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Latin America’s Tolerance of Venezuelan Crisis May Be Reaching Its Limit

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Latin American countries, for all their differences, have a history of solidarity when it comes to protecting the region’s internal affairs, particularly in regards to US involvement. As Venezuela’s economic and humanitarian crisis continues to deepen, however, with lives now at risk and the government refusing to respond, cracks are appearing in this regional solidarity and goodwill.

Venezuela’s crisis is not new. President Nicolás Maduro has steadily lost popularity since taking control from the late Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), and the oil-dependent country has experienced shortages of basic goods, one of the highest rates of inflation in the world, and violent civil unrest to varying degrees throughout this period (NotiSur, March 22, 2015). High profile opposition leaders such as Leopoldo López, Daniel Ceballos, and Antonio Ledezma were imprisoned not recently, but in 2014 and 2015. So while fellow Latin American countries have previously spoken out about these issues, why is a regional shift against the situation in Venezuela happening now?

OAS takes a stand

This shift has been marked by the beginning of talks at the Organization of American States (OAS) about the state of democracy in Venezuela. On May 31, the OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro invoked the organization’s Inter-American Democratic Charter against Venezuela. The charter was adopted in 2001 (NotiSur, Sept. 14, 2001) and can be invoked when democracy in a member state has been overthrown, impaired, or unconstitutionally interrupted. In response, 20 of the 34 member states voted in favor of holding an extraordinary session of the OAS’ Permanent Council to discuss the situation, showing the extent of concern in the region. At the session, held in Washington, D.C., on June 23, Almagro presented his assessment of the threats to democracy in Venezuela, including the failed economic system, corruption, increased political violence, restricted freedom of the press, lack of independence of the judiciary and the national electoral council, and constitutional violations such as the unlawful arrests of opposition activists (NotiSur, Feb. 19, 2016, and April 8, 2016). He closed with a plea for a return to democratic order and stability through ensuring that a recall referendum take place before the end of the year, as well as for cooperation between the executive and legislative branches of government, the release of all political prisoners, and the appointment of a new independent Supreme Court, among other things.

It is the first time that the charter has been invoked by the OAS’ secretary general rather than from within a member country. However, leaders of Venezuela’s opposition-led National Assembly did meet with Almagro to ask for his intervention, causing Maduro to respond that they were traitors to their country.

The process that began at that meeting has the potential to end in the exclusion of Venezuela from the OAS, should the General Assembly approve the action by a two-thirds majority. So far, it is unclear how far member countries are prepared to go along this road, with Uruguayan foreign minister Rodolfo Nin Novoa arguing in an interview that the objective of the discussions was to
see how Venezuela could be helped, rather than to throw the country out of the OAS. However, member states are becoming more united in calls for change in Venezuela. A statement issued on June 15 during the OAS’ General Assembly in the Dominican Republic called for effective dialogue among all political and social actors in Venezuela, condemned violence, and urged the upholding of constitutional norms. It was signed by 15 member countries: Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the US, and Uruguay. Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua were absent from the list.

Speaking out against the crisis

A recall referendum sought by Venezuela’s opposition coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD) (NotiSur, Jan. 8, 2016) to oust Maduro has been blocked continually by ruling party Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV), despite it having been signed by nearly 2 million people in April. A claimed 325,000 of these people also turned out to validate their signatures with fingerprints on the government’s request in June. According to the Venezuelan Constitution, if the referendum takes place before Jan. 10, 2017, and goes against Maduro, an election would be held. However, if it takes place after that date, with less than two years of Maduro’s term in office remaining, he would be replaced by Vice-President Aristóbulo Istúriz.

On May 20, the foreign ministries of Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina issued a formal joint statement urging Venezuela to conduct “an effective political dialogue and a genuine civic understanding between all political and social actors.” It added, “We trust that the Venezuelan people will know how to honor their long democratic tradition... discouraging radical alternatives that can draw it away from the path of democracy.” The statement shows deep concern for Venezuelan democracy.

Then on May 31, just after Almagro’s announcement of the extraordinary session of the OAS’ Permanent Council, the Colombian foreign ministry added its voice to the group in a second joint statement that also called for understanding and dialogue but added that they supported “constitutional procedures such as the recall referendum.” The group also offered support and companionship in this process.

These statements make clear the group’s assessment that Venezuela has moved too far from democratic norms. Other leaders previously supportive of Maduro have distanced themselves, with progressive former Uruguayan president José Mujica (2010-2015) saying in a television interview that while he respected the Venezuelan president, he is “as crazy as a goat.”

‘Effective Dialogue’

One of the most repeated calls from Venezuela’s neighbors has been for “effective dialogue” between the country’s ruling party and the opposition coalition. A key cause of the escalating political tensions has been the PSUV’s failure to acknowledge the opposition’s demands. Former Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004-2011) and former Presidents Leonel Fernández (1996-2000, 2004-2012) of the Dominican Republic and Martín Torrijos (2004-2009) of Panama have been acting as facilitators for a dialogue to take place between both sides, and they gave a report to the OAS on June 21 about their progress. Almagro, meanwhile, has expressed concerns that the ongoing nature of these discussions will postpone further action to resolve the crisis and has urged that they be kept to a reasonable time frame rather than extending indefinitely without concrete results.
**Why now?**

The Venezuelan government’s efforts to ignore and then postpone the recall referendum has acted as the tipping point for the collective distancing from the Venezuelan ruling party by its Latin American neighbors. This, combined with the economic crisis becoming life-threatening for many Venezuelans and the blocking of legislation from the opposition-led National Assembly, has produced a situation that the rest of the region is no longer willing to ignore. This is sensitive territory for a region in which respect and non-interference in one another’s affairs are highly valued; however, it seems that the human cost is now pushing an increasing number of countries beyond this point.

The potential exclusion of Venezuela from the OAS and the distancing of its neighbors will not restore stability in Venezuela. To the contrary, it could isolate Venezuela even further. However, this would greatly increase pressure on the PSUV to accede to more of the opposition’s demands and would further delegitimize the government in the eyes of the Venezuelan people and the international community. This, if it led to greater dialogue and the fulfilment of the constitutional right for a referendum to take place within the next six months, could be the only hope for a country whose president has shown himself to be unwilling to relinquish power at any cost to the people.

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