



Government supporters hold a life-size image of Venezuela's late President Hugo Chavez during a rally in La Guaira, Venezuela, Friday, Jan. 25, 2019. Had the AP photographer zoomed out farther, you would have seen that the pro-Socialists United rally was minuscule compared to the protests against it last week. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd) photo credit: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Last week saw a seismic shift in the fortunes of Venezuela's ruling Socialists United Party (PSUV). The future is not bright for these guys.

The leadership of the U.S. and European Union called for new elections and no longer recognized Nicolas Maduro as the country's president. But way more important than that was the fact that out of the hundreds of thousands of people that protested against PSUV, thousands were from the shanty towns and some were from the so-called "collectives"—PSUV's makeshift, subsidized vigilantes who, until now, have been in Maduro's back pocket.

For the past year, they have all witnessed their friends and family get laid off, go without food, go from working class to destitute, or high-tail it with nothing but the clothes on their backs into Brazil and Colombia. Over 3 million of them have fled Venezuela thanks to the mayhem of the Maduro Administration.

PSUV is a shadow of its former self. Gone are the heydays of the oil boom and *El Comandante* Hugo Chavez, the Che Guevera of the 2000s. All that money is gone or hidden in safes in some general's mansion in Los Roques.

The only thing keeping Maduro in power is the military brass. For many Venezuelans, and surely for some of the foreign policy establishment in Washington, these guys are up to no good. Some are in the narco-trafficking trade, left open from the fall of the Cali and Medellin cartels of Colombia. PSUV has gone from Chavez's experiment with Cuba-style socialism, to what many consider nothing but a criminal gang.

Find me a PSUV official who is broke. Venezuela, on the other hand, has defaulted on every bond issue except the PdVSA 2020s, maturing next year. Guess who is going to have to pay for that? Not the wealthy (what's left of them), who live their lives in dollars.



A woman is offered cash as she begs at a wholesale food market in Caracas, Venezuela, Monday, Jan. 28, 2019. Economists agree that the longer the standoff between the U.S.-backed opposition leader Juan Guaido and President Nicolas Maduro drags on, the more regular Venezuelans are likely to suffer. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd) photo credit: ASSOCIATED PRESS

It's not easy to survey Venezuelans. Many have fled. Some won't talk. In May 2017, Vanderbilt University's Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey showed that only 18% admitted they would vote for PSUV. That was a year before a vote was actually held. Maduro's courts disqualified numerous opposition candidates who had a chance to beat him. He was sworn in for his second term on January 10.

The LAPOP poll was conducted face-to-face with roughly 1,500 Venezuelans, many from the shanty towns that were once the base of PSUV's revolutionary *Chavismo* movement. They haven't done any follow-up surveys since due to

security concerns.

Noam Lupu is the associate director of the Latin America Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt in Nashville. He has been working on Venezuela as a political science scholar since the early 2000s, the heyday of Chavez's Bolivarian revolution, named after Simon Bolivar, another big-thinking leader who dreamed of ways Latin America could defeat colonial Europe.

"The government has been losing support for a long time now," Lupu tells me. "When they lose support, they resort to violence or jailing anyone who opposes them. But now the economy is so unsustainable that something's got to give and people have nothing to lose anymore."

The Obama administration was the first to sanction Venezuela. Obama went after individuals in the military and top PSUV politicians. Two years later, in August 2017, the Trump administration banned purchase of new bond issues, and then sanctioned the sale of agricultural commodities, medicines and medical equipment.

Those were the harshest sanctions because they hit a population already reeling from food and medical shortages.

To measure trade between the two countries since that month, U.S. exports to Venezuela totaled \$339.2 million in Aug. 2017, with imports worth \$949.5 million. Export values remain steady. By August 2018, the U.S. sold \$436.3 million worth of goods to Venezuela and imported \$1.22 billion, most of it in the form of crude oil. So two-way trade between the two has not been shut down. Threats to target Venezuelan oil, however, are circulating in Washington rumor mills.

The Trump administration wants to see PSUV leave.

But so do most people in Venezuela. Considering the Vanderbilt poll of 2017 had 67.5% of survey respondents who identified as PSUV supporters saying the economy was getting worse, one can imagine how they would feel about the economy today. Hint: It's super-duper worse.



A mural of late Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez in Caracas. (AP Photo/Ariana Cubillos) photo credit: ASSOCIATED PRESS

“There seems to be the view in Washington that the only thing keeping PSUV afloat is their drug money, and the rest is oil, Russia and China,” says Lupu.

Russia and China have been financing Venezuela in order to help PdVSA oil production. Russia also promised free shipments of grain.



Jorge Arreaza, Venezuela's foreign minister, speaks during a United Nations Security Council meeting in New York, on January 26, 2019. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took the U.S. effort to recognize Juan Guaido as Venezuela's rightful leader to the United Nations, part of a broader campaign to replace President Nicolas Maduro, and said the choice is between freedom and mayhem.

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Despite calls from European leaders like Emmanuel Macron for PSUV to allow elections, something they promised two years ago, there appears to be no obvious scenario for them to step down. It would require some sort of national reconciliation between the opposition parties, including left-wing opposition parties and the ruling Socialists United. A national reconciliation would also require amnesty for PSUV officials, both elected and appointed, who are known drug traffickers.

“It’s a fairly large group of people you’d have to provide protections for,” says Lupu about PSUV. “You have a population—the vast majority now—that wants something different than this government.”