



FORUM

Venezuela is Buried Under Division and Violence

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Abstract: *After 15 years of the self-proclaimed Bolivarian revolution, Venezuela is divided between two factions. The first yearns for the political hegemony promised by the now deceased Hugo Chávez; its quest to remain in power buttressed by a socialist order. The other part of the country, smothered by a sense of a hopeless future, clamours for a change in the existing political and economic model. Violence was the trigger and is now the norm and the path to solutions remains unclear. Unclear, too, are the consequences for South America of this crisis that erupted in 1999 when Chávez assumed the Presidency. This article attempts to summarise the genesis of the present situation; it reflects upon the implications for the government, for the opposition and for the future of a hydrocarbon economy like Venezuela.*

Keywords: Venezuela, Crisis, Division, Violence

Venezuela remains in conflict and it remains deeply divided. Violence has been the main protagonist of the events of the past few months. The differences seem intractable. It is part of a 15-year strategy on the part of one side to stay in power.

At the date this piece was written, 30 persons have died (4 from the military) from events following demonstrations on the Day of Youth, which was commemorated on 12th February in this South American country. Over 1,500 persons were detained for protesting, and these were mainly students. According to the Venezuelan Penal Forum NGO, there have been more than 59

complaints of alleged torture; 40 of them were made to the Attorney General's Office and the office of the Ombudsman.

The anti-government demonstrations have spread across much of the country, with concentrations in the Capital and Miranda, Zulia, Tachira, Merida, Carabobo, Aragua, Lara, Bolivar and Nueva Esparta. These are states which, except for last two, have the largest populations.

Students, their leaders, and those that have openly appeared in public, have said they will not desist until their comrades and the political prisoners are released, and measures be taken to reduce insecurity and improve the economy.

THE PROCESS

When did it all begin? On 4th February 2014 there was an alleged attempted rape on the campus of the University of Los Andes in San Cristobal, Tachira, a state that borders Colombia. The response of President Nicolas Maduro's executive did not satisfy the students, who were also accused by the Government of orchestrating an attack on the residence of José Vielma Mora, the governor of that state, a retired military officer, and former member of the government of Hugo Chávez who participated in the coup attempt of February 4th, 1992.

The country has been affected by insecurity. There were 24,763 homicides (79 per 100,000) in 2013. In the last 15 years, under the self-styled Bolivarian Revolution, the total number of murders is more than 200,000, according to the NGO Venezuelan Observatory of Violence.

A section of the Board for Democratic Unity (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*, or MUD), which brings together most of the opposition parties in Venezuela, felt that it was time to demand change. It called its supports to the streets as part of what was called the 'Exit' strategy. Its leaders in Caracas were Mayor Antonio Ledezma, the former mayor of Chacao (Caracas) Leopoldo López and independent congress representative Maria Corina Machado, who in 2010 obtained the most votes in the country (235,230 votes, according to the website of the National Electoral Council).¹ Chávez had previously sought to remove the latter's parliamentary immunity to try her for alleged crimes against the state.

The protest march of February 12th went well, with students on the street. Suddenly, violence erupted at the end of the march. A group attacked the Attorney General's Office; the location at which

the march ended. The result? Two dead in downtown Caracas: a student and a Caracas police officer that were part of pro-Chávez groups. The protests escalated. That night there was a third murder in Chacao, east of Caracas, from the ranks of the opposition. Many young people were also detained.

Immediately afterwards, what the government has been calling since 2004 'guarimbas', became engaged. Neighbourhoods blocked streets with barricades composed of articles and goods of various kinds (sticks, stones, chairs, doors, sofas, refrigerators areas, bars, etc.). Some of those neighbours also burnt trash and other objects. Their goal was to express anger over events and stop the law enforcement officials and motorcyclist members of armed groups who sympathize with the government. That ended up isolating them and upsetting other neighbours who called for an end to the *guarimbas* and did not support the protests and demonstrations.

Experts in different areas have described those actions as evidence of a rejection of an popular frustration towards the actions of the Government. Government spokespersons and the President Nicolás Maduro himself- knowing that that assertion will have a great impact on the international community as the world is sensitive to the issue and rejects any action that can be described as 'terrorist' since the attacks of September 11th, 2001 in the US- have claimed that the *guarimbas* engage in terrorist acts. 'Stop the *guarimbas*, stop the terrorism', said Maduro on February 23th, reported by Panorama Daily.

Maduro and his team could immediately defuse the time bomb, release the detained students, call for calm, seek dialogue, enter and disarm the armed groups that are loyal to him. Instead he has opted for repression: to put more police and soldiers on the street; to insult opponents with classic epithets such as 'bourgeois', 'stateless' and 'fascists'; and to pursue his own peculiar version of dialogue. This uncompromising attitude has continued relentlessly. On the night of 19th March, the political police arrested Daniel Ceballos, the mayor of San Cristobal, without a warrant, according to the web version of the newspaper El Universal.²

One concentration of the largest opposition protest in Caracas was the Francia Plaza in Altamira, a residential area to the east of Caracas. This has been a stronghold of the opponents of Chávez. No wonder in October 2002 soldiers who refused to obey the order given by Chávez on April 11th of that year took possession of the Plaza in protest against the then president. Those militaries stayed during months in Altamira square, Caracas, pressing for a change in

the Government. At the end, they had to abandoned the area and some of them were captured, others are in exile.

Up to now, there have been well over 40 days of protests, many of them violent: youths throwing stones at the soldiers and police, with these state security forces responding with tear gas and rubber bullets. This violence ended on Monday March 17th when National Guard troops occupied the Plaza to discourage those who had set up camp there, and the opposition in general. In the afternoon, regular citizens returned. A group of women calling themselves '*Las Damas de Altamira*', in remembrance of Cuba's 'Ladies in White', returned with prayers and banners and the square was again the centre of peaceful protests.

OPPONENTS DIVIDED

What results have the opposition obtained? It is hard to say, since the opposition far from unified. It is a divided group: between those who, like López and Machado, ask people to take to streets; and those who support Henrique Capriles, the governor of Miranda state and former presidential candidate, who calls for patience and avoids joining the protests led by the disontented grassroots. The gap between these two groups has also widened. This has to some extent reduced the responsiveness of the MUD, and its range of activities. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that some parties disassociate themselves from all non-pacific actions.

All this, moreover, works in the government's favour. With opponents divided and fighting each other, it is easier for the government to oppose, as it did in the past (2002-2006), open, consensual and reconciliatory dialogue in favour of a more menacing variant underpinned by an irreconcilable agenda which is unable to connect with the real problems facing the country.

In addition, the opposition has also lost leaders like López, who surrendered to the law. He was sought by the police for allegedly being responsible for the three deaths that occurred after the student march in Caracas on February 12th. He is currently being held in Ramo Verde prison in Los Teques, Miranda, which is a centre for military trials, even though he is both a civilian and politician.

Despite the internecine divisions in the opposition, some analysts nonetheless maintain that that the current juncture still represents an opportunity to focus the protests and to better

organize them in order to win over those unhappy with the way Maduro has performed his first year as president.

REPRESSION IN RESPONSE

How has the government behaved? The answer is that it has done so on two distinct fronts: first, with repression, which has been evident in the widespread deployment of the National Guard – an arm of the National Armed Forces - alongside the National Police, and, according to many complaints, armed civilians; second, by offering dialogue without engaging with the minimum conditions requested by the other side. There has also been an attempt to heighten the control of information through what Andrés Izarra, the current Minister of Tourism, (then director of the Telsur TV channel), called ‘communicational hegemony’ in a 2007 interview with *El Nacional* newspaper.

One example of an action to limit freedom of speech is that government agencies have not paid the preferential dollars – all foreign exchange is directly controlled and distributed by the Government dollars to the business sector and to individuals since currency control was established by Chávez in January 2003- to newspapers that are critical of the Government, such as *El Nacional*, in Caracas, or *El Impulso*, of Barquisimeto. Tamoia Calzadilla, who heads the Research Unit of the daily paper *Últimas Noticias* (Latest News) has resigned. This coincided with the decision to censor the publication of a report in which showed links between the protesters and the military in charge of controlling the protests.

Another example can be seen in the decision to give the executive branch, through the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel), the authority to remove the signal of the Colombian television NTN24 from the (cable or satellite) subscription channels on the grounds that it was allegedly plotting against the government. What the channel did was broadcast live the events of February 12th and following days, which were not televised on national stations. CNN Spanish Edition was also threatened and the accreditation of its correspondent in the country was temporarily revoked.

Similarly, the social networking site, Twitter, complained that on 14th February the government blocked all the images that were shared on its platform. A correspondent of the newspaper *El País*, from Spain, Alfredo Meza, published a report on March 13th, based

on reports and sources in which he claimed that Conatel met with internet service providers 'to warn them that they must comply promptly with the order to block websites with content contrary to the interests' of the Executive.³ The presidential palace, Miraflores, has denied this.

The crackdown has also apparently led to torture, which, according to the Venezuelan Penal Forum, ranges from beatings, forcing youths to kneel for hours, wearing down detainees, psychological pressure, and even the threat of rape (the latter reported by eight women, including a minor, was published in the *El Universal* newspaper, Caracas, on March 16th).⁴ There are also reports of persecution and arbitrary arrests without warrants, which were published in newspapers⁵.

To neutralize the effect on global public opinion, the Executive has continued to insist on a range of mitigating factors, just as it did from 2002 to 2006. These include, for example, the notion that the country was facing a coup; that the opposition seeks violence to achieve its ends; and that strong action was needed to maintain stability. As from 2002, it sought to link this discourse with the broader discourse of Chavismo. In both cases, it also sought out an external enemy. In recent case, this enemy has been the US and Panama. The latter government asked the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States (OAS) to consider convening a meeting of Foreign ministers of the hemisphere to address the crisis in Venezuela.

The call for dialogue was similar to Chávez's actions in 2002 and after he was temporarily removed from power in 2004. Faced with a referendum that did not support him, he tried to diffuse tensions by dividing the opposition and strengthen his institutional control. These antecedents make actors wary of how genuine President Maduro's overtures really are.

LOOKING AT THE GLOBE

The international community is a key actor in this process. The government of Venezuela understands this. Sources who have requested anonymity say that before the protests of 12th February, the Foreign Ministry summoned more than one hundred heads of missions around the world to give instructions regarding what was coming and on how to provide information. It could not be confirmed with the the Foreign Ministry.

The press releases of the European Union⁶ and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights clearly reject violence in the country.⁷ A statement by the regional organization, The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), 'urges all political and social forces in the country to focus on dialogue and seek agreement for the settlement of disputes'.⁸ Calls from the US State Department demanded an end to repression. Panama, as noted above, requested the meeting at OAS. These actions frightened the government which in turn tried to reduce the impact of hemispheric sources by calling on support from their allies in Unasur.

The opposition, meanwhile, feels that the outside world is beginning to understand its problems and struggles. The Permanent Council of the OAS on March 7th, 2014, approved a resolution granting 'recognition, full support and encouragement to the initiatives and efforts of the democratically elected government of Venezuela and all sectors ... to continue moving forward in the process of national dialogue'.⁹ The decision of the hemispheric organization not to send a mission to the country in favour of supporting the dialogue proposed by the Executive, along with the decision by UNASUR to send foreign ministers of the 12 Member States to support this dialogue too, left the opposition rather frustrated and lacking in hope.¹⁰

Some countries have raised more questions than others. One is Colombia. There were high expectations among the opposition for its president, Juan Manuel Santos, one of the few who has received Henrique Capriles (albeit in private meetings) to offer clear support to them. His government has talked of promoting dialogue and he has said on two occasions that he was willing to support mediation. However, the vote in the OAS supporting the proposal that eventually was adopted, has aroused suspicion. The confidence that existed initially is no longer there. The key is the presidential elections to be held in May in which Santos aims to be re-elected. He thus does not want anything to endanger the negotiations for peace that his government is holding with the FARC in Cuba and in which Venezuela is an observer.

CARICOM countries also deserve attention. Sections of the opposition consider that its member states have closed ranks with the Maduro government. In its statement of 18th February, CARICOM called for people to 'respect the democratically elected government' and emphasized that the right to protest should be

exercised 'through violent demonstrations'. CARICOM called on the parties to seek a solution to the crisis.¹¹

Caribbean support for the resolution of the Permanent Council of the OAS on March 7th is interpreted by the country as maintaining a supporting line to everything that Caracas does in the hemisphere. There are many reasons for this, chief among them being the maintenance Petrocaribe agreement. Many CARICOM states are signatories and this gives them access to petroleum under special financing agreements that allow for payment via goods and/or services.

THE REASONS FOR DOUBT

Beyond the political and ideological polarity, the population suffers. Policy is characterised by division, by economic measures that promote communal socialism outside of the provisions of the Constitution, by nationalization of companies, land grabbing, price and profits regulation, a sustained attack on the private sector, foreign exchange controls, workers' control, and a deterrent to private investment.

Daily life has become increasingly complicated with insecurity, a very high cost of living and lack of products, and this has forced many into long daily queues for flour to make arepas, milk, sugar, oil, toilet paper, deodorant, shaving items, soap for bathing etc.

The country ended 2013 with an inflation rate of 56.2 per cent, according to the Central Bank of Venezuela.¹² By contrast, the government agencies estimated the figure as between 26 per cent and 28 per cent, and with shortages of over 20 per cent. The price fluctuation in the first two months of 2014 alone was 5.7 per cent. The cost of living rises, US dollars are not available in a timely manner to import goods and raw materials in a country where much of what we consume comes from the outside. In short, an economic crisis will follow the existing political and social crisis if there are no changes.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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Nacional newspaper, Caracas. He publishes opinion articles for the *Diario de Nava*, Spain. For over seven years he was a professor at the University Monteávila in Caracas.

NOTES

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