

# On the LASA Resolution on Venezuela

By **The Undersigned** / October 30, 2017

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*To the editor:*

The following statement addresses the difficult process of dealing with LASA about the accelerating destruction of democracy in Venezuela.

The Association's record on issues relating to Venezuela is decidedly mixed. Until recently Venezuela was seen as a relatively rich country whose potential delegates therefore required little assistance for participating. Numerous calls for help and efforts to set up funds to assist Venezuelan scholars went largely unheeded. Over the last two years LASA Forum has housed two "Debates" sections on Venezuela. The Executive Council also issued a resolution of concern in early 2017. Through late 2016 and into mid 2017, a resolution put forth by members of the Venezuelan Studies Section calling on LASA to recognize and condemn the erosion of democracy in Venezuela was prepared and presented to the Executive Council (EC), as a step towards having the membership vote on this important matter. The resolution was signed by a large group of colleagues, both belonging to the SVS and to other sections; many of them have also signed this letter. Preparation of the resolution carefully followed the detailed rules and regulations that LASA imposes on this process (including the requirement of original signatures; emails of support were not considered valid). In the end, the effort garnered well over the minimal number of signatures required to move the process to the EC.

That is where problems began. We met with significant resistance from the EC, including lengthy delays and foot-dragging that at times seemed to constitute active sabotage. The proposed text was subjected to a process of editing and revision that can only be described as politically and ideologically motivated. We were informed that our resolution might exacerbate polarization in the country (absurd on the face of it) and were admonished for not being sufficiently "balanced," and for failing to fully historicize the situation. Given that LASA requires that resolutions do not exceed 100 words, the demanded historicization would have been impossible. We were further instructed to include a section that acknowledged that all sides had responsibility for the crisis in Venezuela, an addition that would have suggested an equivalency that, as specialists in Venezuela studies, we could not in good conscience endorse.

We can only assume that the EC's concern with historicization reflects a concern among its membership that our resolution did not take the actions and claims of both sides — both Venezuela's government, and the protestors demonstrating against repression — as equally valid. This was because, in our view, they are not: while neither side is without fault, the country's opposition and pro-democracy protestors are not chiefly responsible for the country's current plight. Our resolution, after all, was intended not as a weighing of historical blame for Venezuela's current condition, but as an unequivocal statement against the immediate and ongoing erosion of democratic values, including the detention of citizens for political reasons and the violent repression of dissent, by that country's government.

The text of the resolution was closely modeled in form and content on one approved by the EC, and passed last year by a vote of the membership, condemning the impeachment and removal from office of Dilma as president of Brazil. Whatever your position on Venezuela, we urge all readers to examine the Brazil

resolution and search for balance, historicization, or deference to the views of those who engineered Dilma's removal. There is none. One must, therefore, ask why such "balance" was felt to be so acutely needed in the Venezuelan case.

Our goal was to give members an opportunity to vote on a resolution concerning Venezuela. Our belief was that this concerned issues that should be of vital concern to a group like LASA. As described, our efforts were significantly impeded by the EC's attempt to edit the original resolution so that the one circulated among the membership, and presented for a vote, followed a specific version pre-approved by the EC. After a complex and lengthy process of negotiation, a more acceptable version of the resolution was eventually approved for submission to members. To our surprise, however, and utterly without consultation with the original signatories, when the resolution was sent out for a vote it was accompanied by a "disclaimer" warning that this resolution did not meet with consensus in the EC. The disclaimer is copied in full below:

*Disclaimer: This resolution reflects the Executive Council's belief that the membership of LASA should express their opinion on this issue. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily reflect the unanimous view of the Council.*

A search of the by-laws and regulations of LASA reveals no provision for unanimity as a condition of approval by the EC, nor any suggestion that the EC should editorialize or present its views on the merits of a resolution put before LASA's members. So what was the purpose of this addition? It is difficult to see it as other than a last effort to discredit and delegitimize the arguments put forth in the resolution. We would have strenuously opposed the inclusion of this disclaimer had we been shown the courtesy of being told about it in advance.

This experience raises an obvious and troubling question: *What is the matter with LASA?* In our view, there are at least two core problems. First, the operating mantra of the association is to provide political balance, and on any position to give equal weight to all sides. This may be emotionally satisfying for some but it is not much of a guide to discovering or identifying the truth of a situation. Truth depends on evidence, not on achieving a balance of opposing views. The second and perhaps more critical element is that for a substantial faction in the Association criticism of anything that comes clothed in leftist rhetoric is unacceptable. This conflates political correctness with ideological solidarity. As honest scholars and intellectuals we must all be ready to oppose and condemn the excesses of any government, of the right or the left. Unfortunately, it appears for many of our colleagues it has become acceptable to unequivocally condemn the impeachment of Dilma (a constitutionally sanctioned process), but insufficiently "historicized," unbalanced, and unacceptable to condemn a self-described socialist regime that tramples on its constitution every day and tosses it away when it can no longer guarantee its survival in power. This is not a very good way to run an association that is supposedly committed to democratic principles and to the promotion of research and intellectual interchange, all of which presume a commitment to truth rather than to political ideology.

The result of the vote on the Venezuela resolution suggests a massive indifference within LASA to the fate of the country. Although the resolution won over 70% of votes cast (1,747 Yes, 463 No, 257 Abstentions) LASA requires that for any resolution to pass, at least 20% of the total membership (13,418) must vote. In this case only 18% bothered to do so. That more than 80% of the members of the Latin American Studies Association are either indifferent to or unaware of the destruction of democracy in Venezuela and the devastation faced by Venezuelans is shocking and shameful. Something is seriously wrong and one can only hope that things change for the better. The undersigned lament this situation and protest the behavior of the previous LASA leadership and EC in the strongest possible terms.

## Signed

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