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Venezuela

Venezuela : "It will be difficult to make us bend"

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Martín Mosquera interviewed Stalin Pérez Borges on February 2, 2019 [1]

Before talking about the current political crisis, how would you describe the social and economic crisis Venezuela is currently going through?

This question requires a very long answer, so I will start by apologizing for the lassitude it may cause. The economic and social crisis, which has accelerated dramatically for about five years now and has reached those foul hyperinflationary waters in which we barely survive, and which have broken the world record, is the cause of the great discontent that reigns. There has also been a significant change in the political balance of power in the current situation. I think this is a consequence of three fundamental facts, two of circumstantial and one structural.

The circumstances are, first and foremost, sabotage and the economic blockade, described by the government as an "economic war". This is the most important factor in the very serious economic and social situation we are experiencing. The siege and blockade contributed to the paralysis of 80 per cent of the little that is produced by the country's industries, at the same time as it imposed a significant reduction in the enormous quantities of imports of foodstuffs, medicines, raw materials and machines. And it is also the origin of hoarding and the fact that unscrupulous traders set prices for all kinds of goods, including the dollar.

The second circumstantial element, even though it's a longstanding one, is corruption, incapacity and impunity, of which the indices have been exponential over the past five years. The corruption and the incompetence of government officials are very great and very harmful. In many cases, acts of sabotage by employers and imperialism benefit from an unpunished complicity by military and civilian officials, concerning speculative increases in the prices of the goods needed by the population.

And the structural problem is the very low production capacity. This is also due to the high historical level of oil rents, which have made the local bourgeoisie a very parasitic social class, always very dependent on the price of a barrel of oil. It prefers to import than to produce and export. There is a sort of genetic or cultural heritage of this old bourgeoisie and this corrupt state bureaucracy that the bolibourgeoisie, which has emerged over the past 18 years, has also adopted.

In this structural weakness of national industrial production, there lie the responsibilities of fifty years of the Fourth Republic and twenty years of the Fifth Republic. Since Chávez, the necessary development of national industry, despite some programmes and plans that have been presented, has not gone beyond the level of writing about these projects. With Chávez, from 2007 to 2012, this inability to produce did not cause discontent, because high oil prices were enough to import beyond what was necessary.

But from 2013 until now, with Maduro, this failure has been paid for a hundredfold. Starting from the drop in oil prices, there was no more money for imports, nor for domestic industry, including transnational corporations, legally to obtain dollars at the guaranteed exchange rate. The struggle of these social sectors to appropriate the distribution of these revenues is the main reason why, during these twenty years of Chavist governments, plots and mortal hatred have been unceasing. This is where the interests of the Yankee and European imperialisms come into play.

On January 23, a new mobilization of the opposition took place, in the context of the putschist climate inaugurated by the "self-proclamation" of Juan Guaidó as "President in office". What was the scale of these

mobilizations and their level of support among the working classes? Is there an extension to the popular classes of the opposition's support base or is it maintaining its waterline in the middle and upper sectors?

Called by the opposition, the January 23, 2019 marches were of an impressive size. The rallies in Caracas and Valencia brought together both regulars and locals. That revived a lot of people. The right-wing sectors had been very passive since the election of the National Constituent Assembly. From this election until January 23 they did not take part in mobilizations. They limited themselves to media campaigns against the government (taking advantage of the discontent that had spread because the government had not been able to effectively counteract the effects of the "economic war") and against the complicity of corrupt officials in speculation.

President Maduro's solutions consisted of providing the famous food baskets by the Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP), issuing vouchers for various reasons, continually raising the minimum wage and the ration tickets of the workers. These small advances have not been enough to cover the loss of the purchasing power of wages. Thus, in the demonstrations of the Right on January 23, there was the usual social base of the middle class, along with sectors of workers, including some unions which, until the beginning of the year, claimed to be Chavist.

What is the state of mind of the popular classes close to the government? What is their level of combativeness, rejection of the coup and support for the government? Are there phenomena of self-organization or are all popular mobilization subordinated to the initiative of the government?

You did not ask me, but it is good to take into account the following for analysis and characterization: after January 23, the opposition made great efforts to gather the same number of people, or more, in Caracas and Valencia. They mobilized again for February 2, but both their number and their demands were no longer the same.

While the Chavist mobilizations of January 23 in Caracas were quite large, they did not mobilize in other cities. However, "the state of mind of the popular classes close to the government" is pretty good. The Chavists organized spectacular and surprising protests in more than six cities on January 28, 29, 30, 31 and February 1 and 2. The February 2 Caracas gathering was as big as in the best moments of Chavism. Then, at that moment, Chavism was encouraged to take the offensive against the coup d'état or the ongoing invasion.

There is no visible expression of self-organization at the base.

The calls to action are made by the PSUV and the governmental structures. However, personally, I am struck by the presence of many young people in these mobilizations.

It seems obvious that one of the main objectives of the coup strategy is to break the monolithic support of the armed forces to the government. How do you see this aspect? Do you think foreign intervention would be possible without an internal rupture of the armed forces?

Well before January 10, the opposition and senior officials of the Trump government, and even senators from this country, as well as some governments, such as that of Duque (Colombia), Bolsonaro (Brazil), Macri (Argentina) and also Luis Almagro (Secretary General of the Organization of American States, OAS) thought that the fall of Maduro would come from sectors of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB). But until today, that has failed. FANB members were offered large amounts of dollars and guarantees of pardon and appointment to high office. After Guaidó's self-proclamation as acting president, the usurper addressed FANB members, promoting a supposed amnesty law for the military who would revolt against the Maduro government. This policy may have a psychological effect on some active officers, but inside and outside of the FANB, no expression has been heard that suggests that a force will be able to embark on a suicidal adventure on the side of imperialism and its lackeys of the opposition.

How do you characterize the strategy of the Right and Imperialism and how do you evaluate the success of this strategy so far?

The strategy of imperialism has always been to get rid of the Chavist government at any cost. The departure of Maduro was planned in the medium and short term. From the moment he was installed in office in 2014, they tried to kick him out. And in the current situation, they are in an emergency situation. That's why events that could accomplish this goal fly faster than the balance sheets they make of their operations. They need to finish with Maduro and the experience of the Bolivarian Revolution in order to put an end to the cycle of instability and of so-called "progressive" and more or less sovereign governments that have appeared on our continent since Chávez launched the revolutionary process. After Lenin Moreno's betrayal in Ecuador and after completely taking over Brazil and Argentina, taking advantage of this favourable balance of power in the region, imperialism wants to finish the job.

Of course, they will want to oust Maduro and reverse the Bolivarian process at the lowest possible political cost, and if they do not get it in the short term, they will still try to do it at all costs. Trump is a project of sectors of imperialism which is desperate for the United States to regain economic, political and military hegemony in the world. They want to recover the economic, financial and industrial superiority that has been taken by China. The strength that they have preserved, fundamentally, is military force. And they do not intend to adapt their aggression or this battle to overthrow Maduro to a scenario of a classic coup.

For ten years, practical examples of various scenarios have existed: in 2009, they eliminated Zelaya, in a different style from the usual coups in Honduras; they then toppled Lugo in Paraguay with a parliamentary coup in 2012; and three years later, with a parliamentary coup and impeachment, they swept away Dilma and unjustly imprisoned Lula. And, to complete the picture, imperialism has contributed to the emergence of Presidents in Brazil (Bolsonaro), Argentina (Macri) and, more recently, El Salvador (Nayib).

For this, they use other weapons, such as "fake news". With this new instrument, they deceive and confuse important sections of the population.

Of course, the mismanagement of the governments of the FMLN, Cristina Kirchner and the Workers' Party (PT) has been helpful to them.

To come back to Venezuela, we should specify that imperialism uses these two instruments here: the threat of resorting to military action and a campaign of messages or fake news. To come back to a part of your question, some variants could arise: among others the one that appeared in Nicaragua in the 1990s with the Contadora/Esquipula Agreement and the electoral defeat of Sandinism by the mediocre Violeta Chamorro. Here, in the same situation, there would be a defeat of the Bolivarian and Chavist process, which they have not achieved for almost twenty years. But this story has not been written, it is being written, and for the moment they have not won.

The anti-imperialist sentiment of our people is historic and it is very strong. It will be very difficult to make us bend. The majority of the workers and the poor will have difficulty in accepting to raise the flag of the United States, like Guaidó and the political leaders of the Right who accompany him in his public meetings. Here, since the oil strike of 1936 - which became a near-national strike against the gringos, the British, and the ruling military dictatorship - a profound anti-imperialist sentiment has been sown. It has been rebuilt or revived for more than fifteen years by Chávez's messages and teachings.

An insubordinate rebellion has sprung up here and has not stopped since February 27 and 28, 1989, as evidenced by the fierce fight against the coup d'état of April 13, 2002, then the response to the lockout and the oil sabotage ... These are all confrontations of resistance that we have conducted and that prevent the Right and imperialism from

driving out Maduro by force. Let us recall that in Nicaragua they started a civil war and used the guerrilla force and the treachery of Commander Eden Pastora to achieve their goals.

A widespread impression on the international level, not only in the imperialist press, but also in sectors of the left, describes the Maduro government as completely degenerate, plagued by corruption, bureaucratization and political authoritarianism. A sort of "Bolivarian Thermidor" that is said to have ended all the conquests of Chavez. Some sectors of the left consider the current confrontation as a "reactionary polarization" (which seems to be inspired by a parallel with some countries of the Middle East, where imperialism and jihadist fundamentalism clash, and where the popular sectors can only reject both). What do you think of this characterization? How do you evaluate the elements of authoritarianism, corruption and bureaucratization present in the government of Maduro? Has there been repression of the left, trade unionists or social movements? What role does the anti-Chavist left play?

Yes, there are sectors of the left, including many old organizations of Trotskyist origin, which characterize the Maduro government as a dictatorship, as fascist, as a criminal regime holding hundreds of political prisoners. And even as an illegitimate government. They coincide with the campaign conducted by the world bourgeois press, which they repeat. These characterizations are the basis of support for imperialism, some governments in the region and Venezuelan right-wing sectors. They are used to demand military intervention, the freezing of PDVSA's accounts in foreign banks and the expropriation of gold deposited in England as well as other thefts of the country's resources. For me, these characterizations are very inappropriate and do not correspond at all to the reality.

I have criticized the bad policies of the Chávez and Maduro governments. Yes, in Venezuela there is an infinity of economic and social problems, for which the Maduro government is largely responsible. The government of Chavez, let alone that of Maduro, were not and are not socialist, regardless of whether they have stuck the "socialist" label on cheap meals or on any other enterprise or activity. The high rates of corruption of civil servants and all state institutions are undeniable. They are obviously unable to solve the economic crisis, prevent budget deficits or capital flight, control the price of the dollar and the costs of production and marketing. It is a government that continues to pay the external debt while we suffer the imperialist economic blockade. It has not challenged any of the monopolies, such as the Polar group or others, whereas it is these monopolies that store food for overcharging or distributing according to their whims.

I live in Valencia, an industrial city, I am a trade unionist, and I can tell you that the industrial zones are almost paralyzed, that there are industrial sectors totally or almost totally paralyzed, that working conditions, security, in essential sectors - such as electricity, oil, health, education - have deteriorated alarmingly. But it must be clear that in all this, there weighs the responsibility of the government but also the economic and commercial blockade of Venezuela.

However, comparing the Maduro government with the existing regimes in the Middle East, where democracy and freedom do not exist, is madness and backstabbing. It is incomparable and unacceptable. Has the Maduro Government committed acts of authoritarianism, suppressed certain demonstrations and prevented a strike? Yes of course. I do not justify these excesses. But that does not deserve the characterization of the government as being repressive or the extent of this campaign of denunciation. They are not running the same campaign against Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico or any another government, whose repression and state crimes are more obvious.

There are political prisoners and we should have a commission of inquiry to know how many and who they are. However, all prisoners that the Right (and even this anti-Chavist "left") publicize, are not political. In this list there are murderous anti-Chavists, such as those who burned alive people who were in shopping malls located in residential neighbourhoods of the middle class and who were considered to be Chavists by their physical appearance. This list of political prisoners is full of those who slaughtered Chavists in their cars, who prevented free movement and who

are responsible for the deaths in these violent actions. There are sectors of the left, anti-Chavist or anti-Madurist, conscious or unconscious, which do the work of the Right.

What did you think of the recent meeting of the members of the Citizens' Platform for the Defence of the Constitution with Juan Guaidó?

It is sad and it pains me greatly. It's really embarrassing. I know most of those who represent the Citizens' Platform for the Defence of the Constitution (PCDC) and who were at this meeting with this coup leader and agent of imperialism, Juan Guaidó. I have long had great respect and esteem for almost all of them. But this action is very questionable from every point of view. Their main argument is that they went to meet Guaidó to "avoid war" and for "the sovereign people to express themselves in a consultative referendum". These two premises mean:

1) that they do not believe that Guaidó is an agent of imperialism nor that his self-proclamation as the presumed president of Venezuela is part of a masterwork of the great coup d'état of the 21st century - still in progress. Those of the PCDC do not believe that Guaidó and his entire network are part of the manoeuvres of Yankee imperialism and that they can bring about a scenario of violence and deaths, in addition to an occupation of Venezuela;

2) Perhaps people in the PCDC do not know that their proposal for this consultative referendum or the call for the presidential election - while the president-elect has been in office for less than a month - only serves as a way out for the imperialist putschists. To propose granting a consultative referendum or presidential elections to the usurper and the Venezuelan grand representative of imperialism and of the governments that are its accomplices, which are the same ones that imposed an economic and commercial blockade, which are the main causes of this economic crisis, of this hyperinflation which makes our wages no longer exist, is to play their game. Elections with an economic blockade and encircled by the imperialist army? What is that? To get together with this rascal to propose to him to avoid war, whereas it is he and his masters who provoke it? The biggest irony is that they call themselves Platform in "Defence of the Constitution". I want to tell them, in the Mexican way: "do not defend it like that, compare!".

If it is only a proof of their naivety, they will have to put up with all the characterizations made by the various groups, organizations of all sorts and by private individuals. Today, I read the statements of Gonzalo Gómez, referring to what he calls "distortions and slanders about the meeting with Guaidó". I have always appreciated and much esteemed Gonzalo. We have a long history of revolutionary activity. We were leaders of the PST "La Chispa", I was with him until the end of 2015 in the national coordination of Marea Socialista and we are still together for the publication of *Aporrea*. In this statement, he says: "They claim not to understand the meaning of the initiative: to avoid war and for the sovereign people to express themselves in a consultative referendum".

However, he does not say what are these distortions and slander, except one: "It was not in the Embassy of Colombia as the teams of computer mercenaries on social networks with their Fake News wanted people to believe". In addition, he indicated in his reply that he also requested an emergency meeting with Nicolás Maduro, repeating the same arguments and objectives as at the meeting with Guaidó, while stating that the PCDC does not recognize Guaidó as President of the Republic but as President of the National Assembly.

And he concluded his statement yesterday with this: "The only meetings that are held are with embassies like that of Mexico, Uruguay and the Apostolic Nunciature to present the same approach, insisting on mediation for a plural and social dialogue, not under cupolas or cenacles, and of course within the constitutional and democratic framework that the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela gives us". With this last part, the good thing is to "know" that if they participate (PCDC), then these mediations for a plural and social dialogue will not be those of "cupolas or cenacles". That's all I can say about the PCDC and Guaidó meeting and its consequences.

Are there any signs that the government is willing to negotiate politically with the Right a capitulation or an "orderly" transition?

There must be members of the government, including civilians and military, who now want to negotiate with sectors of the Venezuelan Right and imperialism. Many of those in executive and FANB positions are neither anti-capitalist nor anti-imperialist. Some say they are afraid of imperialist military intervention or civil war. But one thing is what one or the other wants and another what the objective conditions and the class struggle can bring us.

Will the political leadership of the PSUV and President Maduro and the bulk of the governmental circles accept a presidential election or a referendum in thirty days or three months, overseen by the same multilateral organizations that have harassed them all along this period - and when then begins their constitutional period? While they still have a respected and determined social base to resist attacks? Will the tensions between the parties decrease or will imperialism exert more pressure? Government officials will attend the conference convened in Montevideo (Uruguay) this weekend. They will then seek the path of dialogue. They announce that the operating mechanism will be presented in four steps:

1. "Immediate dialogue", that is, sitting at the table;
2. Negotiation;
3. "Commitments or agreements";
4. "Implementation".

OK, and how long will it take to develop these four steps? The other intriguing question is: in this period of dialogue and implementation of the agreements, what will imperialism do? Will it lift the sanctions or will it keep its guns and missiles to speed up the implementation of the agreements?

What is the reality of the "popular militias"? What capacity for military resistance would the Venezuelan government have in case of foreign intervention or civil war?

In a public statement from LUCHAS, we urgently call for an equal number of officers and non-commissioned officers in our NBCA to be distributed in at least 11,000 communes, so that they cohabit with the communities and organize, in the military field. anti-imperialist resistance. I believe that the civic-military alliance must be created from community spaces.

In this statement, we explained: "We urge workers and the population to voluntarily integrate these "50,000 People's Defence Units in all neighbourhoods, cities, and every nook and cranny of the country (workplaces and centres of study), so that they support and reinforce the integral defence of the motherland ", as President Maduro has requested. The popular militias or these popular defence units are under construction. And the Militia Corps has existed for years and there are already two million militia men and women, many of whom are called on to be active and permanent soldiers in the other forces of the FANB. It is also said that the FANB has very modern weaponry, good logistics and very respectable professionalism.

We also want to call for the formation of "Simón Bolívar International Brigades" in solidarity with Venezuela. We also request that: 1) the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), national confederations, federations, unions and various organizations of social movements in the world, provide medicines, food and raw materials to the legitimate

government of President Maduro and/or to Venezuelan trade unions and the Venezuelan social movement; and 2) that Latin American social organizations organize caravans of solidarity with Venezuela and enter through our borders with Colombia and Brazil.

The government has for a long time been paralyzed in the socio-economic field, showing first and foremost incompetence to cope with the economic siege and the fall in the price of oil. But it is also responsible for a general economic disorganization which can not only result from deliberate sabotage, but which is generally a more objective consequence of the application of strict redistribution policies without a decisive break with the inherited capitalist structure (which leads to investment strikes, capital flight, inflation, etc.). Does the government have an initiative on this subject? Are drastic measures such as the nationalization of the banking sector and foreign trade or the expropriation of companies speculating with the suffering of the population being debated or proposed by some sectors of the government?

I consider that these points, which you question, are the Achilles heels of the government. And if it does not act quickly and does not solve the consequences of its paralysis on the economic and social terrain, it will do more harm than any missile or any entry of imperialist "humanitarian aid". If it fails to control, in an efficient and long-term manner, currency speculation and shortages, food and drug prices, and to encourage domestic production of consumer goods and services, it will eventually lose its social base and have difficulty surviving. Among other things, it must decide not to continue to pay the external debt, prevent the flight of capital, impose progressive levies on the patrimony and a controlled distribution of goods, that is to say function in a social manner and in the interest of workers, otherwise we will die doing our duty.

I understand that it is difficult to make a prognostic in this context, but I must also ask you: what can you expect? What assumptions about the evolution of events seem plausible?

Yes, it is very difficult to make prognostics. I do not have any prognostics. Allow me to end this interview with our motto or our *raison d'être*: "Struggle and struggle, do not stop struggling, for a workers' and people's government".

Interviewed on February 2, 2019

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[1] This interview was conducted by Martín Mosquera of the Argentine magazine *Intersecciones*, which presents itself as "a collaborative publication because it draws on contributions and various reflections, disciplines and heterogeneous sources with a common horizon: to help to search for the intersection of all those who think that today there are no preconceived recipes and that the path to overcome multiple oppressions is to be built." Published on February 2, 2019 in *Intersecciones*:

<http://intersecciones.com.ar/index.php/articulos/147-venezuelacostara-mucho-doblegarnos>