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Violent Protests Continue in Venezuela after President Calls for Constitutional Assembly

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Facing an unmanageable domestic situation that is being exacerbated by violent street clashes between pro- and anti-government supporters, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro took the surprising and disconcerting step on May 1 of calling for an Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (National Constitutional Assembly, ANC). Once gathered, the body would institutionalize the presence in the state apparatus of certain pro-government sectors of society and draft a new Constitution.

The governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV) hoped in this way to gain some political breathing room and at the same time quiet the protests that have routinely filled roads, streets, and avenues, and have been accompanied, in recent weeks, by a wave of lootings, attacks on public offices, and other senseless acts of violence. The ANC plan is meant, it would seem, to benefit the government. But the immediate impact of the announcement was something Maduro and his allies probably didn't anticipate: It unified the opposition.

The unicameral Asamblea Nacional (National Assembly), one of the three branches of government (together with the president) authorized to reform the Constitution, rejected the proposal and announced that it will respond to "this dictatorial idea with a new phase" of actions to pressure the government. The multi-party opposition coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD) has been slow to act, however. It wasn't until June 17, during a gathering of Unidos en la Fe (United in Faith), an event sponsored by the Catholic Church, that opposition lawmaker Freddy Guevara finally offered some clues about what the "new phase" would entail.

"The mobilizations with street occupations will continue. The pressure will continue," said Guevara, a member of Voluntad Popular (Popular Will), the most radical of the opposition parties. "In due time, we'll make announcements so that everyone is informed about how we'll handle the final step, which will be permanent protest. We'll be everywhere, all together and all at the same time, to bring about change."

Neighborhood gatherings

In a decree containing just two articles and in statements made later, Maduro indicated that the ANC would be made up of 545 delegates. Two thirds are to be elected in the "territorial area" (in the country's 335 municipalities) with the other third coming from organized social sectors: community groups, community supply councils, industrial workers, rural workers, students, indigenous communities, cultural associations, sexual diversity organizations, business owners, and misiones, the name the government uses for its social programs.

The Consejo Nacional Electoral (National Electoral Council, CNE) later offered more precise details and fixed July 30 as the day the ANC members are to be selected. The CNE explained that 364 delegates would be chosen in municipalities and 181 in the "sectorial area," including 13 chosen by indigenous groups "in community assemblies, respecting their customs and traditions." The CNE

also reported that 55,314 people had registered as candidates, 19,876 for the “territorial” posts and 35,438 for the “sectorial” seats.

The enthusiasm citizens showed for participating in the process surprised the government and opposition leaders alike, though it’s not clear where the would-be delegates stand politically. On June 5, the CNE reported that as of the previous day, 478 neighborhood assemblies had taken place around the country, many of them involving opposition-minded residents rattled by the violence unleashed in the street demonstrations, which have resulted in dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries and arrests.

The MUD, in the meantime, reiterated Guevara’s stance that it would not participate “in this fraudulent election process” and called on people to express themselves directly, in the streets.

‘A collection of factions’

On April 29, upon returning to Rome following a visit to Egypt, Pope Francis—perhaps the only figure equally respected by both sides—revealed that he had received a new request for mediation in the Venezuelan crisis, and said that in light of the failed efforts made jointly by three former presidents, Leonel Fernández of the Dominican Republic, Martín Torrijos of Panama, and Ernesto Samper of Colombia, and the former prime minister of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, he would only intervene “within a framework of very clear conditions” ([NotiSur, Nov. 4, 2016](#)).

The pope also said that the previous efforts to mediate had come up short because, “to be frank, besides the obstacles both sides introduced, I don’t think the opposition wants to negotiate.” On April 30, the news agency EFE revealed that in response to a question from Spanish journalist Antonio Pelayo, from the television network Antena 3, Francis again said, “It’s curious, but the opposition is divided, and part of it doesn’t want to negotiate.”

While some challenge the pope’s assertion, others, including Venezuelan semiologist Arlenin Aguillón, agree that it doesn’t make sense to talk about the opposition as if it were a single entity. “The opposition has been, is, and will be a collection of factions,” he was quoted as saying by the Argentine newspaper *Página 12*.

“The opposition as a whole can’t be blamed for the deaths, the vandalism, the human rights violations, and assassinations,” Aguillón went on to say. “Why not? Because there are very large numbers of citizens who want another government, and they have every right in the world to feel that way. In the opposition, there’s a faction that attacks with guns, with bombs, that targets hospitals and blocks streets, and there’s another faction that carries out demonstrations that are in accordance with Venezuelan law and accepted by the government.”

Death and destruction

On June 13, after an adolescent died while handling a homemade explosive, Maduro again appealed to the pope. Friends of the deceased, a 17-year-old student named Neomar Lander, said in a video that he “was trying to throw a ‘Bin Laden’ but it got stuck.” A “Bin Laden”—a pressure cooker stuffed with gun power, pieces of metal or glass, and fecal matter—is one of various types of makeshift explosive that opposition groups, through their websites, teach people to make.

The Venezuelan president asked Francis to persuade the opposition “to keep children and adolescents away from the violent demonstrations taking place in the country, because unfortunate

episodes like the one that killed Neomar Lander expose them directly either to death or to becoming criminals.” The pope again responded by saying that the Vatican would only try mediation again under “very clear conditions.”

The government has promised to investigate such crimes and bring the people responsible for the many deaths to justice. And it can be trusted to do so. It has made that promise before and followed through (the accused have always been low-ranking soldiers). The problem now, however, is that there have also been crimes—some of them extremely senseless—for which it won’t be easy to identify the perpetrators. Examples include the partial destruction in Caracas of monuments honoring José Martí, the Cuban poet and independence hero, and Admiral Luis Brión, who arrived from Curaçao to fight for Venezuela’s independence; and the burning of the childhood home of former president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), in the western state of Barinas.

There are also the cases of two people who were burned alive in the capital; the murder of Nelson Moncada—one of the judges who sentenced Voluntad Popular leader Leopoldo López to 14 years in jail—who was pumped full of bullets for refusing to pay a “street toll” to opposition groups; looting in Maracay; the burning of 51 public buses in Ciudad Guayana, in the eastern state of Bolívar; and the dozens of people who have been found dying in the streets, with stab wounds all over their bodies.

Demanding elections

Between 1998, when Chávez was elected for the first time, and 2013, when he died and Maduro was elected, Venezuelans participated in 17 elections or referendums. In all but one of them, a majority of voters supported the so-called Bolivarian Revolution. Under Maduro, the trend has reversed. In the last legislative elections, in December 2015, the opposition won 57% of the votes, and according to the latest polls, between 65% and 70% of Venezuelans now oppose Maduro ([NotiSur, Jan. 8, 2016](#)).

While the government pushes for a constitutional convention, the opposition wants regular elections with clear, established dates. The CNE indefinitely postponed gubernatorial elections that were supposed to take place late last year. Municipal elections are supposed to be held this year, though no date has been set. Nor has the CNE fixed a date for the next presidential election, which ought to be held no later than December 2018, given that Maduro’s term ends in 2019. The opposition wants the presidential election to be moved forward, and has tried a number of mechanisms to make that happen ([NotiSur, April 21, 2017](#)). In each case, however, the CNE has found a pretext to block those efforts.

An analyst with the Uruguayan weekly Brecha noted that for now, the PSUV leadership and members of the state apparatus, including the armed forces, back the president’s call for a constitutional convention. But the pundit also warned—as have others in the media—that the government ought to stay alert, because there are signs “of timid dissent, like from the pro-government lawmaker Eustoquio Contreras and some of his colleagues, along with [more openly] adverse messages from people like Luisa Ortega, the prosecutor general, who has stated plainly that there has been a rupture in the constitutional order.”

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