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THE INDEPENDENCE OF VENEZUELA? RESOURCE NATIONALISM IN THE 2024 ELECTIONS


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

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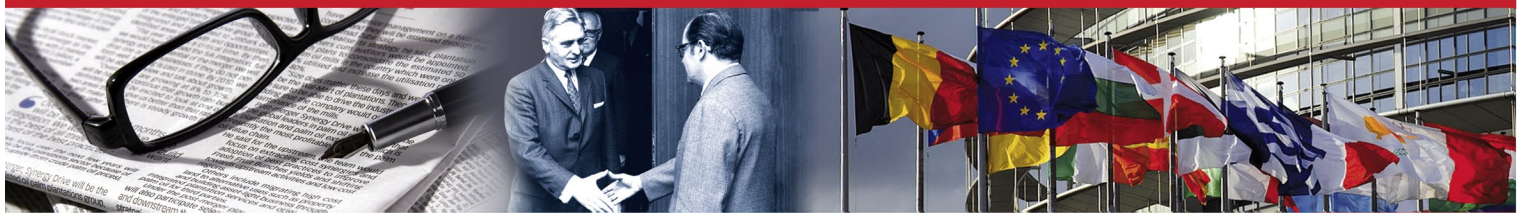
THE INDEPENDENCE OF VENEZUELA? RESOURCE NATIONALISM IN THE 2024 ELECTIONS

“Before the people of Venezuela, and before the world, I can say...” The man who has led Venezuela for more than ten years is dressed in a synthetic track suit on which the colours and stars of the Venezuelan flag are diagonally draped. He continues with a raised voice: “...that I am Nicolás Maduro Moro, the revealed president of Venezuela, and I will defend our democracy, our law and our people!” An ecstatic crowd of supporters, many of them wearing the red caps of his party, bursts into cheers: “¡Favorito! ¡Favorito!”. Maduro triumphantly declares that today is the day of the “independence of Venezuela, of the dignity of the Venezuelan people!” The rest of his speech mainly consists of abuse at the address of the opposition (“*el fascismo*”, “*los demonios*”, “*los terroristas*”, “ugly people on the inside and the outside”), which had supposedly lost the presidential elections held on 28 July 2024. He concludes: “They couldn’t do it with sanctions, they couldn’t do it with aggression, they couldn’t do it with threats, they couldn’t do it now, and they can never harm the dignity of the Venezuelan people!”

The opposition is not convinced of Maduro’s victory, nor is the international community. Contrary to the norm, no official numbers are released by the National Electoral Council (Maduro claims this was due to a “massive hack by demons – I don’t need to say from which country”ⁱⁱ). Polls indicate that Maduro’s main opponent, centrist Edmundo González, would have comfortably won the elections with about 65% of the votes.ⁱⁱⁱ With regards to the cited aggression and threats, these did occur, but it was the opposition, and not Maduro’s followers, who fell victim to most of them. Pressure upon voters occurred through various means, ranging from the use of public vehicles for campaigning, to the intimidation of individuals and companies linked to the opposition, and from the creation of checkpoints in the immediate vicinity of voting stations, to actual violence perpetrated by government actors to people associated with the opposition.^{iv}

Protests erupted against Maduro’s alleged victory, but these were violently suppressed by government forces.^v The internationally recognized president-elect Edmundo González, airing from the Dutch embassy where he was hiding, called upon Maduro to stop the violence, addressing the latter as ‘*Señor Nicolás Maduro*’ instead of the customary ‘*Presidente*’, stating that: “Demanding compliance with the Constitution is not a crime.”^{vi}

Mere months ago, it wasn’t foreseen that Edmundo González would play an important role in these elections. He was only catapulted into the position of Maduro’s opponent after two other opposition leaders (María Corina



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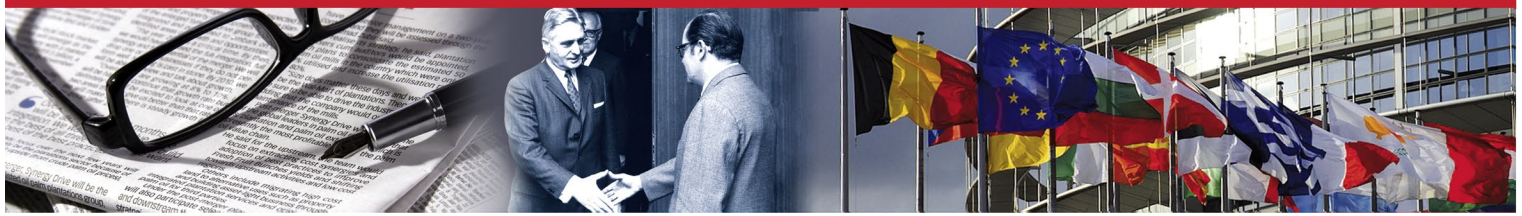
Machado and Corina Yoris) were effectively prevented from registering as candidates, with the help of accusations of corruption, arrests and intimidation of their party members, and tampering with the digital platform through which candidates were supposed to register.^{vii} If González, much less popular than the two Corinas, still received two thirds of the votes, this only underlines how most Venezuelans are willing to vote for virtually any candidate, as long as they are not Maduro. It doesn't matter though: Venezuela seems past the point where votes translate into political appointments.

The recent events in Venezuela are extreme, even for a continent that has historically been known for non-democratic changes of government. It may seem surprising, after such a blatant election fraud, to hear the culprit utter a phrase like “the independence of Venezuela, the dignity of the Venezuelan people”. This phrase can only be understood within the context in which Maduro and his predecessor, the late Hugo Chávez, have consistently framed themselves: as men who would end the centuries-long pillaging of Latin American resources. The reasoning underlying their discourse is simple: neocolonial or imperial actors (“fascists, demons, and terrorists”) are attempting to sabotage Latin America from within, in order to facilitate foreign actors' access to the continent's resources. This framing has allowed Maduro to present his increasingly authoritarian government as a means to defy the international extractivist network in which Latin America would be held captive.

The idea that such exploitation of Latin American resources has occurred is not that far-fetched. Multiple examples can be cited where such a dynamic has been and can indeed still be observed, involving Latin American resources like silver, gold, rubber, guano, and even bananas. The question, however, is whether Maduro's government is offering an alternative. The expansion of mining activities during his government, including in the Venezuelan Amazon, seems to indicate that he is actually supporting and augmenting extractive activities in the country, with the vast majority of the extracted resources being meant for export.^{viii} However, as I will argue, very little of this is used to actually improve the well-being of the Venezuelan populace.

The discourse that Maduro relies upon is what political scientist Thea Riofrancos calls “radical resource nationalism”. By this, she refers to a type of nationalism that seeks to advance countries' economic independence by a rapidly expanding use of natural resources, coupled with increased state control over their exploitation.^{ix} Often, such “resource nationalist” politicians do not stop the cycle of exploitation, but rather intensify it, while redirecting the revenues through new channels to actors that are favourable to them. This, in turn, augments their power, as they are the ones who get to decide who will benefit from the augmented resource revenue, and whose concerns do not need to be taken into account. This becomes an instrument through which political supporters can be kept satisfied, while the voices of those who are affected by resource extraction are silenced.

Venezuela's best-known anthropologist, Fernando Coronil (1944-2011), famously referred to the governing apparatus of his home country as “the magical state”. Ever since the 1930s, Venezuelan politicians have used natural resources to buy the country out of international trade arrangements considered to be exploitative, and to carry out whatever policies would be most popular among their voters. The sheer abundance of these resources (Venezuela is considered the country with the largest oil reserves in the world) made it unnecessary to negotiate with other political or economic actors. The state, meaning the sitting president, was cast in the role of the magician with a high hat full of handouts for supporters.^x



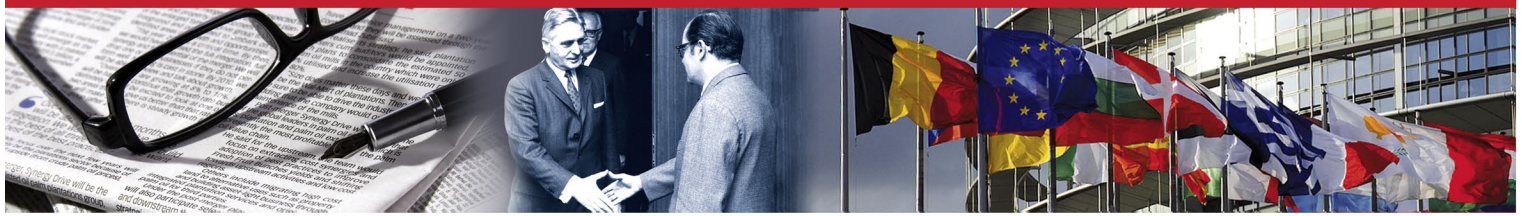
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Abundant resources can make democracies vulnerable. The idea of the “banana republic”, an often-cited stereotype to describe a Latin American country depending on a single resource and getting plagued by rigged elections and coups d'état, is quite the opposite of Coronil's “magical state”. In the “banana republic”, authoritarian leaders are installed with help from foreign governments (from the USA, typically), which in turn expect the new *presidente* to help protect international business interests. Military dictators like Venezuela's Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1950-58), and afterwards the juntas ruling Argentina, Chile and Brazil between the 60s and 80s were not only installed (with explicit or implicit support from the Pentagon) to “clean” their respective countries from – real or alleged – communists, but also to protect the economic interests of local elites and foreign powers.

This strategy did not always work as foreseen, though. If the goal is to quell communist rebellions, the military can be expected to use whatever means available. But foreign power wrongly expected these military leaders to put their own country's interests second. Things went smoothly as long as national and foreign interests aligned, for example when the expansion of extractivist projects would augment both exports and levels of “development”. But just as often military governments would favour decisions that could be described as “resource nationalism”. Chile's military dictator August Pinochet (in post 1973-90), for example, while in all senses the best student in Milton Friedman's neoliberal school of economics, did not reverse the nationalization, by his communist predecessor, of his country's copper industry. Similarly, the military junta ruling Brazil in the 1970s, rather than opening the market to allow foreign companies to settle in the country, strengthened the state's mining company Vale do Rio Doce and allowed it to expand into the Amazonian space with extraction and production facilities of unprecedented dimensions. The returns on resource exports mostly benefited segments of society that were already privileged, while the military dictatorships further marginalized Indigenous and Black populations, women, sexual minorities, and political opponents. To accuse these dictators of ruthless plundering of resources is, however, too easy: their policies reflected their resource nationalism, and in this aspect, they had much in common with the communists that they so vehemently opposed.

During the 1970s and 80s, a time when most of Latin America was suffering under authoritarian governments, Venezuela was a beacon of democracy. The last Venezuelan dictatorship ended in 1958, and since then, elections had been held every five years. The first to assume the highest office in the newly democratic country, Rómulo Betancourt (in post 1959-64), had in his young years been exiled as an alleged communist, and in those years he had authored a booklet, called *Problemas venezolanos*.^{xi} In it, he displayed the same resource nationalism as many of his contemporaries, as well as a passionate belief in the power of industrialization and the diversification of the Venezuelan economy, which had been awfully dependent on one single resource: oil.^{xii} One of Betancourt's main agenda items was the renegotiation of deals with international oil companies operating in the country. In spite of this “resource nationalist” agenda, he received support from an unlikely source: from the USA, where John F. Kennedy wanted to avoid Betancourt's Venezuela becoming a “second Cuba”. Kennedy needed to be sure that Venezuelan stayed firmly in the capitalist camp.^{xiii} Like the dictatorship in Brazil, the Venezuelan democracy under Betancourt and his successors invested heavily in steel and aluminium production in the Venezuelan Amazon.^{xiv} Over the course of the 1970s, the course that the Venezuelan government was choosing became increasingly criticized by ordinary Venezuelans, who thought that the reinvestment of oil revenue in new sectors (like steel and aluminium) in a remote region (the Venezuelan Amazon is the forgotten half of the country) was unnecessary. According to them, oil revenue would be better spent on poverty reduction in the half of the country where most of the population resided. Shocks in the oil price over the 1980s gave the critical push that caused this current of thought to become dominant. When Venezuela could no longer pay the large debts that it had incurred for



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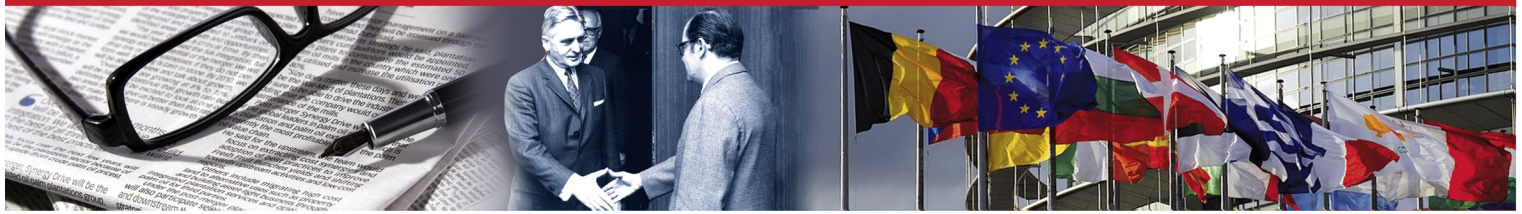
industrial development, and foreign actors imposed a series of restructuring programmes upon the country, violent protests erupted in the streets of Caracas (“*el Caracazo*”, 1989). While the army was called in to quell the protests, a significant share of the young military sympathized with the protesters. These soldiers united in the *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200*, called after the legendary Latin American freedom fighter Simón Bolívar. The leader of the movement? Hugo Chávez.

Chávez launched a failed coup attempt in 1992, but eventually rose to presidency through elections, in 1999. In the early 21st century, his programme of increased government control over production facilities and resource revenue was a countercurrent in Latin America. The 1990s, with most dictators gone, had been a time when the continent moved into the opposite direction. In Brazil, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who as a sociology professor in military-ruled Brazil had been a follower of the dependency theory, was elected to the highest office in 1995, and reversed his previous convictions by selling the country’s crown jewels. First and foremost, he privatized the state-owned mining company Vale do Rio Doce. Several Latin American countries partially liberalized their energy markets. In Bolivia, protests broke out after local authorities attempted to privatize water in the city of Cochabamba. A new Latin American leftist movement emerged, distancing itself from the centre-left (exemplified by ‘Washington socialists’ like Cardoso) that was perceived as having sold out Latin America’s resources. The new generation of leftist Latin American leaders, including Brazil’s Luiz Inácio ‘Lula’ da Silva and Bolivia’s Evo Morales, looked to Venezuela for inspiration.

During the 20 years I’ve travelled through Latin America, I have had numerous conversations with members of social movements, with environmental activists, with public university professors, and with former anti-dictatorships *guerrilleros*. There is one topic that I have learned to avoid in most of these conversations: Venezuela. Even people with whom I share values with regards to social equality, environmental protection, attention to high-quality education, democracy and respect for human rights become defensive when I mention the lack of respect for any of these values in Venezuela. Until recently, Latin American leftist leaders, like Lula, have blindly supported the Bolivarian administrations in Venezuela.^{xv} Only this year, as election fraud became all too apparent, Lula for the first time distanced himself from Maduro, stating that the latter “owes us an explanation”^{xvi} – a major shift in the relations between the Brazilian and the Venezuelan left, even though Lula’s own Workers’ Party had promptly recognized Maduro’s supposed victory.^{xvii}

The Venezuelan leadership today is anything but the typical example of heroic “revolutionary” resistance against the foreign plundering of Latin American resources. This becomes clear when we look at the recent events in the Venezuelan Amazon: a theme very central to most “progressive” discourse in Latin America, but marginal in Venezuelan political discourse (in spite of its size). Hardly discussed, Venezuela may currently be the country with the fastest-rising deforestation rates – mostly due to the contentious *Arco Minero* policy.^{xviii}

In 2016, Maduro announced the “Mining Arc”, an ambitious project to regularize illegal mining (gold, diamonds) and promote industrial mining (bauxite, iron ore) in an area of 112,000 km² (over 10% of the country, and three times Switzerland) of Amazonian rainforest. It includes several national forests that according to a 1989 regulation, later included in the Constitution, are destined for the use of Indigenous populations. Ramón Velásquez Araguayán, Minister of the Popular Power for Ecosocialism and Water, was quick to add that all this industrial and wildcat mining would occur “in harmony and respect with nature.” He presented the plan as being “not the imposition of the government”, but instead a popular demand from those “who rightly want to regularize” illegal mining.^{xix} He failed to mention that the presence of so many gold mines in the Venezuelan Amazon, which his government was



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now legalizing and encouraging to expand, had been the result of a previous programme (the *Misión Piar*, under Hugo Chávez), which had aimed to reduce unemployment among unskilled people in the Venezuelan cities.^{xx}

In April 2022, when Venezuela had just reopened its borders after the pandemic, I spent some days at a university in the Venezuelan Amazon. Professors I interviewed expressed their deep concern for the state of the Venezuelan economy and environment in general, and complained about how funding for activities meant to introduce students to their Amazonian environment was being misappropriated by administrators. A retired professor of environmental studies stated that he hadn't bought any new clothing for the past five years, as his pension would not allow him to buy both clothing and food. In the town, people hardly left their homes, as gasoline had become prohibitively expensive and was moreover rationed – in the country with the largest oil reserves in the world. Going out on the streets was ill-advised, as the population – was hungry and violence rampant. It was clear that, even so close to the actual area of the *Arco Minero*, the population has not seen any of the revenues that were generated by the policy. For a desperate person in urban Venezuela, what would be a way out of this misery? Well, one could join the army of informal miners. Even members of the Indigenous communities are now lured into working in the gold mines, where they are heavily abused and do not receive a fair share of the revenues of their operations. The *Arco Minero* policy did not democratize access to mining sites, much to the contrary – it has enabled the creation of a mining anarchy in which informal armed structures (criminal gangs called *sindicatos*) have control.^{xxi} According to reports presented in 2020 and 2022 by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, these armed groups – militias, criminal factions, and even Colombian guerrillas – extort workers, and punish them with serious mutilation or even death. Children as young as nine years old work in mining, while trafficking in girls and women for prostitution has increased sharply.^{xxii} As a result, Venezuela was in 2021 declared a “conflict mineral” zone by European legislation,^{xxiii} which prevents direct export to any EU country. Venezuelan gold consequently turns up in places like Turkey and Dubai,^{xxiv} or it is illegally trafficked to Guyana or Brazil, with dozens of small planes crossing the borders on a daily basis.^{xxv} As a result, government revenue from gold mining is much less than foreseen, as approximately eighty percent of the gold mined in the region is exported out of the country without bringing in any tax revenues.^{xxvi} The state is reliant on non-state armed actors to support law and order efforts, which has transformed the Venezuelan Amazon in a special paramilitary zone, where no protection of rights exists.

Indigenous groups in the Amazon cite a long list of adverse effects, including: deforestation of large areas of forest, diversion of rivers, contamination of water with mercury and other toxic substances, biodiversity loss, changing natural cycles of ecosystems, land degradation, increases in malaria, measles and sexually transmitted diseases, alcoholism, drug use, prostitution, delinquency, the loss of land and livelihoods, and the presence of armed groups in their territories.^{xxvii} This explains in large part why so many Indigenous Venezuelans have in recent years taken refuge in neighbouring countries.

Venezuelan leaders have repeatedly blamed the economic malaise that has hit the country on the economic sanctions installed after the previous truncated elections, in 2018. Indeed, Venezuelan oil exports have plummeted between 2015 and 2022, but not so much because of the sanctions – it still had enough countries to export its oil to, including sympathetic neighbours like Brazil – but because all the export-based industries in the country had since Chávez's years been turned into political instruments. The Venezuelan government has consistently replaced experienced and knowledgeable engineers in the oil, steel and aluminium industries with loyal party members, sometimes even handing over factories to collectives of workers with great panache. Salaries of former decision-makers in the industry were put on par with manual labourers' salaries. This, combined with the increasing political



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repression and the increasing insecurity, has caused many experienced managers to leave Venezuela, or at least the industry. The industries provided the government with the necessary revenue to execute its social programmes (which in itself were often political instruments), as well as for the setting up of parallel power structures meant to marginalize democratic institutions. In the meantime, no revenue was reinvested in the extractive industries. Technical deterioration (a lack of maintenance, basically) forced these productive facilities to close, one by one. Amidst all this destruction, the government can only deny accountability for this situation with recourse to the mightiest weapon of the 21st century: the use of “fake news” – blaming the entire situation to “demons, fascists, and terrorists”.

Rafael Sánchez, a former lecturer of anthropology at the Geneva Graduate Institute, cites a remarkable character in a 2020 article about “post-truth and populism in Venezuela”.^{xxviii} He used to bring up the same source in classes and lectures as well: Humpty Dumpty, from *Alice in Wonderland*. How can so many people across Latin America support the outright political repression, the policies seemingly designed to augment poverty, the dismantling of the intellectual structures of the country, and the most ruthless destruction of the Amazonian rainforest, only because they are carried out by a government that places itself on the “progressive” side of the debate, the side that argues against the plundering of natural resources by foreign actors? Rafael may have argued that Maduro, prior to his speech about “the independence of Venezuela, the dignity of the Venezuelan people”, must have been reading *Alice in Wonderland*, especially the part where Humpty Dumpty tells Alice: “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

*Dedicated to the memory of my friend Rafael Sánchez (1950-2024),
without whom I would not have been able to conduct research in his home country Venezuela.*

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