needs to be said that, initially mostly the wealthier fled the country, in order to invest their capital. In my opinion, this is mainly the effect of the overregulation of the private sector. The below figures show to which extent the number of Venezuelans granted asylum increased in the last years. (PRI, 2016)

**FIGURE 2**

**VENEZUELAN GRANTED ASYLUM BY THE US. 1997-2013**

Source: Pri’s TheWorld 2016

**Security Crisis**

On the other hand, the Venezuelan security is definitely being threatened by the current situation of the country. Nowadays, violence and crime are unfortunately common issues in Venezuela. The government, the opposition and their supporters, the security forces, and protesters are the main actors involved in this crisis.
Firstly, it must be said that the government has conducted widespread arrests and other repression acts in order to silent critics and politics from the opposition. Security forces have even arrested peaceful demonstrators by using violence and torture. According to the “Venezuelan Penal Forum”, a nongovernmental group that provides legal assistance to detainees, most of the people arrested are political actors. They are accused of planning, fomenting or participating in violent anti-government actions. However, in some cases, the evidence just includes mere possession of political materials such as pamphlets calling for the release of political prisoners.

As it was mentioned before, the opposition is campaigning for a recall referendum on Maduro’s presidency. In this context, government agencies have reportedly fired hundreds of state workers in retaliation for signing the recall petition. Consequently, international actors are demanding Maduro's government stop arresting opponents and abusing detainees, and release every Venezuelan arrested for political reasons. That includes for example, opposition leaders like Leopoldo López, who has been in prison since February 2014. (Vivanco, 2016)

On the other hand, the government accuses the opposition of trying to stage a coup with backing from the United States and inciting violence in the country.

Besides that, both, protesters and members of the security forces have died in demonstrations resulted from the shortage of food and medicine. According to several news agencies, Venezuela is now considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world. Violence just keeps escalating and it seems more and more difficult to stop and is sure it will influence the countries around Venezuela, as gangs and drug traffic increase in the region. (Luzes, 2016)

3.2.3 The “Media War” in Venezuela

The restriction on objective media reporting on situations not favorable to the image of the government has been one of the main characteristics of Chávez and Maduro’s government. Nowadays, Journalists are constantly facing a worsening crackdown as the socialist government takes harsh action against critical media. In fact, it is significant to mention that foreign correspondents have recently been denied entry to Venezuela.

On the other hand, Socialist officials argue that news outlets are pursuing a “media war” against Maduro, and say that the opposition is seeking a coup with the collusion of Washington. Consequently, pro-government protesters have attacked the last remaining national opposition-leaning newspaper, while local journalists have been detained and
questioned by intelligence agents, and television crews threatened by supposed leftist loyalists.

Besides that, some newspaper editors have been sued for publishing stories on senior socialist officials being accused of drug-trafficking. For example, the editor of the “El Correo del Caroní” was sentenced to four years in prison after printing investigations about corruption.

In addition, some media outlets, such as “Últimas Noticias”, have changed their editorial line after being bought by investors with suspected connections with the socialist administration. According to Marianela Balbi, director of the “Institute for Press and Society” the things have worsened since Maduro took office after the death of his mentor, Hugo Chávez. (Schipani, 2016)

Likewise, according to “Press Freedom in Latin America 2014”, a report published by the US-based watchdog Freedom House, Venezuela is ranked as "not free” (See Figure 3)

Venezuela President Nicolás Maduro, who replaced Hugo Chávez after his death in office in March 2013, continued his predecessor’s efforts to control the press. Venezuela’s score declined from 76 to 78 due in part to the acquisition of media outlets by private companies linked to the government”. (Karlekar & Dunham, 2014)
FIGURE 3
COMPARING PRESS FREEDOM IN LATIN AMERICA 2014

4. VENEZUELA’S CRISIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY AND REGIONAL STABILITY

The crisis has provoked various reactions from the international community. The Organization of American States (OEA), Intergovernmental Regional Organizations, United States, and countries from Latin America and the Caribbean criticize the violence and denounce the human rights violations, calling for a dialogue between the Government and the opposition.

It is important to notice that Venezuela’s crisis and its repercussions affect the political map of the Latin American region as a whole, impacting not only on the future of the regional organizations but also on the internal politics in some of the countries in the region. The political leaders have argued that the current crisis of Venezuela which involves democracy and human rights is not just a sovereign national issue. (Serbin, 2014)

Nowadays, international actors condemn some of the actions under Chávez’s and Maduro’s presidency. They disapprove how their governments have diminished democratic institutions, politicized the state, harassed and imprisoned political opponents, created a parallel police and military force, and closed down independent media. (Sabatini, 2016)

It is known that Venezuela now faces an economic and humanitarian disaster, and the situation is only getting worse with the recently recall process. In Venezuela these days, it’s hard to tell whether the next protest will be about the lack of freedom or the lack of food. Demonstrations, violence, and murders are just few examples that Venezuela and its citizens challenge every day.

In this context, the international community and specifically political leaders from the region have asked for a coordinated and early response to defend the human rights and democratic institutions violated in Venezuela. In addition, many political actors agree that is important to preserve the ideal that democracy is a defining right of all Americans throughout the hemisphere.

On the other hand, it is important to mention that the region is divided. Some countries in the region support Venezuela since they have benefitted from Venezuela’s oil and generous trade deals in recent decades. (Serbin, 2014) Added to that, it must be noticed that countries like Ecuador, Cuba and Bolivia support Venezuela not only for their own state interests but also because all of them have ideological positions within the framework of the “21st Century Socialism”.
In the present chapter it will be seen the main different statements and reactions that have been made by political leaders in the Americas. On one hand, those statements that support Venezuela and its government, and on the other hand, those that consider a threat to democracy and regional stability, calling for an end to violence and violations of human rights.

4.1 The Current Role of the Organization of American States in the Venezuela’s Crisis

It is needed to notice that different outsiders have been called in to Venezuela by either the government or the opposition. They have been asked to help resolve deep hostilities between those who support Hugo Chavez’s 21st Century Socialism, and those who fear Venezuela will become a poor socialist country. In this sense, let us now to look at the posture of the Organization of American States giving first a brief description of its purpose in the Western Hemisphere. (McCoy, 2016)

The Organization of American States is the world's oldest regional organization founded on April 30, 1948. The OAS constitutes the main political, juridical, and social governmental forum in the Hemisphere. Its purpose involves strengthening the peace and security; promoting and strengthening democratic governments; preventing and resolving conflict between member states while respecting principles of nonintervention; and preventing aggression against member states. (OAS, n.d.)

On September 11, 2001, the OAS developed the Inter-American Democratic Charter (IADC) designed to strengthen and preserve representative democracy. In addition, the Democratic Charter sets steps to be taken in the event of an unconstitutional interruption of the democratic order or the unconstitutional alteration of the constitutional regime that threatens the democratic order of a member state. (USOAS, 2014)

Article 1 states: The peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it. Democracy is essential for the social, political, and economic development of the peoples of the Americas. (USOAS, 2014)

It is important to mention that the Democratic Charter defines the essential elements of representative democracy in very specific terms, including: respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; holding free and fair elections; a pluralistic system of
political parties and organizations; separation of powers; independence of the branches of
government; freedom of expression and of the press; and constitutional subordination of all
state institutions to the legally constituted civilian authority. (Noriega, 2002)

Besides that, it must be said that the invocation of the charter may involves a
lengthy period of diplomatic good offices to restore democratic institutional stability. And,
subsequently possible sanctions against the member state, that could include disciplinary
fines and potentially its removal from the OAS. However, the suspension of the member
can be done if two-thirds of the OAS member states vote in favor. (LATIN AMERICAN
NEWS, Junio, 2016)

In this context, the OAS has worked in different efforts concerning democracy in
Venezuela. For example, on March 7, twenty-nine states of the Organization of American
States (OAS) approved a declaration lamenting the victims of the violence, and calling for
continued dialogue, but rejecting any type of intervention or sanctions upon Venezuela’s
government. (Serbin, 2014)

However, the most important and recently action has been the one led by the
opposition. Venezuela's opposition-controlled National Assembly, on 19 May 2016,
formally asked to the Organization of American States head, Luis Almagro to apply the
Inter-American Democratic Charter to Venezuela in view of the country's situation. MUD
politicians argued that, their actions are spoiled by the Supreme Court and the National
Electoral Council, there is no separation of powers since the judiciary has become a
inclined enforcer of the executive branch. Added to that, they pointed to the fact that the
Supreme Court blocked key legislation, such as an amnesty law which would have freed
opposition politicians who are in jail. And finally, they accused the president of trying to
block a recall referendum which could change Venezuelans future (BBCNEWS, 2016)

Consequently, on 31 May 2016, the General Secretary of the OAS, Luis Almagro
requested that the OAS activate the Democratic Charter against Venezuela. In this sense,
Almagro invoked the OAS’s Article 20, which allows the general secretary or a member
state to convene a meeting of the organization’s Permanent Council in the event of an
“unconstitutional alternation of the constitutional regime that seriously impairs the
democratic order in a member state”. (LATIN NEWS, Junio, 2016).

The reasons Almagro gave for that announcement included violations of the
constitution by Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, particularly with regard to the
separation of powers, as well as human rights violations and the inability to deal with the
severe humanitarian, economic and security crisis Venezuelans are facing. (EFE, 2016)
As a result, Almagro was heavily criticized by Venezuela’s president; Maduro reacted angrily, accusing the OAS of “foreign intervention”. He also said he would bring charges against the leaders of National Assembly who had requested the OAS to intervene, affirming they had betrayed the nation. (BBCNEWS, 2016)

Finally, on 23 June 2016, the 34 active OAS members were called to vote on that request at a plenary meeting in Washington DC. However, the Democratic Charter was not activated due to the leaders’ statements looking first for dialogue and diplomacy. Therefore, the OAS declared its support for the dialogue efforts sponsored by UNASUR and it was stated that the countries in the region will continue to pay close attention in Venezuela. (McCoy, 2016)

4.2 Latin America’s Reaction to Venezuela’s Crisis

A number of important South American governments claim that defending democracy in the region is a priority of their foreign policy. Democracy protection is a stated goal of various regional organizations, including the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). (Feldmann, Merke, & Stuenkel, 2015)

As it was mentioned before, the consequences of the Venezuela’s crisis affect the political map of the Latin American region as a whole. The crisis is impacting not only the stability of the regional organizations but also the internal politics in some specific countries in the region. Consequently, today Latin American countries make efforts to defend democracy concerning the crisis in Venezuela. (Serbin, 2014)

It is important to notice that the region is divided between those who support Maduro’s government and those who denounce the Government’s repressive actions and human rights violations. Some political leaders across the hemisphere condemn the presidents’ actions and some others support his ideological position. On one hand, there is a level of uncertainty of countries that have benefitted from Venezuela’s oil and trade deals in recent decades, such as the Chávez-backed ALBA “Peoples’ Trade Treaty” and the “PetroCaribe Oil Assistance Program”. (Serbin, 2014)

The Caribbean countries benefited from Venezuela’s oil, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Lucia, and Suriname, are
seriously concern about the crisis since the opposition in Venezuela has openly stated that they would end Petro-Caribe. (Warwick, 2016)

Besides that, since Venezuela has also proactively promoted the progression of leftist leadership in the region by endorsing the development of the “21st Century Socialism”, the country cultivated strong bilateral ties with governments such as Cuba, Bolivia, and Ecuador. All of them have supported national sovereignty and accused critics of being interventionists (Sabatini, 2016)

For instance, Cuba and Venezuela have had a really close relation mainly evidenced by the ideological affinity between Castro and Chávez. Added to that, the relation includes important development aid, joint business ventures, large financial transactions, exchange of energy resources and information technology, and intelligence and military cooperation. (Serbin, 2014)

Additionally, it is interesting to notice that Maduro’s administration has been actively supported by Cuban advisors. Cuba is intensely interested in maintain ties with Maduro since Cuba’s priority is to ensure the continuation of oil assistance to the island and the hiring of Cuban professionals by the Venezuelan Government. (Serbin, 2014)

On the other hand, there are some countries that do not support Venezuela. Two of them are Panama and Colombia. Speaking about Colombia, it must be said that Venezuela has maintained complicated relations with its neighbor Colombia. It has been a volatile relation characterized by a permanent tension. Despite of their important trade relations, the relationship with Colombia has been stressed by two main reasons, the Venezuelan government’s ties with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, FARC) and the Colombia’s apparent alignment with the United States. (EFE, Febrero 2015).

In this sense, the current Colombian government is now concerned by how the Venezuelan crisis can affect its domestic stability. The Colombia’s president stated that his government totally defends democratic values, freedom, and the right to free expression. Moreover, the president stressed that what happens in Venezuela completely affects Colombia, not only because they share a border of 2,200 kilometers but because in Venezuela live about four million Colombians. (EFE, Febrero 2015).

Apart from Colombia, Panama also condemns Maduro’s actions. The country is one of the main promoters of criticism of the Venezuelan government at the OAS. It should be mentioned that in 2014, after Panama requested an urgent meeting at the Organization of American States to discuss the deteriorating situation in Venezuela,
Maduro fractured diplomatic ties with the country, accusing the government of plotting with Washington to intervene in Venezuela. The Venezuelan government unilaterally broke diplomatic relations with Panama, declared persona non grata all their diplomats in Venezuela and gave them 48 hours to leave the country. (Luxner, 2014)

These actions definitely show a crucial international issue that affects the regional stability.

On the other hand, according to some critics Venezuela is getting alone in Latin America because important allies such as Argentina and Brazil have new governments and these do not show the same support. Mauricio Macri, Argentina’s president rapidly broke relations with Venezuela and Michel Temer, Brazil’s president, created a war environment with Venezuela. (Caraota, 2016)

Finally, it is necessary to say that there are recent signs that the leadership of Venezuelan foreign policy is decreasing due to the decline in oil revenues and the internal political turbulence. Thus, in October of 2013, Guatemala withdrew from Petrocaribe, while Brazil, Panama and Colombia have insisted on their claims to have overdue payment for food, manufactured products and other imports. Recapitulating, the declining Venezuelan leadership in the region is both a reflection of Venezuela's reduced economic capacity to sustain its oil based diplomacy, and of the corruption of democracy. (Serbin, 2014)

4.3 United States-Venezuela Relations during Venezuela’s Crisis

Before Chávez’s government, Venezuela generally had strong foreign relations with US, however; these relations deteriorated after the election of Chávez, in 1999, and especially after the 2002 coup against him. Venezuela argues US was a consolidating power behind the coup. The US has imposed limited trade restrictions, and the Venezuelan government has on several occasions expelled US diplomats accused of spying or working to instigate conflict. Added to that, the two nations have not had full ambassadorial relations since 2008 that the US ambassador to Venezuela was expelled, provoking Washington to take the same action. (Watts, 2014)

As it was already mentioned, one of the principles that have ruled Venezuelan foreign policy has been to reduce its dependence on the US. In this context, Venezuela has tried to diversify its trade partners by promoting and creating bilateral trade agreements and cooperation with both regional allies and the governments that support the “anti-imperial” idea. Likewise, this policy has involved the creation of regional organizations
that do not include US and even consistently condemn the US of intervention. (Smilde, & Pantoulas, 2016).

It is important to mention that in spite of the week diplomatic relations, the US is one of the main Venezuela’s trade partners. Despite the Venezuela’s efforts to diversify its oil trading partners, “the US remains the largest market for Venezuelan oil and oil generates more than 95 percent of Venezuela’s export earnings.” (Duddy, 2015)

Concerning US policy, it must be said that United States have had solid concerns for more than a decade about Venezuela, not only because of the aggravation of human rights and democratic conditions, but also because of the lack of cooperation on anti-drug and counterterrorism efforts. (Sullivan, 2013).

In this sense, in 2014, the Obama Administration condemned the Venezuelan government’s repression of protests which resulted in 43 deaths. Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary said “We have not and will not remain silent in the face of Venezuelan government actions that violate human rights and fundamental freedoms and deviate from well-established democratic norms”. (Watts, 2014)

Consequently, the US government passed a bill to punish officials involved in human rights abuses against persons associated with the opposition, persecution of political opponents, restriction of press freedoms, use of violence in response to antigovernment protests, arbitrary arrest and detention of antigovernment protestors, and public corruption. The bill involved visa restrictions and asset-blocking sanctions. (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2016)

On March 9 2015, the White House formally announced the sanctions declaring the situation in Venezuela. In which, it is important to mention that President Obama stated that Venezuela is "an extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States." As a result, On March 14, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), meeting in Quito, Ecuador, delivered a stinging rebuke to the United States sanctions. The 12 member-states of UNASUR unanimously rejected the U.S. sanctions, stressed their support for Venezuelan sovereignty, and called on the United States to cancel the executive order. (Duddy, 2015)

As a result, the U.S. sent Thomas Shannon, current Counselor of the U.S. Department of State, to personally meet Maduro and other Venezuelan leaders. This policy applied during 2015, allowed a substantial improvement of their relations. However, the renewal of the sanctions bill in this year caused new series of anti-imperialist critics and demonstrations in Venezuela. (Smilde, & Pantoulas, 2016)
As it was mentioned before, on 23 June 2016, the 34 active OAS members were called for a plenary meeting in Washington DC. After the meeting, the U.S. and Venezuela announced the reopening of dialogue between Shannon and Venezuelan officials. (Smilde, & Pantoulas, 2016).

In this context, Shannon has already visited Venezuela to meet the President, government’s opposition and different members of the civil society. And, the Congress of US has settled to continuously monitor the situation in Venezuela for the rest of 2016, considering mainly the release of political prisoners, and the respect of constitutional and democratic practices. (Sullivan, 2013)

4.4 The Role of the Regional Multilateral Organizations

4.4.1 The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)

The Union of South American Nations was created in 2008 to promote regional integration on issues related to democracy, education, energy, environment, infrastructure, security, social inequality and exclusion. The members of UNASUR are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela. In June 2012, Paraguay was suspended from the regional block. It is needed to indicate that the regional group has helped to mediate conflicts between member countries, aided in disaster response, and promoted collaboration on defense and development projects. (Flannery, 2012)

UNASUR was created by Venezuela and Brazil, excluding United States and Canada. The organization displaced the OAS by becoming the most important regional organization assisting in South American political crises. In this sense, referring to Venezuela’s crisis, UNASUR has continuously promoted diplomacy and dialogue between the government and the opposition. Moreover, it must be said that according to some critics UNASUR is not so neutral since some of the members support Venezuela because they are part of ALBA and have important trade relations (Serbin, 2014)

As it was previously mentioned, in 2015, UNASUR’s members unanimously rejected the U.S. sanctions, stressed their support to Venezuelan sovereignty, and called to the United States to cancel the executive order.

In order to find a solution to the crisis of Venezuela, UNASUR invited a commission of former presidents, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero of Spain, Leonel Fernandez of Dominican Republic and Martin Torrijos of Panama, who currently seek to
promote a dialogue between the opposition and the Venezuelan government. (RPP NOTICIAS, 2016)

4.4.2 The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC)

The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States is a regional bloc of 33 Latin American and Caribbean states, launched in 2011. CELAC was created by the former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez as an effort to exclude United States and protect the community from its interference. Added to that its goal has been to defend and protect democracy and human rights, and make efforts to resolve issues regionally. (O'Boyle, 2015)

From the time when United States imposed sanctions to Venezuela, the organization approved a statement in which the 33 members supported the country. In the decree the members reiterated its support and totally rejected the US President Obama position declaring that Venezuela represents a threat to the national security of US. The statement in support of Venezuela was presented by the former Ecuadorean Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño. (TeleSur, 2005)

All the members voted for the resolution that clearly expressed that the US measures “go against the international law” and that it should be reversed. In addition, the statement called the US to participate in dialogue with Venezuela under “principles of respect for sovereignty, non-interference in the internal affairs of the states, the self-determination of the peoples and the democratic and institutional order in line with international law.” (TeleSur, 2005)

4.4.3 Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR)

The Common Market of the South is a trading bloc founded in March 1991, considered one of the largest regional integration mechanisms. Its five members include Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay Uruguay and Venezuela that joined the group in 2012. MERCOSUR aims to regulate imports and exports through tariff policies, and promote the free movement of goods, capital, services and people among its member states. Besides that, it is important to mention that the group’s presidency rotates among its full members in alphabetical order every six months. (BBC NEWS, 2012)

Likewise, in 1998, the trade bloc signed the “Ushuaia Protocol on Democratic Commitment” that states "the full force of democratic institutions is essential to the
integration of MERCOSUR countries and the rupture in democratic order would be cause for a member' suspension.” (Reality Check, n.d.)

Concerning Venezuela, it must be said that the country was accepted in 2012 in spite of the critics referring Chávez's authoritarian behavior and violation of the group's democratic principles. Its admission was based practically on the idea that its inclusion would make the bloc a global energy power due to the huge oil reserves of the country. In this context, it is important to mention that the regional bloc is recently facing the worst internal serious crisis, mainly because of the controversial current situation of Venezuela. This internal battle started in August 2016, when Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay refused the Venezuela's presidency of MERCOSUR, and as a result they decided a jointly presidency among Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Argentina will assume the presidency in early 2017. (Renwick, 2016)

Finally, in September 2016, MERCOSUR issued an ultimatum that indicates that until December 1, Venezuela must accomplish the group’s requirements related firstly to trade regulations since their efforts with other blocs are being affected and secondly to democracy and the protection of human rights. If Venezuela do not comply with the group's ultimatum, the country will be suspended from MERCOSUR. (Renwick, 2016)
4. CONCLUSIONES

Despite of being one of the countries with the highest oil reserves in the world, nowadays, Venezuela finds itself in the worst crisis that the country has experienced. Citizens and political leaders face every day social, political and economic problems. The internal tensions in the government, the citizen’s discomfort, along with the disorientation of the countries in the region create multiple threats to the long-term stability of Venezuela.

The stability of Venezuela has been negatively influenced by several factors, the economic policies which basically have depended on the oil reserves, the inefficient management of the country, the polarization between the ruling party and the opposition, and many of the social and political policies which have been aligned to the idea of the “21st Century Socialism”. In other words, not only the price of the oil but the political goal has played a very large role in Venezuela’s crisis.

From an economic point of view the current situation of the country has been certainly caused in part by its oil dependent economy. It is evident that Chavez and Maduro have failed in developing an effective strategy to reduce this economic dependency, in fact the “Bolivarian Revolution” project has been funded using oil revenues.

Moreover, both the foreign debt and the internal economic policies are important reasons for the Venezuela’s crisis. During the last years the “Bolivarian Revolution” has accumulated its foreign debt and that is now incapable of paying. Likewise, the different internal economic policies adopted by Chávez and later on by his successor, Nicolas Maduro, such as the introduction of currency exchange controls, excessive nationalization, price controls, overregulation of the private sector, and the consumption quotas system, have negatively influenced in the stability of the country.

On the other hand, the inadequate management of the government and the elements that involve the goal of the Venezuelan “21st Century Socialism” are also partly responsible for the current situation of the country. The objectives of the administrative reform apparently aimed to create a truly participatory democracy. However, mostly all the policies have permitted the government to have an overwhelming state control of the economy, society, and all aspects of life. Without doubt Chávez’s revolution and Maduro’s
government left behind a legacy of repression and authoritarianism against politicians, private media and all who have opposed them.

The reorganization of the military has definitely not contributed to eliminate existing deficiencies, but further it has aggravated inefficiency and corruption. Besides that, the restriction of the mass media reporting on situations not favorable to the image of the government has contributed to the lack of transparency and freedom.

It is evident that Venezuela faces a humanitarian crisis that permanently affects the domestic environment of the country. One of the main objectives of the government of the “Bolivarian Revolution” has been to combat social problems, but unfortunately the crisis is seriously affecting important aspects of the society, health and nutrition, social security, and education.

Since Maduro’s election in 2013, the country’s situation has seriously worsened and the government has become more authoritarian. As a result, Venezuela became a society divided between those who identify with the government and those who identify with the opposition. In this sense, the government has continuously supported an aggressive campaign against the opposition provoking a strong deterioration of democracy and generating an environment of government impunity in both social and political spheres. Added to that, there is a severe violation of human rights, strong repression of anti-government protests and political opponents that also have contributed to the development of violence.

On the other hand, the Venezuela’ crisis is definitely having significant repercussions on the international community. In fact, Venezuela appears as a great threat to the stability of the whole Latin American region, impacting not only on the future of the regional organizations but also on the internal politics of the countries of the region. Some countries and regional organizations support Venezuela due to their economic interests and ideological positions, and some others condemn the human rights violation and deterioration of democracy.

Shortage of medicine and food, human rights violence, lack of freedom, security problems, political polarization and regional instability are just few examples of this critical situation. It would seem that the country has lost the purpose of politics and the real
concept of democracy since there is no interest for defending the collective welfare but instead there is a huge ambition of the current government to stay in power.

To put it briefly, the situation is worsening and tension increases every day. Unfortunately, the government shows a lack of will in addressing the current crisis. In consequence, the president may not be able to govern the country in the future days, so it is certainly needed some intervention to use public diplomacy and dialogue to make clear that the deterioration of the human rights and lack of political liberties are not only Venezuela’s issues but also regional concerns.
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