

In Venezuela, uncertainty spurs a middle-class exodus

Frustration with Chávez's reforms, inflation, and crime are causing many to leave.

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Panama City - Mervin and Lissette, a middle-aged Venezuelan couple, never imagined they'd leave their hometown in Maracaibo, where virtually their whole family lives. But on a recent day, they sat in a Panama City real estate office and finalized the purchase of an apartment here.

The reason: they feel that under the governance of President Hugo Chávez, Venezuela faces an uncertain future.

Mr. Chávez [won the presidential vote](#) by an overwhelming majority last year, but when he was sworn in as president in January, his rhetoric shifted.

Now that he's calling for a referendum to [reform the Constitution](#), including eliminating term limits for heads of state, this country is seeing a migration of middle-class residents who say they are fleeing economic and political instability and persistent crime.

"We never thought of living anywhere else. Venezuela is the most beautiful country in the world, and we have everything there. But if he reforms the Constitution, Venezuela is going to be a very dark place, and there is nothing we can do about it," says Lissette, tearing up. (She and Mervin did not want their family's last name published because they haven't left Venezuela for good yet.) "The truth is we need another option."

They are not alone. According to Luis Vicente Leon, the director of the polling company Datanalisis, 1 in 3 Venezuelans would consider leaving the country if they could. In addition to politics, they're driven by annual inflation of about 16 percent and a weakening national currency. Oil wealth has largely skipped over the middle class while blessing the rich and funding billion-dollar social programs.

The number of Venezuelans leaving is hard to nail down. According to the US Embassy in Caracas, the number of nonimmigrant visa cards has risen from 70,366 in 2003 to 109,586 last year.

But many Venezuelans are opting for [other countries](#), as US immigration laws have tightened in the wake of 9/11. Nearby Panama, with a similar climate and political and economic stability, is a [popular alternative](#).

"We've had millionaires here forever," says Jose Batista, the director of urban planning in the Ministry of Housing here. "But as soon as Chavez won, we began to see Venezuelan restaurants and small businesses opening across the city."

At one such restaurant, dubbed the "Bakery of the Venezuelans", newcomers congregate nearly every morning. Carolina Belmonte, eating there on a recent day, relocated six months ago to Panama City with her husband and brother after looking at Costa Rica, Spain, and Miami. "You want to invest somewhere where there is security, and where you know you can grow," says Ms. Belmonte.

The Canadian Embassy in Caracas says nonimmigrant visas are expected to number 10,000 by the end of this year, up from 7,000 in 2005. "We've sensed that a large number of these requests are due to political reasons," says a spokesperson.

Disagreement with the direction of Chávez's Venezuela runs at the core of many emigrants' experiences, though the catalyst for leaving differs.

"Chávez is not the threat; he's the consequence," says Antonio Guzman-Blanco, who relocated to Panama a year ago for political and practical reasons. "Fifty percent of the people believe in him ... They want the state to do everything and think it will miraculously improve their lives. I felt alienated from my own country."

But others say it's fear more than disillusionment that's driving the emigration.

"I think people leave the country because they're scared," says Raudo Diaz, who works in publicity in Caracas. "The opposition here also uses fear to stoke the political discourse." Mr. Diaz says only something as traumatic as the kidnapping of one of his children would force him to emigrate.

Many, including Mervin – a former Chavez supporter – are leaving precisely because of crime. Caracas is considered one of the most violent cities in Latin America. In surveys, Venezuelans say crime is a top concern.

"It's not just Caracas," says Mervin, who no longer drives the one hour to his small ranch because he fears getting kidnapped. "The government has done nothing to address security."

The relocation of entire families such as Mervin and Lissette's is a newer trend, says Esther Bermudez, who cofounded a website, www.mequieroir.com, to help disseminate information on emigration.

Rafael Marty relocated his family to Spain, where his father was born. Today some 31,000 Venezuelans have residency visas or are registered in Spain, up from the 7,323 in 1999. Spain's National Institute of Statistics puts the total number of Venezuelans at 52,000.

"I worked in the petroleum industry," says Mr. Marty, who now works for a financial securities company in Madrid, "in the most important company in Venezuela, and leaving that to live in Spain meant a drop in our economic status. But I had to think of our daughter.... I wanted social and political stability for our daughter."