

Crisis in Venezuela: Will Anybody Support Democracy?

Written by Nicolas Falomir Lockhart

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NICOLAS FALOMIR LOCKHART, MAR 24 2014

Since February 12th 2014, popular demonstrations both in favor of and against the government have been taking place in Venezuela. The protests started as a student expression but they were rapidly taken up by the opposition seeking to channel the general dissatisfaction of society with high costs of living and insecurity. In some cases, violence took over these events. As a result, nearly 30 people, including demonstrators – both in favor of and against the government – and law enforcement agents, have already died and nearly 200 people remain detained. In particular, the leader of the hard-right wing opposition, Leopoldo Lopez, has been detained since February 18th accused of instigation to commit crimes and unlawful assemblies and riots. The situation is a great worry for the government whose strength depends mainly on popular support, especially among the less well off. The government has denounced a plot between the “imperialist” government of the US and the “fascist” right opposition. As a result, it has expelled three US diplomatic officers alleging their support of anti-government demonstrations.

The Emergence of Chavism and Maduro’s Taking Office

While dictatorship spread all over Latin America during the second half of the 20th century, Venezuela was one of the rare exceptions where democracy remained in place. However, regularly-held elections did not compensate for corruption, nor for the absence of an efficient administration of national resources (Alvarez Diaz, 1999). Thus Venezuelans have periodically been exposed to massive protests, such as the “*Caracazo*” in 1989 (Lopez Maya, 2003). In this context, lieutenant-colonel Hugo Chavez made his entrance on the political scene, in the name of the most deprived people, through a *coup d’état* in 1992 against President Carlos Andres Pérez (Gott, 2011:63). To understand Chavez’s military action one has to take into consideration two particularities of President Perez: on one hand, he developed in his second term a neoliberal economic policy, in flagrant contradiction of the economical orientation that he had adopted in his first term, which aggravated the situation of the poorest people (Schuyler, 1996); and on the other hand, he was repeatedly accused of corruption and finally in March 1993, a year after Chavez’s attempted coup, became the first chief of state condemned for corruption (Pérez Liñán, 2000).

Despite his military action against constitutional order, Chavez was eventually pardoned of his 2 year sentence. Once free, Chavez decided to have an active political participation in presenting himself as the candidate of the disadvantaged and poor people of Venezuela. Hence, he created his own political party with which he won the presidential elections of December 1998. Chavez immediately set up a project for refounding the nation, based on the vindication of the poor people and the image of Simon Bolivar, the national hero of independence and promoter of Latin-American union. This *Bolivarian* project was characterized, in economical terms, by its anti-neoliberal political orientation and for its plentiful social aids, something that was possible thanks to oil income (Sanjuan, 2008). Furthermore, Chavez imposed a new way of relation with his followers: the so-called “participative democracy” (Lopez Mera, 2004; Wilpert, 2005), consistent with the permanent mobilization of the population so as to legitimate his actions as decisions taken directly by the population. This practice created a sentiment of being the political protagonist among the lower classes of the Venezuelan population. At the same time, Chavez succeeded in having his followers constantly mobilized in his support (Perez, 2013).

Even though Chavez did take up arms against a democratically elected president, it is not correct to sustain that,

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once in office, he was a dictator. He took office through free and fair elections (Gott, 2011:134). Furthermore, his project was continuously legitimated in electoral contests, where opposition parties had the opportunity to compete freely. In fact, since the victory of 1998, Chavez witnessed the victory of Chavism in 16 of 17 elections. If we consider Maduro's presidential election in April 2013 and the municipal elections of December 2013, the Bolivarian movement won 18 of 19 elections. Evidently, democracy cannot be reduced to periodical elections. The strengthening of institutions and the rule of law, the free exercise of political and civil rights, the freedom of speech, and real possibilities of alternation might also be considered. Still, free and fair elections remain the heart of democracy. Hence, rather than dictatorship, it is much more accurate to characterize Chavez's regime by its populist footprints (Cannon, 2009; Hawkins, 2010): the cult of personality and the mythical references to the national hero Simon Bolivar, the substantial social aid in favor of the less well-off and their encouragement towards greater involvement in political life. Other authors, following the "hybrid" model, characterize the regime as a "competitive authoritarian" one (Levitsky and Way, 2002) especially because of the erosion of institutionalization (Kornblith, 2005; 2013).

If popular acceptance was the strongest aspect of the regime, its main weakness is its reliance on the cult of personality. After Chavez's death, in March 2013, the problem became particularly acute due to the lack of leadership. Maduro, Chavez's minister of foreign affairs since 2006, managed to get elected as president in April 2013 (The Economist, 2013b), but since the electoral campaign it has been clear that he does not have the talents of his predecessor. Despite the rigorous respect of chavist premises and his frequent allusion to the "father of Bolivarian revolution", he has had a hard time filling the role of leader of the movement, especially in relation to its hard wing, represented by its military sector and commanded by the current president of the national assembly, Diosdado Cabello, Chavez's former right hand.

Demonstrations Against the Government and Denunciation of Plots

The government has two major reasons to be concerned about the demonstrations. Firstly, it would like to avoid the possible repetition of the events of April 2002 when popular demonstrations coordinated with a military uprising temporarily expelled Chavez from his post (Coronil, 2005; Lopez Mera, 2008; Hernandez, 2004). Secondly, popular discontent erodes the electoral base of the regime. Due to the economic situation, the population is extremely worried and it does not perceive the response of the government as being effective. The national currency, the Bolivar, was devaluated by 33% in February 2013, causing a significant increase in the price of imported products and a shortage of some basic goods, such as flour, milk and toilet paper. Thus, the inflation rate reached 56% in 2013 and the official value of the Bolivar on the black market is 10 times higher than its official value (The Economist, 2013a).

What started as a student demonstration on February 12th has rapidly become a generalized demonstration against the government, led by the opposition, in order to channel the general dissatisfaction of the society with the economic situation. Unfortunately, nearly 30 people died during these demonstrations. Many opposition leaders denounced a brutal repression by the government. The United States shared this idea of the government "confront[ing] peaceful protestors with force and in some cases with armed vigilantes" (Kerry, 2014). Yet, not all demonstrations have been pacific. A significant number of the violent demonstrations were ostensibly anti-governmental (Birns and Mills, 2014). In those cases, protesters have deployed incendiary bombs, guns, and barricades against the government and public property as well as citizens, resulting in injuries and death. This does not necessarily mean that state actors are not responsible for the repression of pacific demonstrations. Indeed, the government is already taking steps to address this. An investigation was opened against members of the SEBIN – the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service. The problem is that the violent anti-government demonstrations are in fact an "exit" strategy calling for a change by extra-constitutional means (Birns and Mills, 2014). They bet that an escalation of violence might provoke a presidential substitution (or an international intervention).

However, the government responses do not seem to be the most reasonable ones. For example, in order to appease the protestors, it advanced the carnival celebration (Lozano, 2014), or to show its strength and popular support, it decreed 10 days of mourning for the anniversary of Chavez's death (Villalobos, 2014). Moreover, it continues to see plots everywhere[i]. Since Maduro assumed the highest office, a little over 11 months ago, he has denounced a dozen of conspiracies or tentative of *coup d'états* and this has not been the exception. This time, two main conspirators were targeted. The first one was a leading figure of the opposition, Leopoldo Lopez, who was accused

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of instigation to commit crimes and unlawful assemblies and riots. The judiciary ordered his detention on February 18th and he is awaiting his trial. The second target was the United States, the chavist favorite scapegoat. For the third time in 11 months, this country suffered the expulsion of diplomatic officers.

Meanwhile, the government called on its own partisans to express their support and organize marches in its favour. Obviously, this is likely to promote confrontation and increase the already existing social tensions. This type of reaction from the government is neither new nor innocent; polarization is a strategy that has been politically profitable since 1998 (Cannon, 2008). However, the social fracture that it has caused forces us to mitigate the balance. Fifteen years of constant confrontation and accusations of betrayal to national interests have led to a division in Venezuelan society that seems hard to reconcile (Cannon, 2004). In fact, polarization weakens the sectors of the opposition that are more inclined to dialogue, such as the one led by Henrique Capriles, the presidential candidate defeated in April 2013 by a very narrow margin (Neuman, 2013). But a similar effect arises on the government's side, where tensions reinforce the most radical sectors of Chavism, represented in particular by Diosdado Cabello, to the detriment of the most moderate ones, led nowadays by Maduro.

Such polarization condemns the country to a situation of unsustainable social fracture in the medium term. To avoid such a scenario, many voices, such as Heinz Dieterich, started to plead for a negotiated political solution. The author of the theory of Socialism of the XXI Century – which is the intellectual foundation of the Bolivarian revolution – suggested the formation of a government of national unity that would include Henrique Capriles (Dieterich, 2014). As the tensions increase and the number of dead grows, Maduro seems to have switched to a more conciliatory approach. He proposed offering to appoint a new ambassador to the United States in order to re-establish normal links with the country. He also invited some opposition leaders to a meeting at the Presidential Palace of Miraflores to discuss a peaceful solution. Nevertheless, he received negative responses to these two proposals. The United States expelled three Venezuelan diplomatic officers (Cawthorne & Chinae, 2014) only the day after Maduro's proposal to appoint a new ambassador; and Capriles refused (for the moment) to participate in the negotiation meeting alleging the continuation of the government's repression policy and the existence of several "political" detainees (Fox & Sherman, 2014).

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After the previous rejections, Maduro seems condemned to reinforce his position, whereas Capriles looks comfortable in his denouncing attitude expecting that demonstrations will continue to weaken the president's support – especially now that Leopoldo Lopez's absence deprives him of his strongest contender. But this is a dangerous path because it leaves the society at the mercy of violence. Human rights violations and protesters' crimes have already left deep wounds in the society, and a worsening of the situation can only lead to an enlargement of the gap of the division among Venezuelan people. At this point it is clear that Maduro lacks Chavez's steering talents, and bets to resolve the conflict through confrontation risks of being a critical test for him. However, Chavism still enjoys an intensely loyal following, and a premature departure of Maduro (in this context) does not guarantee the arrival of someone more moderate and prone to dialogue and to democratic practices, on the contrary. On the opposition side, the perspectives are not that different: the winning game at the moment seems to be confrontation and fiery speeches.

Therefore, if domestic actors are locked in this logic of increasing tension, help should come from the international arena. The region has a certain *expertise* in this field, particularly through regional organizations' interventions. The OAS (Organization of American States), conceived to manage the hemisphere's security against internal and external threats during the cold war, found in the 1980s a new mission: the promotion of democracy. Thus, the organization intervened with success in several interruptions of democratic processes, like Haiti in 1991, Peru in 1992, Guatemala in 1993, and Paraguay in 1996. In these crises, the organization applied its first juridical tool: Resolution 1080/1991 (Milet, 2003)[ii]. However, since it endows itself with the most accomplished mechanism, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, it could only be applied once, in Honduras 2009 when the government was deposed by an "old fashioned" military coup. In Venezuela 2002 it failed to be applied because of the sudden return of Chavez. Ironically, since the broad acceptance of the Charter, the OAS has been experiencing difficulties in playing a decisive role when democracy is challenged by violent social upheavals (Depalma, 2011). This was the

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case in Bolivia in 2003 and 2005, Ecuador in 2005 and Paraguay in 2012. In all these cases, illegal overthrows were “forgiven and forgotten” (Ciurlizza, 2014).

In the current crisis in Venezuela, the OAS is suffering the same lack of efficiency. The OAS Permanent Council has treated the crisis in 2 meetings without achieving anything but a general declaration condemning violence and calling for preservation of peace and democracy. On February 19th, state members limited themselves to express their concerns (OAS, 2014a). And on March 7th, after a multi-hour discussion, the proposal of a declaration of solidarity and support for democratic institutions in Venezuela prevailed over a minority suggestion of a much more active role, only supported by United States, Canada and Panama (OAS, 2014b). This was perceived as a “diplomatic victory” by the chavist regime (The Washington Post, 2014). The OAS, where the US voice was historically the determinant one, could not agree on any action that might favour a government change in Venezuela.

Apart from the OAS, one other regional organization is able to act in the Venezuelan crisis: the UNASUR (Union of South-American Nations). This organization, formally institutionalized in 2008, has already proved its capacity to act when regional democracies are in jeopardy, and to do it rapidly at the very beginning of the crises. Its interventions in Bolivia 2008, Ecuador 2010 and Paraguay 2012 respond to that pattern. The action always consists on the support of the democratically elected government and the threat of non-recognition of the eventual new authorities. Only in the case of Paraguay, could UNASUR not stop the irregular change of authorities and decided to apply a sanction suspending the rights of participation in the organization until a new democratically elected government was in place. By contrast, in current Venezuelan crisis, UNASUR only (re)acted a month after the beginning of demonstrations. As a response to a formal request of Venezuelan government, it decided on March 12 to create a commission to mediate between the parties, but that will not be deployed before April (Unasur, 2014).

In light of this situation the implications are twofold. On the one hand, Venezuela perceives that UNASUR is permeable to its influence that permits it to make “damage-control” diplomacy. On the other hand, the inactivity of the organization shows that UNASUR’s defense of democracy is not without political (and economical) speculation. Many South American neighbors have great interest in having a non pro-US government in Venezuela, but the cost of supporting an administration accused of human rights violations and unable to find a political solution is too high.

In this sense, MERCOSUR’s (Common Market of the South) silence is equally astonishing – it has just emitted a call for peace and respect for democracy. This regional bloc – that includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and recently Venezuela- possesses a democratic clause that was recently applied against Paraguay due to the irregular impeachment of President Lugo on 2012. Yet, it seems that nobody wants to assume the cost of not having analyzed the democratic credentials of the newly admitted member.

So, who will unlock the Venezuelan democratic crisis? All regards turn to the neighbors, especially the big ones. In the crisis of 2002, led by Brazil, they assumed this responsibility by creating the “Group Friends of Venezuela” which helped to find a solution through the referendum of 2004. However, this time no one seems willing to take the first step, not even Brazil, which promoted the South American integration and presents itself as a guarantor of regional stability (Gratius & Gomes Saravia, 2013). Therefore, it seems that Venezuelan democracy has been left on its own.

[i] Maduro has even sustained that Chavez’s cancer was spread by the US government (Castro, 2013)

[ii] There have been others cases that should be considered as irregular interruptions of democratic processes but that did not merit the OAS’s intervention like Ecuador in 1997 and 2000 (Mejias, 2008).

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