



## FORUM

# The Ongoing Crisis in Venezuela

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**Abstract:** *The article provides a synopsis of the historical context of the rise of Hugo Chávez, his tenure and the challenges his successor faces. It also sheds light on the dynamics shaping the current crisis of governance in Venezuela that has led to student-initiated mass protests and the reasons why the troubles do not appear to have a short end in sight.*

**Keywords:** Venezuela, Latin America, Hugo Chávez, Protests

Fewer than twenty kilometres separate the shores of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Despite having divergent political and linguistic trajectories after the 1797 British colonization of Trinidad, both countries have enduring, visible connections of culture, history and kinship. To this effect, the crisis rocking Trinidad and Tobago's closest neighbouring country may have long term repercussions for the Trinbagonian nation. Therefore, a synopsis of the historical context and latest developments regarding the internal disturbances and uprisings in Venezuela will offer Trinbagonians – and, by extension, the wider Caribbean - a better understanding as to what position to hold vis-à-vis our South American neighbour.

The basic issues at hand in the crisis are characterized by divergent visions for Venezuela's future. Should Venezuela continue its path towards 21st Century Socialism? Should the country seek to continue the implementation of a Cuban-inspired model, as interpreted by former President Hugo Chávez, when half

of the population is against such a trajectory? And should it do so currently, particularly, without a charismatic Chávez to lead his supporters? How can opposing sectors of Venezuelan society come to dialogue and establish a sustainable way out of the crisis?

## **THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

From 1958 to 1999, the period known as the *Punto Fijo* era in Venezuelan politics, the country experienced stable elections dominated by two parties, *Acción Democrática* (AD) and *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (COPEI) that set out to bring political and economic stability to the country. Nevertheless, prior to the nationalisation of oil in 1976, when *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA) emerged, the country had and continued to have an overwhelming dependency on oil revenues. This dependency continued well into the Chávez era and to this day.

By the 1980s, oil revenue began to decline from the highs of the 1970s and by the 1990s; this decline in oil, along with growing corruption in governmental sectors, pushed per capita income down from US\$5,192 in 1990 to US\$2,858 by 1997. This erosion of personal income was reflected in income inequalities in Venezuela, where in 1979 the richest 5 per cent of the population earned 41.48 times more than the poorest 5 per cent. By 1997 the ratio was 53.11 per cent. The population in poverty increased from 17.65 per cent in 1980 to 48.33 per cent in 1997. The largest increase in poverty was during Rafael Caldera's second presidency (1994 to 1999) from 41.37 per cent to 53.65 per cent, effects of his 'Agenda Venezuela' that adopted neo-liberal policies encouraged by the IMF, such as privatizations, liberalisation of interest rates, and the imposition of exchange regimes (among others). Homicide rates, for instance, in 1986 were 8 per 100,000; by 1999, 25 per 100,000 and in the capital city Caracas, had significantly increased from 13 per 100,000 in 1986 to 81 in 1999.<sup>1</sup>

As income disparities increased during the 1980s and 1990s, concomitant social tensions emerged particularly as Venezuelans became increasingly discontented with the performance of their political leaders. Carlos Andrés Pérez's second presidency (1989-1993) was fraught with corruption and unrest, leading to a popular wave of protests, uprisings and massacres known as the *Caracazo* (27-28 February 1989). The *Caracazo* began as popular classes

protested the increases in the cost of transportation and basic commodities. The *Caracazo* not only 'marked a turning point for the *Punto Fijo* democracy, initiating its progressive delegitimization'<sup>2</sup> but also one where 'protest became the norm, increasing both in incidence, violence and variety and extending to all sectors of society'.<sup>3</sup> Protests emerged as a way to address governmental policies that negatively affected the lower class sectors that felt ignored by the ruling and upper classes of Venezuelan society.

The general dissatisfaction led to two coups: the first led by Army Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez in February 1992; the other by his followers in November of that year, against Carlos Andrés Pérez. This ultimately placed Chávez in prison, although he was later pardoned by President Caldera. President Pérez was later forced out of office by the Supreme Court for embezzlement of national funds in 1993. These disheartening political and social landscapes in early-to-mid 1990s Venezuela gave legitimacy to Chávez's arguments for his attempted coup, propelling the Army officer on the national stage as a force against governmental graft and corruption.

In 1997, Chávez and his supporters founded the MVR party, *Movimiento Quinta República* (Movement for the Fifth Republic). By the 1998 presidential elections, Chávez ran for president under the MVR party with the backing of all major left-wing parties, forming a political conglomerate known as the '*Polo Patriótico* [Patriotic Pole]'. He ran on a platform underpinned by a discourse of change, of altering the direction of Venezuelan politics away from the *Punto Fijo* era that was characterised by upper class control, IMF and neo-liberal economic policies, and alienation of the popular sectors of society. In 1998, Chávez was elected with 56 per cent of the vote against Irene Sáez, a former Miss Universe, then mayor of the affluent Caracas district of Chacao who at the last minute lost the support of the traditional AD [*Acción Democrática*] party. The traditional COPEI and AD parties switched their support from Luis Alfaro Uceró and Sáez, respectively, in a gamble to avoid a Chávez win and both parties backed Henrique Salar Romer.<sup>4</sup> The precipitous action by the *Punto Fijo* parties and Chávez's rhetoric of a break from the past won the support of the Venezuelan progressive middle class and the lower class, poorer sectors of society that had felt disenfranchised by traditional Venezuelan politics.

Once elected, Chavez embarked on an increasingly radical, populist program of nationalisation and of extricating those influences in the Venezuelan economy which were perceived as American in genesis and therefore imperialistic. During his run for the presidency and first years in office, Chávez articulated the need for Revolution, indeed a change from the past. Nevertheless, he understood and portrayed the Revolution to be developed in Venezuela in quite different terms as that traditionally conceived by the Latin American Left. To Chávez, the traditional categorizations of the Right and the Left were no longer adequate in defining the type of change needed in Venezuela. He considered that liberal capitalist democracy as well as class-less communist society had failed as paradigms. His Revolution was, nevertheless, strongly embedded in anti-Imperialist ideology and promoted as force that sought home-grown solutions to Venezuela's problems.<sup>5</sup>

By 25 April 1999, he spearheaded a national referendum on a new Constitution that identified and increased protections for indigenous peoples and women, and transformed the existing bicameral legislature into a unicameral National Assembly. The new Constitution gave greater powers to the executive and the country's name was altered from the Republic of Venezuela to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, reflecting both Chavez's own, and also the new government's ideology of Bolivarianism, after the founding national hero Simón Bolívar. Moreover, the Constitution sought to 're-found' the republic where not only would the political framework be more democratic, but democracy would 'impregnate all spaces of social life'.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike his predecessors, Chávez actively engaged the masses and sought to establish a direct link between himself and the Venezuelan populace in terms that reflected ideological populism. During the Chávez era, Populism emerged as a legitimizing factor in the new government's programs. Indeed, modern political theorists have analyzed how populism emerges as a response to social and political crises that existing governmental institutions fail to address (e.g. increases in poverty, alienation of lower economic sectors, public dissatisfaction under the *Punto Fijo* governments). Populism has four major aspects: first, as a consequence and a necessary stage towards economic and social development; second, expansionist and redistributive economic policies; third, an ideological, 'people against those in power'; the 'underdog' against the 'elite'; and fourth, the political populism with vertical or leader-

led popular mobilization and the sidelining of traditional Western-led democratic institutions to foster direct leader/people communication.<sup>7</sup>

Some scholars, like Kurt Weyland, consider that

populism will always stand in tension with democracy. The logic of personalism drives populist politicians to widen their powers and discretion. Because these leaders sustain their influence via personal appeals rather than intermediary organizations, they see any institutions outside their control as obstacles to be bypassed or overcome. They undermine institutional protections against the abuse of power and seek political hegemony.<sup>8</sup>

Hence to Weyland, 'populism, whether of the left or the right, is a threat to democracy'.<sup>9</sup> Yet other scholars take a different view of Chávez's politics, what they consider the participatory democracy that Chávez unleashed. According to Margarita López Maya and Luis E. Lander,

this newly born democracy incorporated in its discourse novel proposals to address grave problems of exclusion and social injustice afflicting the majority of the country. For this reason, it ran counter to the globally hegemonic way of thinking and has been viewed with suspicion and frank aversion by some socio-political actors [...] as well as by hegemonic actors in the global capitalist system. It initially awoke suspicion among groups and political actors of the left, among other reasons because it originated mainly from sectors - including the military - quite alien from the traditional left, and because its philosophical bases are rooted in sources distinct from traditional Marxist thought.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, Chavez's ruling legitimacy was based on populism from the start, from his 1992 coup against corrupt governments that had lost their way, as well as on his charismatic figure that projected itself through mass rallies and by direct addresses to the populace, among them, his TV programs and appearances, such as *Aló Presidente*.

In 2000, Chávez was elected to a second term in office. In this term, he increased the implementation of his alternative vision for Venezuela. He increasingly spoke of a Bolivarian Revolution, one that was led by and was in the service of the Venezuelan masses that sought to make Venezuelan society more egalitarian. He politicized PDVSA which led to a 2002 management strike at the national oil company. His policies of aligning with traditional Latin

American powers that sought alternative paths to US hegemony in the region, such as Cuba, began to alienate the traditionally right-wing middle and upper classes. Chávez also survived a short lived coup attempt in 2002 and a recall referendum in 2004.

Chávez's policies began to shift towards implementing a 'Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' which included reversing the privatisations of the Pérez and Caldera eras, and establishing a close alliance with Cuba which provided logistical and social support in the form of Cuban technicians and hundreds of Cuban doctors who served the traditionally marginalised sectors of Venezuelan society in missions termed as *Barrio Adentro* [Deep Inside the Neighbourhood], for example. The support of Cuban doctors has been instrumental in gaining the support of the poverty stricken. A recent interview of one woman, Judith Faraiz, published in the 16 April 2014 edition of *El Nuevo Herald* newspaper described how if it were not for the Cuban doctors her son's leg would have been amputated after a motorcycling accident at a public hospital she took him to. Her son contracted a menacing bacteria and the doctors at the public hospital prescribed him antibiotics that cost her a day's salary, but then she took her son to a diagnostic center run under the Cuban collaborative agreements where his the foot was saved by implanting eight screws. According to Faraiz, 'if the Cuban doctors leave, the poor will suffer',<sup>11</sup> one example of how Chávez's programs have favourable following among lower economic classes.

In the 2006 election, Chávez was elected for a third term with 63 per cent of the votes and formed one single party the PSUV (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*, United Socialist Party of Venezuela). During his third term, he deepened Latin American alliances that sought an alternative to Washington-led policies in the region, such as the ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas) and PetroCaribe. He spent much of Venezuela's oil revenues in exporting his political ideas by providing preferential oil and gas to countries that aligned with the new Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, Cuba being a significant beneficiary of the Chavez-established friendship with the Socialist island. According to renowned Cuban economist Carmelo Mesa Lago, 'the Cuban economy has survived thanks to the credits, subsidies, investment and commerce provided by Hugo Chávez that totalled \$9.4 billion in 2008.'<sup>12</sup>

In 2008, the Venezuelan President continued with nationalizations, for example in the cement sector and instituted programs to combat the increasing food shortages caused by government expropriations of farms and food production industries. In 2011, the Venezuelan leader went to Cuba to undergo surgery for what turned out to be a cancerous tumour and eventually died of the disease on 5 March 2013, unable to complete his fourth term as President. While combatting cancer, he designated Nicolás Maduro as his political successor and the one to lead the continued implementation of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela.

In the 14 April 2013 special presidential elections, Maduro received 7,587,532 votes against 7,363,264 for Henrique Capriles who represented a united opposition to PSUV or the Chavistas. Maduro won the election by just 1.49 per cent of the votes. The election reflected the deep schism in the Venezuelan electorate. Without the charismatic Hugo Chávez to advocate his populist policies, Maduro found it difficult to garner the same support as the late revolutionary president. Lacking the legitimising credentials of having led the 1992 coup and the personal charisma of Chavez, the former bus driver turned politician Maduro depends on a coalition of Chávez supporters, and, in particular, influential figures in the National Assembly, such as Diosdado Cabello. These conditions have placed Maduro and by extension, the Bolivarian Revolution spearheaded by Chávez, in a vulnerable position.

## **THE CURRENT CRISIS**

In early February 2014, students of the Universidad de los Andes in San Cristóbal in the eastern state of Táchira staged protests against the apparent government inaction regarding the attempted rape of a female student. By the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> February, protest marches increased, demanding the release of those detained during the first protests. By 12<sup>th</sup> February, the more vociferous opposition leader Leopoldo López called for massive demonstrations against the Maduro government. As demonstrations spread throughout the country, Maduro and his Chavista supporters labelled the protestors as ‘fascists’ and ‘imperialist agents’ who sought a *coup d’état*. What began as university-student led demonstrations has since snowballed into uprisings and marches motivated by public discontent at shortages of food and basic commodities, inflation, increasing crime and violence, and the general road to Socialism

that Maduro and Chavista supporters are leading the country towards.<sup>13</sup> Opposition leader López turned himself in on 19 February 2014, arrested by government forces for inciting violence, among other charges. Opposition forces then established marches and placed '*guarimbas*' (barbed wires and fences) in streets to prevent Government factions mostly of the *Guardia Nacional* from attacking the protestors. As a result of the violence of both sides, there have now been 36 deaths confirmed<sup>14</sup> and over 2,326 detainees<sup>15</sup>, according to some observers. Also, both Government and Opposition supporters blame each other for the spiralling violence. In cities such as Caracas and Valencia, opposition supporters have recorded Government forces shooting indiscriminately into neighbourhood high rises, believing where opposition backers that shoot and cause havoc are located.<sup>16</sup>

Massive demonstrations by both sides have continued to take place. The Opposition have been calling for the release of López and seeking to address the social and economic problems that they believe the former Chávez and now Maduro governments have caused. One particular claim made by the Opposition has been that there is excessive Cuban intrusion in Venezuelan politics and in the military.<sup>17</sup>

The recent civil unrest has shown fissures within Chavismo, as some forces within the Maduro government have not supported the strong-hand, confrontational approach to eliminating the opposition demonstrations. Meanwhile, international organizations such as the OAS supported by CARICOM have opted to treat the matter as an internal Venezuelan one, and one that should be solved locally by the conflicting parties.

The emergence of Leopoldo López as a strong oppositional figure contrasts with the former Presidential candidate Henrique Capriles who took a less confrontational approach against the Maduro government, believing that his Government would eventually unravel due to the perceived continued failed economic policies.

Chávez entered politics supported by credentials as a fighter against corruption and defender of the poor and dispossessed. The discourse that facilitated his rise was one of breaking with an identifiable, detrimental political and economic past and ushering a new era of hope. It is increasingly difficult for Maduro to make the same claims after 15 years of Chavismo: in his case, the past is

largely the creation of his mentor's policies which he cannot break away from without losing his own supporters.

Recently, the Opposition, represented by MUD (*Mesa de Unidad* [Roundtable of Unity]) has agreed and has engaged in meaningful dialogue with the Government after President Maduro agreed to outside, neutral observers (members of UNASUR and Vatican nuncio) and for the first discussions to be televised nationally, conditions placed by the Opposition. Among the issues the Government has agreed to are the establishment of a truth commission regarding the treatment of the protestors and for the areas governed locally by Opposition parties to be included in the national plan to fight crime. Amnesty for all political prisoners, as requested by the Opposition, has yet to be accepted by the Government, even though Maduro has accepted to review certain cases, such as Ivan Simonovis who has been held since 2004, a strong critic of Chavismo. Nevertheless, as of this writing, the University Student organizations have not joined the MUD, although the MUD has brought student demands to the dialogue. The more extreme factions of the Opposition, such as Leopoldo López and the National Assembly member, Maria Corina Machado, whose recent dismissal was politically motivated, have also not participated in the dialogue with the Government.<sup>18</sup> It appears that on a political level the Government and Opposition parties are on a path of decompressing tensions, but for the University student leaders, the crisis continues and they will continue to protest until their demands are met which are 'their recognition as legitimate actors; equality of conditions for dialogue; and the willingness for the Government to rectify'.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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