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Venezuela's Polarization Shows No Signs of Subsiding

by Andrés Gaudín

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Venezuelan political leaders say that 82% of citizens believe that political polarization is harming the country and that the leaders of the governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) and the opposition Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) should negotiate a new status quo to ensure a harmonious coexistence.

Although no one knows where that dramatic information comes from, analysts and party leaders who have abandoned the MUD in recent weeks are clearly using it as an accurate description of reality, and they cite it as the main reason for their decision to break with the structure run by twice-defeated presidential candidate Henrique Capriles.

"We Venezuelans are fed up with the systematic confrontation, with people in power who write off those of us who criticize them and who insult us, and with an opposition that does not see what is positive simply because it comes from the government and that insults the president [Nicolás Maduro] in the most offensive way," said Felipe Mujica, leader of Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), the third-largest party in MUD, when he announced on July 19 that MAS was withdrawing from the opposition alliance.

No one paid any attention to his message or that of other leaders who made similar statements. The government and the opposition continue to resort to insults and disparagement whenever they refer to each other.

Against this backdrop, all national sectors—politicians, business people, and workers—see the government and the opposition continuing to write new chapters in a narrative that has pushed the stability of the country to the brink. Analysts can no longer trust either the polls or statistics released by public-opinion consultants and the press because they all have taken sides and consequently lost their objectivity. The only accurate data came on Dec. 18 when Venezuelans went to the polls to elect municipal authorities (NotiSur, Dec. 7, 2012, and Jan. 25, 2013).

In this context, positions previously shared by the vast majority—such as viewing the US government with suspicion—have become the private domain of the governing party. "To escape the minefield that the country has become, the government and the opposition have taken their dispute abroad," said political analyst Víctor Mijares, an international analyst close to the MUD.

Maduro sought refuge, and found it, in the progressive South American governments and regional organizations. Capriles sought protection, and did not find it, or found it only minimally, among the continent's rightist leaders.

**Little change in US-Venezuelan mutual antipathy**

For two years Venezuelans have awaited a normalization in relations with the US, today reduced to a minimum even though bilateral trade remains positive. On June 5, at an Organization of American States (OAS) summit in Antigua, Guatemala, the top diplomats of both countries, Foreign Minister Elías Jaua and Secretary of State John Kerry, began an auspicious dialogue (NotiSur, July
5, 2013). Days later, however, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roberta Jacobson met in Washington with three MUD leaders.

"We believe that it shows an unfriendly attitude; these three people refuse to recognize the democratic government of Venezuela and act to destabilize the country, but this time we will not say anything," said Jaua.

Another setback occurred when the Venezuelan government offered asylum to US whistleblower Edward Snowden. Jaua spoke again and said that the White House "tried to put conditions on us, to pressure us publically." The minister always expressly distanced Kerry from "these unfriendly acts," evidently trying to preserve the conditions for continuing the dialogue begun in Antigua.

However, everything went back to square one on July 19, following statements by Samantha Power at her confirmation hearing with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to be ambassador to the UN, when the Maduro administration said rapprochement conversations were ended. At the hearings, Power said that part of her job would be to stand up to "repressive regimes" and that meant "contesting the crackdown on civil society" in several countries, including Venezuela.

The Caracas government said that the US State Department—"not Kerry," said Jaua—"backed the disrespectful opinions" of Power. The official Venezuelan response came the same day. The Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores said that Power's concern regarding supposed repression of civil society was "unacceptable and unfounded," adding, "On the contrary, Venezuela has amply demonstrated that it has a solid system of constitutional guarantees to preserve the unrestricted practice of and respect for fundamental human rights, which has been recognized by the UN in multiple opportunities and scenarios." The statement also said, "By contrast, the whole world constantly expresses its concern for the repressive practices carried out by the US, among them the violation of human right at the illegal prison in Guantanamo, the killings of civilians by drones, and the lamentable persecution of Edward Snowden."

**Capriles takes show on the road again**

At about the same time, Capriles began a second trip abroad looking for support in his campaign to not recognize the Maduro government. The opposition leader repeatedly says that he was the victim of fraud in the April 14 elections. Prior to this, only Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos had received him. Uruguayan President José Mujica and Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto had turned him down. The opposition leader had an invitation from Paraguay’s then President-elect Horacio Cartes to attend his Aug. 15 inauguration, but in the end the invitation was withdrawn.

Capriles arrived in Peru on July 21, after spending two days in Chile and cancelling a stopover in Argentina, where he was to be met by a small group of rightist lawmakers. In Santiago, Capriles did not have a meeting scheduled with President Sebastián Piñera, who finally, after strong pressures from his allies in the far-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), received Capriles in a private home and not at the presidential palace La Moneda or any other official venue. While awaiting Piñera's decision, Capriles learned indirectly that he would not be received by former President Michele Bachelet. Instead, he met with of group of Venezuelan residents in Chile.

The brief meeting with Piñera was at the home of Sen. Jovino Novoa, a lawyer and professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile who was undersecretary of the interior during the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990).
"You are judged by the company you keep," said Maduro. "I excuse Piñera for this, I know that domestic circumstances forced him to meet the Venezuelan fascists in the kitchen of a fascist's house." The president took advantage of Novoa's past to introduce him on his social media accounts. "He administered death, he was the man who ran the dictatorship's concentration camps, who knew who was tortured, who was killed, how many torture camps there were. That's where the fascist Capriles was received," said Maduro.

On July 22, in Lima, the Venezuelan opposition leader was rebuffed by President Ollanta Humala, who refused to receive him saying he had a Cabinet meeting. Capriles then pleaded that Humala "give me just a few minutes, I'll go wherever he says, because I want to talk with him about matters of the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas" (UNASUR).

The effort was unsuccessful. The Lima daily El Comercio said, "A high official of the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores sent a greeting from the president to the Venezuelan leader." That greeting, a meeting with former President Alan García (1985-1990, 2006-2011), and a toast with the group Amigos de Venezuela was all Capriles got out of his 48-hour stay in Peru.

In recent weeks, the level of verbal aggression was on the rise. While Maduro called Capriles a "coup monger," "fascist," and "clown at the service of the US," Capriles called the president "corrupt," "a thief," and "a servant of Fidel Castro."

To this pathetic verbal contest, Capriles added another, no less pathetic, response when he used the words of Guillermo Cochez, a far-right former Panamanian ambassador to the OAS, who showed what he claimed were Colombian identification documents to "demonstrate that Maduro is not Venezuelan and, therefore, cannot be president" of Venezuela. "Maduro, why don't you show you birth certificate? Nicolás, I ask you, where were you born? We Venezuelans have doubts no matter how much the [Colombian] Registraduría says that [the documents] are false," wrote Capriles on his Twitter account.

On July 26, Colombia's Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil had released a note saying that the documentation shown by Cochez was false. "It does not have the special characteristics of our records, such as a series number, and the number that appears here corresponds to the documentation of another citizen."

In August, after MAS left MUD, the respected academic Antonio Ecarri and Deputies Ricardo Sánchez, Andrés Álvarez, and Carlos Vargas followed suit and together with other leaders created the Alianza para el Cambio. All agreed that MUD is the victim of Capriles' authoritarianism and the corruption of many of its top leaders.

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