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Protests, Misinformation Fail To Force Regime Change In Venezuela

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Venezuela’s conservative opposition—for all the help it has received from major national and international media outlets, which have taken the right’s message, amplified it, and spread it far and wide—has so far failed in its campaign to topple the constitutional government of President Nicolás Maduro. Not only that, but its big push, after gaining some early momentum, now appears to be losing ground.

Violent opposition protests—which have resulted in dozens of victims, caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damage, and hurt vital sectors of the national economy—are languishing. Demonstrations have been reduced to a handful of middle- and upper-class neighborhoods in the east of Caracas, as well as in similar neighborhoods in a few other cities around the country.

In the meantime, major international organizations such as the UN, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) have not only turned their back on the opposition but have expressly demonstrated their support for Venezuela’s democracy. In recent weeks, only José Miguel Vivanco, director of Human Rights Watch’s Americas division; the Grupo de Diarios América (GDA), an association of Latin American media companies; and the Fundación Internacional para la Libertad, chaired by Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, have validated the opposition’s demands.

The right has taken advantage of new technologies and social-media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (which are instantaneous and provide little oversight as far as accuracy is concerned) to transmit slogans in real time and present an image of the situation that has little to do with reality. But it seems to have forgotten that the responses to those slogans also arrive in real time. The opposition’s publicity campaign, as it turns out, is losing value and being discredited just as quickly as it is concocted.

"There is a neofascist current within the core of the opposition that has developed a structure for carrying out violence and that is promoted, trained, and financed by external agents from the various global powers," Venezuelan Foreign Minister Elías Jaua told several South American governments during a lighting tour of the region in mid-February.

Inaccurate images

Earlier that month, Venezuela’s main opposition coalition, the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD), launched a venomous campaign to discredit the Bolivarian administration in Caracas. Violence first erupted on Feb. 12, when three people—the first of roughly 40 who have fallen victim to the unrest—died in incidents that authorities are still investigating (NotiSur, Feb. 21, 2014). The Maduro government responded by ordering the arrest of five of its agents, accusing them of disobeying orders and of participating in the episodes that led to the three deaths. Authorities are also looking for a group of encapuchados (hooded demonstrators) and snipers believed to have been collaborating that day with MUD civilians.
Social-media networks were soon awash with images of repression: bloodied children, animals tortured by police agents, even a picture of a young man forced to perform oral sex on a uniformed officer. These aberrant acts are always attributed to the Venezuelan government’s repressive apparatus. The images, though, have been revealed in many cases to be fakes—they are either doctored or depict scenes that took place during demonstrations in other countries.

The group Proyecto Goliath (PG) has played a key role in helping debunk the visual campaign, which initially made a strong impact. PG is a humanitarian entity formed roughly a decade ago that operates—with no fixed headquarters—in various countries in Europe and the Americas.

One of the images PG discredited was posted Feb. 11 by a Twitter user called "@yacubatwitea." The photo showed a pair of police officers violently dragging a young man. One officer had the man in a headlock while the other twisted his arm back. Attached was a message asking that the image "make its way around the world." The photo is real, but it was not taken in Venezuela. It is instead from Chile, taken during one of the many demonstrations students organized in recent years against President Sebastián Piñera, who left office last month.

On Feb. 15, a user named "@CarloshmOFICIAL" uploaded an image of a dog being beaten by police. Included in the Twitter post was the message, "The Guardia Nacional doesn’t even forgive dogs. Is this a Nazi-fascist dog?" A number of Twitter users pointed out that the image is actually of Thodoris, a Greek dog who became something of a media sensation in recent years when he appeared in numerous photos taken at anti-austerity protests in Athens.

On Feb. 16, Venezuelan actress Amanda Gutiérrez ("@amandagutierrez") wrote on Twitter: "I received this. Apologies, but I feel it’s my duty to share it so that it can go around the world." Attached was an image of a young man being forced to perform oral sex on a uniformed security official—presumably during anti-government protests in Venezuela. In reality, the photo was copied from an "adults only" Web site in the US and deliberately cropped so that the English word "police," written across the officer’s chest, did not appear. Gutiérrez later apologized and requested that people stop re-Tweeting her inaccurate post.

On Feb. 19, Twitter user "@rapslibertad" shared a photo of a massive human chain supposedly made by protestors in the western state of Táchira. The image was actually taken near Barcelona, in Spain, and depicts a large group of Catalán separatists. The next day, user "@pedroalvarez" posted a message saying, "This was done by the ‘humanists’ in the fascist and murderous criminal regime of Maduro. Do they deserve forgiveness?" Accompanying the text was a pair of images—a before and after shot—of a person beaten so badly that his eyes were completely black and swollen shut. As it turns out, the victim was not, as the post suggested, a Venezuelan student but rather a young Basque man, Unai Romano, who was arrested and brutally tortured by Spanish police back in 2001.

**Media machinations**

Internet addicts taking advantage of the anonymity social networks provide are not the only ones designing their own reality. Large media companies have also been intentionally inaccurate, omitting key bits of information, in some cases, to create a particular version of events. On the front page of its Feb. 13 edition, Clarín, Argentina’s leading daily, published an image of two men walking in front of a burning car. The man on the left is carrying a machine gun. The caption below described him as an "armed Chavista" even though EFE, the Spanish wire service that provided
the photo, had been careful to identify the men as "members of the Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas (CICPC)."

Ten days later, on Feb. 23 at 22:47 GMT, EFE sent a dramatic cable to its subscribers titled "Armed Venezuelan ex-general accused by Maduro barricades himself in his home." The brief opening paragraph of the dispatch said, "Retired Gen. Ángel Vivas, weapon in hand, barricaded himself today in his house, one day after President Nicolás Maduro ordered his arrest for inciting violence." The second paragraph added, not as a correction or clarification, but as complementary information: "Local media showed images of the former soldier holding a machine gun even though, when other journalists arrived at his home, the only thing Vivas had in his hands was a megaphone, which he used to shout out about his right to a legitimate defense." In the third and final paragraph, Vivas announced "an imminent attack on my house." EFE failed to make it clear that no such attack ever took place.

"If, to sustain their campaign, they need to rely on other realities, it means the real situation in Venezuela isn’t what they’re trying to show. The dramatic images they need just aren’t here," journalist Eleazar Díaz Rangel, director of the Venezuelan daily Últimas Noticias, wrote on Feb. 23.

On March 6, Colombia’s two leading dailies—El Tiempo and El Espectador—began publishing a series of columns under the banner "Todos por Venezuela, sin libertad de prensa no hay democracia" (Everyone for Venezuela, without press freedom there is no democracy). The articles included in the section come from Venezuelan newspapers, which claim they have been gagged by a 2003 law making it nearly impossible to obtain the foreign currency needed to import paper and thus print their own material. A number of other South American newspapers—all of them linked to media business associations such as the GDA, the Grupo de Periódicos Latinoamericanos (PAL), and the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP)—soon followed suit.

On March 26, the GDA’s 11 participating newspapers all ran an editorial piece strongly defending the Venezuelan opposition and criticizing the OAS. The article, titled "Venezuela, la OEA y la legitimidad democrática" (Venezuela, the OAS and democratic legitimacy), appeared in La Nación (Argentina), O Globo (Brasil), El Mercurio (Chile), El Tiempo (Colombia), La Nación (Costa Rica), El Comercio (Ecuador), El Universal (Mexico), El Comercio (Peru), El Nuevo Día (Puerto Rico), El País (Uruguay) and El Nacional (Venezuela). "The OAS needs to give up its complicit diplomatic approach and stop being afraid. It should take a bold stance with regard to Venezuela and thus show that it wants to conserve rather than abdicate its legitimacy," the editorial read.

Mariana Moyano, an expert on the media, said during an appearance on Argentina’s state television network that the GDA’s recent actions are perhaps the most coordinated anti-democratic media attack since the 1950s, when the SIP worked actively to undermine the government of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz. Arbenz was overthrown in a 1954 coup orchestrated by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

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