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Beaton, Amelia C.

Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School

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**NAVAL  
POSTGRADUATE  
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**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**SOCIAL MEDIA IN VENEZUELA: A TOOL FOR  
AUTHORITARIANS, A BOOST TO SOCIAL  
MOVEMENTS, OR BOTH?**

by

Amelia C. Beaton

December 2021

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**SOCIAL MEDIA IN VENEZUELA: A TOOL FOR AUTHORITARIANS,  
A BOOST TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, OR BOTH?**

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Captain, United States Air Force  
BA, University of Puerto Rico - Rio Piedras Campus, 2015

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES  
(WESTERN HEMISPHERE)**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Various social media platforms have been used as tools by social movements and have propelled democratic ideals. Social media has also been used by autocratic leaders to control and repress populations. Both uses of social media have played a prominent role in Venezuela's political discourse since 2000. However, while it is clear that social media has played a salient role in Venezuela's politics, what remains unclear is how effective these platforms are at empowering the social movement sector versus helping authoritarian regimes. The case of Venezuela offers insights useful in this debate because it was one of the first countries in South America to experience democratic backsliding during the digital age. Therefore, this thesis originally sought to answer the following questions: How does social media help the Venezuelan authoritarian regime? How does social media help the social movement sector in Venezuela? How can we measure the impact of these tactics? Does social media help the regime or the social movement sector more? Because of the limited data available in secondary research, it is not possible to directly measure effectiveness. Nevertheless, the analysis did reveal that the regime's and opposition's use of social media in Venezuela has augmented their traditional strategies. Understanding which faction it helps more overall will require access to social media databases.



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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	Asamblea Nacional Constituyente
CANTV	Compañía Anónima Nacional de Teléfonos de Venezuela
CBRV	Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela
CCTV	Closed-Circuit Television
CICPC	Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas
CONATEL	Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones
DDoS	Distributed Denial of Service
DGCIM	Directorate General of Military Counterintelligence
FAES	Special Actions Force
GNB	Guardia Nacional Boliviana
MUD	Mesa de la Unidad Democrática
NEO	New Eastern Outlook
NGO	Non-government organization
PNB	Policía Nacional Bolivariana
ZTE	Zhongxing Telecommunications Equipment



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## I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has been a popular platform in global politics for organizing, assembling, and promoting political views. Various social media platforms have been used as tools by social movements and have propelled democratic ideals. However, social media has also been used by autocratic leaders to control and repress populations. Both uses of social media have played a prominent role in Venezuela's political discourse since 2000. This thesis examines how social media has been used for political purposes in Venezuela, seeking to determine if social media platforms have helped Venezuela's regime to maintain or increase its control over the country more than they have helped the social movement sector to achieve its political objectives.

The case of Venezuela is particularly useful for investigating this phenomenon because the country underwent a transition from democracy to authoritarianism, during which the use of social media was prominent. During Hugo Chávez's tenure, Venezuela transitioned from a democracy into what scholars have called a competitive authoritarian regime.<sup>1</sup> According to Laura Gamboa, a competitive authoritarian regime "has a meaningful competition for power, but this competition is largely unfair. The government uses its control over the state institutions to commit widespread fraud and repress, harass, or deny critical resources to the opposition."<sup>2</sup> Chávez amended the constitution and legislation of Venezuela to remain in power and increase the government's control over traditional media outlets.<sup>3</sup> In 2013, Nicolás Maduro became the president of Venezuela and transitioned the country from a competitive authoritarian regime (partly free)<sup>4</sup> into an

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Gamboa, "Opposition at the Margins: Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy in Colombia and Venezuela," *Comparative Politics* 49, no. 4 (July 2017): 47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26330983>.

<sup>2</sup> Gamboa, 460.

<sup>3</sup> Gamboa, 463.

<sup>4</sup> Rolf Frankenger and Patricia Graf, "Elections, Democratic Regression and Transitions to Autocracy: Lessons from Russia and Venezuela," in *Regression of Democracy? Comparative Governance and Politics*, ed. Gero Erdmann and Marianne Kneuer (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011), 201–20, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-93302-3\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-93302-3_8).

authoritarian regime (not free)<sup>5</sup> that further restricted civil liberties and repressed the population. He has followed in Chávez's footsteps, making amendments to the constitution that permit him to remain in power. Maduro increased his control over the population by removing the legislative branch's legal power and removing the opposition's legal venues to oppose him.<sup>6</sup> He sought further control over the traditional media (radio, newspapers, and television), which has driven the opposition to organize and disseminate their message through social media.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, social media now plays a central role in the opposition's strategy. Opposition leader Juan Guaidó has used social media platforms to organize protests against Maduro's regime, as well as to raise international awareness of Venezuela's humanitarian and political crisis.<sup>8</sup> For example, Guaidó created the hashtag #23FVzlaALaCalle (#23FVenezuelaToTheStreets) on Twitter to encourage his followers to take the streets on February 23, 2019 in order to pressure Maduro to allow entry of humanitarian aid into Venezuela.<sup>9</sup> This is just one example of how Guaidó's tweets effectively triggered thousands of citizens to protest.<sup>10</sup> Another example occurred on March 9, 2019, when Guaidó released a propaganda video through Twitter asking Venezuelans to take the streets to fight for their liberties. Several hours after the video was posted, thousands of Venezuelans rushed to Carlota in Caracas.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, the Venezuelan government has expanded its digital authoritarianism toolkit to surveil the population and deter protests. President Maduro has

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<sup>5</sup> "Venezuela Freedom in the World Ranking," Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2020>.

<sup>6</sup> Javier Corrales, "Venezuela's Odd Transition to Dictatorship," *Americas Quarterly* (blog), October 24, 2016, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/venezuelas-odd-transition-to-dictatorship/>.

<sup>7</sup> Moises Rendon and Arianna Kohan, "The Internet: Venezuela's Lifeline," Center for Strategic & International Studies, December 4, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/internet-venezuelas-lifeline>.

<sup>8</sup> Rendon and Kohan.

<sup>9</sup> Sophie Foggin, "How Guaidó's Twitter Persuades Thousands to Take to the Streets," *Latin America Reports* (blog), March 28, 2019, <https://latinamericareports.com/guaido-twitter-persuade-thousands-to-streets/1529/>.

<sup>10</sup> Foggin.

<sup>11</sup> Foggin,

used his control over the state- sponsored internet service to repress the opposition by blocking its access to social media. For example, on April 28, 2019, during one of the opposition’s protests, the regime blocked websites like Twitter and Instagram to prevent the opposition leader’s message from spreading across the country.<sup>12</sup> The government also surveils political activities on social media platforms to counter their messages by waging disinformation campaigns.<sup>13</sup> These tactics have contributed to the erosion of democracy in Venezuela by limiting freedoms, especially political discourse.

However, while it is clear that social media has played a salient role in Venezuela’s politics, what remains unclear is how effective these platforms are at empowering the social movement sector versus helping authoritarian regimes. Therefore, this thesis originally sought to answer the following questions: How does social media help the Venezuelan authoritarian regime? How does social media help the social movement sector in Venezuela? How can we measure the impact of these tactics? Does social media help the regime or the social movement sector more? Due to limitations in the available data, the thesis was not able to answer this question. However, the analysis did reveal that the regime and the opposition have benefited from the use of social media. The regime was able to use social media to repress, control, and influence the country. The opposition was able to use social media to organize, coordinate, and raise international awareness of the economic and political crisis in Venezuela. Overall, the regime’s and opposition’s use of social media in Venezuela has augmented their traditional strategies, but it is unclear whether social media platforms help one political faction more than the other.

#### **A. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

Studying whether social media helps the social movement or the authoritarians more in the political realm of Venezuela contributes to the literature on the importance of social media in politics. This literature reflects two opposing views: Authors like Rebecca MacKinnon and Nicholas Kristof argue that social media can be an effective weapon to

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<sup>12</sup> Drew Harwell and Mariana Zuñiga, “Social Media Remains Key to Venezuela’s Opposition, despite Efforts to Block It,” *Washington Post*, accessed June 28, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/04/30/social-media-remains-key-venezuelas-opposition-despite-efforts-block-it/>.

<sup>13</sup> Harwell and Zuñiga.

effect political change and to deter political leaders from repressing populations.<sup>14</sup> They argue that social media has been able to efficiently disseminate the social movement sector's message and organize the masses rapidly. MacKinnon points to the case of Egypt, where citizens utilized social media to protest and mobilize against the Egyptian government, which led to Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak stepping down.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, authors such as Malcolm Gladwell argue that social media has not played an essential role in effecting political change and that these platforms distract from the message being delivered.<sup>16</sup> Other scholars like Robert Putnam, Evgeny Morozov, and Henrik Christensen similarly argue that digital activism does not lead to civic engagement and that social media can undermine political goals.<sup>17</sup>

The case of Venezuela offers insights useful in this debate because it was one of the first countries in South America to experience democratic backsliding during the digital age. According to Javier Corrales, democratic backsliding "is a term used to describe the process whereby existing democracies become less democratic."<sup>18</sup> Studying the role of social media during Venezuela's backsliding will provide valuable insight into how effective these platforms are in shaping a country's ideology and governance structure. Moreover, an analysis of social media's role in Venezuela during its democratic

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<sup>14</sup> Rebecca MacKinnon, "Our Web Freedom at the Mercy of Tech Giants," *TED Talk Tuesdays* (CNN, July 31, 2011), <http://www.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/07/31/mackinnon.tech.freedom/index.html>; Nicholas Kristof, "Tear Down This Cyberwall!" *The New York Times*, opinion, June 17, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/18/opinion/18kristof.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Amir Manzoor, "Social Media for Promoting Grassroots Political Movements and Social Change," 2016, 610, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Social-Media-for-Promoting-Grassroots-Political-and-Manzoor/34c966014099b17d33d0d9c66eb49c6d7ffd9b1f>.

<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "Does Egypt Need Twitter?" *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/does-egypt-need-twitter>.

<sup>17</sup> Henrik Serup Christensen, "Simply Slacktivism? Internet Participation in Finland," *JeDEM - EJournal of EDemocracy and Open Government* 4, no. 1 (October 18, 2012): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.29379/jedem.v4i1.93>; Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Morozov Evgeny, "The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom," *New York: Public Affairs* 9, no. 4 (2011): 432, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711004014>; Henrik Serup Christensen, "Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or Political Participation by Other Means?," *First Monday*, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.5210/FM.V16I2.3336>.

<sup>18</sup> Javier Corrales, "Democratic Backsliding through Electoral Irregularities: The Case of Venezuela," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, no. 109 (April 30, 2020): 41–65, <https://doi.org/10.32992/erlacs.10598>.

backsliding can help establish if these platforms might be playing a similar role in other parts of Latin America that are also experiencing this phenomenon.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This thesis is anchored in two bodies of literature within the broader field of social media studies: the study of digital authoritarianism and of how the internet has aided the development of social movements.

For the purposes of this research, the definition of social media is that established by Caleb T. Carr and Rebecca A. Hayes, who state that social media platforms are “internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.”<sup>19</sup> Popular social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok and WeChat, as well as comment sections of websites where users interact with each other.<sup>20</sup>

Social media is a central part of digital authoritarianism. Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole define digital authoritarianism as “the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations.”<sup>21</sup> According to the Varieties of Democracy’s Data Set and Mass Mobilization Project, autocratic regimes that employ digital authoritarianism tactics “face a lower risk of protests than do those autocratic regimes that do not employ these same tools.”<sup>22</sup> For example, in 2013, Cambodia’s opposition movement led supporters via social media to oppose the results of the presidential election in demonstrations that turned

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<sup>19</sup> Caleb T. Carr and Rebecca A. Hayes, “Social Media: Defining, Developing, and Divining,” *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2015.972282>.

<sup>20</sup> Antony Maina, “20 Popular Social Media Sites Right Now,” *Small Business Trends* (blog), May 4, 2016, <https://smallbiztrends.com/2016/05/popular-social-media-sites.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Polyakova and Meserole, *Exporting Digital Authoritarianism*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz, and Joseph Wright, “The Digital Dictators,” April 16, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-02-06/digital-dictators>.



violent.<sup>23</sup> In response, the following year, the Cambodian government passed a law that gave the government control over the media and created a cyber war team that monitored and flagged online antigovernment activity. As a result, Cambodia only had one antigovernment protest in 2017 versus 36 in 2014.<sup>24</sup>

Digital authoritarianism can be implemented in a number of ways. According to Steven Feldstein, six main digital repression tactics used by governments are “surveillance, censorship, social manipulation [e.g., disinformation campaigns] and harassment, cyber-attacks, internet shutdowns, and targeted persecution against online users.”<sup>25</sup> Two innovators in this realm are Russia and China, both of which have exported digital authoritarian tools to Venezuela.<sup>26</sup> China is an autocratic regime that has paved the way for digital authoritarianism and has exported its model worldwide.<sup>27</sup> The Chinese Communist Party has been able to collect a vast amount of data on its citizens through its “great firewall,” a tool that aggressively monitors and blocks social media content that contradicts President Xi Jinping’s ideology.<sup>28</sup> The “great firewall” has allowed the regime to control Chinese political behavior, manipulate the population, and detain human rights activists.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, once the information is collected, the Chinese government utilizes artificial intelligence to analyze the data and create “social credit scores,” which set the parameters for acceptable behavior and penalize unsanctioned behavior.<sup>30</sup> If the Chinese

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<sup>23</sup> Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright, “The Digital Dictators.”

<sup>24</sup> Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Feldstein, “When It Comes to Digital Authoritarianism, China Is a Challenge — But Not the Only Challenge,” War on the Rocks, February 12, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/when-it-comes-to-digital-authoritarianism-china-is-a-challenge-but-not-the-only-challenge/>.

<sup>26</sup> Polyakova and Meserole, *Exporting Digital Authoritarianism*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Polyakova and Meserole, 5; Feldstein, “When It Comes to Digital Authoritarianism, China Is a Challenge.”

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, “The Great Firewall of China: Xi Jinping’s Internet Shutdown,” *The Guardian*, June 29, 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/29/the-great-firewall-of-china-xi-jinpings-internet-shutdown>.

<sup>29</sup> Polyakova and Meserole, *Exporting Digital Authoritarianism*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright, “The Digital Dictators.”

government deems a citizen unworthy, it excludes that person from state-sponsored benefits, enabling the regime to socially manage its citizens.<sup>31</sup>

China has also demonstrated how to integrate digital authoritarianism tools with security cameras (CCTV) and drones to control any sector of the Chinese population deemed unworthy. According Polyakova and Meserole, this combination of technology has enabled the creation of the world’s largest open-air “digital prison.”<sup>32</sup> The digital prisons are cities surrounded by gates with facial recognition software. Biometrics from individuals are collected, aggressive monitoring and surveillance are conducted on citizens, and spyware technology is installed on citizens’ phones to track online activity.<sup>33</sup> In 2014, the Chinese government began to create “digital prison” cities in Xinjiang in response to ongoing civil unrest and violence, a move that enabled the government to conduct mass arrests and utilize pre-trial detention centers, with up to one million individuals are detained.<sup>34</sup>

Russia is another regime that has implemented and exported digital authoritarianism techniques. For one, the Russian government has established a “sovereign internet” based on the Chinese model.<sup>35</sup> Russia controls this internet and denies its citizens access to the worldwide web, enabling the government to block content and identify potential dissidents and allowing the authorities to shut down the worldwide web in specific regions while still maintaining the web’s general operability.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, Russia has created a toolbox for social manipulation that has enabled the government to influence how its citizens view the regime.<sup>37</sup> To support this manipulation tactic, Russia employs “bots”—automated accounts—on social media to distract citizens

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<sup>31</sup> Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright.

<sup>32</sup> Polyakova and Meserole, *Exporting Digital Authoritarianism*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Polyakova and Meserole, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Polyakova and Meserole, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Polyakova and Meserole, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Polyakova and Meserole, 6–10.

<sup>37</sup> Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright, “The Digital Dictators.”

from the truth and create misleading posts ostensibly from the opposition.<sup>38</sup> For example, in 2013, Russia created the New Eastern Outlook (NEO) website to promote pro-Kremlin and anti-U.S. views and conspiracy theories.<sup>39</sup> This website published several articles accusing the United States of creating the coronavirus and waging biowarfare on China. The spread of these articles created confusion among European citizens and negatively affected the United States' credibility with respect to the coronavirus information it was providing to the world.<sup>40</sup> NEO also generated multiple articles denying Russia's involvement in the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight 77 to create internet noise and to lead citizens to distrust democratic telecommunication networks that were reporting otherwise.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, the digital authoritarianism literature has identified different tactics authoritarians use to repress their population and spread disinformation. Authoritarians employ digital surveillance, social manipulation, targeted persecution, and internet shutdowns in an attempt to deter antigovernment movements. It is clear from the literature that these tactics have been employed by different authoritarian rulers. However, the literature does not provide insight into how effective these methods are in helping authoritarian regimes gain or maintain power.

The social movement sector has also employed social media tactics—to organize, raise international awareness of the crisis or problem a country is facing, and quickly disseminate and demonstrate dissent. Camilo Cristancho and Eva Enduiza identify the role of organization in social movements as a critical factor in motivating and inspiring political action.<sup>42</sup> During their study of the Spanish social movement *Indignados*, they discovered

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<sup>38</sup> Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright.

<sup>39</sup> Department of State, *Global Engagement Center Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2020), 22, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia's-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem\\_08-04-20.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia's-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Department of State, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Department of State, 23.

<sup>42</sup> Camillo Cristancho and Eva Anduiza, "Social Media Accounts of the Spanish Indignados," in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, ed. Axel Bruns et al., Routledge Media and Cultural Studies Companions (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 165.

that unstructured framing allowed social movements to organize without centralized leadership.<sup>43</sup> By having decentralized leadership, the movement enabled users on Twitter to personalize encampments and help the movement's message to spread more quickly.<sup>44</sup> The information exchange resulted in the *Indignados* movement having Twitter users in highly politically influential positions that could advocate for the social movement's rights and shape Spain's policy.<sup>45</sup>

Additionally, social media has enabled social movement sectors to raise international awareness of protests and events in areas where traditional media has limited access.<sup>46</sup> For example, during the Arab Spring, social media played a crucial role in initiating a chain reaction of events in different countries by allowing direct and quick communication lines between individuals across borders.<sup>47</sup> Scholars at Washington University conducted research on Twitter usage during and after the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and indicated that Twitter played a key role in spreading news across international borders.<sup>48</sup> Social media enabled users in these countries to bypass traditional media to raise international awareness of the movement and ignite political activism in multiple countries. An activist in Cairo stated that "We use Facebook to schedule protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world," illustrating how individuals used platforms to ignite political action across borders via the international aspect of social media.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Cristancho and Anduiza, "Social Media Accounts of the Spanish Indignados," 177.

<sup>44</sup> Cristancho and Anduiza, 176.

<sup>45</sup> Cristancho and Anduiza, 177.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor Dewey et al., *The Impact of Social Media on Social Unrest in the Arab Spring*, Public Policy Program (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, March 20, 2012), 3, <https://publicpolicy.stanford.edu/publications/impact-social-media-social-unrest-arab-spring>.

<sup>47</sup> Dewey et al., 35.

<sup>48</sup> Catherine O'Donnell, "New Study Quantifies Use of Social Media in Arab Spring," *UW News* (blog), accessed November 19, 2020, <https://www.washington.edu/news/2011/09/12/new-study-quantifies-use-of-social-media-in-arab-spring/>; Carla Danielle Monteiro Soares and Luiz Antonio Joia, "The Influence of Social Media on Social Movements: An Exploratory Conceptual Model," in *Electronic Participation*, ed. Efthimios Tambouris et al., Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 35, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22500-5\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22500-5_3).

<sup>49</sup> Dewey et al., "The Impact of Social Media on Social Unrest in the Arab Spring," 35.

Furthermore, another role social media has played in social movements is providing citizens the ability to re-shape an authoritarian regime's monopolistic media control into a pluralistic media environment that enables citizens to demonstrate dissent.<sup>50</sup> This happened in Egypt during the Arab Spring: social media allowed Egyptians to bypass traditional media and provided journalist different avenues to report the news and cover topics not allowed by the government.<sup>51</sup> This led to a change in how the revolution was presented in traditional media and broadened the opposition's forms of communications.<sup>52</sup> This use of social media during Egypt's uprising amplified dissent and enabled the movement to be more versatile, inclusive, and diverse in ways that previous media had not permitted.<sup>53</sup>

The literature on the use of social media in social movements has provided insight into different tactics opposition leaders use to disseminate, raise awareness, and demonstrate dissent. The social movement sector through the utilization of social media has enabled the masses to express opposing political views against a regime. It is clear from the literature that these tactics have been employed by social movement sectors. However, the literature does not provide insight into how effective these methods are.

### **C. RESEARCH DESIGN AND POTENTIAL ARGUMENTS**

This thesis started with the ambition of evaluating how and the extent to which social media has helped Venezuela's authoritarian regime to increase or maintain its power in comparison to how it has helped the opposition fight Maduro's efforts. To investigate this question, this thesis utilizes an exploratory case study methodology. According to Claire Selltitz, Lawrence S. Wrightsman, and Stuart W. Cook, "exploratory research is the

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<sup>50</sup> Zizi Papacharissi and Stacy Blasiola, "Structures of Feeling, Storytelling, and Social Media: The Case of #Egypt," in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, ed. Axel Bruns et al., Routledge Media and Cultural Studies Companions (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 214.

<sup>51</sup> Papacharissi and Blasiola, "The Case of #Egypt," 213.

<sup>52</sup> Papacharissi and Blasiola, 216.

<sup>53</sup> Papacharissi and Blasiola, 218.

process of investigating a problem that has not been studied or thoroughly investigated.”<sup>54</sup> This method is appropriate for investigating the case of Venezuela because the political effects of social media in this country have not been analyzed before. Although exploratory research does not yield conclusive results, it does enable the identification of many variables regarding a problem.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, this investigation increases our knowledge of the effects of social media, how to research this topic, and what research will be needed to reach more clarity regarding this problem.

Within the context of the exploratory methodology, to assess social media’s effectiveness in Venezuelan politics, this thesis originally intended to use a number of indicators derived from the literature. These indicators would measure the extent to which social media supports the authoritarian regime by analyzing the effects of internet blackouts, media surveillance, and disinformation campaigns—in particular, if any of these tactics correlate to a reduction of the opposition’s mobilization or supports the regime’s main strategies of maintaining power. Likewise, they would measure the effects of social media in the social movement sector by examining whether social media posts lead to demonstrations by the opposition, concessions by the regime, wider international awareness, or domestic policy change that leads to democratization.

To gather data on these indicators, this research utilized secondary research. Secondary research investigates a problem by relying on existing resources rather than generating data.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, this thesis draws upon scholarly work, news articles, and official government documents related to the use of social media within Venezuelan politics. A limitation on the data is that the author does not have direct access to social

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<sup>54</sup> Claire Selltiz, Lawrence S. Wrightsman, and Stuart W. Cook, *Research Methods in Social Relations*, 3d ed (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976); “Exploratory Research: What Are Its Method & Examples?,” *Formplus* (blog) accessed December 9, 2020, <https://www.formpl.us/blog/exploratory-research/>; “Exploratory Research,” *Research-Methodology* (blog), accessed December 9, 2020, <https://research-methodology.net/research-methodology/research-design/exploratory-research/>; M. N. K. Saunders, Philip Lewis, and Adrian Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 6th ed (Harlow, England ; New York: Pearson, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> Selltiz, Wrightsman, and Cook, *Research Methods in Social Relations*; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*.

<sup>56</sup> “Primary vs Secondary Research Methods: 15 Key Differences,” *Formplus* (blog), accessed December 10, 2020, [https://www.formpl.us/blog/primary-secondary-research.](https://www.formpl.us/blog/primary-secondary-research/)

media platforms' databases, so the study relies on existing qualitative research regarding social media usage.

Using this methodology, this thesis sought to investigate whether social media has been more effectively used by the regime and digital authoritarian tactics have contributed to Venezuela's becoming more autocratic; <sup>57</sup> whether social media has helped the opposition raise awareness of Venezuela's crisis; whether it helped the regime and the opposition; or whether social media has not produced any discernable effect on Venezuela's governance structure. However, because of the limited data available in secondary research, it is not possible to directly measure effectiveness.

#### **D. THESIS OVERVIEW AND DRAFT CHAPTER OUTLINE**

This introduction is followed by three chapters. Chapter II examines the main strategies used by the regime to maintain power and provides an account of the country's democratic backsliding. It explains how Venezuela's regime has implemented digital authoritarian tactics and analyzes whether these have helped the regime to maintain power. Chapter III provides Venezuela's internet and social media penetration history and explains how the opposition in Venezuela has tried to counter the regime via social media. Chapter IV summarizes the principal findings and provides recommendations for future research.

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<sup>57</sup> "Venezuela Freedom on the Net Ranking," Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2020>.

## **II. THE REGIME’S BASIS OF POWER AND USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

The first step in determining if social media helps the Venezuelan regime more than it does the opposition is to examine how the regime uses social media and to what extent its activities on social media have helped the regime maintain control over the country. Hugo Chávez’s rise to power and his efforts to consolidate power in the executive branch to further his political agenda paved the way for the regime’s usage of digital authoritarianism, including tactics in the realm of social media. This chapter first examines Venezuela’s democratic backsliding process and the strategies used by the regime under President Chávez and President Maduro to consolidate power and maintain control over the country. It then analyzes the use of digital authoritarianism tactics by the regime under President Maduro’s administration. The analysis reveals that these tactics have allowed the regime to effectively deter the opposition from making political gains and to intimidate citizens to some degree from dissenting. The ambition of Chávez’s successor, Nicolás Maduro, to remain president has led to the regime’s further utilization of digital authoritarianism. The regime’s use of digital authoritarianism has helped it to refined and expand its traditional repressive tactics to control its population more comprehensively, by monitoring social media posts, further extending its control over the media, and effectively eroding freedom of speech.

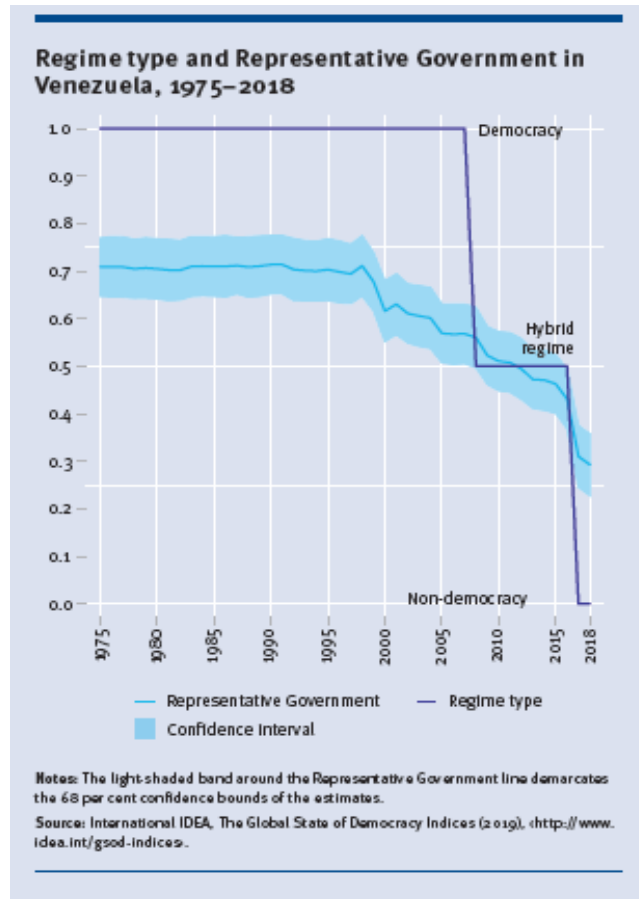
### **A. DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND THE REGIME’S BASIS OF POWER**

Assessing the ways and extent to which Venezuela’s autocratic regime has benefitted from its use of social media requires understanding its strategies for maintaining power—strategies that have caused the country’s democracy to backslide. This democratic backsliding has occurred in the context of a broader trend over the last twenty years in Latin America. Democracy has completely eroded in five Latin American countries:



Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Honduras.<sup>58</sup> In particular, as demonstrated in Figure 1 and Table 1, Venezuela went from having the highest rates of democracy and representative government in the region to becoming a competitive authoritarian regime in 2009 and experiencing full democratic breakdown in 2017.<sup>59</sup>

Figure 1. Venezuela’s trajectory to democratic breakdown.<sup>60</sup>



<sup>58</sup> Aníbal Pérez-Liñán and Scott Mainwaring, “Cross-Currents in Latin America,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (January 2015): 114, <https://journalofdemocracy.com/articles/cross-currents-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>59</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise* (Stockholm, Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019), 122, <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2019.31>.

<sup>60</sup>Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 122.

Table 1. Venezuela’s representative comparison between 1996 and 2018.<sup>61</sup>

**The state of democracy in Venezuela, 1996 and 2018**

Year	GSoD attribute score				
	Representative Government	Fundamental Rights	Checks on Government	Impartial Administration	Participatory Engagement
1996	0.70	0.62	0.68	0.50	High
2018	0.29	0.39	0.25	0.08	Low

■ High    ■ Mid-range    ■ Low

Note: Participatory Engagement is the only attribute that does not have a score, as its four subattributes are not aggregated.  
 Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2019). (<http://www.idea.int/gso-d-indices>).

Figure 1 shows democratic erosion in Venezuela during socialist Hugo Chávez tenure.<sup>62</sup> President Chávez deteriorated democracy in Venezuela by consolidating power to the executive branch. He achieved this consolidation as it will be discussed in the next section by restructuring governmental institutions, controlling the state’s economic affairs, utilizing the profits from oil production to maintain followers, and repressing the media.<sup>63</sup> Upon Chávez’s death in 2013, his successor, Nicolás Maduro, furthered Venezuela’s democratic erosion by utilizing the same strategies, ultimately resulting in the country’s transformation into an authoritarian regime.

### 1. Chávez’s Regime

One of the main strategies Chávez used to consolidate power and erode Venezuela’s democracy was restructuring governmental institutions to concentrate power

<sup>61</sup> Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 122.

<sup>62</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 223; Margarita Lopez Maya, “Hugo Chavez and the Populist Left,” in *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left*, ed. Steven Levitsky and Kenneth Roberts (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Other means the regime used to consolidate power were drug and corruption schemes and receiving assistance and consulting from the Cubans. Also, the refugee crisis in Venezuela led citizens opposing the regime to flee the country, thus reducing the amount of the opposition in the country. These factors contributed to democratic erosion but will not be discussed in this thesis because it’s outside the scope. Ted Piccone, “Latin America’s Struggle with Democratic Backsliding,” *Brookings* (blog), February 26, 2019, 4, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/latin-americas-struggle-with-democratic-backsliding/>; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019*, 122–24.

in the executive branch, thereby reducing the legislative and judiciary branches' ability to oppose the president's decisions.<sup>64</sup> Initially, Chávez expanded participatory democracy in Venezuela through his use of a referenda to implement new laws and change existing ones, but he did so to circumvent the legislative and judicial branches. For example, in 1999, with the approval of a popular referendum, Chávez convened a Constituent National Assembly to modify the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (CBRV).<sup>65</sup> Some of the changes made to the constitution allowed the president to weaken political parties by letting citizens directly vote for political positions and laws.<sup>66</sup> As a result, political parties had less control over policies and laws were passed. These changes reasserted the state as a central component and centralized the power within the executive branch.<sup>67</sup> After Chávez won the presidency again in 2006, he invoked articles of the modified 1999 CBRV to establish laws without the permission of the legislative branch. His intent in doing so was to fulfill his campaign promise to establish a 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism in Venezuela. The first law he enacted to that end was the Enabling Law, which allowed the executive branch to establish new laws for a delimited period (art. 203).<sup>68</sup> With the Enabling Law in place, the president was also allowed to reform articles of the 1999 CBRV that presented political or economic obstacles to a transition to socialism. As Chávez was invoking these articles, the legislative branch, under heavy influence from Chávez, delegated to him its legislative authority over ten spheres of public administration for eighteen months, including the National Electoral Commission, the Comptroller's Office, and the Prosecutor's Office, furthering Chávez's dominion over the state's governmental institutions.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 123.

<sup>65</sup> Lopez Maya, "Hugo Chavez and the Populist Left," 220–28.

<sup>66</sup> Lopez Maya, 220–28.

<sup>67</sup> Lopez Maya, 220–28.

<sup>68</sup> Lopez Maya, 226.

<sup>69</sup> Lopez Maya, 227; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019*, 223.

Furthermore, as part of his efforts to restructure governmental institutions, Chávez enacted CBRV article 331, which gave control over military institutions to the president.<sup>70</sup> This article allowed Chávez to have complete control over military promotions, removals, and job assignments and enabled him to staff the military ranks with loyal soldiers.<sup>71</sup> Having a military full of Chávez loyalists allowed him to consolidate and maintain power by giving military officials key ministerial posts, including in the state's oil company, banks, and other institutions.<sup>72</sup> For example, General Nestor Reverol serves as the Minister of the interior and justice.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, in 2009, Chávez passed laws and reforms like the Organic Law of Decentralization and the Special Regime of the Capital District that allowed him to recentralize powers from the regional and municipal to the national executive level.<sup>74</sup> He also nationalized several businesses considered by Venezuelan politicians to be strategic for the government, including the oil company, telephone company, and electricity in Caracas.<sup>75</sup> These combined actions allowed President Chávez to make decisions without formal and informal democratic checks and balances and contributed to the erosion of democracy in Venezuela.

Enabled by his nationalization of various sectors, another main strategy Chávez used to consolidate power and erode the country's democracy was through his control over Venezuela's economic affairs—in particular, his use of profits from oil production to gain voters and maintain political allies. The 1999 CBRV positioned the state as a key component in economic decisions, blocked the state's privatization efforts, and enforced

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<sup>70</sup> Javier Corrales, "The Authoritarian Resurgence: Autocratic Legalism in Venezuela," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2 (2015): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0031>.

<sup>71</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise* (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019), 223, <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2019.31>.

<sup>72</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 223.

<sup>73</sup> "Chavez Announces New Venezuelan Cabinet," USA TODAY, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/10/14/hugo-chavez-venezuela-cabinet/1632289/>; "A Closer Look at the Venezuelan Military," accessed April 1, 2021, <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1677616751&Country=Venezuela&topic=Politics>; Iselin Åsedotter Strønen, "A Civil-Military Alliance": The Venezuelan Armed Forces before and during the Chávez Era," *CMI Working Paper* WP 2016:4 (2016), <https://www.cmi.no/publications/5808-a-civil-military-alliance>.

<sup>74</sup> Lopez Maya, 234.

<sup>75</sup> Lopez Maya, "Hugo Chavez and the Populist Left," 227, 234.

strong regulatory controls over economic activities.<sup>76</sup> Chávez's control over economic activities allowed him to create "missions," community councils that worked with the military and were funded by the revenue produced by the state's oil company. These missions stimulated the population to work in the oil sector, grew state institutions that contributed to the country's GDP growth, and created social programs in order to gain and retain votes.<sup>77</sup> For example, the Mercal mission sold and distributed food at subsidized prices to lower income sectors.<sup>78</sup> This mission allowed the state to distribute food to 40% of the population and fostered a reliance on the state that Chávez capitalized on during elections.<sup>79</sup> A sustained economic growth since 2004 and the increased investment in these "missions" contributed to Chávez's victory in the 2006 elections.<sup>80</sup> The political base Chávez secured through economic redistribution enabled him to achieve many political and referendum victories that helped him consolidate power in the executive branch.

Furthermore, the state's management of economic resources allowed Chávez to maintain political allies by creating special funds that were funded by oil rent and directly administered by him; how these funds were spent was not subject to public scrutiny, nor did Chávez disclose the budget for these special funds.<sup>81</sup> Chávez utilized these funds to redistribute the profits from the state's oil company to his followers.<sup>82</sup> His followers in the National Assembly voted for laws that Chávez wanted to pass, such as eliminating presidential terms.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Lopez Maya, 221.

<sup>77</sup> Lopez Maya, 223.

<sup>78</sup> Lopez Maya, 224.

<sup>79</sup> Lopez Maya, 224.

<sup>80</sup> Lopez Maya, 225.

<sup>81</sup> Lopez Maya, 223.

<sup>82</sup> Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chávez* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 6–41; Piccone, "Latin America's Struggle with Democratic Backsliding," 4; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019*, 224; Corrales, "Venezuela's Odd Transition to Dictatorship."

<sup>83</sup> Corrales and Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics*, 40.

Lastly, another main strategy used by Chávez to consolidate power and erode the country's democracy was repressing the media. This strategy limited the opposition's and population's ability to dissent. Chávez repressed the media by establishing numerous laws that censored the media and forced them to self-censor to avoid being penalized.<sup>84</sup> Among the most significant of these laws was the revised Law for Social Responsibility in Radio, Television, and Electronic Media (2010). This law allows the government broadcasting authority, *Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones* (CONATEL), to revoke or suspend broadcasting media licenses of any media outlet that foments anxiety, promotes disobedience, or, as the law states, “refuse [s] to recognize the legitimately constituted authority,” or criticizes public authorities and institutions.<sup>85</sup> This law also allows CONATEL to fine broadcasting media, radio, and internet service providers that transmit messages containing expression that violates the above restrictions—up to 10% of their previous tax year's gross income.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, according to the Human Rights Watch report, the revised Organic Law of Telecommunications (2010) “declare [s] broadcast media and the internet to be a public service reserved for the state” and this subjects the media to greater state control.<sup>87</sup> This law also “allows the state to suspend and revoke broadcasting concessions to private outlets” if it is in the purported best interest of the

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<sup>84</sup> Arch Puddington et al., *Freedom in the World 2011: The Annual Survey of Political Rights & Civil Liberties* (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Freedom\\_in\\_the\\_World\\_2011\\_complete\\_book.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Freedom_in_the_World_2011_complete_book.pdf); Arch Puddington et al., *Freedom in the World 2010: The Annual Survey of Political Rights & Civil Liberties* (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/FIW\\_2010\\_Complete\\_Book\\_Scan.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/FIW_2010_Complete_Book_Scan.pdf); “Venezuela: Legislative Assault on Free Speech, Civil Society,” Human Rights Watch, December 22, 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/12/22/venezuela-legislative-assault-free-speech-civil-society>; Mia Alberti, “Venezuela Media Law: Threat to Freedom of Expression,” accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/20/venezuela-media-law-threat-to-freedom-of-expression>; “Venezuela,” Media Landscapes, accessed February 7, 2021, <https://medialandscapes.org/country/venezuela>; “Venezuela’s War on the Press,” Columbia Journalism Review, accessed February 7, 2021, [https://www.cjr.org/the\\_media\\_today/venezuela\\_crisis\\_maduro\\_trump.php](https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/venezuela_crisis_maduro_trump.php).

<sup>85</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Venezuela: Legislative Assault on Free Speech, Civil Society”; Puddington et al., *Freedom in the World 2011*; Carlos Arcila Calderón and David Blanco Herreo, “Venezuela Media Landscape,” Media Landscapes, accessed February 7, 2021, <https://medialandscapes.org/country/venezuela>; “World Report 2020: Rights Trends in Venezuela,” Human Rights Watch, December 11, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/venezuela>.

<sup>86</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Venezuela: Legislative Assault on Free Speech, Civil Society.”

<sup>87</sup> Human Rights Watch.

country and reverts expired or terminated broadcasting licenses to the government.<sup>88</sup> In addition, the Law for the Defense of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination (2010) allows the regime to obstruct Venezuelan human rights advocates from doing their duties of defending political rights, monitoring the performance of public offices, and inviting non-governmental organization (NGO) members to evaluate human right policies by preventing these defenders from publishing their reports.<sup>89</sup> The regime has used this law to expel NGO members from the country under the premise that they have violated this law, which stipulates that human right organizations cannot attack or offend the institutions, sovereignty, or officials of the state.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, the regime also has established compulsory registration for journalists with the National Journalism Association and punished reporters with prison sentences for criticizing the government. As a consequence of the establishment of these laws, Venezuela's independent press has drastically declined, and the regime has blocked sensitive political information and detained journalists and citizens opposing the government.<sup>91</sup>

## 2. Maduro's Regime

In 2013, President Chávez died, and his appointed successor, Nicolás Maduro, assumed command of the country. That same year, Maduro ran for the presidency and won. According to a Freedom House and The Global State of Democracy 2019 report, by 2017, Venezuela had transitioned from a hybrid regime to an authoritarian regime.<sup>92</sup> President Maduro has been able to further erode democracy and maintain power by implementing the following key strategies: removing or manipulating governmental institutions that could oppose the executive branch; controlling the country's economic affairs; repressing

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<sup>88</sup> Human Rights Watch.

<sup>89</sup> Human Rights Watch.

<sup>90</sup> Human Rights Watch.

<sup>91</sup> Calderón and Herreo, "Venezuela Media Landscape"; "Freedom of the Net 2012 - Venezuela" Freedom House, 2012, <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Venezuela%202012.pdf>.

<sup>92</sup> Freedom House, "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2017 Country Report" (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2017), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2017>; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019*, 123.

the population through the security apparatus; surveilling and conducting counter-intelligence operations on Venezuelan citizens; and repressing the media.<sup>93</sup>

As during the Chávez administration, one main strategy the current Venezuelan autocratic regime uses to maintain power is restructuring governmental institutions; this strategy has allowed Maduro to remove all legal avenues that the opposition could use to challenge his rule. Maduro's most important action within this strategy was restructuring and later supplanting the National Assembly, a move that politically dismantled the opposition by preventing them from gaining the majority in the assembly and eventually from holding legislative office altogether.<sup>94</sup> By December 2015, two thirds of the National Assembly seats were occupied by the opposition; the government responded by appealing the legality of the results with the Supreme Court.<sup>95</sup> The Supreme Court at the time was controlled by Maduro loyalists; as a result, it ruled in favor of the regime, stating that the elections were "in contempt" and overturned the results.<sup>96</sup> This action allowed the regime to replace some of the elected members by appointing loyalists and attempting to gain the majority within the National Assembly.<sup>97</sup> While sources disagree on how Maduro lost the majority after the 2015 National Assembly election, what is clear is that in May 2017, Maduro invoked article 347 of the CBRV and ratified it without conducting the required referendum to approve this action.<sup>98</sup> This article allows the president to establish a Constituent National Assembly (ANC) in order to transform the state institutions, create a

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<sup>93</sup> Javier Corrales, "Authoritarian Survival: Why Maduro Hasn't Fallen," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020): 39–53, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0044>; Boz, "Ten Things Keeping Maduro in Power Revisited - December 2019," accessed January 12, 2021, <https://boz.substack.com/p/ten-things-keeping-maduro-in-power>.

<sup>94</sup> Corrales, "Authoritarian Survival"; Julie Turkewitz, "Venezuela's Maduro Claims Control of National Assembly, Consolidating Grip on Power," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/05/world/americas/venezuela-noticias-guaido-maduro.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Mark P. Sullivan, *Venezuela: Issues for Congress, 2013–2016*, CRS Report no. R43239 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2017), 11, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43239>.

<sup>96</sup> "BTI 2020 Venezuela Country Report," BTI (blog), accessed January 20, 2021, </en/reports/country-report-VEN-2020.html>; Corrales, "Authoritarian Survival," 46.

<sup>97</sup> Corrales, "Authoritarian Survival," 46.

<sup>98</sup> Corrales, 46.



new judicial system, and write a new constitution.<sup>99</sup> However, Maduro never intended to use the ANC for its main purpose of rewriting the constitution. Instead, Maduro used this assembly, composed of loyalists, to nullify the power and functionality of the opposition-controlled National Assembly:<sup>100</sup> Once the ANC was established, this institution gave itself the power to make laws and began to act as a National Supreme Court, election authority, foreign ministry, and politburo.<sup>101</sup> The ANC then barred opposition candidates from running for office. Once Maduro's party gained the majority of seats in the National Assembly in the elections of 2020, strengthening the regime's control over the country, Maduro dismantled the ANC without fulfilling its nominal objective of reforming the constitution.<sup>102</sup>

Also, like Chávez, another of the regime's main strategies for maintaining power is its control over the state's economic affairs. This strategy allows the regime to maintain allies within the military by letting loyalists make a profit from state affairs; these loyalists then help the regime repress the population. The Maduro regime has exerted complete control over Venezuela's economic affairs by monopolizing imports, imposing extensive controls on domestic companies, controlling the supply of crucial raw materials, managing the national oil company, and deciding which officials will be assigned to control important industries.<sup>103</sup> The regime uses this economic control to assign loyalists—mainly military members—to these positions of control so they can profit from the revenues generated by state-run industries.<sup>104</sup> For example, the state-owned oil company is run by Maj Gen Manuel Quevedo of the National Guard and the food distribution service is headed by

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<sup>99</sup> “Constitution - Title IX: Constitutional Reforms (Art. 340–350),” *Venezuelanalysis.com*, July 25, 2007, <https://venezuelanalysis.com/constitution/title/9>.

<sup>100</sup> Corrales, “Authoritarian Survival,” 46.

<sup>101</sup> Corrales, 47.

<sup>102</sup> “Venezuela to Shut All-Powerful Legislative Assembly,” accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/19/venezuela-to-shut-all-powerful-legislative-assembly>.

<sup>103</sup> Brian Ellsworth and Maylea Armas, “The Maduro Mystery: Why the Armed Forces Still Stand by Venezuela's Beleaguered President,” *Reuters*, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-military/>.

<sup>104</sup> Ellsworth and Armas; “BTI 2020 Venezuela Country Report.”

Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, in recent years, Maduro has avoided losing support from the military during the economic crisis by allowing military members to profit from narco-trafficking and illegal mining operations without any legal repercussions.<sup>106</sup>

The regime's relationship with the military is central to its ability to implement another of its main strategies for maintaining its power: repressing the population mostly using the country's security apparatus. The military helps Maduro maintain control of Venezuelan citizens by quelling protest, illegally arresting members of the opposition, and controlling the administrative institutions that could potentially oppose him. This strategy has allowed the regime to instill fear in the population and dissuade Venezuelans from opposing the regime.<sup>107</sup> The regime has repressed the population by conducting extrajudicial executions, using excessive force, conducting arbitrary detentions, and controlling the food supply.<sup>108</sup> The state has utilized its Special Actions Force (FAES) to conduct extrajudicial executions of its citizens who have in some way participated in protests in order to frighten the population and discourage their participation in social movements. In January 2019, the FAES executed six men linked to participating in or organizing protests.<sup>109</sup> In each case, FAES portrayed the victims as criminals, tampered

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<sup>105</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2019*, 123; "Venezuela Crisis: Why the Military Is Backing Maduro," *BBC News*, January 28, 2019, sec. Latin America & Caribbean, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-47036129>.

<sup>106</sup> Corrales, "Authoritarian Survival," 50.

<sup>107</sup> "Venezuela's Formula for Repression Is Hunger, Punishment and Fear," Amnesty International, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/02/venezuela-hunger-punishment-and-fear-the-formula-for-repression-used-by-authorities-under-nicolas-maduro/>; Ryan Dube, Kejal Vyas and Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Venezuela's Maduro, Clinging to Power, Uses Hunger as an Election Weapon," *Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuelas-maduro-clinging-to-power-uses-hunger-as-an-electoral-weapon-1521734622>.; Boz, "Ten Things Keeping Maduro in Power Revisited - December 2019"; "Military Pacts with Cuba Help Venezuela's President Suppress Dissent.," Reuters, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-cuba-military/>; Marcela Escobari, "Made by Maduro: The Humanitarian Crisis in Venezuela and U.S. Policy Responses," *Brookings* (blog), February 28, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/made-by-maduro-the-humanitarian-crisis-in-venezuela-and-us-policy-responses/>; A. Venezuelan and James Ausman, "The Devastating Venezuelan Crisis," *Surgical Neurology International* 10 (July 26, 2019), [https://doi.org/10.25259/SNI\\_342\\_2019](https://doi.org/10.25259/SNI_342_2019).

<sup>108</sup> Amnesty International, "Venezuela's Formula for Repression Is Hunger, Punishment and Fear"; Dube, Vyas, and Kurmanaev, "Venezuela's Maduro, Clinging to Power".

<sup>109</sup> Amnesty International.

with the crime scenes to make it appear as if the men were resisting arrest, and tortured the victims in front of their families.<sup>110</sup> Amnesty International has reported that FAES, the Bolivarian National Police (PNB), and the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) have used excessive force to quell protests. On January 22, the PNB opened fire on a group peacefully protesting in Catia and injured Alixon Pizani, who died at the hospital due to the bullet he received to his thorax. Pizani family members and friends were also targeted by the FAES, which opened fire on them at the hospital entrance.<sup>111</sup> Additionally, the regime has conducted arbitrary detentions of children and adolescents throughout the country to prevent citizens from engaging in protests.<sup>112</sup> Once detained, the adolescents have been branded as terrorists and tortured for crimes that, according to national law, do not require detention.<sup>113</sup> For example, some of these adolescents have been charged with instigating citizens to protest through Facebook, and the judicial system applied the “Law against Hatred” to prosecute them.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, Maduro also applies repressive tactics to maintain control of the military. The United Nations has accused the regime of torturing soldiers with “electric shocks, suffocation, waterboarding, sexual violence, and water and food deprivation”;<sup>115</sup> this strategy has created an environment in which the military is extremely unlikely to oppose Maduro. Maduro also represses the population by leveraging food to coerce people to participate in elections and vote for him.<sup>116</sup> In March 2018, a Venezuelan teacher interviewed by the *Wall Street Journal* stated that the government threatened to eliminate her state job benefit of receiving food, her only way to feed her family, if she did not vote for Maduro in the upcoming elections.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Amnesty International.

<sup>111</sup> Amnesty International.

<sup>112</sup> Amnesty International.

<sup>113</sup> Amnesty International.

<sup>114</sup> “Kids Behind Bars in Venezuela,” *Human Rights Watch* (blog), April 12, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/12/kids-behind-bars-venezuela>.

<sup>115</sup> Angus Berwick, “Special Report: How Cuba Taught Venezuela to Quash Military Dissent,” *Reuters*, August 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-cuba-military-specialreport-idUSKCN1VC1BX>.

<sup>116</sup> Dube, Vyas, and Kurmanaev, “Venezuela’s Maduro, Clinging to Power”.

<sup>117</sup> Dube, Vyas, and Kurmanaev.

The military is the focus of another main strategy used by the regime to maintain its power: surveilling and conducting counter-intelligence operations on soldiers. This strategy has allowed the regime to monitor for any coup attempts, identify personnel who oppose Maduro's rule, and create a climate of fear.<sup>118</sup> The regime has utilized the Directorate General of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) to spy on the armed forces, instill paranoia in soldiers, and quash dissent through repressive tactics.<sup>119</sup> DGCIM surveils the military by using Genesi, a program that can "intercept, monitor, and analyze every kind of information source."<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, the department taps the phones of officers and commanders and embeds agents loyal to the regime in the units to compile dossiers on soldiers who display disloyal behaviors. These tactics employed by DGCIM have led to hundreds of arrests.<sup>121</sup> In June 2017, the DCGIM arrested Rafael Acosta, a Navy Captain, accusing Acosta of "participating in an unspecified 'right wing' plot."<sup>122</sup> While in custody, Acosta died, presumably from being tortured.<sup>123</sup> Acosta's wife claimed that the accusations were false and demanded that DCGIM investigate the events surrounding his death; this demand prompted the department to acknowledge what happened to Acosta, but DCGIM claimed that it was an "unfortunate event."<sup>124</sup>

Lastly, as during Chávez's administration, another main strategy Maduro uses to maintain power is legally repressing the media. This strategy allows Maduro to penalize journalists who criticize the government, limits the citizens' ability to dissent, and censors the media. Among the most significant of these laws was the Law against Hate, for Pacific

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<sup>118</sup> Boz, "Ten Things Keeping Maduro in Power Revisited - December 2019."

<sup>119</sup> Berwick, "Special Report."

<sup>120</sup> "IPS Visionary Intelligence - About Us" accessed January 22, 2021, <https://www.ips-intelligence.com/en/about>.

<sup>121</sup> Berwick, "Special Report."

<sup>122</sup> Berwick.

<sup>123</sup> Berwick.

<sup>124</sup> Berwick.

Coexistence and Tolerance.<sup>125</sup> This law criminalizes the promotion of “fascism, hatred, and intolerance” and gives the state authority to imprison any person who publishes in the media or on social media messages of hatred or intolerance as defined by the government.<sup>126</sup> In January 2018, the regime used this law to persecute its first victims, three teenagers, who were accused of inciting hatred for encouraging citizens via social media to protest against the government.<sup>127</sup> Likewise utilizing this law and the laws established by his predecessor, Chávez, Maduro was able to shut down much of Venezuela’s independent press, close over 40 radio stations and three quarters of the country’s newspapers, and detain ten reporters, and his regime has performed over 200 physical attacks on reporters.<sup>128</sup> As a consequence of this strategy, Venezuela’s 2020 press freedom index ranking was 147 out of 180 countries, thirty-one places lower than in 2014.<sup>129</sup> Maduro’s strategy has repressed and restricted the media environment, does not permit journalists to hold the state accountable for its actions, and limits the media’s ability to have an open dialogue about the policies being implemented.

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<sup>125</sup> Calderón and Herreo, “Venezuela Media Landscape”; “Venezuela: Freedom of the Net 2020,” Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2020>; “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2019 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2019>; Alberti, “Venezuela Media Law”; Columbia Journalism Review “Venezuela’s War on the Press”; Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2020.”

<sup>126</sup> Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2020”; Columbia Journalism Review, “Venezuela’s War on the Press.”

<sup>127</sup> “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2018 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2018>.

<sup>128</sup> Columbia Journalism Review, “Venezuela’s War on the Press”; Sara Cincurova, “Venezuela Arbitrarily Detaining Reporters Covering COVID-19: CPJ,” accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/3/venezuela-arbitrarily-detaining-reporters-covering-covid-19-cpj>; “Venezuelan Photojournalist Released After 16 Months in Military Prison,” Voice of America, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/venezuelan-photojournalist-released-after-16-months-military-prison>; Ana Vanessa Herrero and Liam Stack, “Cody Weddle, a U.S. Journalist, Is Arrested in Venezuela and Will Be Deported,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/06/world/americas/cody-weddle-journalist-venezuela.html>; “Inside the Battle to Get News to Venezuelans,” *Time*, accessed February 7, 2021, <https://time.com/5571504/venezuela-internet-press-freedom/>; Calderón and Herreo, “Venezuela Media Landscape”; BBC Monitoring, “Analysis: Venezuela’s Media Landscape Is as Polarised as Its Politics – BBC Monitoring,” accessed February 7, 2021, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200pqkj>.

<sup>129</sup> Calderón and Herreo, “Venezuela Media Landscape.”

## B. DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM VIA SOCIAL MEDIA IN VENEZUELA

As part of its broader authoritarian strategy, the Maduro regime has used digital authoritarianism to further extend its control over the Venezuelan population. Since 2014, there have been three major upheavals in Venezuela during which the regime's use of digital authoritarianism has been prominent: the protests of 2014, 2015–2018, and 2019–2021, including the 2018 presidential elections. Analysis of these events reveals that the regime has used social media to implement digital authoritarianism in the form of surveillance, censorship, disinformation campaigns, internet shutdowns, phishing attempts, harassment, and targeted persecution of citizens who criticize the government in social media posts, all in order to repress the opposition and maintain power.<sup>130</sup> The vast majority of these tactics were used to quell protests, and mislead citizens about the status

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<sup>130</sup> Stephanie Niklander, "Content Analysis on Social Networks: Exploring the #Maduro Hashtag," in *2017 International Conference on Computing Networking and Informatics (ICCNI)* (Lagos, Nigeria: IEEE, 2017), 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICCNI.2017.8123803>; Department of State, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2017 - Venezuela* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2018), Venezuela, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1430430.html>; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Democratic Institutions, the Rule of Law and Human Rights in Venezuela* (Washington, DC: Organization of American States, 2017), <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Venezuela2018-en.pdf>; Erica Frantz, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, and Joseph Wright, "Digital Repression in Autocracies," *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)* (University of Gothenburg, March 2020), 54, [https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer\\_public/18/d8/18d8fc9b-3ff3-44d6-a328-799dc0132043/digital-repression17mar.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/18/d8/18d8fc9b-3ff3-44d6-a328-799dc0132043/digital-repression17mar.pdf); Kevin Munger, "Elites Tweet to Get Feet Off the Streets" 27; "How Venezuela's Vice Grip on the Internet Leaves Citizens in the Dark during Crises," NBC News, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-venezuela-s-vice-grip-internet-leaves-citizens-dark-during-n1006146>; "Venezuela's Crisis Shows Social Media at Its Worst — but Also at Its Best," *Washington Post*, accessed March 5, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/venezuelas-crisis-shows-social-media-at-its-worst—but-also-at-its-best/2019/05/01/5164d718-6c3f-11e9-be3a-33217240a539\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/venezuelas-crisis-shows-social-media-at-its-worst—but-also-at-its-best/2019/05/01/5164d718-6c3f-11e9-be3a-33217240a539_story.html); Michelle C Forelle et al., "Political Bots and the Manipulation of Public Opinion in Venezuela," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2635800>; "Social Media Shutdown in Venezuela Is a Warning of What Is to Come as Political Tensions Rise," *Access Now* (blog), January 22, 2019, <https://www.accessnow.org/social-media-shutdown-in-venezuela-is-a-warning-of-what-is-to-come-as-political-tensions-rise/>; Peter Pomerantsev et al., "The New Authoritarians: Ruling Through Disinformation," *Beyond Propaganda* (London: Legatum Institute, 2015), <https://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/arena/archives/the-new-authoritarians-ruling-through-disinformation-june-2015-pdf.pdf>; Danny O'Brien, "Venezuela's Internet Crackdown Escalates into Regional Blackout," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, February 20, 2014, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2014/02/venezuelas-net-crackdown-escalates>; "World Report 2021: Rights Trends in Venezuela," *Human Rights Watch*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/venezuela>; "Freedom of the Net 2012 - Venezuela"; "Venezuela: Freedom of the Net 2020"; Calderón and Herreo, "Venezuela Media Landscape"; "Freedom on the Net 2015 - Venezuela," *Freedom House*, 2015, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2015/venezuela>; "Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2016 Country Report" (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2016), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2016>; Freedom House, "Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Report" (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2017), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2017>.

of the country in the hopes of maintaining public support and power. Overall, the regime's use of digital authoritarianism via social media has helped it to refine its traditional repressive tactics by monitoring social media posts, further extend its control over the media, and effectively erode freedom of speech and thereby comprehensively control its population.

### **1. 2014 Protests**

One of the first major incidents in which the regime used digital authoritarianism was during the 2014 protests against Maduro. During these events, the regime utilized many digital authoritarian tactics, the most prominent of which were disinformation campaigns, political bots, digital surveillance, and persecution of citizens based on their social media posts. These tactics hampered citizens from criticizing the government, allowed the regime some control over the narrative within the country's borders about the crisis, and ultimately deterred the opposition from achieving their political goal of removing Maduro.

In January 2014, the political opposition party accused Maduro of fraudulent acts during the special elections, which Maduro won by a margin of 1.5%.<sup>131</sup> During this period, inflation and violent crime rates in Venezuela were at their worst since 1999, and the opposition capitalized on the population's discontent to rally citizens around the hashtag *#LaSalida* (*#TheExit*) to pressure Maduro into resigning his presidential post.<sup>132</sup> During these protests, the government responded with violent tactics (e.g., tear gas, shooting citizens, running over citizens with trucks) to disband the demonstrations.<sup>133</sup> The violence during these protests resulted in forty deaths.<sup>134</sup> The protests finally wound down in May of 2014 after the government's display of strength.<sup>135</sup>

One of the regime's main tactics in the social media realm during the 2014 protests

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<sup>131</sup> Munger, "Elites Tweet to Get Feet Off the Streets," 3.

<sup>132</sup> Munger.

<sup>133</sup> Munger, 4.

<sup>134</sup> Munger, 4.

<sup>135</sup> Munger.

was manipulating the media environment by tweeting progovernment messages, filling social media with content not relevant to the protest, and conducting disinformation campaigns regarding the opposition.<sup>136</sup> Kevin Munger analyzed the Twitter usage of the 2014 Venezuelan National Assembly members (*diputados*) from both political parties to infer the regime's information strategy during the protests. The study revealed that the regime's strategy was to increase the volume of tweets by its politicians during this period, flooding their accounts with topics unrelated to the protests to divert citizens' attention from the protests and acts of suppression by the regime, as well as creating disinformation campaigns.<sup>137</sup> The regime employed this strategy to reduce the protests' visibility among citizens and to decrease citizens' confidence in the validity of information about the protests posted on social media, including by other citizens.<sup>138</sup> For example, in an effort to damage the regime's reputation and bring international awareness to Venezuela's violent crime rates, the opposition had forged images of violence during the protests and uploaded them to social media platforms.<sup>139</sup> The regime was able to prove that images were fakes and used this opportunity to create disinformation campaigns on social media to discredit all violent pictures regarding the protests, claiming that the opposition had falsely accused the regime of using violent tactics to quell protests.<sup>140</sup> This effort helped the regime to obfuscate the violent tactics it was using to disband the protests. The regime also uploaded images on social media of Venezuelans enjoying a festival at the beach in areas near the protests in order to portray the country as peaceful to domestic and international audiences.<sup>141</sup> The regime's largest volume of tweets concentrated on creating a trending topic of portraying the opposition leader Leopoldo López as a fascist and claiming that the

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<sup>136</sup> Munger.

<sup>137</sup> Munger.

<sup>138</sup> Munger.

<sup>139</sup> Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2014," 931; "Caso Venezuela: La verdad de las fotos fakes/falsas," *Gaby Castellanos* (blog), March 3, 2014, <https://gabycastellanos.com/caso-venezuela-la-verdad-de-las-fotos-fakesfalsas/>.

<sup>140</sup> Freedom House 931; *Gaby Castellanos*.

<sup>141</sup> Freedom House 931; *Gaby Castellanos*.



opposition were terrorists.<sup>142</sup> The regime used this tactic to discredit the opposition and thereby invalidate the accusations made by the opposition towards the government. Munger's study determined that the regime's strategy of a large volume of tweets, persistent social media messaging, and disinformation campaigns throughout the protests deterred citizens from organizing and coordinating the revolution. This tactic thus contributed to the failure of #LaSalida and the opposition's withdrawal of this aggressive strategy to oust the president.<sup>143</sup>

The regime's disinformation campaigns on social media during this period were effective in part because the regime augmented them with political bots.<sup>144</sup> The regime's use of bots augmented its ability control the media environment by quickly disseminating its narrative and creating the illusion of widespread public support. According to Michelle Forelle's research team, bots are "automated scripts [that] generate content through social media platforms and then interact with people."<sup>145</sup> The regime used this software to extend its social media impact by artificially increasing its number of social media followers and causing artificial trends.<sup>146</sup> For example, Maduro had more than six thousand bot Twitter accounts that followed his account and retweeted his progovernment messages, making Maduro the third most re-tweeted public figure in the world at the time.<sup>147</sup> The use of political bots also created the perception of a regime favored by its citizens.<sup>148</sup> This

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<sup>142</sup> Munger, "Elites Tweet to Get Feet Off the Streets," 18.

<sup>143</sup> Munger, 17–23.

<sup>144</sup> Forelle, Howard, Monroy-Hernández et al., "Political Bots"; "Perceived Popularity and Online Political Dissent: Evidence from Twitter in Venezuela - Juan S. Morales, 2020," accessed January 12, 2021, [https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1940161219872942?casa\\_token=gt9J6rnAJl8AAAAA%3AmfrDtphbEOuuCJlk4IGpBrn-J8MARAiN3Sy3hDVK2meR8\\_WhK1vy0O5PzIU7oTcwY0N2q1R\\_PhT\\_1w&journalCode=hijb](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1940161219872942?casa_token=gt9J6rnAJl8AAAAA%3AmfrDtphbEOuuCJlk4IGpBrn-J8MARAiN3Sy3hDVK2meR8_WhK1vy0O5PzIU7oTcwY0N2q1R_PhT_1w&journalCode=hijb).

<sup>145</sup> Forelle, Howard, Monroy-Hernández et al., "Political Bots, 5."

<sup>146</sup> Forelle, Howard, Monroy-Hernández et al., 6.

<sup>147</sup> Forelle, Howard, Monroy-Hernández et al., 2; Emiliana Duarte, "The Venezuelan Government Uses This Trick to Control Media Coverage," *The New Republic*, February 24, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/116731/how-nicolas-maduro-controls-venezuelan-media>; Lt Col Jarred Prier, "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare," *Air University*, Strategic Studies Quarterly, 11, no. 4 (2017): 36, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-11\\_Issue-4/Prier.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-11_Issue-4/Prier.pdf).

<sup>148</sup> Forelle, Howard, Monroy-Hernández et al., "Political Bots"

perception likely discouraged the opposition from openly criticizing the regime since, once Twitter deleted many of the regime-associated bot accounts, Munger identified an increase of open criticism of the government.<sup>149</sup>

Moreover, the regime further controlled the media environment in 2014 by conducting internet blackouts and disrupting internet service. These tactics allowed the regime to obstruct the opposition from utilizing social media platforms to criticize the government and organize protests. These efforts allowed the regime to hide the harsh repressive tactics it utilized to disband protests and helped the regime to control the narrative to some extent within its country.<sup>150</sup> During 2014, to prevent Venezuelans from getting information on the country's crisis and ongoing protests, the regime blocked over 1,000 sites that were critical of the government or that the opposition used to organize protests. Among them were Argentine site Infobae, the website of Colombian channel NTN24, Zello, and some images posted on Twitter.<sup>151</sup> The regime blocked these websites and others under the pretense of fighting off online cyber-attacks against the government. It also blocked websites that were documenting the regime's abuses against its population. This tactic helped the regime hide its repressive tactics by claiming to wage cyber war against the opposition's disinformation campaigns regarding the repressive tactics utilized by the government during protests.<sup>152</sup> Given the number of sites blocked, the duration of internet shutdowns, and the disruption of internet service, the regime was likely effective at obscuring information transmitted by the opposition via social media about the crisis within the country.

Finally, the regime also extended its strategy of surveillance by monitoring social media postings, persecuting citizens who spoke negatively of the government by detaining

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<sup>149</sup> Munger, "Elites Tweet to Get Feet Off the Streets."

<sup>150</sup> Loretta Chao, "Twitter, Other Apps Disrupted in Venezuela Amid Protests," *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2014, sec. World, <https://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303775504579397430033153284.html>; Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2014," 986.

<sup>151</sup> Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2014," 935; Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2015 - Venezuela."

<sup>152</sup> O'Brien, "Venezuela's Internet Crackdown Escalates into Regional Blackout."

them and/or publishing their private information to humiliate them and tarnish their reputations.<sup>153</sup> The regime's social media surveillance extended to governmental institutions, private institutions, and citizens. In January 2014, Minister of Communication and Information Delcy Rodríguez tweeted the personal information (e.g., ID numbers, vacation destinations, flight information) of 27 opposition members to make them feel threatened in retribution for supporting the ongoing protests.<sup>154</sup> In February 2014, Globovisión journalist David De Matteis criticized Maduro during a presidential conference on Twitter, which allegedly led to his dismissal by Globovisión as punishment.<sup>155</sup> In March 2014, congresswoman Maria Corina Machado allegedly supported a plot on social media to overthrow the government and was removed from her parliamentary seat by the regime; her phone records were aired to expose her involvement.<sup>156</sup> In October 2014, at least six citizens were arrested and accused of digital espionage, inciting crime, and violent defamation for propagating information, images, and jokes on social media about the death of Roberta Serra, a parliament member of the ruling party.<sup>157</sup> The constant online surveillance allowed the regime to collect personal data on citizens who opposed the regime and use that information to intimidate, persuade, and coerce individuals to stop posting unfavorable social media posts.

Overall, the digital authoritarianism tactics used by the regime in 2014 helped the regime deter the opposition's political goal of removing Maduro from office and obscure information on the crisis Venezuela was facing. The regime's disinformation campaigns were effective at flooding the internet with contradictory information that ultimately led the opposition to stop requesting Maduro's resignation.

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<sup>153</sup> Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2014," 935.

<sup>154</sup> Freedom House, 935.

<sup>155</sup> Freedom House, 986.

<sup>156</sup> Freedom House, 935.

<sup>157</sup> Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2015 - Venezuela."

## 2. 2015–2018 Protests and Presidential Election

Another major event in which the regime used digital authoritarianism was during the protests of 2015–2018 and the 2018 presidential election. During these events, the Venezuelan regime utilized many digital authoritarianism tactics, the most prominent of which were digital surveillance through the Fatherland Card, distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks against websites that citizens used to oppose the regime, blocking digital media, and social media harassment.<sup>158</sup> These tactics extended the regime’s strategies of surveillance, repressing the population using the security apparatus, and control over the media environment to maintain power. These efforts helped the regime to coerce citizens to vote for Maduro, obscure negative information posted online regarding the regime, and to repress the population, including physical attacks and attacks on freedom of speech.

From 2015–2018, the citizens of Venezuela were again protesting the regime. Venezuelans were demonstrating through these protests their discontent with the regime’s establishment of a National Constituent Assembly to circumvent the opposition-controlled National Assembly and the social and economic crisis within the country.<sup>159</sup> In particular, they were demanding that all protesters arrested during the 2014 protests be released, seeking policy changes to improve their quality of life, asking for governmental infrastructure changes that would decentralize power from the executive branch, requesting better policies to decrease the country’s violence rates, and demanding that the regime

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<sup>158</sup> “Venezuela”; Freedom House, “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Report”; “Venezuela.”

<sup>159</sup> As Section A describes, in 2015, the regime tried to control the National assembly by trying to remove recently elected members but was unsuccessful.

provide necessities (e.g., more food and medical supplies).<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, Venezuela held presidential elections in 2018 in which the regime used the data collected from surveilling social media platforms to coerce citizens to vote for Maduro—a tactic that potentially enabled his victory. The result of the election prompted a new wave of protests, once again demanding the removal of President Maduro.<sup>161</sup> The government responded to these protests in a similar manner to the 2014 protest, using a mixture of traditional authoritarian tactics (e.g., attacking protesters, destroying the offices of media outlets, and confiscating media outlets' equipment) and digital authoritarian tactics via social media.<sup>162</sup> As a result of these tactics, there were fewer mass protests in 2018 than in previous years.<sup>163</sup>

One of the regime's main digital authoritarianism during these protests was extending its capability to surveil the population by tracking its citizens' social media and online activity using the Fatherland Card. The regime also created a Twitter account for the "Fatherland Card" and used it to spread progovernment propaganda, encourage citizens to get the card, and persuade voters to vote for Maduro. In 2017, Venezuela bought Chinese technology from ZTE corporation that allowed the regime to implement the "Fatherland Card" (*Carnet de la Patria*). The Fatherland Card is required to get economic assistance

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<sup>160</sup> "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2019 Country Report" (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2019), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2019>; "2017 para Venezuela: un año de protestas sociales, polarización política y crisis económica," December 29, 2017, France 24, <https://www.france24.com/es/20171228-2017-resumen-venezuela-protestas-sociales>; "La crisis económica y social genera al menos 30 protestas diarias en Venezuela," *diariolasamericas.com*, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/america-latina/la-tesis-economica-y-social-genera-al-menos-30-protestas-diarias-venezuela-n4158107>; "Miles de venezolanos protestaron en Caracas contra el gobierno de Nicolás Maduro," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2016, sec. en Español, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2016/09/01/espanol/miles-de-venezolanos-protestaron-en-caracas-contra-el-gobierno-de-nicolas-maduro.html>; "Venezuela: opositores salen a las calles en apoyo a Leopoldo López," May 30, 2015, BBC News Mundo, [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/05/150530\\_venezuela\\_protestas\\_leopoldo\\_lopez\\_dp](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/05/150530_venezuela_protestas_leopoldo_lopez_dp); "Nuevas manifestaciones a un año de las protestas en Venezuela," February 12, 2015, BBC News Mundo, [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/ultimas\\_noticias/2015/02/150212\\_ultnot\\_venezuela\\_protestas\\_12f\\_ano\\_dp](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/ultimas_noticias/2015/02/150212_ultnot_venezuela_protestas_12f_ano_dp).

<sup>161</sup> "Venezuela"; "Venezuela: Freedom of the Net 2020"; "Venezuela"; "Venezuela."

<sup>162</sup> "Venezuela"; "Venezuela"; "Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Report."

<sup>163</sup> "Venezuela."

and access to other government social programs.<sup>164</sup> The government uses the “Fatherland Card” to track its citizens’ purchases, health history, and voting activity, among other data, by monitoring online activity, including social media platforms and how the users interact with the platform.<sup>165</sup> The Fatherland Card thus creates a centralized database that allows the regime to access citizens’ online activity without needing to monitor each social media platform individually, increasing the regime’s social media surveillance capability.<sup>166</sup> Creating an extensive profile of each citizen allows the government to coerce citizens into supporting the regime. For example, in the lead-up to the 2018 presidential election, government officials urged citizens via social media to register for the “Fatherland Card” and strongly implied that voter participation during the election would be monitored.<sup>167</sup> During the election, the regime rewarded voters who used the “Fatherland Card” to vote for the ruling party with food handouts and measles vaccines, which were scarce resources at the time.<sup>168</sup> The regime also used the data collected on this ID card to track down individuals who had not yet voted at the time and encouraged them to vote by reminding them of their government benefits.<sup>169</sup> The implementation of this card helped the regime to secure the presidential election victory, centralize individuals’ social media activity in one database, increase its surveillance capability, and thereby maintain control over the country.

Moreover, during this timeframe, the regime increased its DDoS attacks on social media platforms and blocked digital media (e.g., websites) in order to deter the spread of unfavorable information and so further its control over the media environment. According to Cloudflare, DDoS attack is “a malicious attempt to disrupt the normal traffic of a targeted

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<sup>164</sup> Angus Berwick, “How ZTE Helps Venezuela Create China-Style Social Control,” A Reuters Special Report (Reuters Investigates, November 14, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-zte/>.

<sup>165</sup> Berwick, “How ZTE Helps Venezuela Create China-Style Social Control.”

<sup>166</sup> Berwick.

<sup>167</sup> Media Landscapes, “Venezuela,” 18.

<sup>168</sup> “In Venezuela, Maduro Regime Uses Hunger to Get Votes,” *ShareAmerica* (blog), January 24, 2019, <https://share.america.gov/in-venezuela-maduro-regime-uses-hunger-to-get-votes/>.

<sup>169</sup> “Maduro Regime Uses Hunger”.

server, service or network by overwhelming the target or its surrounding infrastructure with a flood of Internet traffic.”<sup>170</sup> The regime targeted with DDoS attacks media outlets and human rights organizations that criticized the government or reported on the humanitarian crisis within the country. For example, between January and March of 2017, the regime conducted 10 DDoS attacks on the websites of news outlets, including *El Cambur*, *Caraota Digital*, *Correo del Caroní*, *Provea*, *Apporea* and *Acción Solidaria*.<sup>171</sup> One of the most notable attacks was against the media outlet *El Pitazo*-an attack that forced the website to go offline and conduct extensive repairs on its infrastructure.<sup>172</sup> These attacks made these organizations websites inaccessible to the public for long periods of time and sometimes even caused these news outlet websites to locked out of their websites without measures to recover them.<sup>173</sup> This tactic built on the regime’s social media repression tactics and helped it control the information being disseminated within its borders. Given the number of websites and the duration of the blocked content, this tactic likely hampered the opposition’s ability to disseminate information.

Also, under the guise of protecting Venezuela from the information war within its borders, the regime outright blocked several social media platforms that published political, social, or economic content, increasing the regime’s control over the media environment.<sup>174</sup> For example, the regime blocked the website Infobae because it published two articles critical of the regime that informed Venezuelans on the human rights situation in the country.<sup>175</sup> The regime also blocked streaming sites and online TV sites like *Vivo Play*, *El Capitolio TV*, and *Venezolanos por la información* that were covering the violent

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<sup>170</sup> “What Is a Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) Attack?,” Cloudflare, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://www.cloudflare.com/learning/ddos/what-is-a-ddos-attack/>.

<sup>171</sup> “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Report,” 21.

<sup>172</sup> “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Report,” 21.

<sup>173</sup> Department of State, “Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2017 - Venezuela,” 172.

<sup>174</sup> Media Landscapes, “Venezuela,” 9; Freedom House, “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Report.”

<sup>175</sup> Media Landscapes, “Venezuela”; Infobae, “El régimen de Maduro volvió a bloquear Infobae en Venezuela,” infobae, accessed March 26, 2021, /2015/07/20/1743000-el-regimen-maduro-volvio-bloquear-infobae-venezuela/.

antigovernment protests.<sup>176</sup> The regime also blocked the websites *El Nacional*, *El Pitazo*, *La Patilla*, and rogue policeman Oscar Pérez's Instagram page during a police operation against Pérez that ended in his death.<sup>177</sup> During the operation, Pérez was posting to his Instagram the violent clash between himself and the police officers. Pérez was a well-known supporter of the opposition and had organized multiple protests, and for this, he was branded a terrorist by the regime and executed.<sup>178</sup> These blocking campaigns aided the regime in controlling the narrative within its borders and obscuring any information that was not favorable.

Lastly, the regime extended its strategy of repressing the population utilizing the security apparatus by incorporating the tracking of social media posts and the opposition's usage of these platforms to extend its intelligence gathering capabilities. In particular, the regime used social media harassment campaigns to persecute and request information on the whereabouts of opposition members who participated in protests. As a result, the regime gained new ways to track and repress citizens. For example, a United States Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices reported that the Venezuelan forensic police were using Twitter to brand seven individuals who participated in protests against the Supreme Court and Maduro as terrorists.<sup>179</sup> The Criminal and Forensic Investigations Corps (CICPC) utilized the account "Prensa CICPC" to denounce and criminalize them, publishing 186 messages with the hashtags *#SeBuscaTerroristas* (*#TerroristsWanted*), *#TerroristasVanPresos* (*#TerroristsGoToPrison*), and *#DenunciaTuZona* (*#ReportYourArea*) and asking the public to inform them of the "terrorists" locations.<sup>180</sup> These social harassment campaigns were used to slander the reputation of members of the opposition and persecute critics of the regime.

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<sup>176</sup> Freedom House, "Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Report," 10.

<sup>177</sup> Media Landscapes, "Venezuela," 10.

<sup>178</sup> Nicholas Casey, "Venezuela's Most-Wanted Rebel Shared His Story, Just Before Death," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/21/world/americas/venezuela-oscar-perez-nicolas-maduro.html>.

<sup>179</sup> Department of State, "Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2017 - Venezuela," 127.

<sup>180</sup> Department of State, 127; IPYS Venezuela, "Se impone discurso de odio contra manifestantes y activistas de DDHH en redes sociales," *IPYS* (blog), accessed March 26, 2021, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/alerta/se-impone-discurso-odio-manifestantes-activistas-ddhh-redes-sociales/>.



Overall, these digital authoritarianism tactics via social media helped the regime to request and obtain information on citizens that oppose it through phishing attacks. It also allowed the regime to obscure undesirable information regarding the crisis. Lastly, these tactics extended the regime's security apparatus reach over its citizens, thus likely increasing the effectiveness of the traditional authoritarian tactic of utilizing the security apparatus to repress its citizens.

### 3. 2019–2021 Protests

Another major event during which the regime used digital authoritarian tactics was during the protests of 2019–2021. During these events, the Venezuelan regime's most prominent tactics were phishing attacks, internet shutdowns, and targeted persecution of online individuals. As during previous years, these efforts extended the regime's strategies of repression and control over the larger media environment. These tactics allowed the regime to collect information on citizens who opposed its rule, to hinder its citizens' ability to coordinate and organize protests, and to use social media platforms to track the location of citizens.

In 2019, the opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, called upon Venezuelans to protest against the regime to demonstrate support for his claim to power as interim president and demand the restoration of the constitutional order.<sup>181</sup> The opposition also used these demonstrations to appeal to the military to no avail.<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, while the majority of protests up to 2019 were mostly led by the opposition and demanded regime change, in 2020, the protests faced by the regime were a result of the policies it implemented to combat COVID-19.<sup>183</sup> These protests were mainly centered in rural areas that saw

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<sup>181</sup> "Venezuela: Arrests, Killings in Anti-Government Protests," Human Rights Watch, January 25, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/25/venezuela-arrests-killings-anti-government-protests>.

<sup>182</sup> Joe Parkin Daniels, "Venezuela Protests: Thousands March as Military Faces Call to Abandon Maduro," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/23/venezuela-protests-thousands-march-against-maduro-as-opposition-sees-chance-for-change>; "Venezuela: Arrests, Killings in Anti-Government Protests."

<sup>183</sup> "Venezuela Crisis: Anger over Shortages Triggers Protests," *BBC News*, September 30, 2020, sec. Latin America & Caribbean, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-54354225>; "Venezuela Shortages Prompt Wave of Protests across Country," *The Guardian*, September 30, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/30/venezuela-shortages-protests>.

worsening electricity, water, gas, petrol, and household supply shortages as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown.<sup>184</sup> These citizens demanded better living conditions and the restoration of these resources.<sup>185</sup> The regime responded similarly to all the mass protests since 2014: it used a combination of traditional and non-traditional tactics that resulted in the disappearances, deaths, and use of violence (e.g., torture) against critics of the regime.<sup>186</sup>

One of the regime's main tactics in the social media realm during the 2019–2021 protests was its use of phishing attacks on social media to collect information on citizens who opposed it, which furthered its ability to surveil citizens by increasing its database on them. According to Imperva, phishing is “a type of social engineering attack often used to steal user data, including login credentials and credit card numbers. It occurs when an attacker, masquerading as a trusted entity, dupes a victim into opening an email, instant message, or text message.”<sup>187</sup> The regime utilized sophisticated phishing attacks on social media to collect personal information such as addresses, emails, and social media of citizens who were aligned with the opposition.<sup>188</sup> For example, in 2019, the regime utilized a phishing attack against a site used by the opposition to distribute aid in order to divert supporters of this cause to a fake website similar to the original to collect personal information, such as identity card number, home address, emails, and social media accounts.<sup>189</sup> Maduro has had a longstanding policy of not accepting humanitarian aid, and for that reason, the regime targeted the website in order to identify citizens who oppose his

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184 “Venezuela Crisis;” “Venezuela Shortages Prompt Wave of Protests across Country.”

185 “Venezuela Crisis”.

186 “Venezuela Crisis.”

187 “What Is Phishing? Attack Techniques & Scam Examples,” Imperva,” *Learning Center* (blog), accessed March 26, 2021, <https://www.imperva.com/learn/application-security/phishing-attack-scam/>.

188 Media Landscapes, “Venezuela,” 21, 29; “Venezuela’s Government Appears To Be Trying to Hack Activists With Phishing Pages,” *Vice*, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/d3mdxm/venezuela-government-hack-activists-phishing>.

189 “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report” (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2020), 29, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2020>; Media Landscapes, “Venezuela,” 21.

government.<sup>190</sup> As a result of this attack, thousands of citizens had their personal information stolen.<sup>191</sup> Subsequently, in 2020, the regime launched another phishing attack against *Héroes de la Salud*, a site developed to facilitate external economic aid to healthcare workers.<sup>192</sup> The government attacked this platform in order to gain personal information on its citizens like home and work address, identification, and other images of official documentation.<sup>193</sup> These phishing campaigns helped the government to capitalize on the personal information it collected to persecute and coerce citizens to support the regime. The regime retaliated against citizens who worked in the public sector by firing them.<sup>194</sup> The regime has often used these types of social media attacks in the past to coerce support from its citizens. For example, Venezuelan teacher Sara Meza claimed that she voted for the regime during the mayoral and presidential elections of 2018 because she was told by regime members that if she did not, there would be trouble, implying that she could lose her job as a teacher and subsidies.<sup>195</sup>

Furthermore, the regime has continued its tactics of utilizing internet shutdowns to censor unfavorable information on social media platforms and to deter the opposition from using social media platforms to organize. For example, in April of 2019, Compañía Anónima Nacional de Teléfonos de Venezuela CANTV (the state-run internet service provider) appeared to block social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Google chat service in order to prevent Juan Guaidó, the opposition leader, and other groups from organizing and mobilizing a growing protest against the Venezuelan government.<sup>196</sup> In January of 2020, Netblocks, a Twitter account, reported that CANTV

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<sup>190</sup> Freedom House, “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report”; Vice, “Venezuela’s Government Appears To Be Trying to Hack Activists With Phishing Pages.”

<sup>191</sup> “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report,” 30.

<sup>192</sup> “Venezuela: Freedom of the Net 2020,” 30.

<sup>193</sup> “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report,” 30.

<sup>194</sup> “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report,” 30.

<sup>195</sup> Ryan Dube Kurmanaev Kejal Vyas and Anatoly, “Venezuela’s Maduro, Clinging to Power, Uses Hunger as an Election Weapon,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuelas-maduro-clinging-to-power-uses-hunger-as-an-electoral-weapon-1521734622>.

<sup>196</sup> Harwell and Zuñiga, “Social Media Remains Key”.

had blocked the usage of Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and YouTube hours prior to the National Assembly meeting to elect a new leader. Guaidó was hoping to be re-elected during this vote since the National Assembly was the only institution not controlled by President Maduro. The Venezuelan government prevented Guaidó from entering the Assembly building, and as a result, he lost the election to a pro-Maduro candidate. Venezuelans were not able to see the government's transgression since it had blocked social media platforms and no coverage of this event was broadcast within Venezuela, potentially decreasing the risk of mass protests as a response to impeding the opposition leader from partaking in the election.

Lastly, the government's continued effort to dominate the social media narrative within its borders involves persecuting citizens based on what they post on social media, extending its strategy of media environment control. For example, in May 2019, Pedro Jaimes Corriolo was arrested and imprisoned in Helicoide for sharing on Twitter the route that President Maduro's presidential plane was taking.<sup>197</sup> The regime stated that Criollo was arrested and awaiting trial for national security-related charges.<sup>198</sup> In June 2020, journalists María Luisa Arriaga and Marco Aurelio Antonima were arrested for allegedly running a Twitter account, "@VV\_periodistas," that covered the COVID-19 pandemic shortages and posted *Venevision's* self-imposed censorship directives that prevent the criticism of the government.<sup>199</sup> Also, in 2020, the editor of the *Senadores de Apure* news site, Eduardo Galindo, was detained by the regime for covering on social media gasoline shortages within the country.<sup>200</sup> The regime tried to confiscate his computer, but he refused. As result, he was charged with "disclosing false information."<sup>201</sup>

The regime's persecution of citizens over social media posts has involved even harsher repressive tactics. For example, six protesters were executed by the Venezuela Special Actions force in several locations for causing posts criticizing Nicolás Maduro to

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197 "Inside the Battle to Get News to Venezuelans."

198 "Inside the Battle to Get News to Venezuelans."

199 "Venezuela: Freedom of the Net 2020," 24.

200 "Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report," 24.

201 "Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report," 24.

go viral on social networks.<sup>202</sup> One of the protesters was Luis Enrique Ramos Suárez, who was executed a day after posting on social media a voice note that announced the next protest against the president.<sup>203</sup> He was beaten and shot by 20 heavily armed security forces members in his home while his family was present.<sup>204</sup> These persecution campaigns against online users force citizens to self-censor and be cautious of what they post. This tactic makes it difficult to foster public discourse and therefore helps the regime control the narrative.

Overall, the digital authoritarianism tactics used by the regime during this timeframe helped it dominate the narrative within its borders, extending the regime's capability to control the media environment. It also hampered the citizens' ability to coordinate protests, as well as repressed its citizens, including their freedom of speech.

### C. CONCLUSION

The Venezuelan regime's use of digital authoritarianism has contributed to its ability to maintain power by creating a media environment that is not trusted by citizens,<sup>205</sup> which helps Maduro obscure the country's economic and humanitarian crises. The first key effect of the regime's use of digital authoritarianism tactics to remain in power is that they have allowed the regime to retain voters by deterring and slandering the opposition via disinformation campaigns, thus making citizens question their credibility. A second key effect of the regime's use of digital authoritarianism tactics has been its ability to maintain broader public support by controlling the information Venezuelans receive and portraying a favorable narrative of the regime, which has contributed to some extent to the regime's electoral victories. Lastly, another key effect of the regime's digital authoritarianism tactics is that it has been able to deter the opposition's ability to make political gains through

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<sup>202</sup> "Venezuela Crisis Mission: Protesters Executed for Social Media Posts," accessed March 5, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/venezuela-crisis-mission-protesters-executed-social-media-posts>.

<sup>203</sup> "Venezuela Crisis Mission."

<sup>204</sup> "Venezuela Crisis Mission."

<sup>205</sup> "Informe 2018 Latinobarometro," Corporacion Latinobarometro, August 2, 2018, <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latContents.jsp>.

protests by suppressing the platforms the opposition use to communicate and organize demonstrations. A V-Dem Institute research report titled “Digital Repression in Autocracies” has concluded that the regime’s implementation of digital authoritarianism in Venezuela has helped decrease its risk of experiencing a protest by 4 to 6%.<sup>206</sup> Thus, control over social media allows the regime to deter the opposition’s political agenda and makes it difficult for them to coordinate and organize resistance activities. Overall, the implementation of digital authoritarianism via social media helps the regime extend its ability to surveil, repress, and control the media environment, thus maintaining power over the country.

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<sup>206</sup> Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, and Wright, “Digital Repression in Autocracies,” 50.

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### **III. SOCIAL MEDIA PENETRATION IN VENEZUELA AND THE OPPOSITION'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

The second step in determining if social media helps the Venezuelan regime more than it helps the opposition is to examine how the opposition uses social media and to what extent its activities on social media help the opposition counter the regime. Hugo Chávez's rise to power in Venezuela and the regime's use of social media to expand its authoritarian governance caused the opposition to incorporate social media into its efforts to organize, coordinate, and call upon international influence.<sup>207</sup> This chapter first examines the opposition's political objectives and the broader strategies they have used to counter the regime. It then provides information on social media penetration in Venezuela to establish the extent of social media influence in the country. The penetration of social media in Venezuela has been fundamental in allowing politicians, the citizenry, and activists to protest the regime and to advocate for societal change.<sup>208</sup> This chapter then analyzes the effectiveness of social media usage by the opposition since 2014.

The analysis reveals that the opposition's use of social media has aided them in effectively organizing, coordinating, and mobilizing citizens to protest the regime. The opposition has also effectively used social media to increase international awareness of Venezuela's political and economic crisis. However, the opposition has not been able to reverse the democratic backsliding by removing President Nicolas Maduro from power or even been able to significantly degrade the regime's power and control over the country. It

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<sup>207</sup> Lopez Maya, "Hugo Chavez and the Populist Left," 226.

<sup>208</sup> Elias Said Hung and Francisco Segado-Boj, "Social Media Mobilization in Venezuela: A Case Study," *Social and Economic Studies, AI and Society*, June 12, 2018, 235, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.16949.93924>.



has not been able to achieve its main political objective due to using the same ineffective strategies via social media that it has used against the regime since 2001.<sup>209</sup>

#### **A. THE OPPOSITION’S POLITICAL OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES TO COUNTER THE REGIME**

Assessing the ways and extent to which the opposition has benefited from its use of social media requires understanding the opposition’s broader political objectives and strategies to counter the regime. The opposition in Venezuela is composed of both parliamentary and nonparliamentary actors that alternately lead the movement.<sup>210</sup> Accordingly, the opposition has implemented institutional and extra-institutional strategies depending on the circumstances. All these strategies are in support of the opposition’s main political objective of installing a liberal democratic government with a market-based economy, but they have proven to be variously beneficial and ineffectual.<sup>211</sup>

One strategy used by the opposition to counter the regime is the unification of all opposition actors in the political and civil spheres to rally in favor of a single set of candidates to obtain electoral wins.<sup>212</sup> In 2006, for the first time, the opposition unified under the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) party, creating a formal unified electoral vehicle, a unified discourse, and a centralized stable of candidates.<sup>213</sup> This strategy initially

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<sup>209</sup> Phil Gunson, “Venezuela’s Opposition Is Clinging to a Failed Strategy,” *World Politics Review*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29426/in-venezuela-guaido-and-the-opposition-are-clinging-to-a-failed-strategy>; Barry Cannon, “As Clear as MUD: Characteristics, Objectives, and Strategies of the Opposition in Bolivarian Venezuela,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 56, no. 4 (2014): 49; Maryhen Jimenez Morales Rosales Antulio, “Venezuela’s Opposition Needs a New Strategy,” accessed September 8, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/12/23/venezuelas-opposition-needs-a-new-strategy>.

<sup>210</sup> Cannon, “As Clear as MUD,” 63; “Opposition in Bolivarian Venezuela: Caught Between Conflict and Compromise,” *E-International Relations* (blog), April 8, 2014, <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/04/08/opposition-in-bolivarian-venezuela-caught-between-conflict-and-compromise/>.

<sup>211</sup> Cannon, “As Clear as MUD,” 63. Institutional strategies “are patterns of organizational action concerned with the formation and transformation of institutions, fields and the rules and standards that control those structures.” Thomas B. Lawrence, “Institutional Strategy,” *Journal of Management* 25, no. 2 (April 1, 1999): 161–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639902500203>.

<sup>212</sup> Cannon, 54; “Friendly Fire: Venezuela’s Opposition Turmoil,” Crisis Group, November 23, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/71-friendly-fire-venezuelas-opposition-turmoil>.

<sup>213</sup> Cannon, “As Clear as MUD,” 54.

resulted in three national electoral successes: In 2008, the opposition won the governorships of six of the most important states in Venezuela, and in 2010, they obtained only 1% less of the votes than the regime in the legislative elections, impeding the regime from having a two-thirds majority of seats, making it harder for the regime to pass legislation that could further empower itself.<sup>214</sup> In 2015, the MUD won two thirds of the seats in the National Assembly, altering for the first time its political balance since Chávez assumed command.<sup>215</sup> The strategy of unification thus increased the opposition’s electoral strength and enabled it to achieve electoral victories.<sup>216</sup> However, the strength of the opposition’s unity wavered through the years.<sup>217</sup> In 2018, MUD launched the “Broad Front” (“Frente Amplio”) campaign to unify once again the political and civil society, creating a committee to organize general strikes and choose political leadership and drafting a program that could be used by a transitional government.<sup>218</sup> However, the campaign failed to unify these groups, and the campaign has not been able to replicate the success MUD had initially.<sup>219</sup>

Another strategy consistently used by the opposition to date is the organization and coordination of protests to challenge the regime, thereby pressuring the regime to listen to the opposition’s demands.<sup>220</sup> The first cycle of protests occurred in 2001 when the opposition protested the Enabling Law.<sup>221</sup> They then demanded for President Chávez to

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<sup>214</sup> Simon Romero, “Once Considered Invincible, Chávez Takes a Blow,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2008, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/25/world/americas/25venez.html>; “Factbox: Hugo Chavez’s Record in Venezuelan Elections,” *Reuters*, October 8, 2012, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-election-ballots-idUSBRE89702320121008>; William Neuman, “Venezuelan Opposition Claims a Rare Victory: A Legislative Majority,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2015, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/07/world/americas/venezuela-elections.html>.

<sup>215</sup> “Friendly Fire”; Neuman, “Venezuelan Opposition Claims a Rare Victory.”

<sup>216</sup> Cannon, “As Clear as MUD,” 55.

<sup>217</sup> Cannon; “Opposition in Bolivarian Venezuela.”

<sup>218</sup> “Friendly Fire.”

<sup>219</sup> “Friendly Fire.”

<sup>220</sup> “Friendly Fire”; Ybiskay González, “Democracy under Threat: The Foundation of the Opposition in Venezuela,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 40, no. 1 (2021): 69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/clar.13090>.

<sup>221</sup> González, “Democracy under Threat.”

step down, but the demonstrations did not yield any results: the decree remained in place and the president was not removed.<sup>222</sup> The strategy of coordinating protest has also been in combination with institutional strategies.<sup>223</sup> For example, in 2004, the opposition complemented its protests with a presidential recall referendum that ultimately was unsuccessful.<sup>224</sup> In 2016, opposition leaders called for a presidential recall referendum against President Maduro that, according to Venebarómetro poll, indicated that 68% of Venezuelans wanted him out of office.<sup>225</sup> The opposition mobilized citizens to protest against the government in order to pressure the regime into implementing the recall referendum, but ultimately, the opposition's efforts were halted by the regime, and the referendum did not pass.<sup>226</sup>

Lastly, another strategy used by the opposition to counter the regime has been to boycott elections in order to signal that elections in Venezuela are fraudulent.<sup>227</sup> In 2005, the opposition boycotted regional and parliamentary elections because they did not believe that the electoral process would be fair and free.<sup>228</sup> In 2018, the opposition boycotted the presidential election since they viewed the electoral process as “fraudulent [and] illegitimate” and stated that the regime had created unfair conditions such as barring

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<sup>222</sup> González.

<sup>223</sup> Cannon, “As Clear as MUD,” 61.

<sup>224</sup> Cannon, 61. A recall referendum is a vote to remove an official from office. According to the Americas Society, in Venezuela, “an official can only face a recall once per term. Of importance for the opposition, if Maduro is forced to step down during the first four years of his term, Article 233 mandates that a special election be held to replace him. If, on the other hand, the vote is delayed until the last two years of his term, the executive vice president, currently Aristóbulo Istúriz, would succeed to the presidency directly.” Holly K. Sonneland, “Explainer: What Is the Recall Referendum Process in Venezuela?,” AS/COA, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-what-recall-referendum-process-venezuela>.

<sup>225</sup> “Explainer: What Is the Recall Referendum Process in Venezuela?,” AS/COA, accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-what-recall-referendum-process-venezuela>.

<sup>226</sup> “Venezuelans Throng Streets of Caracas Seeking Recall Referendum for President,” *The Guardian*, September 1, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/01/venezuelans-march-caracas-recall-referendum-rally>; “Venezuela Electoral Body Suspends Referendum Drive, Opposition Fumes,” *Reuters*, October 20, 2016, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-idUSKCN12K2US>.

<sup>227</sup> “Friendly Fire”; Cannon, “As Clear as MUD.”

<sup>228</sup> Cannon, “As Clear as MUD,” 61; Juan Forero, “Chávez’s Grip Tightens as Rivals Boycott Vote,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2005, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/05/world/americas/chavez-s-grip-tightens-as-rivals-boycott-vote.html>.

members of the opposition from running and banning MUD from running.<sup>229</sup> The opposition strategy of boycotting this election fueled international condemnation of the regime from the OAS and helped opposition leader Juan Guaidó receive international backing.<sup>230</sup> In 2020, the opposition urged Venezuelans to boycott the National Assembly (parliamentary) elections since the electoral process was fraudulent.<sup>231</sup> This strategy has helped the opposition gain international influence and raise awareness of the country's political crisis.

Overall, though the political strategies used by the opposition to counter the regime and transition Venezuela into a democratic country have proven ineffective against the regime. The opposition have been using the same strategies since 2001 to no avail. Even though the opposition have gained small electoral victories, the regime has been able to maintain and increase its control over the country.

## **B. SOCIAL MEDIA PENETRATION IN VENEZUELA**

Understanding how effectively the opposition has used social media to dissent against the government and its political agenda requires first establishing the degree of internet and social media penetration in Venezuela to establish the opposition's reach to citizens via social media platforms. As Chapter II explains, one of the regime's main strategies for maintaining power has been to control the media environment. This control has led Venezuelans to mistrust the country's traditional media and to look for alternative,

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<sup>229</sup> "Venezuela Opposition to Boycott 'fraudulent' Presidential Vote," *Reuters*, February 21, 2018, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-idUSKCN1G52FD>.

<sup>230</sup> Bradley A. Freden, "OAS Resolution Condemns the Fraudulent Elections in Venezuela," U.S. Mission to the Organization of American States, December 9, 2020, <https://usoas.usmission.gov/oas-resolution-condemns-the-fraudulent-elections-in-venezuela/>; Deutsche Welle, "Venezuela: EU Backs Juan Guaido as National Assembly Head," DW.com, April 6, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/venezuela-eu-backs-juan-guaido-as-national-assembly-head/a-53689379>; Donald J. Trump, "Statement from President Donald J. Trump Recognizing Venezuelan National Assembly President Juan Guaido as the Interim President of Venezuela" (official statement, Washington, DC: The White House, 2019), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-recognizing-venezuelan-national-assembly-president-juan-guaido-interim-president-venezuela/>.

<sup>231</sup> "'Vote for What?': Venezuelan Opposition Boycotts Parliamentary Election," *Reuters*, December 6, 2020, sec. AMERS, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-election-idUSKBN28G056>; "Maduro Consolidates Power in Venezuela, Dominating Election Boycotted by Opposition," *Washington Post*, accessed August 30, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/venezuela-election-national-assembly-maduro-guaido/2020/12/06/8a9fee74-35d2-11eb-8d38-6aea1adb3839\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/venezuela-election-national-assembly-maduro-guaido/2020/12/06/8a9fee74-35d2-11eb-8d38-6aea1adb3839_story.html).

reliable, sources of information regarding the country's political events and economic crisis.<sup>232</sup> A survey by Hinterlaces in 2018 reported that 77% of Venezuelans had little to no confidence in the country's traditional media.<sup>233</sup> Therefore, Venezuelans have become reliant on social media platforms to obtain information. A director at the Washington-based think tank Inter-American Dialogue emphasized social media's role in Venezuela by stating that these platforms "had become the most critical ways Venezuelans communicated beyond the reach of government censors."<sup>234</sup> As a result, the opposition has organized, campaigned, vied for international influence, and countered the government's narrative largely through social media platforms.<sup>235</sup> In particular, the opposition mobilizes citizens publicly through Facebook and Twitter campaigns and privately communicates important information about upcoming protests through the encrypted messaging service WhatsApp.<sup>236</sup> Therefore, establishing social media penetration in Venezuela since 2011, when President Hugo Chávez joined Twitter and propelled political discourse to social media platforms, is key to understanding the opposition's ability to mobilize citizens against the government. However, the regime does not provide official statistics about social media usage within the country, so the only data available come from civil society groups, NGOs, and professional organizations, which sometimes offer contradictory information.<sup>237</sup> Nevertheless, the data still provides useful insight into the country's internet and social media penetration, as well as Venezuelans attitudes towards social media platforms.

Over the last decade, Venezuela has experienced varying levels of internet penetration and infrastructure degradation; overall, however, the country has been able to increase its internet and social media penetration. During this period, citizens have

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<sup>232</sup> Calderón and Herreo, "Venezuela Media Landscape."

<sup>233</sup> Calderón and Herreo.

<sup>234</sup> Calderón and Herreo, "Venezuela Media Landscape"; Harwell and Zuñiga, "Social Media Remains Key"; Rendon and Kohan, "The Internet: Venezuela's Lifeline."

<sup>235</sup> Calderón and Herreo, "Venezuela Media Landscape"; Harwell and Zuñiga, "Social Media Remains Key"; Rendon and Kohan, "The Internet: Venezuela's Lifeline."

<sup>236</sup> Harwell and Zuñiga, "Social Media Remains Key."

<sup>237</sup> Calderón and Herreo, "Venezuela Media Landscape."

increasingly relied on social media platforms to obtain information about the status of the country and politics.<sup>238</sup> By 2011, Venezuela's internet and social media penetration had increased significantly from previous years, and politics took a more prominent role on social media platforms.<sup>239</sup> The country's internet penetration had reached 40% of Venezuelans, who ranked third in social media use in Latin America.<sup>240</sup> Among internet users in Venezuela, 75% accessed social media platforms, so about 30% of the country's population was on social media.<sup>241</sup> In particular, Venezuela's Twitter penetration exhibited the third highest growth worldwide as a result of President Hugo Chávez joining the platform in April of 2011.<sup>242</sup> Twitter saw a 5% increase in registered Venezuelan users a few months after Chávez joined, making him the second most followed president in the world on Twitter that year.<sup>243</sup> Chávez's move to join Twitter influenced the opposition leader Henrique Capriles to increase his footprint on the platform by tweeting three times more than Chávez did, effectively propelling political discourse among Venezuelans on social media platforms.<sup>244</sup> However, despite the increase of Twitter users within the country in 2011, Venezuela's most utilized platform was Facebook, with 30% of

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<sup>238</sup> Calderón and Herreo.

<sup>239</sup> "Indonesia, Brazil and Venezuela Lead Global Surge in Twitter Usage," Comscore, Inc., accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Press-Releases/2010/8/Indonesia-Brazil-and-Venezuela-Lead-Global-Surge-in-Twitter-Usage>; "South America Social Media," TranslateMedia, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.translatemedia.com/translation-services/south-america-social-media/>; Shannon K O'Neil, "Latin America's Growing Social Network," *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), October 3, 2012, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/latin-americas-growing-social-network>; "Social Networking Media Widely Popular in Venezuela," *Venezuelanalysis.com*, July 31, 2011, <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/6392>; Christine Noonan, *Global Social Media Directory*, PNNL-23805 Rev. 0 (Richland, WA: Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, 2014), 134, [https://www.pnnl.gov/main/publications/external/technical\\_reports/PNNL-23805Rev0.pdf](https://www.pnnl.gov/main/publications/external/technical_reports/PNNL-23805Rev0.pdf).

<sup>240</sup> "Social Networking Media Widely Popular in Venezuela."

<sup>241</sup> "Social Networking Media Widely Popular in Venezuela."

<sup>242</sup> "Indonesia, Brazil and Venezuela Lead Global Surge in Twitter Usage"; O'Neil, "Latin America's Growing Social Network"; Roberto I. Garza, "Social Media in Latin America," *synthesio*, January 2011, <https://robertoigarza.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/rep-social-media-in-latin-america-synthesio-2011.pdf>; "Social Networking Media Widely Popular in Venezuela"; Noonan, "Global Social Media Directory," 134.

<sup>243</sup> "Indonesia, Brazil and Venezuela Lead Global Surge in Twitter Usage"; O'Neil, "Latin America's Growing Social Network"; Garza, "Social Media in Latin America."

<sup>244</sup> O'Neil, "Latin America's Growing Social Network."

Venezuelan internet users subscribed to the platform and the country ranked fifth in Facebook usage in Latin America.<sup>245</sup>

From 2011 to 2015, Venezuela saw a steady increase in internet and social media penetration. During this period, Venezuela's telecommunication infrastructure and quality of internet access was hampered by the country's economic crisis, thus exacerbating the gap in internet access between rural and urban areas and impeding continuous internet access to users.<sup>246</sup> Venezuela's internet penetration decreased by 2%.<sup>247</sup> The country's inability to adequately maintain internet infrastructure resulted in Venezuela having the worst internet speeds in the region.<sup>248</sup> Regardless of the poor infrastructure and poor internet quality during this time, social media platforms' role in politics was still prominent.<sup>249</sup>

Finally, from 2017 to 2021, despite Venezuela's poor infrastructure it has been able to slowly increase its internet and social media penetration and widen the range of topics in Venezuela's public discourse.<sup>250</sup> Social media platforms have become an even more important alternative source for Venezuelans to stay informed on political and state affairs.<sup>251</sup> According to a survey by Delphos, 16% of the population rely primarily on social media platforms to stay informed on politics within the country.<sup>252</sup> A survey done by Hinterlaces showed that Venezuelans trust information obtained from social media platforms more than that from traditional media: in 2017, 32% trusted social media, while

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<sup>245</sup> "Social Networking Media Widely Popular in Venezuela," Venezuelanalysis.com, July 31, 2011, <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/6392>.

<sup>246</sup> Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2015 - Venezuela"; "Venezuela."

<sup>247</sup> "Venezuela"; Freedom House, "Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Report"; "Venezuela"; Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2015 - Venezuela."

<sup>248</sup> "Venezuela."

<sup>249</sup> "Venezuela"; Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2015 - Venezuela."

<sup>250</sup> Freedom House, "Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Report"; "Venezuela"; "Venezuela"; Freedom House, "Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report."

<sup>251</sup> Calderón and Herreo, "Venezuela Media Landscape."

<sup>252</sup> Calderón and Herreo.

25% trusted traditional media.<sup>253</sup> Social media platforms have thus become an important communication tool for the opposition and critics of the government, potentially explaining why, according to a Latinobarómetro 2018 report, Venezuela’s use of social media is above the Latin American average.<sup>254</sup> Furthermore, in 2021, internet penetration in Venezuela increased by 0.3% from the previous year and has reached 72% of the population as of 2021.<sup>255</sup> Social media penetration increased by 16.7%, and the most popular social media platforms based on visits were Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.<sup>256</sup> Overall, Venezuela’s internet and social media penetration has slowly increased over the last two decades despite the communication infrastructure deterioration.

### C. THE OPPOSITION’S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

As social media penetration has increased, Venezuela’s regime has implemented measures to block the opposition from freely accessing and sharing data using traditional media and social media platforms.<sup>257</sup> Nevertheless, as this section shows, the opposition has relied on the decentralized nature of social media to bypass the regime’s censorship and control over traditional media, making these platforms a critical tool for the opposition to further its agenda.<sup>258</sup> In a media environment mainly controlled by the regime, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and others have allowed the opposition an arena in which they can contest the regime and force a pluralistic media environment.<sup>259</sup> In particular, the opposition uses social media to allow the public to interact with each other, opposition leaders, and the international community and so join

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<sup>253</sup> Calderón and Herreo.

<sup>254</sup> “Informe 2018 Latinobarómetro”; Calderón and Herreo, “Venezuela Media Landscape.”

<sup>255</sup> Simon Kemp, “Digital in Venezuela: All the Statistics You Need in 2021,” DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, accessed April 15, 2021, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-venezuela>.

<sup>256</sup> “Social Media Market Share Venezuela 2020,” Statista, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1072544/venezuela-share-visits-social-media-websites/>.

<sup>257</sup> Corrales, “The Authoritarian Resurgence,” 220.

<sup>258</sup> Rendon and Kohan, “The Internet: Venezuela’s Lifeline”; Freedom House, “Venezuela: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report”; Said Hung and Segado-Boj, *Social Media Mobilization in Venezuela*.

<sup>259</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom on the Net 2015 - Venezuela”; Papacharissi and Blasiola, “The Case of #Egypt.”



in conversations geared toward the revolutionary movement opposing the government.<sup>260</sup> Additionally, the opposition has used social media to mobilize Venezuelans with the goal of pressuring the government into conceding to the opposition's political terms. Since 2014, the opposition has predominantly used social media in an effort to organize and coordinate demonstrations against the regime, as well as to raise international awareness about the country's political and economic crisis. Like the regime, the opposition has also used social media tactics such as disinformation campaigns and political bots to augment and quickly disseminate favorable messages. Overall, the opposition's use of social media has helped it to dissent against the regime and garner international awareness, but it has not helped the opposition make political gains or reach its goal of transitioning Venezuela into a democratic government.

One of the opposition's main uses of social media has been to coordinate the resistance against the regime via institutional strategies. One of the first major incidents in which the opposition used social media in this way to coordinate and mobilize citizens was during the 2013 presidential and local elections. During this event, opposition leader Henrique Capriles created the hashtag *#Operacionavalancha* (*#Operationavalanche*) to mobilize voters; the hashtag became a trending topic that generated thousands of retweets and an average of more than 120 messages per minute.<sup>261</sup> This campaign likely contributed to the opposition's loss against Maduro by only 1.49% of the vote. In 2016, the opposition used social media to coordinate, inform, and encourage citizens to sign a petition to conduct a recall referendum on the president.<sup>262</sup> Analysis of opposition leader Henrique Capriles' Twitter indicates that he used this platform to request signatures for the recall referendum, to publicize propaganda videos showcasing Venezuelans' struggles to reach centers to sign

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<sup>260</sup> Robin L. Thompson, "Radicalization and the Use of Social," *Journal of Strategic Security*, Perspectives on Radicalisation and Involvement in Terrorism, 4, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 167–90, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.8..>

<sup>261</sup> Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2014," 930; Univision, "Guerra por votos venezolanos en Twitter," Univision, accessed September 1, 2021, <https://www.univision.com/noticias/guerra-por-votos-venezolanos-en-twitter>.

<sup>262</sup> Dany Bahar and Harold Trinkunas, "10 Things You Should Know about the Current Crisis in Venezuela," *Brookings* (blog), April 24, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/04/24/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-current-crisis-in-venezuela/>; "Venezuelans Throng Streets of Caracas Seeking Recall Referendum for President."

the petition, and to call upon citizens to peacefully protest to pressure the regime into holding a recall referendum.<sup>263</sup> Despite the resulting demonstrations and the opposition's effort to follow the legal framework to remove Maduro from power, the national electoral body decided to suspend the recall referendum, citing fraud allegations.<sup>264</sup> The suspension of the recall referendum, the ongoing food and medicine supply shortage, and a 700% inflation rate fueled a second round of protests in Venezuela in that year.<sup>265</sup> Capriles used the hashtag *#LaTomaDeVenezuela* (*#Venezuelatakeover*) to coordinate one of the largest demonstrations in Venezuela's recent history, with more than 1.2 million protestors, at least 3% of the Venezuelan population.<sup>266</sup> The protest resulted in international intervention in which the Vatican mediated a conciliatory dialogue between the regime and the opposition, but it did not yield any results or resolve the conflict between these parties.<sup>267</sup> Here again, while the opposition was able to use social media to effectively mobilize citizens, it was not able to achieve its political objective of holding a recall referendum, nor did it pressure Maduro to resign or get the regime to revise policies to provide food and medical supplies to Venezuelans.

A second major incident in which the opposition used social media to coordinate and organize was during the 2014 mass demonstrations against President Maduro and his administration. During these events, the opposition used social media to coordinate protests and publicize its grievances via the hashtags *#LaSalida* (*#TheExit*), *#SOSVenezuela*, and *#PrayforVenezuela*, as well as utilized political bots to augment the number of messages

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<sup>263</sup> "Henrique Capriles R. on Twitter," Twitter, accessed September 2, 2021, <https://twitter.com/hcapriles/status/726476245723168768>.

<sup>264</sup> "Venezuela Electoral Body Suspends Referendum Drive, Opposition Fumes."

<sup>265</sup> "Venezuelans Throng Streets of Caracas Seeking Recall Referendum for President"; "Venezuela Protests: Large Anti-Maduro March Held in Caracas," *BBC News*, September 2, 2016, sec. Latin America & Caribbean, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-37243191>; "Miles de venezolanos protestaron en Caracas contra el gobierno de Nicolás Maduro."

<sup>266</sup> "Venezuela Protests"; "Venezuelan Protesters Rally against President Maduro," DW.COM, October 26, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/venezuelan-protesters-rally-against-president-maduro/a-36164729>.

<sup>267</sup> Trinkunas, "10 Things You Should Know about the Current Crisis in Venezuela."

being posted with these hashtags.<sup>268</sup> A study by Michelle Forelle and her team determined that the opposition used more political bots to retweet their content than the regime.<sup>269</sup> The opposition used these tools to rally a series of protests, civil insurrections, and political demonstrations against poor governance by the regime, which had produced a rise in inflation, urban violence, unemployment, a poor economy, and a shortage of essential goods and services.<sup>270</sup> For example, opposition leader Leopoldo López used Twitter to denounce the regime’s repressive policies, ask for Maduro’s resignation, and organize student protests.<sup>271</sup> The protests were recorded by participants and shared widely via social media platforms to spur international community intervention in the country’s political, economic, and social situation.<sup>272</sup> However, while these efforts enabled the opposition to rally citizens to protest the government, the use of social media did not aid in the achieving their political objectives—to remove Maduro from the presidency and pressure his administration to provide better security for Venezuelans. Following the protests, the inflation and shortage of essential goods persisted.<sup>273</sup>

Lastly, since 2014, the opposition has used social media in an effort to raise awareness of Venezuela’s crisis and to petition for international support. This effort yielded the most results during 2018–2021. During this timeframe, the opposition utilized social media to call on other countries to sanction the regime, support Juan Guaidó as interim

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<sup>268</sup> Said Hung and Segado-Boj; Juan Masullo, “Making Sense of ‘La Salida’: Challenging Left-Wing Control in Venezuela,” in *Global Diffusion of Protest*, ed. Donatella della Porta, Riding the Protest Wave in the Neoliberal Crisis (Amsterdam: University Press, 2017), 87, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1zkjxq0.7>.

<sup>269</sup> Forelle et al., “Political Bots.”

<sup>270</sup> Alan Taylor, “Venezuela Gripped by Weeks of Anti-Government Protest” *The Atlantic*, accessed August 31, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/02/venezuela-gripped-by-weeks-of-anti-government-protest/100689/>; George Ciccariello-Maher, “#LaSalida for Venezuela?,” March 5, 2014, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/lasalida-venezuela/>; Masullo, “Making Sense of ‘La Salida.’”

<sup>271</sup> Uri Friedman, “Why Venezuela’s Revolution Will Be Tweeted,” *The Atlantic*, February 19, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/02/why-venezuelas-revolution-will-be-tweeted/283904/>; Freedom House, “Freedom on the Net 2014”; Freedom House, “Freedom on the Net 2015 - Venezuela.”

<sup>272</sup> Friedman, “Why Venezuela’s Revolution Will Be Tweeted.”

<sup>273</sup> Associated Press in Caracas, “One in Three Venezuelans Not Getting Enough to Eat, UN Finds,” *The Guardian*, February 24, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/24/venezuela-hungry-food-insecure-un-world-food-program>; Bea Sophia Pielago, “Uncovering the 5 Major Causes of the Food Crisis in Venezuela,” *Glocality* 3, no. 1 (June 24, 2020) 4, <https://doi.org/10.5334/glo.24>.

president, and advocate for humanitarian aid. In 2018 and 2020, the opposition used social media to validate the opposition's claim to the presidency. During this timeframe, the opposition boycotted the presidential and national assembly elections since the electoral process was fraudulent and favored the regime, and as a result Maduro was elected president once again and gained control over the National Assembly.<sup>274</sup> Opposition leader Juan Guaidó used social media platforms to denounce electoral fraud, inform the international community of the political crisis, declare himself president, and advocate for sanctions.<sup>275</sup> This social media effort led to more than 50 countries recognizing Juan Guaidó as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela and regime officials getting sanctioned by the U.S., E.U., and Switzerland.<sup>276</sup> The opposition's use of social media was thus able to supplement its strategy of boycotting the election and to provide Juan Guaidó with international support. Furthermore, in 2019, the opposition used social media to denounce food and medicine shortages; this online activity led the international community to send humanitarian aid to Venezuela and to denounce Maduro when he blocked the aid at the borders.<sup>277</sup> Overall, social media has helped the opposition to receive international support, but that support ultimately did not further their political objectives of removing Maduro from power and transitioning Venezuela into a democratic government.

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<sup>274</sup> "Venezuela Opposition to Boycott 'fraudulent' Presidential Vote"; "Vote for What?"

<sup>275</sup> "Juan Guaidó on Twitter," Twitter, accessed September 2, 2021, <https://twitter.com/jguaido/status/1335395329626267656>; "Guaido Urges More EU Sanctions for Venezuelans," *Arkansas Online*, 4:04, <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2020/jan/23/guaido-urges-more-eu-sanctions-for-vene/>.

<sup>276</sup> ShareAmerica, "More than 50 Countries Support Venezuela's Juan Guaidó," *ShareAmerica* (blog), November 15, 2019, <https://share.america.gov/support-for-venezuelas-juan-guaido-grows-infographic/>; "Venezuela: The Council's Response to the Crisis," accessed September 2, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/venezuela/>; Global Affairs Canada, "Canadian Sanctions Related to Venezuela," GAC, October 19, 2015, [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international\\_relations-relations\\_internationales/sanctions/venezuela.aspx?lang=eng](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/sanctions/venezuela.aspx?lang=eng); "Swiss Impose Sanctions on Seven Senior Venezuelan Officials," *Reuters*, March 28, 2018, sec. americas-test-2, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-swiss-venezuela-idUSKBN1H42KP>; Clare Ribando Seelke, *Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions*, CRS Report No. IF10715 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021), 3, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10715>.

<sup>277</sup> Laurel Wamsley, "Humanitarian Aid Arrives For Venezuela — But Maduro Blocks It," *NPR*, February 8, 2019, sec. Latin America, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/08/692698637/humanitarian-aid-arrives-for-venezuela-but-maduro-blocks-it>; "The U.S. Says Maduro Is Blocking Aid to Starving People. The Venezuelan Says His People Aren't Beggars.," *Washington Post*, accessed September 2, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/02/08/us-says-maduro-is-blocking-aid-starving-people-venezuelan-says-his-people-arent-beggars/>.

## D. CONCLUSION

The opposition has effectively used social media to pass data as quickly as possible before it is deleted or filtered by the regime's information monitoring agents, and social media has played a critical role in advocating for political change and better governance. The opposition's political strategies aided the people in understanding the need to end the authoritarian leadership and the consequent poverty, lack of freedom, and the weak economy, all of which has vastly reduced the living standards of the larger Venezuelan population. As the Venezuelan president continues to force opposition leaders to flee the country, it has emerged that the opposition leaders in exile continue to use social media to influence the opposition in formulating political strategies and increasing international awareness and subsequent intervention measures.<sup>278</sup>

However, while social media has proven to be effective in these efforts, it has finally not helped the opposition achieve its political objectives of removing Maduro from presidency and transitioning Venezuela into a democratic government. The opposition has not been able to achieve its political objectives because the opposition's use of social media has been an extension of its previously ineffective strategies into the digital realm rather than a tool for innovating new, more effective strategies of resistance. Overall, social media is a critical tool to circumvent the regime, and the opposition has been able to effectively use it to mobilize citizens and gain international support, but it has not aided in the furthering of their political objectives.

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<sup>278</sup> "The Exile Effect: Venezuela's Overseas Opposition and Social Media," Crisis Group, February 24, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/086-exile-effect-venezuelas-overseas-opposition-and-social-media>.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

As the previous chapters have shown, social media has been heavily used in Venezuelan politics. The regime has used social media to implement digital authoritarianism that extends its ability to surveil and repress Venezuelans. These tactics have helped the regime to control the media environment and deter some protests by suppressing the platforms that the opposition uses to organize demonstrations. However, the opposition has still been able to use social media to coordinate, organize, mobilize, and gain international support.

This chapter offers key findings with respect to the research question, sets forth implications for U.S. policy in Venezuela, and makes recommendations for future research into the role of social media in Latin American politics. Overall, the analysis reveals that both the regime and the social movement sector have extensively incorporated social media into their political strategies. The use of social media as a political tool has helped the regime insofar as it has been able to incorporate social media into its broader successful strategy of maintaining power, while the opposition has used social media in part as an extension of otherwise ineffective strategies. However, based on the available evidence in secondary sources, it is not possible to determine definitively which party use of social media has helped more.

Furthermore, while the findings are not a sufficient basis for altering current U.S. policy towards Venezuela, they can potentially provide insight into the use of digital authoritarianism in the process of democratic backsliding in other countries. Lastly, to better understand the role of social media in countries that are experiencing democratic backsliding, future research should be conducted to understand if the algorithms, anonymity, reach, and decentralization of social media platforms inherently favor authoritarian regimes over oppositional social movement sectors.

### **A. KEY FINDINGS**

By internationally accepted measures, Venezuela has experienced democratic backsliding following Chavez's election. During this process, the Venezuelan regime has

effectively used social media to implement digital authoritarianism in the form of surveillance, censorship, disinformation campaigns, internet blackouts, phishing attempts, harassment, and targeted persecution of citizens who criticize the government for the purpose of repressing the opposition and maintaining power. Overall, the regime's use of digital authoritarianism helped it to refine its traditional repressive tactics. The case of Venezuela therefore suggests that digital authoritarianism is not a substitute for traditional authoritarianism: it augments and expands it. The use of digital authoritarianism in Venezuela has contributed to the regime's ability to maintain power by creating a media environment that is not trusted by citizens.<sup>279</sup> A general distrust of media has helped Venezuelan authorities obscure the country's economic and humanitarian crises by conflating information with disinformation. This strategy has resulted in reducing the number of protests and limiting the opposition's options for disseminating information. Digital media has also helped the regime identify dissidents for arrest, spread its message farther and more quickly, and target opposition voices for suppression. By monitoring social media posts, blocking internet access, and undertaking disinformation campaigns, the Venezuelan regime has achieved greater control over its population.

The opposition's objectives in using social media include increased public engagement on political issues and coalescing varied opposition groups around the goal of removing Maduro from power and transitioning Venezuela to democracy. Accordingly, the opposition has used social media to quickly disseminate information domestically and abroad to damage the regime's reputation and bring international awareness to Venezuela's various social calamities, as well as to coordinate, organize, and mobilize Venezuelans to protest the regime. The opposition mobilizes citizens publicly through Facebook and Twitter campaigns and privately communicates essential information about upcoming protests through the encrypted messaging service WhatsApp. The opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, used social media to call upon Venezuelans to protest the regime, to demonstrate support for his claim to power as interim president, and to demand the restoration of the constitutional order. In general, the opposition has used social media to bypass the regime's

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<sup>279</sup> Informe 2018 Latinobarometro.

control over traditional media. That said, while the use of social media by the opposition has been critical to gaining international support for its struggle, social media contributed mixed results to the opposition's objectives and strategies. Overall, social media plays a central role for the opposition since it is one of the few media they can use to resist the government on a large scale with speed and agility. Thus, this research has found that social media has helped both the regime and the opposition. However, it was unable to determine if social media helped one side more than the other largely based on lack of available data on the following:

- Social media platform databases
- Venezuelan politically active social media users within the country versus outside the country
- Venezuelan internet accessibility and use within the country
- The role of external actors using social media regarding Venezuelan politics (e.g., the Venezuelan diaspora, NGOs, foreign governments)
- Internal Venezuelan governmental data measuring the degree to which the government is becoming stronger or weaker as a result of social media
- Protester turnout, voter turnout, and election outcomes in relation to social media use

Overall, in the absence of this data, it is hard to correlate social media activity with tangible political outcomes to determine which political party uses social media more effectively.

In sum, this research has found that neither the opposition nor the regime seems to believe that social media alone can deliver a revolutionary outcome or control a population; it is an extension of their strategies. Based on this analysis, the platforms have limitations based on the sophistication and motivations of the users. Social media's ability to influence political change within a country has potentially been overemphasized by some scholars because the literature does not provide quantitative analysis of its effectiveness and tends to ignore social media's limitations.



## B. U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The current U.S. policy toward Venezuela has been to support and recognize opposition leader Juan Guaidó as interim president; the United States has also provided humanitarian aid to help the country and has sanctioned Venezuelan officials in an effort to transition the country to democracy.<sup>280</sup> While the research findings reveal the role of social media in Venezuelan politics, they do not provide a sufficient basis for trying to use social media to aid in democratic transition. Specifically, this thesis has identified significant roadblocks to policy that seeks to aid Venezuela's transition towards democracy via social media: the regime controls the internet service provider, giving the regime the ability to easily block content, and it does not properly maintain the internet infrastructure, limiting internet service in rural areas. These two problems limit U.S. foreign policy options since the U.S. does not have physical presence and so cannot help build a communication infrastructure or distribute information through non-electronic means. Moreover, the United States supports the opposition and their strategies to counter the regime, but the analysis revealed that having the ability to quickly disseminate information, coordinate, and mobilize are not sufficient to transition Venezuela into a democratic government. To influence democratic change in Venezuela would require a much greater investment from the United States.

Despite these roadblocks, the United States will need to find ways to overcome these obstacles and use these tools to influence outcomes in the South American region. The United States has shifted its focus to great power competition and directed its efforts to combat the threats posed by Russia and China. This competition is prominent in Latin America, and Russia and China have exported digital authoritarian toolkits to countries in

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<sup>280</sup> "U.S. Reaffirms Support for Venezuela's Guaidó, Sees No Talks with Maduro," *Reuters*, February 3, 2021, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-venezuela-idUSKBN2A33AU>; "Venezuela, Humanitarian Assistance," U.S. Agency for International Development, July 16, 2021, <https://www.usaid.gov/humanitarian-assistance/venezuela-regional>; "Venezuela-Related Sanctions," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/venezuela-related-sanctions/>.

the area, threatening the United States' democratic ideals and security.<sup>281</sup> This development could enable Russia and China to export their tactics and software to other Latin America countries, thus expanding their influence in the region. The Venezuelan regime's successful use of digital authoritarianism could also prompt other Latin American countries to use these tactics. Other states might observe that Venezuela's successful authoritarian regime uses digital authoritarianism, which could prompt other Latin American countries to use these tactics to repress, surveil, and control their populations. Expanding our knowledge of how social media has enabled Venezuela's descent into autocracy or challenged Maduro's effort to remain in power could help the United States develop a strategy to promote democratic values through social media and deter authoritarians in the Latin American region.<sup>282</sup>

### C. FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research can provide a basis for further research into the role in social media in the process of democratic backsliding in other countries and politics. In particular, this research could be expanded to compare what social media tactics are similar within Latin America and how the countries differ in their regimes' use of social media to erode democracy. The case of Venezuela reveals that a potential first warning sign that a regime will use social media to implement digital authoritarianism is that it will repress and control traditional media to deter dissent and silence criticism. Furthermore, a regime could potentially implement or mandate the use of a government-issued identifying card that has a software imbedded to track the citizens online movements. Overall, this research provides insight into how Venezuela transitioned into an authoritarian regime and how the use of social media helped the regime to further that process. These findings can inform other case studies of countries that might be experiencing the same phenomenon.

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<sup>281</sup> Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole, *Exporting Digital Authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese models*, Democracy & Disorder (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2019), 1, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/exporting-digital-authoritarianism/>.

<sup>282</sup> Naazneem Barma, Brent Durbin, and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "Digital Authoritarianism: Finding Our Way Out of the Darkness," War on the Rocks, February 10, 2020, <http://warontherocks.com/2020/02/digital-authoritarianism-finding-our-way-out-of-the-darkness/>.

Furthermore, in order to better inform U.S. policy, future research should be done to understand if the properties of social media platforms, such as algorithms, anonymity, reach, and decentralization of social media platforms, tend to help a regime or the social movement sector more. If there is a regime and opposition within a country that both have efficient strategies, does social media routinely give the advantage to the social movement sector or the regime? Additionally, to more accurately assess how effectively social media mobilizes political protest, a quantitative study should be conducted to see if the number of people posting on social media about protests typically correlates to how many people participate in demonstrations. Lastly, other future research can examine if social media disinformation campaigns by the opposition or the regime result in domestic policy change or contribute to governmental structure change. Being able to study the correlation between posts and outcomes can help determine social media's political effectiveness.

To expand the knowledge of digital authoritarianism in the country, further research can be done on how the Cuban government influenced the Venezuelan government via both security and intelligence assistance—in particular, how the Cubans served as a consultant to Venezuela regarding online dissenters and state media narratives. Studying Venezuela's drug and corruption activities in relation to gaining supporters and how these activities affect the social media sphere would likewise help determine how effective social media is for the regime. Lastly, studying the migration and refugee problem in relation to social media could help determine if the majority of opposition users are outside or inside the country and correlate these numbers to political effects within Venezuela.

#### **D. CLOSING THOUGHTS**

As this research has revealed, the use of social media assists the Venezuelan regime in maintaining power and repressing the population. It also aids the opposition in organizing, coordinating, and planning efforts to counter those in power by decentralizing and hiding its communications, disseminating information, and organizing protests. Ultimately, social media does not replace the traditional strategies of the regime or the opposition but rather augments their existing strategies. However, understanding which it helps more overall will require more research and access to social media databases.

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