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Venezuelan Opposition Struggles to Capitalize on Government Missteps

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After its failed attempt last year to organize a recall vote against the government ([NotiSur, Nov. 4, 2016](#)), the Venezuelan opposition, taking advantage of the support it receives in the media and from foreign political groups, decided to double down and make 2017 the year President Nicolás Maduro is finally forced out of office, come what may.

The opposition kicked things off by introducing a barrage of confrontational measures in the opening session of the unicameral Asamblea Nacional (National Assembly) on Jan. 9. Availing itself of the comfortable majority it has in the legislature—the only branch of government in opposition hands—it decided to disregard the president's authority, accuse him of abandoning his post (Maduro was temporarily out of the country), and demand that a new presidential election be held within 30 days. Afterwards, Luis Almagro, secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the opposition's most consistent outside ally, was quick to make the idea his own.

Circumstances seem to be very much in the opposition's favor, with polls suggesting that between 65% and 70% of Venezuelans oppose the president. Also, starting in late March, the government offered its critics a golden opportunity in the form of two highly controversial and legally questionable decisions. The opposition failed to capitalize, however, and Maduro quickly moved to amend the situation, once again thwarting plans to oust him from the Palacio de Miraflores, the presidential palace in Caracas.

The first decision came March 29, when the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (TSJ), the nation's highest court, decided to assume the functions of the legislature. The second came April 7, when the controller general's office banned opposition leader Henrique Capriles from holding office for 15 years starting the moment his current post, as governor of the central state of Miranda, expires. Capriles, a key figure in the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD), the opposition coalition, twice ran for president, losing both times ([NotiSur, Oct. 19, 2012](#), and [May 3, 2013](#)). He is accused, among other things, of receiving donations from foreign countries and issuing no-bid contracts.

In both cases, incompetence led the government to take ill-timed measures that are related to past events and only serve to fuel the fire of its critics. "The government went from being an authoritarian regime to a dictatorship," said Henry Ramos Allup, a former speaker of Asamblea Nacional.

Missed opportunity

The high court move has its origins in a January 2016 decision—shortly after elections that gave the opposition a clear majority in the legislature—when the TSJ declared the Asamblea Nacional to be in contempt for including, among its ranks, four lawmakers from the southern state of Amazonas who may have won their seats amid voting irregularities. Three of the four are members of MUD.

The other belongs to the governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV). The three MUD deputies ignored the TSJ's complaints against them and stayed on in the legislature, giving the opposition a two-thirds "magic majority." The PSUV deputy stepped down. Since then, the high court has considered all Asamblea decisions to be invalid.

The opposition failed to take advantage of the latest TSJ controversy and limited itself to calling the move a coup d'état. Capriles, for his part, is declaring himself a "victim of political persecution." In the meantime, with the OAS, the Republican Party and other sectors in the US, the countries of the MERCOSUR trade bloc (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) ([NotiSur, Feb. 3, 2017](#)), the governments of Peru, Colombia, and Mexico in Latin America, and of Spain and Great Britain in Europe, all exerting pressure against the Maduro administration, the opposition has tried to mobilize street demonstrations. But turnout has been disappointing. The small protests that have taken place in Caracas and other cities were co-opted by groups of violent, hooded protesters known as encapuchados. On April 18, the Spanish news agency EFE reported that, according to the opposition, at least six people died between April 7 and 18, more than 100 were arrested, and a similar number wounded. On April 19, the government and the opposition both held massive demonstrations in celebration of the 207th anniversary of the beginning of the war of independence against Spain. At the end of the day, local media reported on the death of a young student, although the circumstances of his death were not clear.

Coalition's ineffectiveness exposed

MUD's political ineffectiveness has been exposed, and just at a time when the coalition is dealing with an internal crisis that has led it to restructure its leadership. The government had offered a gift on a silver platter, but the platter flipped over, giving Maduro a chance to rectify what MUD had denounced as a power grab.

On April 2, the TSJ reversed course and gave up on its claim to the legislature's powers. It did so at the behest of the Consejo de Defensa (Defense Council), a high-level advisory organ that Maduro activated to seek a solution to the conundrum. Left empty-handed once again, the opposition could only stand by and listen as Maduro boasted about "using mechanisms in the Constitution to tackle a difficult situation and resolve this controversy between two branches of government."

In reality, the decision made by the Consejo de Defensa—and hailed by Maduro as an example of how to resolve conflicts between branches of government—didn't come from the president but from the attorney general, Luisa Ortega Díaz, an old-guard PSUV member who is now distanced from political power.

"The TSJ decision isn't a coup d'état because it neither dissolved the Asamblea Nacional nor suppressed the sovereignty of the popular vote," Ortega Díaz told members of the foreign press in explaining the proposal she put before the Consejo de Defensa, which was subsequently adopted by the high court. "Only an idiot could call this a 'coup' or a 'fujimorazo' (in reference to the self-coup executed in 1992 by then Peruvian leader Alberto Fujimori). The ruling created a special situation within the political system that is similar to a break in the constitutional order."

As an analyst with the Uruguayan daily La República explained, Ortega Díaz's carefully calibrated "break in the constitutional order" explanation "got the government's potatoes out of the fire." She saved the government's skin, in other words.

'Propaganda war'

Within Latin America, the Maduro regime has few friends left. In the OAS, some of the Caribbean nations that benefit from Venezuela's oil policy abstain when issues related to Caracas come up, leaving just Bolivia and Ecuador to speak in Maduro's defense. But the Venezuelan government does have an ally in the Mexican daily *La Jornada*.

On April 1, when the Consejo de Defensa issued the "suggestion" that was later adopted by the TSJ, the newspaper published a short editorial note. "The ongoing Venezuelan crisis is being joined by a tenacious media campaign that looks to bring world opinion around to the idea that the country is experiencing a coup process," it argued. The article described the campaign as "a propaganda war against the democratically elected government" and said that in addition, Maduro has been the target in recent weeks of "political bashing by the OAS and the region's conservative and ultra-rightwing regimes."

The Mexican daily added, "The Constitution is still in force, the president is still in office, guarantees are still in place, there's been no interference in any of the political parties, and freedom of expression continues to be respected." The idea that the legislature was "dissolved," the editorial argued, "is absurd, since no deputy has been ousted and the Asamblea can return to its normal functioning as soon as it adheres to the TSJ's January 2016 ruling [regarding the Amazonas deputies]."

La Jornada was right to suggest that, to a degree, the Venezuelan situation is playing out in certain power centers outside the country. The persistent and disparaging remarks by Almagro are generously echoed in the hundreds of regional papers linked to the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), which has twice this year sounded off on the Venezuelan government.

The Maduro administration, for its part, has repeatedly denounced what it defines as meddling by the US and the Republican Party of President Donald Trump. An example were remarks—published March 27, just before the TSJ decision—that US Senator Marco Rubio, a Republican from Florida, made to *El Nuevo Herald*, the Spanish-language sister paper of *The Miami Herald*. Rubio warned that the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Haiti run the risk of losing US aid money if they don't line up against Venezuela when and if the OAS votes on sanctions against the Maduro regime.

"This is not a threat, but it is the reality," the conservative senator, a favorite of the hard-right Tea Party Movement, told the Miami newspaper. "We have a very difficult situation in Washington, where massive cuts in foreign aid are under consideration. And it will be very difficult for us to justify assistance to those countries if they, at the end of the day, are countries that do not cooperate in the defense of democracy in the region"—meaning vote to condemn Venezuela.

Rubio said he has already been in touch with the presidents of Costa Rica (Luis Guillermo Solís Rivera) and Honduras (Juan Orlando Hernández Alvarado) to seek support for a plan by Almagro to active the OAS's Inter-American Democratic Charter, which could then trigger sanctions against Venezuela. Adopting sanctions would require votes from two thirds of the body's 35 members—still a far-off possibility. Doing so would imply taking rigorous and aggressive measures, including an embargo similar to the one Cuba has dealt with since 1960 and the freezing of Venezuelan assets abroad.

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