Political Infighting Fuels Standoff Between Venezuelan Government, Opposition

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Three months after the Venezuelan opposition decided to pull out of talks mediated by the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) and the Vatican, the South American country is stuck in a debilitating standoff that is being further complicated by internal divisions within the two competing political forces: the government of the Revolución Bolivariana and the rightist Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD).

UNASUR and the papal nuncio, the Vatican’s ambassador in Caracas, would like to see the talks resumed. The chances of that happening are increasingly slim. Under the banner "salida ya" (out now), minority sectors within the opposition continue to insist—even at the risk of breaking up the MUD—that President Nicolás Maduro resign immediately. The government, for obvious reasons, rejects that position, as does the rest of the opposition, which believes the calls for Maduro’s ouster do nothing more than fuel street violence.

More than 40 people were killed and another 873 injured as a result of opposition protests that began Feb. 12 and continued for two months (NotiSur, April 4, 2014). The government’s more moderate opponents originally backed the unrest but have since withdrawn their support. "The radicals don’t produce results, just injuries, deaths, and chaos," Henry Ramos Allup, leader of the traditional centrist party, Acción Democrática (AD), said of his more hard-line MUD colleagues.

Major fault lines are also appearing within government ranks. On June 18, Planning Minister Jorge Giordani—a political veteran who worked for years with former President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) —resigned amid internal complaints regarding instances of corruption that may have involved various government economics officials. Giordani made his announcement in a public letter. "It’s painful and alarming to see a president who doesn’t convey leadership," he wrote. Giordani, one of the most well-respected members of the governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), also accused Maduro of creating "the clear impression of a power vacuum."

While Giordani’s statements failed to produce any apparent change of course by the government, they did prompt an isolated act of solidarity from another Chávez-era Cabinet official, Héctor Navarro, a former education minister who was promptly suspended from his leadership role within the PSUV.

Opposition infighting
The violent protests that began in February led, starting April 10, to talks in which Archbishop Aldo Giordano, the papal nuncio to Venezuela, and the foreign ministers of Brazil (Luiz Figueiredo), Colombia (María Ángela Holguín), and Ecuador (Ricardo Patiño), participating on behalf of UNASUR, served as "good-faith witnesses" (NotiSur, June 6, 2014). After three rounds of discussions, however, the MUD decided unilaterally to withdraw and thus end the process. Since then the mediators have called repeatedly for the talks to continue. The government favors the idea. The opposition does not.
Only a small segment of the MUD (three of its 29 affiliated groups) rejects the mediation process outright, according to Ramos Allup, who was quoted in a July 7 EFE article saying that "limits should be placed on these small groups, and it should be insisted upon that the talks resume." The AD leader went on to say that the mediation process "is supported by an immense majority inside the country and internationally."

Ramos Allup also made a point of identifying the three MUD leaders who adamantly oppose the talks: Leopoldo López, who was jailed for inciting the bloody disturbances in February; Corina Machado, a former deputy who lost her seat after taking the unusual step this past March of taking on a position as an alternate representative for Panama before the Organization of American States (OAS); and Antonio Ledezma, the mayor of Caracas. Ramos Allup, in contrast, openly supports the mediators’ calls for further negotiations, as do MUD’s executive secretary Guillermo Aveledo and 2012 presidential candidate Henrique Capriles.

In declarations published on his Twitter account, Ledezma, one of the three "hard-liners" called out by Ramos Allup, has since engaged in a bit of self-criticism. The DPA news agency quoted him as telling his colleagues, "We should sit down so that we can speak to each other very clearly and restore unity." Nevertheless, he continues to clamor for la salida—Maduro’s exit.

The MUD’s gaping divisions were also on display July 12, when José Ramón Medina, another of the coalition’s secretaries, acknowledged that there is "no plan to get López out of jail, for the simple reason that he put himself there, basically begging to be arrested so that he could turn himself into a martyr."

The infighting prompted Archbishop Diego Padrón, president of the Conferencia Episcopal Venezolana (CEV), to describe Venezuela as "a puzzle that is increasingly difficult to put together." Padrón, who openly sympathizes with MUD, regrets that the talks have been frozen. "There’s been a loss of mutual trust in Venezuela," he said. "The dominant image now isn’t of fraternal love but of internal divisions within the majority sectors." Padrón went on to say, "It’s apparent right now that there isn’t full unity in either sector, either in the opposition or the governing party. Instead there is deep fragmentation, and ultimately the whole country feels very frustrated."

**A French connection?**

The government, in the meantime, has been too distracted—and discredited—by its own internal problems to take advantage of the politically costly divisions so openly apparent in the opposition.

On June 18, Venezuelans and foreign allies of the Revolución Bolivariana were surprised by the appearance—on the normally pro-government Web sites aporrea.org and rebelión.org —of Giordani’s scathing resignation letter. The departing planning minister accused the Maduro government of failing to take into account the mistakes it made trying to guarantee "the sustainability of the economic and social transformation," threatened when, to ensure [Hugo Chávez’s] victory in the Oct. 7, 2012, election, "public resources were accessed and used at extreme levels."

That money was spent, Giordani explained, on "social security and to improve the quality of life of the majority," to subsidize the public provision of basic goods and services such as water, food, transportation, and electricity, on maintaining an exchange rate that favored imports and reduced exports, and on propping up state enterprises "with huge operational deficits to ensure, in the short term, the jobs and salaries of the workers."
Giordani noted two particular areas of concern: corruption and uncontrolled public spending. The ex-minister accused Maduro of allowing himself to be seduced by capitalism and giving in to public-sector pressures by putting in place free-market-style financial mechanisms. The situation, he wrote, "gives off the clear impression that there is a vacuum of power in the presidency and a concentration in other centers of power." Giordani did not specify what or where those "other centers" might be. He concluded his criticisms by saying that Maduro—whom he refers to as "the successor" of Chávez—"showed ignorance regarding economics and made decisions based only on the guidance of a French advisor who was completely out of touch with the country’s situation."

While the government may have been at a loss regarding what to do about Giordani’s criticisms, the Bolivarian Revolution’s foreign enemies were not. In an article published July 3, the rightist Spanish daily El Mundo used a clearly derogatory tone to describe "the French Connection, those French advisors who, according to the ex-minister’s letter, are pulling the government’s strings" in Venezuela. The Madrid-based publication quoted German sociologist Heinz Dieterich (a resident of Mexico), who identified one of the French advisors as Ignacio Ramonet. "He is one of the intellectuals who has most benefited from the Revolución Bolivariana," the article explained. Dieterich said Ramonet is part of "a cloud of French socialist advisors" headed by Matthieu Pigasse. El Mundo described Pigasse as "a multimillionaire banker, co-owner of the weekly Le Monde Diplomatique, and self-declared rebel against the bourgeois establishment."

Interestingly, opposition leaders in Venezuela are ignoring the superlative role the "French Connection" is supposedly playing in their country. The same goes for officials in Ecuador, Argentina, and Greece, three countries that, according to El Mundo, "also received advice from Pigasse regarding their macroeconomic plans."

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