

Monkey Cage Analysis

# Here's what Erick Erickson gets wrong about dictators and migration



Undocumented Venezuelans are held in a truck by Colombian migrant police after crossing the border. (Ivan Valencia for The Washington Post)

By **Kathryn Sikkink**

December 4

In a recent op-ed, conservative writer Erik Erickson [argued](#) that the U.S. government should support the “next Pinochets” to create more stability in Latin America and stop the flow of refugees seeking access to the United States. The remark was instantly controversial because Augusto Pinochet was a Chilean dictator who committed massive human rights abuses.

But there’s another problem with his argument, too: It gets the facts exactly backward. Recent history and social science don’t show that authoritarian regimes stop people from fleeing across borders. They show that they make more people want to flee.

Erickson acknowledges that Pinochet was a “corrupt tyrant who ruthlessly exterminated” his own citizens. But oddly, he thinks that a leader like this will lead to more rather than less migration. In fact, Pinochet’s repressions and the political stability under his rule forced 200,000 Chileans into exile abroad, or about 2 percent of Chile’s 1973 population. Chilean refugees [went to at least 110 countries](#) and perhaps as many as 140. Canada alone [accepted](#) more than 8,000 Chilean refugees.

Indeed, Pinochet’s Chile was one example of a broader phenomenon: Large-scale migration is correlated with authoritarianism, war, repression and crime. One contemporary example from Latin America is Venezuela, which is the [most authoritarian country](#) in South America today.

Venezuela is creating the biggest flow of migrants and refugees. According to the United Nations, more than 3 million Venezuelans — more than 7 percent of its population — have [left their homeland](#) over the past couple of years. Most of these migrants and refugees are not going to the U.S. border, so we hear less about them, but they represent one of the [largest refugee flows](#) in the world. Venezuelans are mainly going to other South American countries. Ironically, one of them is democratic Chile, which is now a refugee-receiving country, not a refugee-producing country as it was under Pinochet.

Venezuela illustrates an additional problem of authoritarian rule: The government itself has become a corrupt, criminal organization involved in the drug trade that is a main cause of crime and death in Latin America. While both democratic and authoritarian regimes suffer from corruption, authoritarian regimes are more likely to be corrupt, and [some](#), like [Venezuela](#), have become kleptocracies. The next three least democratic countries after Venezuela and Cuba in the region, according to [Freedom House](#) — Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua — also suffer from corruption and are major sources of migrants at the U.S. border.

There's yet another risk posed by authoritarian regimes like Pinochet's: armed conflict. All over the world, war is a root cause of migration. For example, the wars in Syria and Iraq have provoked the greatest refugee flows in recent history. Putting dictators in charge increases the risk of war. In 1978, the Argentine military government and Pinochet almost went to war over some small islands in the Beagle Channel. The Argentina military junta also attacked the United Kingdom in the Falkland Islands to shore up its own lack of legitimacy. These were not trustworthy governments, to say the least.

Of course, the main problem in Latin America today isn't war, but crime. With the recent peace agreement in Colombia in 2016, Latin America is for the first time free of armed conflict, according to the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program](#). But crime, and especially drug-related crime, has increased sharply. The threat of criminal violence is clearly motivating some in Central America to seek asylum in the United States.

Addressing this violence is clearly necessary. But there is little evidence that authoritarian leaders are the solution.

## ADVERTISING

Erickson argues that a “socialist-communist resurgence threatens our borders.” In reality, there's arguably been a turn to the right, with newly elected conservative governments in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Paraguay. But the problem isn't socialism, communism, conservatism or any other ideology. The problem is authoritarians of

all ideological stripes. After all, Honduras and Guatemala have right-wing governments, and Nicaragua and Venezuela have left-wing ones.

Of course, it is important to identify the right policies to reduce refugees — especially in a world more interconnected by communication technologies, which allow people in violent and poor countries to seek information about good prospects for migration elsewhere. But the actual history of authoritarian leaders hardly suggests that “more Pinochets” would reduce refugee and migrant flows.

*Kathryn Sikkink is the Ryan Family Professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and the Carol Pforzheimer Professor, Radcliffe Institute, and most recently author of “[Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century](#).”*