

**Food Scarcity, Local Committees for Supply and Production (CLAP)  
and Political Clientelism in Venezuela during Nicolas Maduro's presidency**

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## Introduction

On April 3, 2016, Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro announced that the Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP) would be created at the national level, responsible for "the correct distribution and commercialization of food and basic necessities."<sup>1</sup> The CLAP were created in the middle of an economic crisis, which has led to scarcity of food around Venezuela, and one of the largest humanitarian crisis in the world.<sup>2</sup> The committees hand out bags of food—called "bolsas CLAP"—to be able to provide hungry low-income Venezuelans with food. In this paper, I will argue that the CLAP system, although presented as a benevolent government-sponsored food assistance program, is a form of political manipulation which creates a clientelist relationship between the Maduro government and the most vulnerable population of Venezuela, while at the same time failing to achieve its goal of alleviating hunger in the country.

First, I will define how the terms clientelism and scarcity will be used in the context of this essay. Second, I will lay out the political and economic context which led to the situation of food scarcity and malnutrition in Venezuela, and also explain a tactic of political clientelism used during the Chávez government: the *misiones* (missions). Third, I will describe the structure and history of the Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP) system, and argue how it can be understood as a form of political clientelism and manipulation. I will be asking the question of what it means for the socioeconomic agency of Venezuelans to use the most basic form of human subsistence, food, as a political tactic. Fourth, I will analyze how this discussion of food as politics ties into the larger context of development tactics and international human rights

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<sup>1</sup> According to Article 2 of the Decree of State of Exception and Economic Emergency published in the Official Gazette of Venezuela #6227

<sup>2</sup> Prichard, Meghan. "Quick Facts: Venezuela's Humanitarian Crisis." Mercy Corps. June 06, 2019.

discourse, and the ways in which national political coercion differs from the "anti-political" argument that comes from development agencies' or other countries' sources of food aid. Lastly, I will provide an overview of my argument and mention further possibilities for the analysis of CLAP as a form of clientelism.

The following section will include the definitions of clientelism, political clientelism, and scarcity that will be used throughout the paper. *Clientelism* involves asymmetric but mutually beneficial relationships of power and exchange— a *quid pro quo* between individuals or groups of unequal standing. Clientelism also implies mediated and selective access to resources and markets from which others are normally excluded.<sup>3</sup>

*Political clientelism*, according to Susan Stokes, is “the proffering of material goods in return for electoral support, where the criterion of distribution that the patron uses is simply: did you (will you) support me?”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Roniger explains that, in the political realm, clientelism is associated with the particularistic use of public resources and with the electoral arena, entailing votes and support given in exchange for jobs and other benefits. It is a strategy of partial political mobilization that differs from more universal patterns, such as programmatic appeals or mobilization motivated by parties' achievement records.<sup>5</sup>

According to Stokes, political clientelism can: (1) slow economic development by discouraging governments from providing public goods and creating an interest in the ongoing poverty and dependency of constituents; (2) vitiate democracy by undermining the equality of

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<sup>3</sup> Roniger, Luis. "Political Clientelism, Democracy, and Market Economy," *Comparative Politics* 36, no.3 (2004): 353

<sup>4</sup> Susan C. Stokes. "Political Clientelism," *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science* (2011): 2

<sup>5</sup> Roniger, 354

the ballot; and (3) keep dictators in power by allowing them to stage elections in which competition is stifled in which voters who would prefer to vote against the regime are kept from doing so by fear of retaliation.<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this paper, we will use this definition of political clientelism, while also expanding the definition to include, not only support through elections, but also through the use of the distribution of public resources, primarily for the physical subsistence of the citizens of Venezuela.

*Scarcity* can be defined in economics as the limited availability of a commodity, which may be in demand in the market or by the commons, which also includes an individual's lack of resources to buy commodities.<sup>7</sup> Thus, food scarcity is the limited availability of food resources. Although during the Chávez presidency there was a scarcity of basic products, such as milk, eggs, and flour,<sup>8</sup> for the purpose of this paper, given that the CLAP were created in 2016, food scarcity will refer to the extreme scarcity which has occurred in the past 4 years (2015-2019). Now that I have provided a conceptual framework, I will explain Venezuela's socioeconomic and political context, leading up to the Maduro presidency.

### **Venezuela's socioeconomic and political context**

In his 1997 book *The Magical State*, Fernando Coronil takes a look into the political landscape of Venezuela from the dictatorship of General Juan Vicente Gomez (1908-1935) to the beginning of the second Presidency of Rafael Caldera (1994-1998), with the rise and fall of the Venezuelan petro-state and the 'Venezuelan dream' that came along with it. He argues that, due to

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<sup>6</sup> Stokes, 1

<sup>7</sup> Siddiqui, A.S. *Comprehensive Economics XII* (Laxmi Publications Pvt Limited, 2011), 2

<sup>8</sup> "Chávez Y Su Reforma Agraria Provocan La Escasez De Nueve Productos De Primera Necesidad." *Libertad Digital*. April 30, 2007.

the appearance of oil, the Venezuelan state has been "constituted as a unifying force by producing collective fantasies of collective integration into centralized political institutions."<sup>9</sup> His analysis of Venezuelan politics, although dated, can help us understand the present situation.

Coronil states that oil's power to "awaken fantasies" enables state leaders to fashion political life into a dazzling spectacle of national progress through "tricks of prestidigitation." State representatives, the visible embodiments of the invisible powers of oil money, appear on the state's stage as powerful magicians who pull social reality, from public institutions to cosmogonies, out of a hat.<sup>10</sup> So, ever since the appearance of oil, Venezuela's presidents have been able to provide a "magical" view of progress, that is not necessarily in accordance with reality. One of the governments which used this tactic of constructing a magical reality and imagery of progress to present to the citizens of Venezuela, was that of Lieutenant Hugo Chavez Frias, the predecessor of the current president Nicolas Maduro. To be able to understand the presidency of Maduro, it is necessary to understand the rise of Chavez.

According to Penfold, Venezuela used to be considered one of the most stable regimes in Latin America since its transition to democracy in 1958 but, since 1989, it has become one of the least stable and more polarized political systems in the region.<sup>11</sup> Between 1989 and 1998 moderate and extreme rates of poverty increased substantially, where extreme poverty ranged from 20,07% in 1989 to 28,8% in 1998. Under this landscape, Chavez ran as a presidential candidate in 1998,<sup>12</sup> campaigning on a platform of revising the Constitution and creating more

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<sup>9</sup> Coronil, Fernando. *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4

<sup>10</sup> Coronil, 2

<sup>11</sup> Penfold, Michael. "Clientelism and Social Funds: Evidence from Chávez's Misiones." *Latin American Politics and Society* 49, no. 4 (2007): 69

<sup>12</sup> Penfold, 69

socialist policies that guaranteed rights to those living in poverty. He was elected, and began his presidency in 1999.

In his first years of government, Hugo Chavez deployed social policies based on targeted programs in a framework marked by strong political tensions and significant economic restrictions. Following Coronil's argument, president Chavez won the support of the people using oil revenues to finance social programs. In 2003, the accelerated increase in oil-based income allowed the development of new programs of greater scope implemented through extra-institutional mechanisms: the *misiones*.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Social missions and clientelism under Hugo Chávez*

One of the initial decisions made by the Chávez administration in terms of social policy was to dismantle the Ministry for the Family created by the Caldera presidency (1994-1999) that was in charge of managing social funds.<sup>14</sup> During his presidency, Chavez created many social programs called *misiones* (missions). Some of the most important ones were: *Misión Barrio Adentro*, which focused on providing permanent and preventive health care in the shantytowns in urban areas of the largest cities; *Misión Robinson*, focused on an alphabetization campaign; and *Misión Ribas*, oriented toward providing education to poor adults who had not concluded their high school degree. Of special interest is *Misión Identidad*, which aimed at providing identification cards particularly among the very poor, precisely where Chávez's support was the strongest. Citizens were provided in the same place with a *cédula* and were immediately

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<sup>13</sup> "Venezuela 1999-2007: Nueva Sociedad." Nueva Sociedad | Democracia Y Política En América Latina. May 01, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Penfold, 70

registered in the national electoral database,<sup>15</sup> so this became a powerful mechanism to publicize the social programs, but also guarantee that voters benefiting from the programs would be politically enfranchised.

Another *misión* crafted by the Chávez government, was named “*Mercal*”, which involved the distribution of subsidized food. After the oil strike in 2003, any citizen was allowed into the stores and in less than a year more than 40% of food in Venezuela was distributed through this new channel. In 2004, more than 9,300,000 individuals (out of a population of around 26,000,000)<sup>16</sup> had bought food in these discount stores located throughout the whole country. As a result, private firms became more dependent on the State to distribute their products and even some companies started to manufacture private brands for “*Mercal*” with labels celebrating the social achievements of the government.

All of these missions guaranteed national support from Chávez, who won with overwhelming support in all presidential elections. According to Penfold, the use of social funds became a central aspect of his political strategy to win the recall referendum, who states that the “coercive practice embedded in the social programs became a cornerstone for the regime to consolidate its clientelistic networks and effectively “buy votes”.”<sup>17</sup>

### *Economic crisis, food scarcity, and hunger in Venezuela*

Although very popular, the policies implemented by Chávez also started creating economic problems for the country, given that they were only made possible by the high oil prices. When the economic situation drastically changed and the state oil company PDVSA

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<sup>15</sup> Penfold, 74

<sup>16</sup> "Venezuela - Población 2005." Datosmacro.com. October 04, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Penfold, 80

found itself in a situation that did not allow to undertake new investments. Additionally, corruption and mismanagement flourished in the last years of Chavez's government. As a consequence, there started to be discontent because of political repression, media censorship, and more authoritarian measures. Inflation started rising, and availability of the benefits of missions declining.<sup>18</sup> In the December 2012 presidential election, Chávez won with 55% of the vote against opposition leader Henrique Capriles.<sup>19</sup> Yet, after battling cancer, on March 5, 2013, Chávez passed away.

After Chavez's death, Nicolas Maduro—who was essentially described as his hand-picked successor—<sup>20</sup> was elected as president. Maduro inherited the economic structure and social programs from Chavismo, and a very complex economic crisis. According to an Ecoanalitica publication<sup>21</sup>, between 2014 and 2017, there has been a poverty increase by income level of 38.6 points increasing from 48.4% to 87.0%, respectively. According to ENCOVI, extreme poverty would reach 61.2% in 2017, an increase of 9.7 points compared to the previous year. The International Monetary Fund anticipated that Venezuela's inflation rate would reach 10 million percent in 2019, becoming one of the worst cases of hyperinflation in modern history.<sup>22</sup>

For the purpose of this paper, it is important to focus on the statistics on hunger. According to ENCOVI 2017,<sup>23</sup> eight out of ten Venezuelans said they were eating less because they did not have enough food at home, and six out of ten said they had gone to bed hungry

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<sup>18</sup> Ángel Bermúdez. "Cómo Venezuela Pasó De La Bonanza Petrolera a La Emergencia Económica" BBC News. February 25, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> "Chavez Re-elected as Venezuelan President, Defeating Capriles." CNN. October 09, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Primera, Maye. "Hugo Chávez Nombra Sucesor: "Elijan a Nicolás Maduro Como Presidente"." EL PAÍS. December 09, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Ecoanalítica Informe Semanal Número 08. Semana I Marzo 2018, <http://ecoanalitica.com/informes/>

<sup>22</sup> "República Bolivariana De Venezuela and the IMF."

<sup>23</sup> ENCOVI 2017. <https://encovi.ucab.edu.ve/ediciones/encovi-2017/>.



because they did not have the money to buy food. Additionally, a majority of Venezuela (64.3%) said they had lost weight in 2017—11.4 kg on average— with the poorest losing most. The study also found that: traditional meals were decreasing in size and quality; nine out of 10 people couldn't afford their daily food; 8.2 million had two meals a day or fewer; and sources of iron, vitamins and other nutrients were lacking from people's diet.<sup>24</sup>

Hunger is killing the nation's children at an alarming rate.<sup>25</sup> In a five-month investigation by The New York Times, doctors at 21 public hospitals in 17 states across the country said that their emergency rooms were being overwhelmed by children with severe malnutrition. In 2017, there was a great increase in malnourished patients, with children arriving with the same weight and height of a newborn.<sup>26</sup> Official statistics for 2018 and 2019 are difficult to find, but according to a new study by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Venezuela is the Latin American country that has experienced the greatest increase in hunger and malnutrition during the 2016-2018 biennium<sup>27</sup>. The study also shows that hunger tripled between the trienniums 2010-2012 (3.6%) and 2015-2017 (11.7%).

Maduro's government, trying to cover the critical situation, hides the economic indexes and blames the scarcity problem on what he calls "the economic war," stating that the private sector aims to sabotage the production and distribution of goods, with the international support of the "imperialist" countries.<sup>28</sup> When analyzing the future, economists are very pessimistic. In

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<sup>24</sup> ENCOVI 2017

<sup>25</sup> Casey, Nicholas. "Venezuelans Ransack Stores as Hunger Grips the Nation." The New York Times. June 19, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Herrera, Isayen, and Meridith Kohut. "As Venezuela Collapses, Children Are Dying of Hunger." The New York Times. December 17, 2017

<sup>27</sup> Moleiro, Alonso. "El Hambre Se Triplica En Venezuela, Según La FAO." EL PAÍS. November 11, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> "Venezuela: Maduro Aparece En Cadena Nacional Junto a Mandos Militares Y Asegura Que Saldrán Victoriosos Del Levantamiento promovido Por El Imperialismo Estadounidense - BBC News Mundo." BBC News. May 1, 1970.

the Consensus Forecast Report of Latin Focus Barclays Capital projects that the Venezuelan GDP will fall 21% this year. The report also cites the Goldman Sachs projection that calculates the 25% drop and the JP Morgan calculation that forecasts a 10% decline.<sup>29</sup> Under this context is that the government of Nicolas Maduro must create new mechanisms to support the ongoing food scarcity crisis across the country.

### **Creation of the Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP)**

CLAP stands for *Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción*, which means Local Committee for Supply and Production. For some people CLAPs are simply "a new popular organization to distribute house-by-house regulated products of first necessity."<sup>30</sup> Their creation was announced on April 3, 2016. In 2018, 16.3 million people, 3.7 million more than in 2017, received CLAP bags or boxes, upon payment, according to the preliminary results of the Survey of Living Conditions.<sup>31</sup>

According to Article 2 of the Decree of State of Exception and Economic Emergency published in the Official Gazette of Venezuela #6227, the CLAPs are responsible for "the guarantee, even through intervention of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela and citizen security organs [...] for the correct distribution and commercialization of food and basic necessities." In addition to this, in accordance with Article 9 of the Official Gazette 6227, CLAPs can be "assigned functions of surveillance and organization to the Local Supply and Distribution Committees (CLAP), the Communal Councils and other organizations of the People's Power,

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<sup>29</sup> Martínez, Eugenio G. "El Colapso Económico De Venezuela No Tiene Freno." *Diariolasamericas.com*. June 17, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Valery, Yolanda. "Qué Son Los Polémicos CLAP, El Sistema Paralelo De Distribución De Alimentos Del Gobierno De Venezuela - BBC News Mundo." *BBC News*. June 03, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> ENCOVI 2018

together with the National Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela (FANB), the Bolivarian National Police (PNB), State and Municipal Police Corps, to maintain public order and guarantee security and sovereignty in the country." Some of the products included in the CLAP boxes are rice, lentils, beans, tuna, cooking oil, pasta, corn flour, sugar and milk.

### *Mismanagement and corruption*

When analyzing the CLAP logistics and distribution model there are some problems that can be identified. First of all, some of them are incomplete, and do not reach the specified weight. In only a year of their creation, the amount of kilograms that reached each family has been reduced from the initial 24.3 kilos (without animal protein) to 16 kilograms, as recognized by the Minister of Food Rodolfo Marco Torres.<sup>32</sup> Some people argue that this happens because the CLAP boxes are opened: "not only do they have less food, but they also take out the milk and sugar. Now they are more expensive and incomplete."<sup>33</sup> This article shows how in one state of Venezuela, Maturín, people were presented with conditions for receiving their CLAP bag, such as number of family members in the house, and whether or not they have a fridge and kitchen. This shows that with the lack of resources, CLAP is not a sustainable option.<sup>34</sup> Another irregular situation is that the CLAP bags do not reach the targeted population. For example, the head of state during the inauguration of the hospital Doña Felicia Rondón de Cabello del Furrial, in Monagas state denounced that their CLAP boxes "were going to be taken out to Colombia to sell abroad."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "A Un Año De Los CLAP Se Entregan Bolsas Incompletas Y Con Menos Kilos." El Interes. March 12, 2017

<sup>33</sup> "Varguenses Protestaron Por Demora Y Costos De La Caja CLAP." EL NACIONAL. March 21, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> "Clap Condiciona Entrega De Cajas Y Bolsas a Familias De Maturín." El Pitazo. June 25, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> "Halladas 3 mil cajas de Clap que iban a traficar a Colombia; detenidos responsables". Venezolana De Televisión.

Yet one of the most notorious problems with CLAP bags is corruption. Felipe Pérez Martí describes how "80% of the imports remain, in a rude and grotesque manner, in the hands of those who handle this, which are some corrupt military and their distribution networks. Those are the ones that benefit."<sup>36</sup> Apart from not distributing the goods, there are also some serious corruption allegations related directly to Maduro and the CLAP System. In August 2017, Luisa Ortega, Former Attorney General of Venezuela, accused Maduro of being the owner of a company that sold food products to the CLAP: "according to the former prosecutor, the company would be registered in Mexico, called Group Grand Limited, whose owners are Rodolfo Reyes, Álvaro Pulido and Alex Saab."<sup>37</sup> Saab Moran is related to the Global Construction Fund contractor. Thanks to a company registered in Hong Kong, this businessman has managed to sell food to Venezuela for more than 200 million dollars in a negotiation signed by Nicolás Maduro. "When this news became public, the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel), the agency responsible for regulating communications in Venezuela, prohibited journalists from disseminating information about Alex Nain Saab."<sup>38</sup>

All these allegations continued to be investigated and recently, on July 25th 2019, the Department of State of the USA applied sanctions to Alex Saab, Álvaro Pulido and Emanuel Rubio, Clap businessmen<sup>39</sup>. This whole controversy implies that Nicolas Maduro is personally profiting off the CLAP system. Now that I have laid out the historical background for the

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<sup>36</sup> "Felipe Pérez: Militares Se Quedan Con 80% De Las Importaciones De Los CLAP." *El Interes*. January 04, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> "Barranquillero Alex Saab Es Socio De Maduro: Exfiscal Ortega." *EL HERALDO*. August 23, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Martín, Sabrina. "Venezuela: Alex Saab, El Nombre Que La Dictadura Quiere Borrar De La Prensa." *PanAm Post*. September 12, 2018

<sup>39</sup> "EE.UU Sanciona a Alex Saab, Álvaro Pulido Y Emanuel Rubio, Empresarios De Los Clap." *El Pitazo*. July 25, 2019.

creation of CLAP, and the structure and problems of the system itself, I will explain why CLAP is a form of political clientelism.

### **The CLAP system and political clientelism**

Under clientelism, “the relations of patron and client present us with a paradox. They entail unequal actors— slave and master, worker and manager, voter and party boss—who enter into a relationship that is both voluntary and, from the less-powerful member’s vantage point, exploitative.”<sup>40</sup> So, if we would expect clientelist relations to be full of opportunities for defection and betrayal, “why does the relationship persist, even though the client might be better off severing the link?”<sup>41</sup> This paradox is important in understanding CLAP system, which relies mainly a “cluster of bonds of domination in opposition to a realm of mutual recognition, of equality and cooperation.”<sup>42</sup>

Following the creations of Chávez’s social missions, for the Opposition,<sup>43</sup> it became clear that he was using the *misiones* in a clientelistic manner in order to build support among the very poor, not only by targeting resources from the different programs to his constituency, but also by making sure that those receiving the support would also be able to vote. Similar to the *Mision Identidad* in the Chavez regime, which provided citizens with IDs to be able to vote, Nicolas Maduro created a system called *Carnet de la Patria* (translated as “Fatherland card”).

According to a Reuters investigation, the *Carnet de la Patria* system was created in collaboration with the Chinese company ZTE, creating a database system which stores details

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<sup>40</sup> Stokes, 5

<sup>41</sup> Stokes, 5

<sup>42</sup> Auyero, Javier. *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Network and the Legacy of Evita* (Duke University Press, 2002), 22

<sup>43</sup> Currently in Venezuela, the “Opposition” is anyone opposing Nicolas Maduro and the Chavista regime

such as birthdays, family information, employment and income, own property, medical history, state benefits received, presence in social networks, membership of a political party and if a person voted.<sup>44</sup> The Fatherland Card is necessary for anyone wanting to receive the CLAP bags, and other government benefits, such as medicines, pensions, food baskets and subsidized fuel, and citizens fear that this system is always identifying who supports the government and who is not. According to a study by the Andres Bello Catholic University (UCAB) and other two universities, the system imposed by the government worked because 90% of Venezuelan residents receive the CLAP, and therefore have a Fatherland Card.<sup>45</sup>

According to Patrick J. McDonnell of the LA Times, Maduro himself has called the CLAP his "most powerful weapon" while affirming that it was key to reducing hunger in the country.<sup>46</sup> In the recent elections of 2017, representatives of Mr. Maduro's party tracked those who voted with the Fatherland Card, and promised aid and government subsidized food handouts<sup>47</sup> if he was re-elected.<sup>48</sup> Here, Susan Stokes, definition of political clientelism as "the proffering of material goods in return for electoral support"<sup>49</sup> holds true.

Even before the elections, since the introduction of CLAP bags, there were allegations that only supporters of Maduro were provided food, while critics were denied access to goods. Mariana Zuñiga reported how people who oppose the government, are denied the CLAP bags: Carmen Villegas, who lives in the rough Caracas neighborhood of Catia, said: "I was told very

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<sup>44</sup> Reports, Special. "Carnet Venezolano, Creado Con China ZTE, Rastrea Conducta." Reuters. November 14, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> PolítiKa UCAB. <https://politikaucab.net/>.

<sup>46</sup> "En Venezuela, La Comida No Solo Es Una Necesidad Extrema, También Se Convirtió En Una Herramienta Política Clave." Los Angeles Times. February 07, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> McDonald, Brent, Ora Dekornfeld, and Nicholas Casey. "How to Win an Election in Venezuela: Control the Food." The New York Times. May 22, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Herrero, Ana Vanessa, and Megan Specia. "Venezuela Is in Crisis. So How Did Maduro Secure a Second Term?" The New York Times. January 10, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Stokes, 2

clearly and straight to my face: We won't sell you the bag of food, this benefit is reserved only for chavistas.<sup>50</sup> PROVEA, a Caracas-based rights group, said the CLAPs have introduced a form of food discrimination, which they call "food apartheid," which is exacerbating social unrest. The group said it has recorded hundreds of complaints from Venezuelans who say they are being left hungry because of their opposition to the government.<sup>51</sup> Mabel Sarmiento reports how, for people to receive their CLAP bag, they had to justify in writing why we did not vote in the government-run National Constituent Assembly elections.<sup>52</sup>

In her analysis of political clientelism, Stokes explains that there used to be a cultural "norm" that tied the patron and client together, a different way of thinking about clientelist exchanges is that "they tie the client to the patron not by encouraging a norm of reciprocity but by encouraging a fear that the flow of benefits will be cut off."<sup>53</sup> This is exactly what occurs in a state such as Venezuela. When becoming less dependent on democracy, and more on authoritarianism and political coercion, clientelism is no longer only an exchange for votes but simply of unconditional support as a matter of subsistence. Regardless of votes, maintaining alliances with the government is necessary for every type of benefit, and citizens are controlled with their IDs and data.

Thus, "the notion that the exchange of votes for favors is at the core of political clientelism does not do justice to the much more complex reality of the enduring and long-lasting relationships, narratives, and identities that are constructed within the problem-solving

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<sup>50</sup> *Chavistas* refers to supporters of Hugo Chavez and the movement associated with him that continues with the Maduro presidency

<sup>51</sup> "El Apartheid Alimentario De Los CLAP." PROVEA.

<sup>52</sup> Cavadias, Lesslie et. al. "Para Darnos El Clap Nos Hicieron Justificar Por Escrito Por Qué No Votamos Para La Constituyente"." *Crónica Uno*. August 11, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Stokes, 6

networks."<sup>54</sup> Maduro has even used cultural traditions to manipulate the public with CLAP. For example, Christmas is a very important date for Venezuelans, and one of the traditions is eating pork legs (*perniles*) as part of the Christmas dinner. In December 2018, Maduro promised he would give out *perniles* as part of the CLAP bags,<sup>55</sup> but they were never properly distributed. There were protests on the streets of some of the shantytowns in Caracas, and other regions of the country,<sup>56</sup> which demonstrates the reliance that Venezuelan citizens have on the government for food, and the importance that the CLAP bags have achieved in the past years.

Auyero argued that as poor people utilize problem-solving networks, they participate in and reproduce (for the most part unknowingly) a powerful web of political domination.<sup>57</sup> Venezuelans rely greatly on the CLAP system, and under the fragile government of Maduro, it is in his interest to maintain this political domination as a form of manipulation of the most vulnerable population of Venezuela: those who are malnourished and hungry, to guarantee some level of political support. The reason why the clients stay in this relation, although it reproduces this web of power, is that they need it to survive.

*Development discourse, food aid, and its relationship to CLAP and clientelism*

In *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994), James Ferguson argues that development discourse constructs its object in specific ways for specific purposes. He problematizes our notion of what “development” is, stating it is an apparatus that organizes both the production of forms of

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<sup>54</sup> Auyero, 214

<sup>55</sup> Pitazo, El. "Maduro: "Más De 20.000 Toneladas De Pernil Distribuidas En Los CLAP Y Ferias De Campos Soberanos"." YouTube. November 30, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Caraotadigital.net. "Continúan Protestas En Catia Por Los Clap, El Pernil Y Los Servicios Públicos." YouTube. December 29, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Auyero, 84



knowledge about the country's society and economy, and the setting in place of techniques of power linked to that knowledge,<sup>58</sup> while also creating a certain type of consciousness regarding the "Third World." Although this analysis focuses on the Thaba-Tseka Development Project in Lesotho from 1975–1984, and the influence of development institutions such as the World Bank, this analysis of the construction of the Third World and development can be applied to the notion of political clientelism and food discussed in this paper.

Ferguson talks about the fact that although "failure" is the norm for development projects in Lesotho, there are some "side effects" that come with the planners' intentions, which may be better seen as "instrument-effects" (Foucault 1979): effects that are at one and the same time instruments of what turns out to be an exercise of power."<sup>59</sup> Following this argument, "the "instrument-effect" is two-fold: alongside the institutional effect of expanding bureaucratic state power is the conceptual or ideological effect of depoliticizing both poverty and the State."<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the failures of the CLAP bags seem to always be present and inevitable, but they do not prevent the CLAP system from occurring and continuing. Like the development planner's which construct a notion of development, the failures of CLAP are not the aspect we should focus on, but rather the political message that it is carrying out. The construction of the idea of the Venezuelan citizens as dependent on the state to subsist their hunger, is in itself a discursive practice.

Ultimately, Ferguson claims that "whatever the liberal aims of the development planners may be, the consequences can be far from democratic and may simply confer greater power on

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<sup>58</sup> Escobar, Arturo. *American Ethnologist* 18, no. 3 (1991): 618-20

<sup>59</sup> Ferguson, James. *The Anti-politics Machine "development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 255

<sup>60</sup> Ferguson, 256

the state.”<sup>61</sup> In the case of Maduro, the Venezuelan state is the one providing the project, but in an attempt to depoliticize it, he is actually conferring a great deal of power onto himself which achieves the manipulative power discussed in the previous section of this paper. Moreover, even from non-governmental organizations, food is never apolitical in the context of Venezuela (or may I argue, in any context). Apart from the political manipulation and communication apparatus that occurs within the country, this idea is complicated even further, when we take into account the fact that external entities and the United States have proposed sending food aid to Venezuela, which Maduro has denied.

On January 24th, 2019, Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State of the USA, announced on an Extraordinary Session at the OAS where they discussed the Venezuelan crisis, that the United States will donate 20 million dollars in humanitarian aid to the Venezuelan people.<sup>62</sup> Immediately after that announcement, Maduro reacted saying that there was not a humanitarian crisis in Venezuela and stating that : "we are not anyone's beggars"<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Maduro said sending humanitarian aid to Colombia was “madness” and asked colombian president Duque to stop that madness. He also considered sending humanitarian aid as "a trap for dumb people," because it intended to violate the sovereignty of Venezuela by the United States. He assured Venezuelans that the food sent was "rotten" and that the real purpose of that initiative was to invade Venezuela.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Poulter, Sebastian. *African Affairs* 90, no. 358 (1991): 139

<sup>62</sup> Tele. "[Video] EEUU Brindará Más De 20 Millones De Dólares En Ayuda Humanitaria a Venezuela."

<sup>63</sup> Periódico/EFE, El. "Maduro Rechaza Ayuda Humanitaria Para Venezuela: "no Somos Mendigos De Nadie"." Elperiodico. February 05, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> D'Andrea, Darío Silva. "Maduro Rechaza La Ayuda Humanitaria Del Mundo Pero Recibe La De Rusia." Perfil.com.

Maduro had his reasons for denying aid, because it was a political statement about the lack of resources in Venezuela, and on the side of the people providing aid, it is a political statement showing that the current government cannot provide, so regime change must be necessary. If people provide on the State for all their needs— medicine, food, and education— but the State with bad administration is not able to provide it, what should happen? Similar to development agencies, if the government is not able to fully provide for the people they are “helping,” then what guarantees can be sought out? Moreover, the external aid debates demonstrate that Maduro's CLAP system cannot escape the political effects under which it was created. CLAP presents a notion of government provided food assistance to Venezuelans, and it exist in webs of power and domination, which when challenged, will have consequences for those on the "client" side of this clientelist relation.

## Conclusion

During the presidency of Nicolas Maduro, the hunger crisis in Venezuela has escalated to unprecedented numbers. There have been deaths and a massive migration out of the country,<sup>65</sup> but the government has failed to recognize the humanitarian crisis occurring. Under this context, the Local Committees for Supply and Production (CLAP) were created to guarantee the Venezuelan people their right for food, under the "Twenty First Century Socialism" system.

The CLAP system has been proved to be insufficient to solve the hunger crisis, and has been subject to allegations of corruption, missing products, and more, with Maduro even being accused of personally profiting off the system. Additionally, the government of Maduro has denied outside aid, stating that the hunger crisis is a discursive tool from imperialist countries who want the Chavista revolution over. By analyzing the recent history of Venezuela and examining literature on clientelism and development discourse, this paper argues that the Local Committees for Supply and Production are not only a government assistance program, but also a form of political clientelism and manipulation, based on the most basic element of human survival for the vulnerable Venezuelan population: food.

In 1997, Fernando Coronil talked about the "collective amnesia that envelopes the dominant memorialization of Venezuela's history."<sup>66</sup> This "amnesia" that Coronil mentioned might explain how many still idolize Chavez while condemning Maduro.<sup>67</sup> There have definitely been instances in the past in which there has been a similar form of political clientelism. The scope of this paper was not to answer "what is to be done?"<sup>68</sup> about food scarcity in Venezuela,

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<sup>65</sup> "Number of Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela Reaches Three Million." International Organization for Migration. November 08, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Coronil, 3

<sup>67</sup> Jesus Silva R. "'Chavista Pero No Madurista'." Aporrea. December 31, 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Ferguson, 279

but rather to show the ways in which political manipulation through food is being used under the Maduro government. While demonstrating the clientelist relationship between the Venezuelan government and their citizens, using the example of the CLAP, this paper also attempts to look further and pose the questions: What is the difference between this instance of food subsidies and past ones, such as Chavez's *Mercal*? Moreover, what other forms of political manipulation is the government using? And lastly, what can CLAP tell us about similar tactics across Latin America, and the rest of the developing world?

Javier Auyero said that, "in the context of deproletarianization, widespread material deprivation, and symbolic rejection, food is the new utopia among the poor."<sup>69</sup> The creation and the many failures of the Local Committees for Supply and Production, demonstrate that food is not a reality for most of the country, but while it is a utopia, it will continue to establish a manipulative political clientelism relationship between the government and the poor in Venezuela.

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<sup>69</sup> Auyero, 204

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