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Venezuela

# A cycle of mobilization and violence

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**For four months, an acute political crisis has affected Venezuela, in the context of an economic collapse that has hit the country since 2014. The Venezuelan popular classes are paying a heavy price and suffering violence of all forms.**

The Bolivarian process, which aroused great expectations in the radical left, it is today in a critical situation. Between April and July of 2017, the country experienced violent clashes. The political polarization between the supporters of the government and its opponents has reached very high levels whereas most of the population, faced with a growing precariousness, does not support either side. The fall in oil prices and the collapse of the currency are causing major economic difficulties for the Venezuelan working class: there is rampant inflation and massive shortages, including of basic necessities.

## Political violence on all sides

Between April and July, opposition demonstrations followed by violent clashes killed 124 people and left several thousand wounded. A UN report, considered biased by the government, reported a brutal crackdown by government supporters, accusing police officers of being responsible for 46 deaths and pro-government armed groups for 27 killings. The opposition was held responsible for 28 deaths (15 in accidents related to barricades, 8 members of the police killed and 5 Chavist militants lynched). [\[1\]](#)

During these four months, the opposition called demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people. Some were violent, with *guarimberos* [\[2\]](#), mostly young, calling themselves Resistencia, clashing with the police. Among these violent actions opposed to the government, there were some acts marked by a spirit of social revenge against ordinary Chavist militants, with a certain tolerance from the leaders of the conservative opposition. In such a context, more precise insurrectionary impulses manifest themselves; such as the grenade attack on the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) and the Ministry of the Interior by a soldier who stole a police helicopter, or the assault on the Naguanagua military base by about 20 men claiming to be carry out “civic and military action”.

On the government side, there are also armed groups, *colectivos*, which are very heterogeneous. There are some old groups, remnants of the guerrillas of the 1960s, now with a certain autonomy from the government, which are developing a real social presence and ensuring the safety of their neighbourhood against delinquency. Others were created much more recently, serving as “shock troops” for the government, threatening those who do not support President Nicolás Maduro with suspending social programs, and sometimes physically blocking peaceful demonstrations. Some attacked the National Assembly, sequestering deputies and employees on the spot for nine hours with a relative complicity from the government. For their part, the army and the police maintain an increasingly repressive order. The state of emergency in force for a year and a half limits the right to protest; under the Zamora Plan, arrested protesters are brought before military courts.

## A controversial Constituent Assembly

The starting point of these mobilizations was, on March 30, the decision of the Supreme Court (which supports Maduro) to strip the National Assembly (in the hands of the opposition) of its prerogatives and to lift the immunity of parliamentarians. The Venezuelan authorities have backed down on this initiative but, since the opposition won the

parliamentary elections in December 2015, the decisions of the National Assembly have been invalidated on suspicion of fraud in relation to the election of the three deputies from Amazonas. The opposition wanted to call a recall referendum, provided for in the 1999 Constitution, against Maduro. Its implementation was systematically delayed and in fact suspended by the electoral authorities, favourable to Maduro.

Faced with this crisis, on May 1, 2017 Nicolás Maduro convened a National Constituent Assembly (ANC), to be elected on July 20. It is made up of 545 constituents, one third of whom are elected by sector and the other two thirds by universal suffrage by municipality, with a very strong overrepresentation of rural areas, where Chavismo is more resistant. In the first college, it was found that five million Venezuelans did not benefit from the sectoral vote. Since the opposition had boycotted the vote, the only issue was the breadth of participation.

The official bodies have announced nearly 8.1 million voters, in “the largest vote of the Revolution” in the words of Maduro. In the absence of opposition observers, it is difficult to verify this data. It is, however, rather unlikely that a government with a favourability rating of around 20% has mobilized more than Hugo Chávez at his maximum popularity. This vote must be understood in the context of an extremely strong political polarization. Maduro himself threatened public sector workers and beneficiaries of social programs with reprisals if they abstained. In a number of neighbourhoods, opponents intimidated voters so that they would not vote, forcing the government to concentrate offices in areas under its control. Candidates who were critical of the government in one sector could be declared, by the electoral bodies, candidates in another sector where they were not so well known, according to Stalin Pérez, who is nonetheless favourable to the ANC.

The protests have reached the Chavist elites. The Attorney General, Luisa Ortega, appointed by the Chavistas, rightly criticized the decree of the TSJ which poured oil on the flames, the scale of the repression and the convening of a Constituent Assembly without holding a prior referendum as Hugo Chávez had done. Accused of being the intellectual author of the spring violence, her accounts were frozen, and she was banned from leaving the country. In such a context of polarization, where it is difficult to remain independent of Chavismo and the opposition, she has gone into exile, now protected by the conservative governments in the region.

## Reactions to the crisis

The MUD (the Venezuelan right-wing opposition coalition) is not a progressive political perspective. It is still led by neo-liberals who have never accepted the presence in power of a leader of modest origins backed by the popular classes, Hugo Chávez then Nicolás Maduro. For nearly two decades, its social base has remained mostly centred on the wealthy classes, even though, in recent years, the urban popular classes have increasingly turned their backs on Chavismo. At the level of public liberties, there is nothing to suggest that it would be less authoritarian. During the failed coup d'état of April 2002, the opposition immediately dismissed all the authorities and repressed the population. In February 1989, the orthodox application of an IMF adjustment plan triggered a rebellion suppressed at the cost of 1,000 deaths.

The authoritarian drift of the Maduro government does not only affect opposing political elites. In the steel company, SIDOR, or in the state-owned oil company, PDVSA, union elections have been postponed indefinitely. In these two strategic firms, the protests are old but the postponement of the elections betrays the government's fear of seeing opponents, often on the left, win. “People's Liberation Organizations”, responsible for restoring security in working-class neighbourhoods, have been accused of dozens of killings by human rights organizations.

The left is divided with regard to these initiatives. On the one hand, organisations like the Venezuelan Communist Party and Luchas participated in the ANC which, according to them, could be the opportunity to block the offensive of

the right and deepen the process of change. On the other hand, groups are mobilizing in the streets and denouncing an authoritarian government that has driven the Constituent Assembly to stay in power at all costs despite growing unpopularity. For example, the Partido Socialismo y Libertad adopts the slogan “Maduro Out” and participates in the political actions of the opposition. Meanwhile, Marea Socialista and the Liga of Trabajadores por el Socialismo maintain independence with respect to both camps, trying with difficulty to embody an alternative way for the Venezuelan popular classes.

Regional elections were held on October 15, 2017 and saw the victory of the government in 18 out of 23 states, mainly through the demobilization of the opposition. However, the political crisis is not over for two reasons: polarization remains strong in the country and the economic situation is critical.

## The collapse of a rentier economic model

Whether Nicolás Maduro remains in power or not, whether or not a government of national unity is in place, the economic situation of the Venezuelan working classes will remain a matter of concern. The government explains that this is an “economic war” waged by former elites in search of revenge. The executive also accuses those who resell subsidized products on the other side of the border, called *bachaqueros*. This term covers some very different realities, from the family trying to find individual solutions to survive to the criminal at the head of a juicy business generating tens of thousands of dollars in profits. To avoid this diversion of subsidized products, the government has decided to create Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP) which bring the products directly to the beneficiaries. This individualized implementation is accused of representing a clientelist drift in the allocation of social programs.

From the discovery of oil, almost a century ago, investments have abandoned agriculture for oil extraction. Since then, the country's economy has been of the rentier type, dependent on oil which represents more than 95% of the country's exports, the biggest proven global reserves. If Hugo Chávez redistributed some of the wealth to the most modest, he did not diversify sources of income. Imprisoned by this extractivism, the Venezuelan economy has been hit hard by the fall in oil prices since the summer of 2014.

## The extractivist rush

In a desperate headlong rush in early 2016, the Maduro government issued the so-called “Orinoco Mining Arc” decree, aimed at entrusting 112,000 km<sup>2</sup> or 12% of the national territory to dozens of foreign multinationals (Chinese and Russian, but also Western like the Canadian Gold Reserve) for the exploitation of gold, diamonds, iron, coltan, bauxite and other minerals.

This project contradicts the assertion of national sovereignty over underground resources, proclaimed in the Constitution promulgated at the time of the accession of Hugo Chávez to power. The Orinoco Mining Arc owes its legal existence to its status as an economic zone of national development, a Venezuelan declension of the Chinese Special Economic Zone, derogating from tax and employment law. This project is harmful for the employees but also for the dozens of indigenous communities that have lived on these lands for centuries.

Behind this project, we note the maintenance of the extractivist paradigm in the perspectives of the government, a paradigm at the origin of the current economic crisis, accentuating dependence on oil, neglecting diversification of the sources of income, enclosing humanity in a logic of the short term. If the neoliberal opposition radically criticizes the

Constituent Assembly project, it does not mobilize against the Orinoco Mining Arc, sharing the project of dispossession of indigenous lands, exploitation of workers and predation of the environment with the Maduro government.

## Exchange rate diversion

Another phenomenon contributes to this economic crisis, the collapse of the currency. For nearly fifteen years, large corporations have been avoiding exchange control, with the complicity of senior government officials, by overbilling imports or requests for subsidized dollars for unrealized imports. Economists report a leakage of several hundred billion by this path.

Today, the difference between official and unofficial exchange rates is 1 to more than 3,000. This gap limits imports, including staple goods. For more than a year, Venezuelans have been facing shortages of food and medicine. The inflation rate is spiralling upwards. According to the IMF, it was 69% in 2014, 181% in 2015, 255% in 2016. It is forecast at 1134% in 2017 and 2530% in 2018. Salaries are very far from following such an evolution. The “full salary”, comprising the minimum wage plus luncheon vouchers, represents only 24.5% of a household's monthly food expenditure and 18.7% of basic expenses (including health care, housing and so on).

## Facing the “end of cycle” of progressive governments

The Maduro government is not only weakened by a political and economic crisis, but also by the coming to power of conservative coalitions in other Latin American countries. For fifteen years, progressive governments were elected thanks to the active support of social movements and benefiting from high prices of raw materials. While Hugo Chávez had benefited from the support of his continental counterparts at critical junctures, the failed coup d'état of April 2002 or the economic blockade between December 2002 and February 2003, a turnaround has occurred since autumn 2015 in South America.

The election of neoliberal presidents in Argentina and Peru and the institutional coup in Brazil have been bad news for Nicolás Maduro. Those countries that have recently switched right are putting pressure on the Maduro government to accept the opposition's demands. Venezuela was suspended from the regional free-trade organization, Mercosur, for “breaking with the democratic order”, a motive that paradoxically was not invoked against Brazil during the institutional coup of spring 2016, testifying to the political character of the “democratic” label as a tool of legitimization or delegitimization.

## Institutionalization of the Bolivarian process

The Venezuelan situation today is very different from the period 2002-2004, when the opposition also led an insurgency strategy to overthrow the government of Hugo Chávez. In the first half of the 2000s, employers were a major player in the putschist coalition. The ephemeral president from the April 2002 coup d'état was the leader of the main employers' federation, Fedecámaras. The Chávez government did not have complete control of law enforcement and judicial institutions, but used its popularity among the popular classes to defeat the attempted overthrows.

More than a decade later, the government now consults regularly with employers in the framework of the National Council of the Productive Economy, which met 48 times in 2016. Nicolás Maduro now uses his guardianship of judicial institutions and law enforcement agencies to try to contain growing discontent within the working classes.

# A permanent pressure from US imperialism

If there is continuity throughout the period, it is the diplomatic confrontation between the Chavist government and the imperialist power of the region, the United States. Uncle Sam, then headed by George W. Bush, was one of two states in the world (with Spain's José María Aznar) to have recognized the ephemeral putschist government of April 2002. In March 2015, Barack Obama issued a decree against Venezuelan leaders saying that “the government’s erosion of human rights guarantees... constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security of the United States”.

The coming to power in Washington of a president as unpredictable as Donald Trump could foreshadow an evolution, in view of the revelation by the press of the financing of his investiture by up to half a million dollars by the Venezuelan government via Citgo, the US subsidiary of PDVSA. The sanctions by the White House involving the freezing of assets, affecting about twenty leaders including Maduro, are in line with a decade and a half of interference. Trump has even threatened Venezuela with the military option, which was not accompanied by military exercises and seems, for the time being, to remain just another outrage by the US president.

At the economic level, relations between the United States and Venezuela have long been marked by a certain economic pragmatism. More than eighteen years after the accession to power of Hugo Chávez, the United States remains the biggest customer and the largest supplier of Venezuela. Conversely, the geographically close South American nation is the third largest oil supplier to the US, and any a suspension of these flows would lead to a rise in the price of gasoline.

So far, diplomatic clashes have had limited commercial consequences. Total exports and imports with the United States fell by 10 points between the first and second half of the Chávez presidency, while trade with Brazil, and even more with China, increased in a similar proportion. The Trump administration has, however, issued a decree that prohibits the purchase of new bonds issued by Venezuela or PDVSA. This decision is likely to have serious consequences for a country already in crisis and could precipitate a default. The MUD welcomed these measures, revealing even more its reactionary nature.

# Rebuilding an anti-capitalist perspective

The Venezuelan popular classes are currently experiencing a particularly tragic situation for multiple reasons, a crisis that is both political and economic. The government, unable to put an end to the shortages, continues to pay a growing external debt which will be more and more difficult to pay with the US sanctions. If the trend of recent months continues, the establishment of an authoritarian regime with a strong military influence cannot be ruled out.

The MUD opposition does not represent a progressive perspective. Its neoliberal orientation and appeal to the armed forces are not likely to improve the daily life of the Venezuelan popular classes. With a socialist ideal mistakenly identified with the Maduro government, left-wing forces now have less room for manoeuvre. In these difficult conditions, we must affirm our solidarity with all those in the country who continue to struggle with the prospect of redistributing wealth through the self-organization of the people.

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[1] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Human rights violations and abuses in the context of protests in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela from 1 April to 31 July 2017", Geneva, August 2017.

[2] a term used to refer to opposition protesters on the streets – origins unknown