

# Unfed and unwashed How chavismo makes the taps run dry in Venezuela

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Plentiful rain plus Bolivarian socialism equals water shortages



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IT IS the rainy season in Caracas and the reservoirs are full. But most of the 5.3m people who live in and near the city have not had regular running water for at least a month. Venezuela is an oil-rich country that cannot pay for food and medicines. Now its autocratic regime is showing that it can create shortages even when nature provides abundance. "I've forgotten what it is like to bathe in running water," says Soledad Rodríguez, a graphic designer.

Supplying Caracas with water is not easy. The city is 1,000 metres (3,300 feet) above sea level. The nearest big river, the Tuy, flows on the other side of a mountain range. Earlier governments had cracked these problems. Marcos Pérez Jiménez, a dictator in the 1950s, oversaw construction of a system of pumps and reservoirs that kept up with the city's fast growth.

Hugo Chávez, whose election as president began Venezuela's "Bolivarian revolution" in 1999, improved water supply to poor areas but did not upgrade infrastructure. By 2005 shortages were a problem. Chávez, who died in 2013, responded, characteristically, with lots of cash and publicity and little supervision. He and Nicolás Maduro, who succeeded him as president, spent \$10bn to little effect.

Now the city is getting less water than it did in 1999, says José de Viana, who in pre-Chávez days was president of Hidrocapital, a state-owned water utility. The main job requirement for workers is loyalty to the leftist regime. This has led to its “de-professionalisation”, says Mr de Viana.

Hyperinflation and depression—the economy has shrunk by half since Mr Maduro took over—make matters worse. The company cannot afford spare parts for vehicles. The minimum salary at Hidrocapital is worth less than three dollars a month at the market exchange rate. For that pay, many employees do not even pretend to work. Just 20 of Hidrocapital’s 400 maintenance teams are functioning. Two aqueducts are supplying Caracas with less than half the normal amount of water because the firm has not maintained pumping stations. Water is ridiculously cheap, which is part of the problem. The monthly water bill for a three-bedroom house is 20,000 bolívares, less than three cents.

Drier parts of Venezuela have both water shortages and power cuts. Domenico Clara, who runs a bakery in Maracaibo, capital of the oil industry, says power is cut off five to seven times a day. Without refrigeration ingredients spoil; electronic payment systems don’t work so customers can’t pay (there is a shortage of cash, too).

Mr Maduro, who will probably be re-elected in a rigged vote scheduled for May 20th, may be getting nervous. Last month *caraqueños* living near the presidential palace, normally loyal to the regime, protested noisily against water shortages. They calmed down after the government dispatched a single water truck. With expectations so low, sops like that may earn Mr Maduro a few votes.