



Amid crisis, Venezuelan students seek community on campus

Augusta Saraiva

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On one of the first weeks of Winter quarter, when Juan Guaidó declared himself the interim president of Venezuela, one of Weinberg freshman Mariana Zárate's friends wore a Venezuela hat to their math class. In a context in which people are often "oblivious" to the situation, Zárate said the small gesture made her feel supported.

"Everything feels so normal while my country is falling apart," Zárate said, describing her Northwestern experience. She is one of the many Venezuelan students on campus living a tale of two realities. Her parents still live in Caracas, the country's capital city. Besides stressing over midterms and internship recruitment, she worries about whether a power outage will impede her from calling her mother and whether her father will make it home after work.

"It's very hard to balance my life here and my life in Venezuela," Zárate said. "A lot of times I feel guilty for being here. I live a reality that is completely different from what my family is experiencing at the moment. I feel secure; I don't have to worry about not finding medicine or food, or being killed."

Not only has Venezuela's economy been ranked the "most miserable" in the world for the past four years by the Cato Institute Misery Index, but the country is also going through what UN agencies have described as a "humanitarian catastrophe." In January, National Assembly President Juan Guaidó declared himself Venezuela's interim president after denouncing the last presidential elections, which resulted in Nicolás Maduro being elected for another term, as illegitimate.

With two self-declared presidents and an ongoing socio-political and economic crisis taking place in Venezuela, Zárate is not the only Venezuelan student distressed by the turmoil in their home country.

McCormick freshman María Corina Seijas said that although her family is among the more than four million Venezuelans who have left the country since 2014, she still cares deeply about her home country.

"The situation in my country does sometimes distract me from my academic duties," Seijas said. "However, I try to use the current situation as a motivation to work harder because hopefully the

experiences and knowledge I acquire here at NU could serve to rebuild my country in the future.”

Kellogg adjunct lecturer Daniel Lansberg-Rodríguez, a specialist in Latin American geopolitical risk, believes that, like Seijas, many Venezuelans abroad are eager to help rebuild the country.

Born in the U.S. to Venezuelan parents, Lansberg-Rodríguez grew up “between here and Venezuela” and still has friends and family who live in the country. He describes the situation in Venezuela as complex, but he said he is confident that once the political and economic crisis is resolved, the Venezuelan diaspora will bring new ideas to the country, as “it’s impossible to find a country that has so perfectly exported its educated class as Venezuela.”

“The minute Venezuela becomes an open economy, you could have a flood of not only Venezuelans coming home, but investments in Venezuela,” Lansberg-Rodríguez said. “When you had the opening of the economy in Cuba, you saw those whose parents and grandparents fled the Cuban Revolution invest in the country. That could happen in Venezuela, but also because those Venezuelans had been exposed to things that work elsewhere, to new ideas, to new norms, that’s something that could be a huge benefit. I think the recovery could be much faster than we imagine, because of the diaspora.”

As Zárate hopes for the best outcome in her country, she said she is doing her best to keep up-to-date with the news and to support Venezuela from abroad – all of that while preparing to help it actively in the future.

“If I were there, I wouldn’t be really able to do anything,” Zárate said. “Right now, my best chance to help is to prepare myself here, to study and then pursue a career that will help me support my family and my country.”