

Venezuela and the US Left

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Venezuela is in crisis, and Trump's saber-rattling is making things worse. Our response should be guided by three principles: non-interventionism, self-determination, and solidarity with the oppressed.

How should we respond to the fraught situation in Venezuela? The question has sparked heated debate on the Left, both in the US and around the world. The recent intensification of US efforts to remove Nicolás Maduro, by force if necessary, has lent that question renewed urgency.

There are no easy answers. But in thinking it through, we should be guided by three principles: non-interventionism; self-determination; and solidarity with the oppressed.

Non-Interventionism

Non-interventionism is the principle that sovereign states should not interfere in the internal dealings of other sovereign states. It is synonymous with the principle of national sovereignty.

In a world marked by more and less powerful states, this is a crucial tenet for anyone who cares about fairness and equity. Without national sovereignty, any state can do whatever it wants to any other state, provided it has sufficient force. More powerful states can push less powerful states around, and global hegemons impose their will on the rest of the earth. The unfairness of this imperial logic is obvious.

Applying the principle of non-interventionism to the Venezuelan case is straightforward: the US has no right to interfere in Venezuela's internal affairs. It is thus incumbent on leftists in the US and elsewhere to oppose any efforts to do so. This means standing against US threats to wage war on Venezuela as well as Trump's increasingly debilitating sanctions. (We should also reject efforts by other powerful states, such as Russia and China, to dictate what Venezuela does.)

In addition to the moral case, there are also practical reasons for non-interventionism. It is hard to see how draconian sanctions and the threat, much less the reality, of US-led or -supported violence would improve the lives of ordinary Venezuelans. Sooner or later such efforts would likely lead to Maduro's ouster. And even if one were to grant the desirability of Maduro stepping down (which some on the Left are willing to do), the costs of this occurring due to US sanctions or war would be tremendous: lives lost and destroyed; social, economic, psychological, and infrastructural damage inflicted. The cavalier attitude of the John Boltons, Elliott Abrams, and Donald Trumps of the world towards this suffering is sickening.

US sanctions have already worsened Venezuela's profound humanitarian crisis, as a November 2018 report by the US Congressional Research Service acknowledges. The oil sanctions initiated last week will undoubtedly deepen this crisis even more, prolonging and increasing ordinary Venezuelans' suffering. And there is every reason to think a military conflict would not be short, given Maduro's current support in the Venezuelan military, and the near-certainty that a US invasion would spark significant popular resistance, particularly among grassroots Chavistas. What's more, a US-led effort to remove Maduro would be set an awful precedent — reaffirming the right of

more powerful states to push around less powerful states.

There are exceptions to the non-interventionism principle. If it can be reasonably determined that either genocide or humanitarian catastrophe is taking place, intervening against the offending state is potentially warranted. Such instances require very careful analysis of whether a given intervention could in fact end the dire threat, as well as the costs and benefits of intervening versus not intervening. It is also crucial to remember that powerful states, particularly the US, often use arguments about “humanitarian intervention” to push imperial projects that have no likelihood (and often no real intention) of addressing social needs.

This is clearly the case with Venezuela. US attempts to bring about regime change are not a justifiable exercise in humanitarian interventionism. In fact, past and present US actions are a major — though not the only, nor even the primary — reason for the humanitarian crisis Venezuela is facing. A party to a tragedy cannot be trusted with resolving that tragedy.

Finally, one can make a left case for “progressive” intervention, in which a left government or leftist individuals take a side in a domestic conflict, with the goal of advancing equality or social justice. Cuba’s engagement in Angola in the 1970s and the participation of foreign leftists in the Spanish Civil War come to mind. But Washington’s actions in Venezuela cannot plausibly be read through this lens. There’s absolutely no justification for US sanctions or military intervention.

Self-Determination

Self-determination is the principle that people should have a real say in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. The tenet is typically applied to political decisions, but in its most radical form it [also applies](#) to economic, social, and other decisions that impact people’s daily existence.

Applying this principle to Venezuela is less straightforward than non-interventionism. Many leftists argue that Maduro deserves support because he was democratically elected. According to this view, the principle of self-determination (at least in its minimal, representative democratic variant) is still in effect in Venezuela. Defending Maduro is therefore the same as defending self-determination in Venezuela.

But Maduro was not democratically elected. It is true, as leftists who support Venezuela’s government note, that Maduro was declared the winner of the country’s May 2018 presidential election. It is also true that many mainstream media claims about the election — that there was widespread fraud and vote rigging — have not been substantiated and resemble the innumerable unsubstantiated claims of electoral fraud during the Chávez years. And it is true that Maduro lucked out when the opposition decided to boycott the 2018 election. Had the opposition united behind Henri Falcon, it is possible Maduro would have lost.

But all of this leaves out the crucial fact that Maduro banned Venezuela’s leading opposition parties and candidates — most prominently, Henrique Capriles Radonski — from running. Leftists would rightly denounce a right-wing ruling party that engaged in such tactics. And we must criticize Maduro for doing so as well. On top of that, Maduro’s actions are part of a pattern, since early 2016, of increasing authoritarianism. Examples include the government’s cancellation of a recall referendum against Maduro in October 2016; the one-year postponement of 2016 governor elections; the pro-Maduro Supreme Court bypassing, and thus essentially dissolving, the opposition-controlled National Assembly March 2017; Maduro’s decision to call elections to a new Constituent Assembly in July 2017; outright fraud in the count for that election; and, most brazenly of all, the theft of the most closely contested race in the rescheduled October 2017 governor elections.

To this we must add the state's use of repression, not only against opposition violence, but also against peaceful protest, with scores killed in 2017 and an estimated forty killed in the last week. The opposition's own role in fostering violence deserves equal condemnation, as does US support of such violence.

But neither changes the fact that by holding onto power through authoritarian means, the Maduro administration has systematically blocked the Venezuelan people's ability to express themselves politically. In the face of this, the Left should embrace the call for free and fair elections in Venezuela. Failure to do so is a failure to promote the principle of self-determination.

Elections are not, of course, the only or even the primary form of self-determination. One might ask whether the Maduro administration has rejected liberal democracy in favor of "revolutionary democracy," in which workers and the poor exercise direct control over economic, social, and political decisions affecting their lives. Whatever the past plausibility of such an argument may have been, nothing of the sort is occurring now.

Workers and the poor did create institutions of popular power in recent decades (grassroots communes, food distribution networks, etc.), which Chávez helped promote and which continue to exist in some form. But the extent of popular power in Venezuela has diminished significantly in recent years, largely thanks to the crisis. As grassroots Chavista organizers told me in 2015 and 2016, economic woes (which the government bears primary responsibility for) have made it much harder to do grassroots work.

The weakening of popular institutions is also due to direct repression by the Maduro administration. A notable example was the state's refusal to recognize the sweeping victory of commune leader Angel Prado in December 2017 municipal elections. Instead of heeding the people of Simon Planes, who elected Prado with a whopping 57.92 percent of the vote, the government placed Prado under investigation. (Despite his critiques, Prado has pledged to defend Maduro in the face of US aggression.)

Solidarity With the Oppressed

The first duty of leftists is to provide solidarity to the oppressed: subordinate classes, women, racialized groups subject to discrimination, and anyone who is economically, socially, culturally, or politically marginalized. A key part of this principle is that the oppressed deserve solidarity over and above state actors, regardless of whether such actors label themselves leftists, socialists, or revolutionaries. Standing in solidarity with the oppressed means several things, including documenting their oppression, working to understand the root causes of their oppression, and acting in ways that support their efforts to overcome their oppression.

Applying this tenet to Venezuela today requires, as a first step, recognizing the immensity of the country's humanitarian crisis — something the government has frequently failed to do in recent years. Venezuelans are suffering tremendously from shortages of food, medicine, and basic goods. Hyperinflation is ravaging the country. Three million have left Venezuela in recent years, and many fear that even more will flee this year.

Solidarity with the oppressed demands, secondly, a correct analysis of the causes of Venezuela's crisis. The primary driver is the government's mismanagement of its oil revenue, through a disastrous currency policy and, relatedly, a failure to curb corruption on the order of hundreds of billions of dollars, according to former Chávez officials. US policy has also exacerbated the crisis, particularly in the last eighteen months. Sanctions implemented in August 2017 have triggered a major fall in oil production and oil revenue. The oil sanctions the Trump administration just

enacted will have even more devastating consequences.

Instead of playing an either/or game, both sources of Venezuela's crisis must be acknowledged: the government's criminal mismanagement (which cannot be dismissed as "errors" since systematic corruption exists at very high levels); and the US's brutal policy of deliberately increasing suffering as a way of pushing the population to turn against the government.

Standing in solidarity with the oppressed demands, thirdly, supporting the oppressed in their efforts to overcome the sources of their oppression and suffering. This means working to prevent increased hardship from a US war and debilitating sanctions. As such it means firmly opposing US intervention in Venezuela, not only because it violates the principle of non-interventionism, but also because it will increase the suffering of the oppressed. But solidarity also requires that leftists in the US do what we can to support Venezuelans' own struggles against the Maduro administration's disastrous policies, criminal ineptitude, and repression. Opposition to Maduro is now common not only among upper and middle classes (as it has been for some time), but also among the popular sectors. Polls indicate that most Venezuelans want Maduro out (through negotiations and not foreign intervention). Failing to listen is not only tone deaf. It is a violation of our duty of solidarity.

Still, while it appears clear most Venezuelans reject Maduro, it does not follow that most back the opposition — including Juan Guaidó, who declared himself president last week and is strongly supported by the US. Venezuelans' desire for new leadership should not be equated with support for the types of neoliberal policies that US-backed opposition would likely implement. A February 3, 2019 poll indicated that 33 percent of Venezuelans identify as Chavista, 19 percent as opposition, and 48 percent as neither. Alongside pictures showing significant turnout in both opposition and government rallies on Saturday, February 2, this suggests that Venezuela remains a deeply polarized society.

Standing with the oppressed demands opposing both the US and the Maduro administration. It means supporting efforts, such as those led by Mexico and Uruguay, to foster peaceful transformation in Venezuela. And it requires, above all, supporting options that allow the oppressed to have a real say in deciding their own future.

Looking Forward

With the likes of John Bolton and Elliot Abrams directing Trump's policy on Venezuela, the chances of a devastating US intervention appear to be rising. We should oppose this with everything we've got. But that isn't enough.

Keeping in mind the three principles laid out above, the best thing to do now is support multilateral efforts to foster a peaceful resolution to Venezuela's crisis. We should also back the call for free and fair elections, doing so in a way that acknowledges the growing opposition to Maduro (from all sectors of society, including the popular sectors), the continuing support for the Chavista project, and even — to a much lesser extent — for Maduro. Supporting free and fair elections does not mean supporting a US-led or US-backed project of neoliberal transformation. It means working to expand the space within which Venezuelans can make their own choices about the future.

Above all, the Left must act in solidarity with the oppressed. For leftists in the US this requires looking both outward and inward. It means working to end US sanctions (particularly on the oil sector) and organizing to block a US war on Venezuela. It means supporting Venezuelans' right to choose their own government. In the not unlikely event that a new government takes hold, a critical task will be to prevent the exclusion and demonization of Chavistas, Chavismo, and the Left in general. The dangers of this occurring are very real.

Finally, it means working to transform US politics — not just challenging Trump's adventurism, but also pressuring Democrats to change their foreign policy tune. As the war machine gears up, this is a critical task for the Left. Otherwise Venezuelans and others on the wrong side of US imperialism will continue to be stifled in their ability to decide what their own futures will look like.

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