



Venezuela: 'In the face of deepening economic and social crisis, discontent can only be silenced with political-electoral manoeuvres and repression'



At the end of a year that has seen economic crisis, political turmoil and mass protests in Venezuela, CIVICUS speaks to Nizar El Fakih, a human rights lawyer and Director of Proiuris. Proiuris is a Venezuelan civil society organisation focused on the study and defence of the rule of law, and on the denunciation of its violations.

1. What led to the founding of Proiuris in 2015, and what are its aims?

Proiuris was formally established in 2015, after a [wave of arbitrary mass arrests](#) of demonstrators took place in 2014. Our original purpose was to join efforts to offer legal help to people who were arbitrarily detained for exercising their legitimate rights, including the right to protest. Proiuris subsequently expanded our scope of work to include research, documentation and dissemination of civil and political rights violations as well as violations of economic and social rights, forced by the circumstances of a country in which the human rights problem is severe, systematic and cross-cutting.

2. What have been the main causes of the discontent and the protests that took place in April-June 2017?

The main cause of the protests was the huge and ongoing economic and social crisis, the most dramatic expressions of which are food and medicine shortages disproportionately affecting the most impoverished sectors of the Venezuelan population. Men, women, older people, boys, girls and adolescents rummage through the trash in search of food, and the [shortage of medications](#) reaches 85 per cent (and up 95 per cent for medicines used for the treatment of chronic diseases) according to the calculations of representatives of the pharmaceutical industry in Venezuela. The health of patients with chronic diseases declines and they die because the drugs they need are very expensive and the state is not supplying them in a timely manner. The [shortage of antiretroviral drugs](#) for people living with HIV/AIDS, for example, is now the worst in 20 years. This is a crisis without precedent in Venezuela. In the face of it the government tries to wash off its responsibility by invoking an alleged '[economic war](#)' they claim [is](#) being promoted from abroad.

The social and economic tragedy has deepened as a result of the government's inefficiency in responding to contingencies. But the complex humanitarian crisis Venezuela is going through has structural causes: it is the result of the progressive destruction of the country's productive

apparatus and its increasing dependence on imports, which in turn have diminished substantially due to the fall in international oil prices.

In short, the Venezuelan state is currently not able to guarantee its citizens' right to food. The health situation is also extremely serious. For instance, epidemics such as malaria and diphtheria, which had been eradicated from Venezuela 50 years ago, have returned and caused deaths that are known only [unofficially](#), because the authorities insist on illegally hiding the epidemiological reports that show how serious the situation is.

The progressive deterioration in the provision of basic services fuelled the desire for a national leadership change. Between March and June 2017 thousands of people [took to the streets](#) of Venezuelan towns and cities to express their discontent.

3. How has the government reacted to the protests? Has the Venezuelan citizenry continued to mobilise?

Far from addressing the legitimate demands of the population, the Venezuelan government reacted with [extreme violence](#), a violence much greater than that applied during the [2014 protests](#). The [official report](#) issued by the Public Ministry indicates that there were 121 deaths, many of them at the hands of officers with the state security forces and of violent -sometimes armed - groups that call themselves 'collectives', which operate with the support or the acquiescence of the state. Unofficially, the count of detainees exceeded 7,000, many of whom were subjected to military jurisdiction although they were civilians.

The demonstrations between March and June 2017 were clearly protests against the government. Needless to say, the government has done everything possible to [discredit](#) them, including by calling them terrorist acts and characterising what happened in the course of protests as military crimes. In an authentic democratic system, there would be institutional checks and balances preventing these kinds of presidential excesses, but in Venezuela the government has co-opted all institutions and makes efforts to censor any form of dissent. This has been a decisive component of the current crisis.

The right to demonstrate peacefully and without weapons is enshrined in Article 68 of the Constitution of Venezuela, which establishes the state's obligation to ensure that demonstrations take place without exceeding established limitations. However, the Supreme Court of Justice's Constitutional Chamber has blurred the guarantees of this right through a regressive [interpretation](#) of Article 68, to the extent of making the right to demonstrate conditional on prior authorisation by the main civil authority in the relevant jurisdiction. In practice, this has turned the centre of Caracas, where the main public institutions are headquartered, into forbidden territory for anti-government demonstrations, since it is located within the Libertador municipality, whose mayor belongs to the ruling party.

The brutal government repression, along with a lack of a leadership able to channel citizen discontent, ended up weakening the protests. However, the economic and social crisis has continued deepening to the point where it has been impossible to silence the causes of discontent and dissent other than through political and electoral manoeuvres. Among these manoeuvres, a special mention should be given to the establishment of a self-proclaimed 'National Constituent Assembly' with plenipotentiary powers, which has been convened, elected and established outside the Constitution and has encroached on the jurisdiction of the National Assembly, the only opposition-controlled public institution.

4. Did independent media and civil society organisations experience restrictions when it came to documenting what happened in the protests?

Journalists and media, both national and international, have been the victims of censorship and government reprisals for reporting on social conflict in Venezuela. On 25 June 2017, the National Union of Press Workers [reported](#) that between 31 March and 24 June, 376 media workers had been assaulted, and that in 60 per cent of these cases, those responsible were military officers from the Bolivarian National Guard.

The siege on the press during the 2017 protests provides additional evidence of the systematic policy of repression carried out by the government through the disproportionate use of force to control demonstrations.

But freedom of expression is a human right and all citizens must have guarantees to exercise it. In the context of the protests, many citizens were brutally repressed for documenting and disseminating information on what was happening on the streets of Venezuela. And they were not just arrested, but they also suffered physical aggressions and the [theft of their cameras and cell phones](#).

5. How has civil society responded to these rights violations?

Organised civil society that has an advocacy mission reacted in various ways: from submitting formal complaints, despite being aware of the mechanisms of impunity at work within a justice administration system that is subordinate to the government, to developing various creative forms of expression, including a [‘Wall of Shame’](#) exposing the government officials that were deemed responsible for the repression and violation of human rights. Various forms of artistic expression - singing, dancing, and theatre performances - were also incorporated into the protests and deployed in public places such as squares and shopping malls.

Other important reactions were the formation of alliances with the media to publicise abuses, and the organisation of [protests by groups of neighbours](#) taking place close to their places of residence.

6. Do you think the responses of the international community to the situation in Venezuela have been adequate? What support does Venezuelan civil society need from its foreign, regional and global counterparts?

In the face of the government’s indifference, the opposition sectors that promote political change have devoted their efforts to drawing the attention of the international community to what is happening in Venezuela. For its part, the Venezuelan human rights movement has carried out invaluable work to document human rights violations and bring them to the attention of international organisations. However, it has not been easy to compete with the official propaganda apparatus, which goes out of its way to show that Venezuela has a vigorous democracy and that the chaos that resonates with the international press is part of the alleged ‘war’ being waged by imperialistic powers against Venezuela.

At this point, our priority is to get international organisations to admit that a complex [humanitarian crisis](#) is taking place in Venezuela that the state cannot or will not resolve. In that sense, it is significant that, for instance, when issuing its [2017 World Malaria Report](#), the World Health Organization for the first time explicitly recognised that there is a humanitarian crisis underway in our country. And beyond mere recognition of the humanitarian crisis, it is vital

that, where necessary, international organisations are flexible with their protocols in order to address it, to provide Venezuelans the help they need, especially food and medicine.

Venezuela is not the first country in the world to suffer an authoritarian government that tries to perpetuate its power. Venezuelan civil society would appreciate their peers in Latin America and the world sharing their accumulated organisational experience to fight against the system that oppresses us, and ask that they contribute to denouncing and making visible the systematic abuses that are being committed in Venezuela. We Venezuelans would be grateful if the outside world looked into the complex humanitarian crisis affecting us through a human rights lens, that is, on the basis of a recognition of human dignity and by means of an effective exercise of solidarity. We are confident that the true promoters and defenders of human rights in any part of the world will not remain indifferent to the incontrovertible fact that there are children who are starving to death in Venezuela.

- **Civic space in Venezuela is rated as ‘repressed’ in the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), indicating serious restrictions in the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.**
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