

Venezuelanalysis - Authoritarianism in Venezuela? A Reply to Gabriel Hetland

Saturday 27 May 2017, by [KOERNER Lucas](#) (Date first published: 19 May 2017).

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Venezuela is once again dominating international headlines as violent opposition protests bent on toppling the elected Maduro government enter their seventh week. The demonstrations have claimed to date at least 54 lives since April 4 [1], surpassing the previous wave of violent anti-government protests in 2014, known as “the Exit”. However, this time around, the unrest coincides with a severe economic downturn and a transformed geopolitical landscape defined by the return of the right in Brazil and Argentina as well as an even more bellicose regime in Washington.

Meanwhile, the international outcry at this latest violent effort to oust the Chavista government has been far more muffled than the last time.

With the notable exception of an open letter by LASA members [2], a UNAC/BAP joint statement [3], and other smaller protest actions, the US left has been largely passive vis-a-vis both the Trump administration’s escalating intervention against Venezuela as well as the systematic media blackout [4], preferring silence to active solidarity with Chavismo.

In this environment, some leftist academics have publicly broken with the Maduro administration over its response to the country’s current political and economic crisis.

In a recent piece for NACLA*, University of Albany Assistant Professor Gabriel Hetland parts ways with the Bolivarian government [5], citing concerns over Maduro’s “authoritarian” slide.

“Yet, while previous claims of Venezuela’s authoritarianism have had little merit, this is no longer the case,” he writes.

While we deeply respect Professor Hetland’s critical contributions to the debate on Venezuela, we at *Venezuelanalysis*** – a collective of journalists and activists who at one point or another have lived, studied, and/or worked in Venezuela – firmly reject this charge of authoritarianism on both analytical and political grounds.

Setting the record straight

Hetland cites a number of recent actions of the Venezuelan government to bolster his claim, including the Venezuelan Supreme Court’s (TSJ) alleged “dissolving” of the opposition-held National Assembly (AN), the “cancel[ation]” of the recall referendum, the postponing of “municipal and

regional elections that should have occurred in 2016”, and the TSJ’s blocking of the AN’s legislative activity in 2016.

There are of course a number of serious problems with this account.

To begin, several elements of this narrative are misleadingly presented, if not all-together factually inaccurate.

First of all, as Venezuelanalysis reported at the time [6], the TSJ’s March 29 decisions did not “dissolve” the Venezuelan National Assembly as was almost uniformly reported in the mainstream press. Rather, the rulings sought to temporarily authorize the judiciary to take on pertinent legislative functions [7], which in this particular case meant approving a pressing joint venture agreement between Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA and its Russian counterpart, Rosneft, which was critical for the former’s solvency. The ruling – which was based on article 336.7 of the Venezuelan constitution – provoked a rift within Chavismo [8], with the current and former attorney generals lining up on opposite sides of the constitutional divide. One can certainly criticize the since-reversed decision [9] on constitutional and political grounds, but to present it as a “dissolution” of the parliament is just disingenuous.

This brings us to the question of the Supreme Court’s blocking of the opposition-majority legislature in 2016. It is undeniable that the TSJ did in fact strike down three of the four laws the AN managed to approve last year. However, it takes two to tango and Hetland severely understates the opposition’s own role in this protracted institutional standoff. It’s important to note that the AN did not “act beyond its authority” only “in some cases”, as Hetland describes.

From quite literally the moment that the new AN was sworn-in in January 2016, the body explicitly declared war on the Bolivarian institutional order crafted by Chavismo, with AN head Henry Ramos Allup promising to oust Maduro “within six months” [10] – a blatantly unconstitutional threat against a sitting president. A sampling of the legislation pursued by the National Assembly in 2016 includes a law to privatize Venezuela’s public housing program [11], a law to return expropriated lands and enterprises to their former owners [12], a law forcing the executive to accept humanitarian aid into the country [13], the infamous Amnesty Law [14], as well as a constitutional amendment retroactively shortening the presidential term by two years [15]. We can add to this list the opposition’s attempted parliamentary coup [16], in which it declared that Maduro had “abandoned his post” first in October and again this past January [17] – which Hetland likewise neglects to acknowledge. Nor does he mention the reason for the legislature’s current “null” status, namely the opposition’s refusal to unseat three of its lawmakers from Amazonas state currently under investigation for alleged vote-buying in flagrant violation of the high court. Again, one may still criticize the TSJ’s blockage of the AN, but to understate the parliament’s systematic efforts to overthrow the Bolivarian government by any means necessary is quite misleading.

Hetland similarly omits the opposition’s own role in the suspension of the recall referendum (RR) process [18]. As we noted, the opposition-held parliament came into office with the objective of overthrowing Maduro “within six months” – a goal evidently incompatible with the RR, which takes a minimum of eight months. Indeed, the RR was just one of the strategies in the opposition’s four-pronged plan to oust Maduro unveiled in March 2016 [19], which also included the aforementioned constitutional amendment, a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution (which the opposition now opposes [20]), and heating up the streets to force Maduro’s resignation. As a result of the opposition’s own internecine divisions, it delayed in beginning the RR [21] and made serious procedural errors, such as collecting 53,658 fraudulent signatures, which gave the government a pretext to indefinitely stall the process in the courts [22]. There is no doubt that the Maduro administration dragged its feet on the RR process knowing full well it would likely lose, but this was

hardly the one-sided drama presented by Hetland.

Lastly, the National Electoral Council (CNE) did in fact postpone the regional elections scheduled for last year [23], citing logistical conflicts with the RR process, a move which is indefensible on constitutional and political grounds. However, it's worth noting that there is a precedent for such a delay: the local elections slated for December 2004 were similarly postponed until August 2005 on account of the recall referendum against then President Chávez the year before [24]. Hetland passes over this important detail in his rush to indict Venezuela's democratic credentials.

Moreover, while it's perfectly legitimate to criticize the Bolivarian government for delaying the governors' races, municipal elections are a different story. Local elections are scheduled for 2017, meaning that they can be held any time before the close of the year. In suggesting that the government has postponed local elections, Hetland commits yet another factual error that serves to inflate his largely ideological case for the Maduro administration's "creeping authoritarianism", as we shall see below.

Fetishizing liberal democracy

Beyond these factual errors and misrepresentations, the main problem with Hetland's piece is his implicit notion of "authoritarianism", which he at no point takes the time to actually define.

Without going extensively into the genealogy of this term, it's key to remember that authoritarianism is hardly a politically neutral concept.

As Hetland correctly observes, the charge of authoritarianism was dubiously leveled against the Chávez administration and other "pink tide" governments who were excoriated by Western commentators and political scientists for daring to challenge the hegemony of (neo)liberal capitalist representative democracy.

Indeed throughout the last decade, political scientists led by former Mexican foreign minister Jorge Casteñeda have distinguished between a "good" reformist, liberal left epitomized by Brazil's Lula Da Silva that is willing to play ball with the Washington and transnational capital and a "bad" radical, populist left embodied by Hugo Chávez, which has opened up the liberal representative floodgates to direct mass participation in democratic governance [25].

As Sara Motta underlines, this binary is deeply colonial in nature [26]: the "mature" and Westernized

"“good-left” has learned from the alleged failures of revolutionary Marxism and embraced incremental reform, while the “bad-left” remains mired in the clientelism and tribal authoritarianism of the “pre-modern” past, rendering it hostile to liberal democracy.”

This "good-left"/"bad-left" dichotomy is of course nothing new, amounting to a minor aesthetic rehashing of the "revolutionary"/"democratic" distinction applied to the Latin American left in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, which in turn is founded on the classic "civilization" versus "barbarism" divide.

Hetland, in lieu of questioning the liberal ideological criterion behind this colonial binary, preserves the distinction, announcing that the Maduro government has passed over into the dark realm of authoritarianism:

“By cancelling the recall referendum, suspending elections, and inhibiting opposition politicians from standing for office, the Venezuelan government is systematically blocking the ability of the Venezuelan people to express themselves through electoral means. It is hard to see what to call this other than creeping authoritarianism.”

In other words, “authoritarianism” for Hetland seems to amount to the quashing of proceduralist liberal democratic norms, including most notably separation of powers, threatening the political rights of the country’s right-wing opposition.

What we get from this formalist approach is a sort of Freedom House-style checklist [27] in which the pluses and minuses of global South regimes (freedom of speech, press, etc.) are statically weighed and definitive moral judgement concerning “democratic quality” are handed down. Venezuela is still not yet a “full-scale authoritarian regime,” Hetland tells us, “given the opposition’s significant access to traditional and social media and substantial ability to engage in anti-government protest.” In this point, Hetland’s conclusion is virtually indistinguishable from that of mainstream Latin American studies, which has long invented convoluted monikers such as “participatory competitive authoritarianism” to characterize the Bolivarian government [28].

The trouble with this perspective is that it ends up reifying these so-called authoritarian practices, casting them as the cause – together with the opposition’s regime change efforts – of Venezuela’s current crisis rather than a symptom of the underlying correlation of forces.

The Maduro administration’s alleged steamrolling of certain liberal democratic norms – particularly the postponement of regional elections – is undoubtedly quite concerning, precisely because it evidences the catastrophic impasse in the Bolivarian revolutionary process.

We at Venezuelanalysis have long been critical of the Bolivarian government’s top-down institutional power plays to contain the opposition’s efforts to oust Maduro, which we view as a conservative attempt to maintain the status quo in lieu of actually mobilizing the masses of people from below to break the current deadlock and resolve the crisis on revolutionary terms.

In this vein, we have critiqued those tendencies within the Venezuelan state which we see as consolidating the power of corrupt reformist “Boli-bourgeois” class fractions [29] in the bureaucracy and armed forces [30], including direct military control over imports, the de-facto liberalization of prices, reduced social spending coupled with draconian debt servicing [31], the Orinoco Mining Arc [32], a dubious but since-modified party registration process [33], and a conservative turn in anti-crime policy [34].

Yet Hetland is strangely silent regarding these reformist retreats and regressions over the past four years, which for all intents and purposes are far more serious than many of the above “authoritarian” abuses he describes.

It is precisely here that the charge of “authoritarianism” betrays its liberal ideological bias: by prioritizing the procedural violations affecting the bourgeois right-wing opposition, Hetland renders invisible the underlying dynamics of class warfare brutally impacting the popular classes.

Therefore, contra Hetland, the problem is not that liberal democratic norms have been undercut per se, but rather that the revolutionary construction of alternative institutions of radical grassroots democracy – the “communal state” in Chávez’s terms – has come up against decisive structural roadblocks [35].

Here we must be unequivocal: liberal democracy is not absolute nor universal, and its relation to revolutionary processes is always mediated by context. To impose these norms on the Cuban

Revolution, for instance, in its context of genocidal imperial siege is the height of absurdity and political irresponsibility. Given these circumstances, Cuba's model of revolutionary democracy – despite all its faults and limitations – is no less legitimate than other democratic socialist projects that have made strategic use of elements of liberal democracy, such as Chile and Nicaragua in the 70s and 80s or Venezuela and Bolivia today.

The Bolivarian process is, however, fundamentally different, as it is premised on an electoral road to socialism in which the existing bourgeois democratic order is approached as a strategic space of counter-hegemonic struggle. In this context, the suspension of certain liberal rights such as elections or specific opposition freedoms would only be acceptable under exceptional circumstances in which the Bolivarian government were actually taking revolutionary measures to resolve the current crisis and commanded unquestioned legitimacy among its social bases.

Despite the undeniable spiral of political and economic violence driven by the opposition, Venezuela is unfortunately not going through an equivalent of a “special period” insofar as the leadership of the party and state has thus far failed to go on the offensive against endemic corruption and take the fight to the local and transnational capitalist enemy as was the case during crucial revolutionary turning points in Russia, China, and Cuba.

Given this reality, the message coming from some sectors of Chavismo that there can be no elections under conditions of warfare – a legitimate argument in other contexts including Nazi-besieged Britain – is questionable at best. Nonetheless, this counterfactual is useful insofar as it demonstrates that liberal democracy is a wholly inadequate yardstick for evaluating revolutionary processes, confounding far more than it clarifies, as in the case of Hetland's critique of “authoritarianism” in Venezuela.

Throw them all out?

In this diagnosis of causes of the current crisis, our position coincides with that of the vast majority of Venezuelan left-wing movements whose chief grievance is hardly the litany of “authoritarian” practices against the right-wing opposition enumerated by Hetland, but, on the contrary, the reformist and at times outright counter-revolutionary policies being pursued by the Maduro government.

The same is true for Venezuela's popular classes – the social base of Chavismo – who don't particularly care that the Supreme Court has blocked the National Assembly and the president has been ruling by emergency economic decree since February 2016. According to independent pollster Hinterlaces, around 70 percent of Venezuelans negatively evaluate the opposition-controlled parliament [36], while 61 percent have little faith that a future opposition government will address the country's deep economic problems [37]. Rather, the majority of Venezuelans want the Maduro administration to remain in power and resolve the current economic crisis [38]. Their discontent flows not from Maduro's use of emergency powers – contrary to the international media narrative – but rather from his failure to use them to take decisive actions to deepen the revolution in lieu of granting further concessions to capital.

Despite the setbacks, retreats, and betrayals that have characterized the past four years since the death of Chávez, the mood among the Venezuelan masses is not a uniform rejection of Venezuela's entire political establishment as Hetland suggests in a sweeping generalization:

“If any slogan captures the current mood [39] of the popular classes living in Venezuela's barrios and villages it is likely this: Que se vayan todos. Throw them all out.”

While Chavismo has undoubtedly bled significant support over the past five years and the ranks of independents, or *ni-nis*, has swollen to over 40 percent of the population [40], the PSUV remarkably remains the country's most popular party, actually increasing its support from 27 to 35 percent since January [41]. Similarly, Maduro still has the approval of approximately 24 percent of Venezuelans [42], making him more popular than the presidents of Brazil, Mexico, and Chile – a fact consistently suppressed by international corporate media. These poll numbers are nothing short of incredible in view of the severity of the current economic crisis ravaging the country, speaking to the partial efficacy of some of the government's measures such as the CLAPs [43] as well as the opposition's utter failure to present any alternative program.

Likewise, despite growing disillusionment with the government and hints at a possible rupture [44], the fact is that the overwhelming majority of Venezuela's social movements and left-wing political parties continue to back Maduro.

What's more is that this left unity in support of the Bolivarian government has only hardened in the face of the ongoing opposition onslaught and in anticipation of the National Constituent Assembly to be held in the coming months.

However baffling on the surface, this staunch defense of the Maduro administration actually makes perfect sense for at least two reasons.

First, as any Chavista who has lived through the last six weeks of right-wing terror can attest to, the choice between the continuity of Chavismo in power and an opposition regime is not a matter of mere ideological preference – it's a question of survival, as there is no predicting the extent of the political and structural violence the opposition would unleash if they manage to take Miraflores. This is in no way to deny or downplay the fallout of the current economic crisis, for which the government bears a great deal of responsibility, but there is no doubt that an opposition government would take this economic war on the poor to new levels of neoliberal savagery.

Second, the existence of the Bolivarian government embodies the lingering possibility of transforming the inherited bourgeois petro-state as part of the transition to 21st Century socialism. While there is cause for skepticism about the real possibilities of pushing forward the democratization and decolonization of the Venezuelan state in this conjuncture, there has been an outpouring of grassroots support for the National Constituent Assembly [45] which could serve as a vehicle to retake the revolutionary offensive and institutionalize radical demands from below [46].

This broad-based consensus of critical support for the government on the part of Venezuela's left stands sharply at odds with Hetland's "plague on both your houses approach", which, in Steve Ellner's terms [47], ends up "placing opposition and Chavista leaders in the same sack" as equally undesirable alternatives.

While there is indeed tremendous anger and frustration with the government – which may in fact translate to a crushing electoral defeat for Chavismo in the next elections – the prevailing sentiment among much of Venezuela's popular classes in the face of the opposition's present reign of terror remains "no volverán" (they shall not return).

The role of solidarity

All of this brings us to the position of international solidarity activists with respect to Venezuela.

We wholeheartedly agree with Hetland that it is the duty of each and every self-respecting leftist

and progressive to “reject any and all calls for imperialist interventions aimed at ‘saving’ Venezuela”.

Nevertheless, while anti-interventionism is urgently necessary, this begs the question, with whom are we supposed to be in solidarity?

Hetland calls on us to stand with “the majority of Venezuelans who are suffering at the hands of a vengeful, reckless opposition, and an incompetent, unaccountable government.”

The end result of such a “plague on both your houses” approach is a refusal to take a side in this struggle – in a word, neutrality. This posture flows naturally from Hetland’s liberal framework of authoritarianism, which necessarily posits the Western intellectual as a disembodied arbiter – occupying the Cartesian standpoint of the “eye of God” in Enrique Dussel’s terms – uniquely capable of objectively weighing the democratic virtues and deficits of Third World regimes.

In contrast, we at *Venezuelanalysis* stand unconditionally with Venezuela’s Bolivarian-socialist movement, which at this conjuncture continues to critically support the Maduro administration.

We take this stance not out of a willful blindness to the Bolivarian government’s many faults and betrayals, but because we (and particularly our writers on the ground) know that for a great many Chavistas the choice between radicalizing the revolution and right-wing restoration is, quite literally, a matter of life and death.

Lucas Koerner

P.S.

* May 19th 2017:

<https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/13136>

* A version of this article was submitted to NACLA, but no initial response was received. The editor elected to go ahead and publish at venezuelanalysis.com in the interest of a timely response.

UPDATE: NACLA did ultimately respond to our submission on the afternoon of May 19, but by that time, the article was already published.

* Written by Lucas Koerner on behalf of Venezuelanalysis’ writing and multimedia staff as well as VA founder Greg Wilpert.

Footnotes

[1] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/13081>

[2] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/13121>

[3] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/13127>

[4] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/13070>

- [5] <https://nacla.org/news/2017/05/03/why-venezuela-spiraling-out-control>
- [6] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/13018>
- [7] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13013>
- [8] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13014>
- [9] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13019>
- [10] <http://www.telesurtv.net/news/Ramos-Allup-asegura-que-sacara-a-Maduro-en-seis-meses-20160105-0039.html>
- [11] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/11965>
- [12] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/11870>
- [13] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/12038>
- [14] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/11887>
- [15] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/11948>
- [16] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/12737>
- [17] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/12912>
- [18] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/12875>
- [19] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/11880>
- [20] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13111>
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- [23] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/12727>
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- [26] https://www.academia.edu/31559252/Latin_America_as_political_sciences_other
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- [29] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/12861>
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- [31] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/12120>
- [32] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13086>
- [33] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/12929>
- [34] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/11489>
- [35] <http://www.alainet.org/es/articulo/184922>
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- [37] <http://hinterlaces.com/61-no-confia-en-que-la-oposicion-resolveria-actuales-problemas-economicos/>
- [38] <http://hinterlaces.com/61-no-confia-en-que-la-oposicion-resolveria-actuales-problemas-economicos/>
- [39] <http://venezuelablog.tumblr.com/post/160047747376/protests-and-lootings-in-venezuelas-popular>
- [40] <http://hinterlaces.com/monitor-pais-44-no-simpatiza-con-ningun-partido-politico/>
- [41] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/12866>
- [42] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13053>
- [43] <http://hinterlaces.com/53-se-ha-beneficiado-con-los-clap-en-2017/>
- [44] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13033>
- [45] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13123>
- [46] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/13125>
- [47] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/13126>