

Venezuela Defines the Future of the Region - A Battle on Two Fronts

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The struggle for Venezuela will decide the destiny of Latin America, argues Claudio Katz. We must recognise global Right's hypocrisy in its attempts to topple Maduro. But it doesn't act alone: similar forces are alive inside a government that has failed to counteract economic collapse.

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Guaidó's self-proclamation as Venezuelan president is the most ridiculous and dangerous coup attempt in recent years. With the shameless backing of Washington, the Venezuelan rightwing intends to place a complete stranger at the helm of the state.

This time around, the starting signal was neither a terrorist attack nor an assassination attempt directed against Maduro. Trump has chosen a group of conspiracy experts (Abrams, Pence, Bolton, Rubio) to pursue escalation and has opted to seize the Venezuelan oil enterprise operating in the United States (CITGO). He has brushed aside all principles of legal guarantee in his quest to appropriate the world's largest concentration of crude oil reserves.

South America's rightwing governments have their own motives for supporting the coup. Colombia's Duque wants to do away with the Peace Accords signed with the guerillas, after having dismantled UNASUR. A contingent of the US Marines already stationed in Colombia is prepared for any sort of provocation.

Brazil's Bolsonaro continues to identify Venezuela with the blight of "populism". That rhetorical gesture is meant to paper over his largely improvised presidential debut and forestall the inevitable disappointment of his electors.

Macri leads the line in the crusade against Venezuela. The Argentine head of state is eager to show that his administration can be the most able servant of the empire, going so far as to designate one of his own party officials as Guaidó's ambassador. The president has reserved special exemption for Venezuelan immigrants in the midst of a wave of xenophobia whose ultimate purpose is to distract from runaway inflation, unemployment and utility hikes. For the Macri administration, the Venezuelan crisis has the additional benefit of dividing the opposition, where leaders of federal Peronism join the President in vilifying Venezuela.

Without the backing of the United States, Duque, Bolsonaro and Macri are completely ineffective. The so-called "Lima Group" could not even boycott Maduro's swearing-in. There were more foreign

delegations present at the ceremony than the investiture of the raving Brazilian military captain.

Meanwhile, Venezuela's atomized opposition is clinging to a fictional president. It has never managed to win a presidential election and failed in every attempt to contest election results. It has unflinchingly accepted the United States' veto of negotiations with Chavismo, and it periodically likes to plunge into brutal acts of violence. For the time being it is a simple marionette of the State Department, subject to the whimsies of Trump the puppeteer.

Double Standards

The Caribbean coup leaders have become media darlings. They draw on the complicity of journalists, attributing to Maduro a litany of sins that also happen to be extensive to other governments throughout the region. A cursory overview of these similarities would show the plot to be completely unjustified, or, alternatively, would force a call for a continent-wide regime change.

The Venezuelan government is repeatedly characterized as illegitimate, as if it were the product of electoral fraud. But the reality is that the Maduro government was confirmed with the participation of 67% of the population, a level well beyond recent poll numbers registered in Chile or Colombia. No journalist thought to call for the ousting of Chile's Piñera or Colombia's Duque on the basis of low voter turnout.

It is true that one sector of the opposition called for abstention, yet another did participate in elections and did not contest the outcome. Nor was there ever any evidence of fraud in an electoral system praised by international organisms (Carter) and political figures (Zapatero). The very same electoral mechanism awarded the opposition with leadership of the National Assembly in 2015. Operating within the same electoral framework, Maduro is protested and Guaidó is recognized.

24 elections have been held over the last two decades of the Chavista regime, each one allowing for a recall vote. The right to a recall does not exist in any other country throughout the region. Voting is not obligatory [as is the case in many Latin American countries], and yet Venezuelan elections routinely show levels of voter participation above the regional average. The opposition never acknowledges defeat and always appeals to accusations of voter fraud when the results do not go their way.

With their habitual duplicity, the same journalists and media who criticize Venezuelan elections do not find anything suspect about the commission of elections in Brazil while Lula sits in jail. They dispute the rulings of the Venezuelan judicial system while extoling on the virtues of the magistrate who brought down Lula (Moro). Nor do they object to his ministerial appointment by Bolsonaro.

Likewise, the media denounces the detention of opposition leaders (Carmona, Ledesma, López) but fails to mention the cause of their imprisonment. They are not in prison for their critical opinions; they are there for fomenting coup attempts or for their involvement in bloody guarimbastreet fighting. Chavismo is subject to a level of scrutiny that applies nowhere else in Latin America. Where Venezuela is concerned, it would seem that we should be more understanding of such attempts at regicide.

Nor does the media care to mention the brutal violation of human rights practiced by Venezuela's opponents. Since the signing of the Peace Accords, Colombian paramilitaries acting under the watchful eye of the government have murdered hundreds of social leaders. Political prisoners in Argentina are mounting and there is a cloak of impunity protecting those responsible for the murder of Santiago Maldonado and Rafael Nahuel (one, a solidarity activist with indigenous causes, the

other, a member of Argentina's Mapuche community). Brazil has seen an escalation in attacks against the Landless Workers' Movement [MTS], and recent findings have implicated the sons of Bolsonaro in the murder of PSOL politician Marielle Franco.

Chavismo is even accused of maintaining -imaginary- connections with drug traffickers. But the same groups leveling those accusations have overlooked the very real financial backing by organized crime for the Colombian rightwing. No international organism has called for punishing that country as it continues to harbor the production of illegal drugs. What has taken place in Mexico is even more serious. The entire Mexican territory has been torn apart by a massacre claiming some 200,000 lives, without so much as a suggestion of regional intervention from the Organization of American States.

Venezuela is of course experiencing a massive wave of emigration as a consequence of its economic troubles. But comparable forms of displacement have also been observed under similar circumstances in other countries. Poverty always leads those most affected to seek refuge in a neighboring country.

If these catastrophes amount to a "humanitarian crisis", it would be fitting to say the same of equivalent migrations elsewhere. No one is speaking in those terms of the harrowing flight of Central American families to North America. Their torments are apparently not worthy of pious calls for aid. Instead, they are the excuse for the construction of a border wall. The internal war in Colombia saw similar levels of human displacement without any call for foreign intervention.

Media conglomerates always frame their coverage of Venezuela with allegations of the violation of the freedom of press. But the disruptions they portray are irrelevant next to the systematic murder of journalists in Mexico and other Central American countries. The manufacturers of lies tend to apply a double standard to their own practices.

Contradictions Below the Surface

It suffices to recall what took place in Iraq and Libya to have some sense of the stakes involved. Imperialism is capable of wreaking unimaginable havoc. If a large-scale intervention should take place, Latin America will lose one of its major safeguards against the kind of catastrophe visited on Africa and the Middle East.

The Venezuelan rightwing dismisses the dangers involved, expecting a rapid victory with little collateral damage. It is already announcing the imminent retreat of Chavismo, Maduro's isolation and the desertion of the military's top ranks. It likes to point to the unity among its own ranks and the international support behind it. But these are tall tales that unravel under the most superficial analysis.

The command center in Washington is compromised by a number of dissenting voices, while Trump is preoccupied by a complex political-legal context on the home front. Fiascos in the Middle East have put a damper on enthusiasm for foreign military incursions. The military is disoriented, recently having withdrawn troops from Syria and Afghanistan. The possibility of a repeat of the Granada or Panama occupations has been discarded, and the typical pre-invasion ultimatum, like that offered to Hussein or Gadhafi, is being postponed. The Pentagon is only entertaining limited engagements for the time being, starting with the shoddy pretext of humanitarian intervention.

Nor are the US's European partners eager to participate in adventurism. Their role in the plot against Venezuela lacks a credible threat. Divergences among Western leaders has led to an impasse

over the agreement on sanctions in the Organization of American States and the UN, while the Vatican seeks to remain neutral.

Coup conspirators have also taken note of the augmented role Russia plays in supplying the Venezuelan military. A Russian presence could complicate matters for Trump's oil seizures, if it proves to be the case that Russia has shares in CITGO. Nor is it clear who would exactly be most affected by the seizure. Experts estimate that the United States has managed to separate its supply of Venezuelan oil. But those purchases make up 13% of imports and their cancelation could affect energy prices.

The media is at pains to conceal these dilemmas. Coverage is triumphalist, despite the failure on the part of the rightwing to register any type of achievement in the last two weeks. So long as bribes, threats and US enticements fail to erode the Armed Forces, Guaidó will continue to exercise command of a nonexistent post.

A Battle on Two Fronts

The rightwing has indeed recovered its capacity to mobilize, but Chavismo has responded in kind with equally massive demonstrations. The government maintains a remarkable ability to rally its supporters in the midst of the crisis. Both sides recognize that repeated marches will not be enough to force the government to relinquish power. The indeterminacy of the current situation could ultimately prove costly for the opposition.

Their leaders are left to choose between the path of violence (which led to their isolation in 2017) or accepting the status quo (which is sapping their energies). For the time being they have opted against the violent guarimbasin the wealthier neighborhoods, preferring to test their strength through provocations in popular neighborhoods.

The government too has learned from past confrontations and is exercising caution. It shows leniency towards Guaidó's photo ops and is betting on his slow demoralization. But economic collapse raises questions about long-term popular support in the battle against the rightwing. All of Venezuelan society is being torn apart by the collapse of income.

Contraction in production over the last five years has destroyed 30% of GDP. Such a downturn is on level with the 1930's Great Depression. No sector of Venezuelan society is immune to the debacle.

Crude oil extraction has been halved. Monetary financing of the fiscal deficit has triggered the largest hyperinflationary spiral of the twenty-first century. Price indexes leapt from 300% (2016) to 2,000% (2017). The current price average is unquantifiable.

The scale of the crisis is demolishing salaries, leading to barter exchange and a critical shortage of food and medicine. The daily suffering of the population is appalling, their survival often dependent on official government supply networks (CLAPS).

The media portrays this collapse as the inexorable consequence of "Chavista populism", overlooking the role played by the architects of economic warfare. The foreign blockade and internal sabotage have led to a collapse in crude oil extraction, diminishing international reserves and skyrocketing costs of basic imports. Foreign and local capitalists have provoked this collapse as a means to expedite the arrival of a more business-friendly political regime.

Indescribable economic adversity has been aggravated by the government's own improvisations,

ineffectiveness and outright complicity. Maduro has passively tolerated the destruction of production. Sectors of Chavismo have lobbied to penalize corrupt bureaucrats and their millionaire partners, to no avail.

These are the initiatives needed to forestall economic collapse. Other measures proposed include effective control over the banking system to impede capital flight, radical shifts in the assignation of foreign reserves to the private sector, progressive taxation of private fortunes, incentive programs to encourage local production of food and measures to generate popular control of prices.

This program also calls for a new approach to debt that would anchor the local currency and contain hyperinflation. No “petro” or “sovereign bolivar” will function so long as the boliburguesía [portmanteau of Bolivarian and bourgeoisie, i.e. the new bourgeoisie that prospered under the Chavez administration] enjoys official government protection. This privileged layer has thrived by over-billing imports, transferring funds abroad, engaging in currency speculation and scarcity. The rightwing is not the only force looking to topple Chavismo: similar forces are alive inside a government that has failed to counteract economic collapse.

Commitment or Neutralism

As the conflict grows more serious, many voices are calling to impose a set of conditions under which the Venezuelans could democratically determine their future. The legitimacy of that principle is beyond debate. The question is how it can be implemented, because if the coup forces take the upper hand then that aspiration will be as good as dead. The continued sovereignty of the country and the defense of popular rights demand, above all, that the escualidos be defeated [escualido, “the squalid,” is a common pejorative for the anti-Chavista opposition].

The conflict underway is no longer an “internal affair” of Venezuela. The confrontation exceeds its territorial origin and now involves the entire region. The two principal interests stoking the crisis have very precise goals. The United States looks to recover dominion over its “backyard”, while the Latin American elites want to bury the previous decade’s popular demands.

If the coup conspirators manage to defeat Chavismo, they will move next on Bolivia and Cuba, extending neoliberal authoritarianism across the continent. The dispute over Venezuela is about the preservation of one of the last breakwaters as the reactionary tidal wave continues to expand.

The parties, organizations and intellectuals who categorically reject the coup are capable of grasping the dimensions of the dilemma. The strength of anti-imperialist demonstrations underlines this. Gone is the hesitancy that watched on from the sidelines during the 2017 guarimbas. The designs of an ascendant rightwing are all too plain to see; the portents of a Venezuelan Bolsonaro would mean irreparable damage.

The current dilemma should in no way deter criticism of the decisions made by the Chavista government. But it is of vital importance to situate any critique within a shared battle against the putschists.

Moreover, the current struggle calls for something more than the ambiguous neutrality expressed in recent pronouncements. By distancing themselves from the conflict’s protagonists, those declarations situate either side on a common plane. With the same yardstick they question Maduro and Guaidó, suggesting that there is a shared level of illegitimacy. They simultaneously criticize the regime’s authoritarianism and the adventurism of the opposition. They object to the US military threat and the geopolitical presence of Russia.

But does a mutual condemnation of Maduro and Guaidó then entail recognizing neither party? A call for abstention from the rallies marshaled by the government and the opposition? Does it mean an indiscriminate censure of the Marines and the Bolivarian Army?

Neutralists praise the attitude of the Mexican and Uruguayan governments, who are advocating for the immediate renewal of negotiations between both parties. That initiative has opened a channeled of dialogue which Maduro has already accepted, and Guaidó rejects.

It is clear that the concrete specifics of negotiation will be decided with the outcome of the struggle. The rightwing will not accept dialogue so long as there is a perceived possibility that it can seize power. Therefore, defeating the Right is the basic condition for resuming negotiations. The outcome of negotiations will be a reflection of the balance of forces. Defeating the rightwing is the categorical priority for the present moment. In that battle, the destiny of Latin America is being decided.

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P.S.

- Verso Books, 08 February 2019:
https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4235-venezuela-defines-the-future-of-the-region?fbclid=IwAR29LG4j2Wb-teP9_vJTamsOq2FaDy68CwQjWqzv8ebU3CtxKrOjWkcOY3E
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