8-26-2016

Misery and Misconceptions as Crisis in Venezuela Deepens

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Against a string of obstacles, some of which it created, Venezuela’s opposition bloc has set things in motion for a referendum that could perhaps put an early end to the presidency of Nicolás Maduro. Time, though, is not on the opposition’s side as the do-or-die date for the recall project—Jan. 10, 2017—looms.

The country’s top electoral authority (Consejo Nacional Electoral) validated the steps taken so far by the opposition coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) and fixed the deadline for the next step in the process—the gathering of nearly 4 million signatures (representing 20% of the registered electorate, as required by the Constitution)—for late October (NotiSur, April 8, 2016).

But given that the signatures would then need to be validated, and that there would also be a 90-day delay before a referendum could be held, it’s unlikely the vote would take place by Jan. 10. In that case, even if voters opted to oust Maduro, his administration would stay on until the natural end of its term, in January 2019. Why? Because the Constitution establishes that if a recall vote takes places before a leader completes two-thirds of his or her term (Jan. 10, in this case), and the vote is affirmative, new elections must be called. But if the referendum occurs after the cut-off date, what remains of the president’s six-year term must be completed by the vice-president, meaning the government would remain in the hands of the “chavistas,” as members of the governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) are known.

Political ineptitude and internal divisions on the side of the opposition also favor the government’s chances of staying on until 2019. Analysts who are close to or were in some cases even members of the MUD say the coalition has failed to take advantage of what seemed, at first glance, to be a clear majority opposing Maduro. “We lost the mobilizing power we had. The only persistent support the current [opposition] leadership enjoys comes from abroad,” Ramón Aveledo, a former MUD secretary and political moderate, was quoted as saying earlier this month in the conservative daily El Nacional.

Within the country, the government and opposition are locked in a tiresome game of back-and-forth accusations that hasn’t helped either get a clear message across. But outside the country, the MUD continues to score points with major media outlets, the UN and the Organization of Americans States (OAS), and some Latin American governments (NotiSur, July 8, 2016). Luis Vicente León, an analyst frequently cited by the media, argues that if the MUD really hopes to have a future, it will at some point have to change its approach. “At the end of every story there’s a negotiation, and for that to happen, both sides have to make concessions,” he said.

The Venezuelan people, in the meantime, continue to suffer hardships, with shortages of food supplies and other basic goods, and soaring inflation that could reach 700% this year, according to the International Monetary Fund. Still, conditions aren’t nearly as dramatic as outside voices would make it seem. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently described the situation as “a humanitarian crisis.” The word “famine” has also been used. “The MUD hails the support it gets
from abroad. But it should ask itself how useful it really is having a version of events that doesn’t match reality,” political analyst Benigno Alarcón suggested.

Venezuela’s ambassador to the OAS, Bernardo Álvarez, challenged the statements by Ban Ki-moon, who is set to leave the UN in the coming months and whose assessment of the situation in Venezuela contradicts the findings of international aid organizations. “What’s happening to us is what Cuba had to deal with at one point,” the diplomat said. “Attacking Venezuela is like ordering a pizza by telephone. It’s cheap, and when it arrives, everyone applauds.”

**Busting myths**

BBC Mundo’s Caracas correspondent, Daniel Pardo, also challenged the climate of exaggeration with a July 21 piece titled “5 mitos sobre la crisis en Venezuela (y lo que pasa en realidad)” (Five myths about the crisis in Venezuela, and what’s happening in reality). Pardo, a professional critic of the PSUV government, introduced each of the five misconceptions with one of the “catastrophic” questions that family members and colleagues ask him each time he leaves the country—question like: Are you eating? Does the government censor you? Do you have bodyguards? The questions reflect a “polarized and politicized context,” the journalist wrote. “[They’re based on] exaggerated impressions about what is occurring in a country that went from rich to poor, and nobody seems to understand why.”

In fact, Venezuela owes its economic woes to serious errors committed by the Maduro administration and above all to the drastic fall in the price of oil, which drives the country’s economy (NotiSur, May 22, 2015). The misconceptions that Pardo highlighted—each based on one of the questions he regularly receives—are worth citing.

**PEOPLE ARE STARVING:** “In some areas of Venezuela, people are going hungry, but not the bulk of the population,” the correspondent wrote. Pardo acknowledged that some people are eating fewer meals per day, but are not going “hungry” as defined by the UN’s World Food Program. “There are shortages of rice, flour, and milk, but Venezuelans have fruit and vegetables available on every corner,” he added. Pardo also noted that in a true famine situation, Venezuela, with a population of roughly 30 million, would have some 6,000 deaths per day, according to the UN. At the most, 28 people are dying per day, according to numbers that the MUD—based on its own estimates—presented in June.

**VENEZUELA=CUBA:** “Venezuela is a capitalist country where the private sector has a certain amount of activity despite restrictions and expropriations by the state, which has gained increasing control over the economy.... Here, the Internet is the slowest in the region, but almost all of us have a connection with access to Facebook, Netflix, and international media that is critical of the government. That’s not the case in Cuba,” Pardo explained. The correspondent also pointed out that businesses such as McDonald’s and Zara are both present in Venezuela, and that while new cars are only sold in US dollars, there are people who buy them. “One can see them in the streets. In Cuba, they’re only seen in Hollywood movies,” Pardo wrote.

**VENEZUELA IS A DICTATORSHIP:** “This is an academic debate that has been going on for years, with some describing Venezuela as a ‘modern dictatorship’ or ‘hybrid regime.’ But there aren’t many experts here or abroad calling this a traditional dictatorship,” Pardo wrote. The journalist noted, for example, that Venezuela continues to have an active opposition and elections. He acknowledged, however, that the government, following the opposition’s major victory in last year’s
parliamentary legislations, has curtailed the power of the legislature (NotiSur, Jan. 8, 2016). Pardo also mentioned that the opposition press struggles to import paper. “But there is opposition press,” he wrote.

EVERYONE HATES MADURO: “There are people abroad who read Maduro’s statements and ask themselves, ‘Why don’t they topple him? Who likes this guy?’” Pardo wrote. The answer, according to polls, is between 20% and 30% of the population. “At any rate, 30% support is more than the presidents of Brazil, Chile, or Colombia have these days,” the correspondent noted.

THE STREETS ARE OFF-LIMITS: “Rampant crime, along with the fear it generates, has meant that at night, some people prefer to watch a movie at home rather than go out to a bar. But there are still a lot of people, and not just in Caracas, but all over the country, who go to nightclubs, bars, and restaurants,” Pardo explained. “Paradoxically, in places with the highest incidence of homicide, the poor neighborhoods, things are as active at night as in any city in the world,” he added. “But in the middle class and upper class sectors, the streets are empty after 9 p.m.” The correspondent also explained that during daylight hours, the downtown areas of the country’s cities and towns are as lively and bustling as anywhere else in Latin America.

**Moves toward mediation**

The Maduro government, in the meantime, is celebrating a recent agreement to gradually reopen its nearly 2,200-kilometer border with Colombia. The border row had been an additional source of tension for the beleaguered administration. The development comes as a group of former presidents—José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (Spain), Martín Torrijos (Panama), and Leonel Fernández (Dominican Republic)—continue pushing for a dialogue between the MUD and the Maduro administration to ease the political standoff.

On July 22, Ernesto Samper, the secretary general of the Union of South American Nations (Unión de Naciones Suramericanas, UNASUR), revealed that the sides would be willing to enter into talks mediated, not just by the aforementioned former presidents, but also by the Vatican. Samper suggested that the idea came from Pope Francis himself, with whom he met during a visit in May to the Holy See.

Federico Lombardi, until recently a spokesperson for the Vatican, confirmed the possibility and even admitted that the Vatican’s powerful secretary of state, Pietro Parolin (who served as the apostolic nuncio to Venezuela between 2009 and 2013) could play a major role. On Aug. 13, following a conversation with Parolin, Argentina’s foreign affairs minister, Susana Malcorra, confirmed the matter in a round-about way by saying: “I have the impression that we’re close to having the Vatican participate in a mediation.”

Maduro said that he’s waiting for the pope’s emissary “with open arms.” The opposition, in contrast, has kept mum on the topic, and by calling for new street demonstrations starting Sept. 1—a form of protest that has gradually lost momentum—seems inclined to resume its so-called “citizen pressure” strategy (NotiSur, Feb. 21, 2014, April 4, 2014, and July 25, 2014).

In an analysis shared Aug. 10 with the AFP news agency, Marco Ponce, the coordinator of the Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, an independent think tank, suggested that “the MUD revise its strategy, because people are focused on their own things; they’re sick of taking to the streets every time someone has the idea to call one of these marches, which are getting smaller each time and never have any practical effect.”
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