

Venezuela's National Dialogue: Disaggregating Key Issues

by STEVE ELLNER | Universidad de Oriente, Puerto La Cruz

At first glance, intense political polarization in Venezuela appears to leave little room for compromise or a peaceful resolution to the current political crisis facing the nation. What many believe to be at stake is nothing other than the continuation or termination of the rule of Nicolás Maduro. Statements by top leaders of both the Chavista movement and the opposition, as well as the coverage offered by the U.S. mainstream media, reinforce this impression of zero-sum-game politics. Nevertheless, Venezuelan politics is much more complicated, in part because the nation's opposition is far from monolithic. Once the major issues at play are disaggregated, a picture emerges that is quite different from the one predicting a final showdown due to the irreconcilability of government and opposition positions.

At the time of the writing of this essay in mid-November 2016, the negotiations brokered by the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), along with a representative sent by Pope Francis, have generated a modest degree of hope that the Venezuelan impasse can be overcome. The dialogue was facilitated by a series of government concessions. In an attempt to demonstrate that it was acting in good faith, the government released opposition leader Carlos Melo and two other anti-Chavistas recently accused of planning terrorist actions; accepted the opposition's condition of Vatican participation in the dialogue; and agreed with the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) that the talks be held in Caracas rather than the island of Margarita. These concessions demonstrated the possibility of at least limited progress in reducing tensions, and at the same time contradicted the notion often conjured up by the media that the Chavistas have displayed unmitigated intransigence in a desperate attempt to hold onto power.

The following essay seeks to determine whether a collision course between Chavistas and the opposition is the most likely scenario, if not an inevitable one. With this objective in mind, I analyze two aspects that shed light on the possible avoidance of head-on confrontation and internecine conflict. The essay first examines interparty unity of the opposition, which is a prerequisite for any massive confrontational effort to achieve regime change. Second, the essay looks at key areas of conflict between the opposition and the government in order to consider the possibility of convergences on specific proposals. In evaluating problem areas separately, the essay rejects the tendency to depict Venezuela as a veritable failed state facing a "humanitarian crisis," a composite picture which conflates the issues of violation of human rights, violation of democratic norms, delinquency, malnutrition, economic shortages, and corruption.

A Divided Opposition

The division within the opposition, which dates back to the April 2002 coup,¹ set the stage for the current impasse over the holding of a recall election. Following the opposition's triumph in the December 2015 National Assembly elections, parties belonging to the opposition coalition, the MUD, put forward distinct proposals for the removal of Maduro from office. Primero Justicia favored the route of the recall election, while the Causa R called for a constitutional amendment limiting presidential terms, and the more radical Voluntad Popular advocated a constitutional assembly to revamp the entire Chavista-created political system.

Two distinct strategies underpinned these different approaches. A hard-line approach represented by Voluntad Popular and

María Corina Machado (of the small explicitly neoliberal party Vente Venezuela) argued that replacing the president through a recall election was insufficient, and that a complete break with the past had to include judicial trials of leading Chavistas. National Assembly president Henry Ramos Allup expressed this position at the seventy-fifth anniversary gathering of his Acción Democrática party: "We hope that Maduro has a long life . . . so that after he is president he pays jail time for the destruction he has caused, for having divided the Venezuelan family, robbed resources from Venezuelans and for having converted Venezuela into a compost heap."

The hard-line political approach, designed to neutralize the Chavista movement, was compatible with the shock-treatment neoliberal formulas along the lines of the economic measures currently being carried out by the governments of Argentina and Brazil. Generally speaking, the more thorough the process of regime change, the more feasible a radical version of neoliberalism becomes, and the greater is the likelihood that the neoliberals in power are able to minimize popular resistance. In contrast, the soft-line approach was less insistent on—and perhaps even opposed to—neoliberal-driven radical economic transformation.

The divergences between Primero Justicia, which in the early months of 2016 concentrated its efforts on the recall, and Voluntad Popular, which was allied with Acción Democrática, slowed down the process of fulfilling preliminary legal requirements for the recall. The Chavistas took advantage of the delays, as well as errors committed by the opposition in the initial step of signature collection, in order to assure that the recall election not be held before January 10, 2017. After that date Maduro, if voted out of office, would

be replaced by the nation's vice president. Only after the recall gained momentum did other sectors of the opposition lay aside their alternative proposals and rally behind the recall effort. The U.S. mainstream media generally ignored reference to the reasons for the delay and instead focused on the opposition's united front actions and the Chavista resistance to the recall clamor. The slant emphasizing Chavista objections to the recall efforts fed into the narrative of a humanitarian crisis in a nation with a semiauthoritarian state.

The current negotiations involving representatives of the government and the MUD also illustrate the divisions among opposition parties. At first, Machado, Primero Justicia's standard-bearer Henrique Capriles Radonski, and representatives of Voluntad Popular and Un Nuevo Tiempo censured MUD's secretary general Jesús Torrealba for initiating negotiations in late October following the Vatican's announcement of its willingness to participate. Most of MUD's main member parties soon modified their position, unlike Voluntad Popular, which declared: "Conditions are not appropriate given the regime's persistence in promoting socio-political confrontation, and persecution and intimidation of all those who think distinctly." Maduro responded by calling Voluntad Popular a "terrorist group."

Economic Policy versus Politics

One possible area of convergence that could lay the basis for achieving a *modus vivendi* between the government and the opposition is economic policy. In his presidential candidacies of 2012 and 2013, Capriles embraced neoliberal economic formulas, which included a virtual open-door policy toward foreign investments, returning expropriated companies to their former owners, and autonomous status for

the Central Bank. Nevertheless, a tactical agreement on economic policy between the Chavistas, on the one hand, and Primero Justicia and other MUD parties, on the other hand, is feasible for several reasons.

In the first place, Capriles, who emerged as the opposition's leading figure in 2012, is not a hard-liner and as a presidential candidate pledged to retain and improve upon the government's social programs rather than scrap them. Following the opposition's electoral triumph in December 2015, Capriles called on the National Assembly to prioritize economic policies in order to avoid "a social explosion." In a demonstration of moderation, he pointed to the rallying cry "la salida" (the exit) that was behind the violent protests to oust Maduro in 2014 as one of the "great national failures along with the general strike [of 2002–2003]," a statement sharply criticized by Voluntad Popular, Acción Democrática, and even Torrealba. Capriles warned against repeating the slogan in 2016 in part because it would detract from economic goals.²

Voluntad Popular and other opposition radicals fear that negotiations over economic issues will overshadow efforts to achieve political objectives and ultimately regime change. Along these lines, opposition leader Haydée Deutsch criticized MUD's decision to participate in the talks on grounds that "the negotiations are not going to resolve the political problem because the government is steering them away from political issues in order to situate the problem on the economic rather than political terrain."³ For Deutsch and other radicals, "political problem" refers to nothing other than Maduro's continuation in office.

In the second place, the government and the Chavista movement are not tied to

a single economic strategy, thus leaving room for flexibility in negotiations with the opposition. Some cabinet members, such as Foreign Commerce and Investment Minister Jesús Faria, favor a more open approach to foreign investments and a closer tie-in between exchange controls and market conditions. Furthermore, some leading Chavistas are wary of the state's overexpansion into the economic realm. While no one in the movement questions public ownership of strategic industries, such as steel, telecommunications, and electricity, which were nationalized by Chávez,⁴ nonstrategic sectors are a different matter. Last year, the much-respected Chavista editor of *Ultimas Noticias*, Eleazar Díaz Rangel, criticized Chávez's expropriation of the Spanish-owned agribusiness firm Agroisleña in 2010 and applauded the National Assembly's decision to investigate state mismanagement of the company along with corruption.

In the third place, the private sector's willingness to engage in a dialogue with the government over economic issues encourages the political opposition to follow suit. The nation's main business organization Fedecámaras began negotiating with the government over economic proposals during the four-month period of political protests in 2014 when the opposition rejected Maduro's call for a national dialogue. Fedecámaras's posture contrasts with its actions in 2002–2003 when it spearheaded two attempts at regime change.

Finally, there are good reasons for the opposition to focus on concrete practical proposals rather than regime change. Indeed, it may be argued that a viable opposition strategy for assuming power and implementing its policies including neoliberalism (in any of its

varieties) precludes the recall route. This consideration may help explain the opposition's lack of rigor in fulfilling the legal requirements for the recall. If everything had gone according to schedule, the anti-Chavistas' successful presidential candidate to replace Maduro would have taken office in early to mid-2017, giving him or her less than a year to carry out the opposition's program prior to the outset of the 2018 presidential campaign. The challenges that this scenario implied would have been intensified by continued rock-bottom international oil prices. Analysts generally agree that a significant time lag (certainly more than one year) exists between the implementation of neoliberal formulas and the hoped-for resultant benefits. Finally, the opposition's interests are better served by the holding of gubernatorial elections, which have been delayed as a result of the recall initiative.

Separating the Key Issues

A distinction needs to be made between Venezuela's economic and political problems. While the Chavistas and anti-Chavistas differ over the causes of the nation's economic difficulties, both sides recognize the gravity of the problems of scarcity, contraband, distribution of basic commodities, and inflation. Similarly, although Chavista leaders accuse the opposition of exaggerating the extent of corruption and criminality, they acknowledge that both problems besetting the nation are of major proportions.

In contrast, the Chavistas and the opposition hold diametrically opposed positions on the state of Venezuelan democracy, leaving little room for compromise or for exploring areas of convergence. Any objective analysis cannot discard the plausibility of the government's side of the story. The fact is that the

opposition refused to call off the protests in 2014, which consisted of four months of mass civil disobedience and violence and resulted in 43 deaths, including six national guardsmen and a number of Chavista sympathizers. More recently, a policeman was killed while allegedly attempting to disperse demonstrators in a nationwide protest on October 26—an incident that went mainly unreported in the U.S. media—along with injuries inflicted on 26 members of the security forces the same day.⁵ In addition, considerable evidence exists that ever since the 2002 coup, opposition protests have been accompanied by (though not linked to) terrorist activity.⁶ It may be asked, how would governments elsewhere have reacted under similar circumstances?

This essay does not pretend to take a position on the state of democracy in Venezuela. My principal argument is that the Maduro government's case cannot be dismissed as lacking substance, as if it were a truly authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, the U.S. mainstream media has failed to achieve a degree of impartiality by fairly presenting both sides of the dispute. A short, well-written essay denouncing the Venezuelan government's authoritarian tendencies, including the violation of human rights, could easily get published in any of hundreds of U.S. mainstream newspapers. The same cannot be said with regard to a piece that justified the government's human rights record or its adherence to democratic norms.

Senior Venezuela diplomat and ex-foreign minister Roy Chaderton Matos recently called on the media to contribute to the effort to promote a national dialogue: "To the degree in which journalists . . . lower the tone of aggressiveness, we can advance on a more peaceful, tranquil and just road."⁷ Most importantly, news coverage

that conflates the nation's economic problems, which are of undeniable urgency, and claims of government authoritarianism, which are open to serious questioning, tends to leave misleading impressions and reach misleading conclusions.

U.S. media coverage of Venezuela reflects the opposition's discourse, which emphasizes the violation of democratic norms. Accusations along these lines serve to justify outside interference in the Venezuelan political conflict. Economic problems, as serious as they may be, are not a generally accepted rationale for international condemnation, even more so in a downturn period for the economies throughout the region, if not the entire world. Violation of constitutional norms and particularly human rights is a much more compelling argument, which has been used by foreign actors sharply critical of the Chavista government. The Venezuelan opposition has actively sought and approved of the punitive measures considered by international organizations, including the application of the Democratic Charter by the OAS and the decision by MERCOSUR to block Venezuela's assumption of the organization's rotational presidency. For this reason, an impartial evaluation of Venezuelan democracy that is divorced from the nation's pressing economic difficulties, and that gives serious consideration to both sides, has far-reaching implications and is very much in order.

International condemnation of the Venezuelan government and promotion of the "humanitarian crisis"/failed state image play into the hands of the radical wing of the opposition, which subordinates all other issues to regime change. The nonradicals, such as *Primero Justicia*, also insist on regime change but at the

same time accept negotiations with the government and underscore the importance of exploring concrete solutions to the nation's critical problems.

There is another reason for clearly separating economic and political dimensions and avoiding the "humanitarian crisis"/failed state depiction. A false evaluation of the extent of the nation's political crisis leads to misleading conclusions about the urgency of regime change. A president's declining popularity is not, in itself, a viable argument for his or her removal from office. If it were, democracies throughout the world would be much more fragile and unstable than they are. The latest public opinion polls, for instance, indicate that the approval rating of Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto is 23 percent and declining. Furthermore, he is subject to many of the same criticisms for problems that in some cases are of equal or greater proportions than those besetting Venezuela: corruption, lack of transparency, organized crime, violation of human rights, and economic adversity. Yet spokespeople for the White House and elsewhere at the international level are not calling for sanctions against the Mexican government.

Conditions prevailing in Venezuela contradict the arguments for regime change. While Maduro's popularity has declined significantly, the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) remains the strongest party in Venezuela and its mobilization capacity is as great as, or greater than, that of the opposition (but receives little coverage in the U.S. media). Furthermore, the Venezuelan opposition has failed to capitalize in a major way on the unpopularity of the Maduro administration due to economic hardships, and indeed antigovernment protests have remained largely confined to wealthy

neighborhoods. A growing number of Venezuelans are disillusioned with both the government and the opposition. Finally, for the majority of Venezuelans, the solution of economic problems takes preference over the state of Venezuelan democracy and regime change. Indeed, the polling firm Hinterlaces recently revealed that 61 percent of Venezuelans attach primary importance to the efforts to solve the nation's economic problems, as opposed to 33 percent who prioritize the recall.⁸

A misreading of conditions for regime change has led to tragic events elsewhere in the world. In short, the failure to separate clearly economic and political concerns contributes to the intensity of political polarization and conflict, which in turn threaten the nation's stability and could easily lead to violent confrontation.

Notes

Steve Ellner, who has taught economic history at the Universidad de Oriente in Puerto La Cruz, Venezuela since 1977, is the editor of *Latin America's Radical Left: Challenges and Complexities of Political Power in the Twenty-First Century* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2014). He is currently coordinating an issue of *Latin American Perspectives* titled "Progressive Governments and Class Strategies in Latin America: Populist and Pragmatic Policies in a Broader Context."

¹ The day after the coup of April 11, 2002, a hard line headed by provisional president Pedro Carmona decreed the abolition of democratic institutions, while a soft-line current favored acting within the National Assembly. See Steve Ellner and Fred Rosen, "Crisis in Venezuela: The Remarkable Fall and Rise of Hugo Chávez (Coup, Chaos or Misunderstanding?)," *NACLA: Report on the Americas* 36, no. 1 (July–August 2002).

² "Críticas de Capriles a 'La Salida' desatan torbellino en la MUD," December 27, 2015. <http://www.aporrea.org/oposicion/n283332.html>.

³ "Más fraccionamientos y denuncias en la derecha: El G4 se apropió de la conducción de la MUD," November 14, 2016, <https://www.aporrea.org/oposicion/n300146.html>; "Voluntad Popular no asistirá al encuentro en el Museo Alejandro Otero," *El Nacional*, October 30, 2016.

⁴ Ellner, "Showdown in Venezuela," *NACLA: Report on the Americas* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 111.

⁵ Lucas Koerner, "The Truth about Venezuela's Opposition," *Jacobin*, November 1, 2016. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/venezuela-maduro-opposition-violence-capriles/>.

⁶ See George Ciccariello-Maher, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela* (London: Verso), 50–65.

⁷ "Chaderton: Medios de comunicación deben bajar el tono de agresividad para contribuir en el diálogo," *Apporea*, November 7, 2016. <http://www.aporrea.org/medios/n299805.html>.

⁸ "Hinterlaces: Dos de cada tres venezolanos prefiere que se resuelvan los problemas económicos al revocatorio," October 30, 2016. <http://www.noticierodigital.com/2016/10/hinterlaces-dos-de-cada-tres-venezolanos-prefiere-que-se-resuelvan-los-problemas-economicos-al-revocatorio/>. ■