

# The Authoritarian Gambit

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Venezuela is in the midst of a protracted, bitter, often violent, and sometimes deadly struggle to determine what kind of society and government it will have and what kind of future Venezuelans can hope for. At the time of writing (mid-August 2017) it is too early to know how this struggle will turn out, or what the process will be like until some more or less settled pattern emerges. But it is not too early to know what the regime and opposition want, to identify the tools with which they work, and to be clear about what they hope for and what they fear.

This regime wants above all to stay in power. Its principal leaders and enablers (army, national guard, police and political police, and paramilitaries) fear a loss of power which would limit their access to goods and funds, and make them vulnerable to legal and political processes, for example for violations of human rights, corruption, or drug trafficking.

As to tools, this has been an evolving process. President Maduro clearly has exercised control of the executive branch of government, including institutions that monitor and control elections, he has relied on a compliant judiciary, and counted on a range of security (better called “insecurity”) forces that have played an active role in harassment and repression of the opposition.

What the regime no longer enjoys is the popular support that carried Hugo Chávez to a succession of electoral victories, the last when he was clearly dying of cancer. After Chávez’s death in early 2013, Maduro (his designated successor) was elected president by a tiny (and contested) margin. Since that time the regime has lost successive elections at the local and regional level and lost control of the National Assembly, where the opposition

gained an absolute majority in December 2015.

What to do when electoral success becomes questionable and elections are no longer a reliable source of power or legitimation? The first step is to disqualify opposing candidates on charges of corruption, or “incitation to violence,” or “failure to carry out their duties.” If opposition candidates win anyway, a second step is to disqualify elected officials. This has been the case of numerous mayors and of three deputies from Amazonas whose disqualification kept the opposition from acquiring a supermajority (required to pass “organic laws”) after gaining control in the electoral landslide of 2015. When the Assembly passes laws, a further step has been to have the courts disqualify them (numerous laws were declared unconstitutional on issues from amnesty to land title). If the problem persists, a next to final resort is to have the courts declare the Assembly in rebellion and try to shut it down. This is what sparked the round of protests that began in early 2017 and continue to the present.

The Bolivarian constitution of 1999 provides an elaborate mechanism for removing the president from office through a recall election. What can be done if the opposition gathers the required signatures and looks likely to force a recall election? The first response, used ably by Chávez himself when facing a recall vote in 2004, is to engage in a series of delays and sequential changes of rules while strengthening the regime’s position with economic benefits. But the current economic situation is so bad, and the government’s popularity so low, that these do not appear sufficient. So what to do? The answer has been that if all else fails, simply cancel elections indefinitely. At this point the regime abandoned democracy.

With electoral means put off the table and the very existence of the national assembly threatened, ordinary political means lack validity, and the opposition turned to massive and continuous public demonstrations and civic strikes which have become a constant presence in national life. Faced with such sustained opposition, what tools remain to the regime? The first choice has been repression and intimidation—mass arrests of activists (tried in military courts), arrests of political prisoners in the middle of the night, and active, violent harassment of demonstrators and opposition figures by police and proregime paramilitaries.

Let us be clear. The overwhelming weight of violence, the overwhelming control and use of the means of violence, lies in the hands of the regime. Aided by paramilitary groups, official forces (like the army, police, national guard, and political police) deploy considerable force every day against manifestations and members of the opposition.

If violence is not sufficient to quell protests, the next step, given the opposition’s use of the constitution to legitimate its actions, has been to scrap the constitution and start over. Hence the process of “electing” and installing a National Constituent Assembly (vote July 30, installation immediately after). This was no ordinary election: candidates were preselected by the regime; no opposing views were represented. Moreover, in contrast to the Constituent Assembly that launched the Chávez period, there was no referendum to decide whether or not such an assembly should be elected in the first place. This is an assembly imposed from above and designed to create a fortified, armored authoritarian system. It is important to realize that a constituent assembly is a unique kind of legislature, with no preset limits or

controls, empowered to abolish all existing institutions, remove all existing officials, and start from scratch. The Constituent Assembly began in this way, asserting its general authority and disqualifying or ousting opponents.

The preceding comments show the regime working to hold on to power through an escalating series of measures, always accompanied by violence. If these are the goals and tools of the regime, what of the opposition? The short-term goals of the opposition remain clear: to remove the president by legal and constitutional means, hold new elections, free political prisoners, and restart the economy by loosening controls and reopening international ties. All these have been laid out in legislation regularly swatted away by the Supreme Court. As the electoral ground has gradually been constricted or eliminated, and in the face of attacks on the National Assembly and harassment of deputies and other elected officials, the opposition has turned to massive, continuous public protests in an effort to rally and consolidate support and keep the issues on the public (national and transnational) agenda. In these the opposition has been successful, but the regime hangs on, entrenched behind its security forces and now with a Constituent Assembly to provide a legal foundation more to its liking.

How this contest will work out is difficult to predict in detail. For the regime the choice is clear: double down on authoritarian rule or risk losing everything. The Constituent Assembly is the vehicle for that doubling down. It is impossible to know precisely what the Assembly will come up with, but some informed speculation is in order: assert control of all institutions; continue to provide for elections but with severe controls on access,

participation, venues, and candidates. There will be tightened controls over media, information, and freedom of movement and association. The regime will crack down on independent social movements, particularly those that monitor events; shut down external funding; accelerate repression and imprisonment of activists, protesters, and opposition officials; accentuate all economic controls; and increase the already significant role of the military in all production and distribution of essentials like food and medicine.

Will the authoritarian gambit work? For how long? Similar efforts to stabilize authoritarian rule have worked, sometimes lasting for a very long time. Regimes of this kind face a few great perils. Free elections of any kind, including referenda, are dangerous (*viz* Nicaragua in 1990, Chile in 1988, Uruguay in 1980).<sup>1</sup> So we can expect elections to be controlled. Sustained internal opposition threatens to raise the cost of control to an excessive level. So we can expect more repression. Continued, accelerated economic decay will further fuel opposition and out-migration. We can also expect escalating violence and serial defections from the ruling coalition (e.g., military officers, public officials), which can probably be contained, at least for a while.

The options for the opposition are above all to maintain unity, sustain a public presence, avoid provocations, and mobilize and coordinate support within the country and from international sources. Venezuela is already very isolated internationally in both political and economic terms. Numerous governments and transnational groups (Mercosur, the European Union, the UN, and the Vatican) have condemned the destruction of democracy and declined to recognize the Constituent Assembly.<sup>2</sup> International carriers have cut service, and trade including petroleum exports is likely

to suffer further, damaging the capacity of the regime to provide for basic needs. The end result will be further damage to the well-being of Venezuelans. This is going to be a rough, costly, and likely violent ride, so buckle up.

Supporters of the regime argue that the troubles of Venezuela all stem from an economic war against the country being waged by imperialism. This story rings hollow to anyone who looks at the facts, including the government's own statistics. The only indices that have consistently gone up over the last five years are inflation (the highest in the world), poverty, deaths by violence, scarcity, out-migration (two million Venezuelans already in self-imposed exile<sup>3</sup>), and infectious disease, with the return of once eliminated diseases like malaria, dengue fever, cholera, and chikungunya. Essential services from transport to electricity, potable water to public health, not to mention availability of food and medicines, have all collapsed. The regular repetition of the claim that it is all somebody else's fault reminds one of Groucho Marx's famous line in the movie *Duck Soup*. When faced with someone he is unable to convince of something clearly absurd, who will not swallow a half-baked story, Groucho's character, Rufus T. Firefly, asks: "You gonna believe me or you gonna believe your lying eyes?"

I prefer to believe my eyes. I believe in facts—what we can see with our eyes and with the tools of political and social analysis. The facts are as outlined above: a struggle between a regime desperate to hold on to power by any means and working to consolidate a more secure and lasting authoritarianism, and an opposition hoping to restore political democracy and civil and social liberties. These are the facts. Hopefully LASA as an institution committed to democracy and human

## Medium- and Short-Term Historical Causes of Venezuela's Crisis

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rights will take a principled stand and unequivocally condemn the destruction of democracy in Venezuela, a process unfolding before our horrified eyes.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Sandinistas lost power in 1990 when Daniel Ortega was defeated in presidential elections by Violeta Chamorro. Military plans for indefinite rule were defeated in plebiscites in Chile (1988) and Uruguay (1980). Democratic government was restored following free elections in both countries (elections in Chile in December 1989, elections in Uruguay in November 1984).
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. the Declaration of Lima (August 8, 2017), signed by foreign ministers and representatives of Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Paraguay. On the same day, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights denounced widespread torture and abuse of human rights by the Maduro regime.
- <sup>3</sup> A. Torres, P. De Lllano, A. Marcos, and G. Ballesteros, "El Chavismo lleva al exilio a más de dos millones de Venezolanos," *El País*, August 13, 2017. ■

I have conducted research in Venezuela since the early days of Hugo Chávez's presidency, when his movement was idealistic and optimistic. At the time, as a burgeoning scholar of nineteenth-century Latin American history, I wanted to work in a country that would be a safe location to conduct my research. I had traveled throughout Central America and the Andes in the 1980s and had seen the travesties of civil war and drug violence. In contrast, since the 1970s scholars had written about "Venezuelan exceptionalism" in reference to the country's use of oil revenues to foster stable democracy and socioeconomic development, successfully avoiding the military dictatorships and extreme violence that plagued Latin America in the 1970s–1990s. On my first trip to Venezuela, as a graduate student in the year 2000, I saw a stable democracy with a comparatively high standard of living, which I assumed would remain a safe location for me to conduct my research. This turned out to be a poor prediction. The country now is either a failed state or close to it and has among the highest rates of homicide and kidnapping in the world. The last five years mark the country's harshest descent in terms of political, economic, and living standards since its war of independence (1810–1823), when it lost one-third of the population.

So how did we get here? A full answer is beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, an exploration of weaknesses in Venezuelan democracy since its inception in 1958, along with recent governmental policies, point toward some key observations. Since well before *chavismo*, Venezuelan governments have lacked accountability to their citizens and have been highly corrupt. Also, rather than foster sustainable economic policies, these governments have focused on consolidating power unto themselves. The current regime has

accelerated these trends, and in so doing has caused far greater damage than the previous administrations.

To understand present-day Venezuela we should return to 1958, when a coalition of civilians and military personnel ousted Marcos Pérez Jiménez, the country's last military dictator. Then the country's three main political parties met and signed the Pact of Punto Fijo, which laid the groundwork for democratic governments for decades to come. Under this pact, elected governments would include members from different parties sitting in the president's cabinet and the legislature, and they would exclude parties from the far right and far left. Labor leaders also signed the pact, agreeing to work with state and industrial leaders to negotiate agreement without resorting to violence or strikes. *Puntofijismo* sought to create stable, moderate governments that could defend themselves against radicals from the right or the left. In many ways, it worked for almost four decades. Aside from a comparatively small leftist-guerrilla movement in the 1960s, this country weathered the remainder of the Cold War as a peaceful constitutional democracy.

Nonetheless, serious social, economic, and political problems emerged under *puntofijismo*, which persist to this day. Here I will address two of these problems. The first was a lack of government accountability to its citizens. In theory, a democratic citizenry can affect state policy through voting or refusing to pay taxes. In Venezuela, however, the ruling parties did not need citizen support as much as access to petrodollars that could be used to continue ineffective policies, curry favors, and buy votes. Politicians thus were often immune to the pressures from a discontented citizenry. This disconnect from popular opinion became even stronger