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Venezuelan Student Protests Continue, President Gives View in New York Times Op-ed

by Andrés Gaudín
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Maduro both conciliatory, defiant

The Uruguayan Web site Montevideo Portal said on April 3 that the Venezuelan president made two key points that go beyond whatever credibility his words warrant. The first was to reiterate his offer to work with White House officials to re-establish full diplomatic relations between the US and Venezuela (NotiSur, July 5, 2013). Despite a seemingly conciliatory gesture in the Times, Maduro didn’t refrain from telling his counterpart US President Barack Obama that, while Washington says it’s on the side of the Venezuelan people, "in reality, it’s on the side of the 1% who wish to drag our country back to when the 99% were shut out of political life and only the few—including US companies—benefited from Venezuela’s oil." The second point was Maduro’s critique of the "distortions" promulgated by the media reporting on the situation of his country when they label Venezuela a "deficient democracy" or say it has a "democratic deficit."

Maduro says that the media doesn’t present the truth when it says "current protests represent mainstream sentiment." The president wrote, "Anti-government protests are being carried out by people in the wealthier segments of society who seek to reverse the gains of the democratic process that has benefited the vast majority" of Venezuelans. He also said that the press fails to report that protesters "have a single goal: the unconstitutional ouster of the democratically elected government of the people."

The same day that the Times printed Maduro’s op-ed piece, the Associated Press (AP) sent subscribers a story titled "Venezuela’s street barricades a deadly protest" by Christopher Sherman. The Huffington Post was among the outlets that published the story. It seems to complement Maduro’s op-ed piece because Sherman explains the poor results the right-wing opposition—and even some cities that support the regime—have achieved with barricades and road closures aimed at creating discontent. The AP report read, "The barricades in Caracas’ middle-class neighborhoods and swaths of opposition-governed cities aim to disrupt, frustrate and ultimately trigger a popular revolt. But like the broader, mostly peaceful, anti-government movement that it grew out of, the tactic has so far failed to sow wider unrest."

Sherman interviewed Gustavo Pérez, an activist and restaurant chef working in an upscale neighborhood of Caracas. Pérez explained the goal of the barricades and the strategy of insurrection, saying, "You create chaos. All day you create discomfort, a delay in everything. The people don’t arrive early to their jobs, sometimes they can’t leave. The little food there is to distribute doesn’t
arrive to the supermarkets. Then it creates a domino effect. The idea is to collapse the city so that people go out into the streets."

Sherman wrote that, nevertheless, "the plan never reached critical mass and ultimately Perez’s neighbors felt the pain more than the government did. Not surprisingly many of the barricades in Caracas, including Perez’s, have disappeared."

Even before Maduro’s piece appeared in The New York Times, The Guardian of London had published an opinion piece by Mark Weisbrot, co-director of the Washington, DC-based Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), titled "The truth about Venezuela: a revolt of the well-off, not a ‘terror campaign.’" Weisbrot’s piece, reprinted in the Mexico City daily La Jornada, had made a similar point. He rejected calling Venezuela a "failed state" and said it is inaccurate to call the violent protests a popular rebellion.

After spending a month in the South American country, Weisbrot wrote, "Major media outlets have already reported that Venezuela’s poor have not joined the right-wing opposition protests, but that is an understatement: it’s not just the poor who are abstaining—in Caracas, it’s almost everyone outside of a few rich areas like Altamira, where small groups of protesters engage in nightly battles with security forces, throwing rocks and firebombs and running from tear gas."

In Altamira, one of Caracas’ most exclusive neighborhoods where the very wealthy live, public infrastructure has suffered serious damage. The analyst criticized US Secretary of State John Kerry, saying he "knows which side of the class war he is on." He also said, "The domestic politics of Kerry’s posturing are pretty simple." Moreover, "it seems to have divided the opposition and united the Chavistas," thus leading to his conclusion that "the only place where the opposition seems to be garnering broad support is Washington."

**Talks with diplomats, opposition**

While mainstream media around the world began to make minor adjustments in their editorial lines regarding the Venezuelan situation, diplomats have agreed to sit at the same negotiation table. The Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) did so, followed immediately by the papal nuncio, the Vatican’s ambassador in Caracas.

On April 17, once there had been two meetings between the government and the opposition, Miami’s El Nuevo Herald gave top play to a long story detailing these conversations. Under the byline of Antonio María Delgado, the newspaper—close to the Latin American hawks in exile in Miami—maintained that the dialogue enlarged differences among opposition leaders and day by day dampened the sound of the protests. "Conversations between the regime and members of the opposition have widened divisions in the opposition with one band denouncing the dialogue for providing a weakened government with oxygen and another group describing the process as a new front against the Revolución Bolivariana," the paper said.

The Miami newspaper later followed up by exposing rejections of Henrique Capriles, the former opposition candidate who once united the opposition in the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) behind him. "Central to the discord are accumulated distrust in one sector of the opposition in the ability of its ex-candidate to fight a regimen it accused of having hijacked democratic institutions and in another the fear that it will help Maduro to break up the demonstrations," it said. The daily, which did not site sources in Caracas, based its report on the opinions of three people living in Miami.
A few days later, Maduro stepped forward and praised a dispatch from the British news agency Reuters titled "From music to nudity, Venezuela protesters get creative." During an official act in Miraflores, the presidential palace, Maduro recommended the article saying, "It shows, in all its pathos, the loneliness that is moving the oligarchy." The report said that some activists, "trying to reverse the waning intensity of their protests … are shunning traditional street confrontation for more emotive tactics. They have been going out before dawn to plant mock crosses, coffins, and gravestones on prominent avenues to symbolize Venezuela's homicide victims."

Students employ new tactics to protest

As the number of demonstrations has dropped and daily street confrontations lose strength, students have tried to breathe new life into the protests by publishing nude photos of themselves on Twitter and playing music and acting in the streets, a Girish Gupta agency correspondent wrote. The reporter quoted Eliana Mora, a 25-year-old student at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello who explained the posts: "Lately, the protests haven't been working so well. People are starting to get tired and bored. … This is a different way to motivate them and make them do something else."

Just as others have, Mora posted her photo with the words, "Better naked than without freedom of expression. … I'm waiting for you," because she said she believes that a suggestive message "is a different way to motivate them."

In addition, "the new tactics aim to give the protest movement broader appeal and contrast with the images of violence, petrol bombs, and tear gas that have come to define the unrest," Gupta said, adding that, several days before May 1, an opposition march fizzled because it began when only two people met at the starting point. The story quoted David Rodríguez, a mechanical engineering student and probable Maduro supporter, as saying, "The student movement is divided and several universities didn't support the rally.

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