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U.S. Threats, Opposition Infighting Help Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro Cling to Power

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Just when Venezuela's internal crisis, along with pressure from abroad, seemed to spell the inevitable fall of the government of President Nicolás Maduro, everything shifted radically in a matter of days, allowing the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV) to reassert its hold over the country.

The political astuteness of the PSUV's leaders, infighting among the members of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD) opposition coalition, and a threat of military intervention issued by US President Donald Trump turned the chaotic situation on its head and allowed "Chavismo" to re-establish control.

With Venezuela's sovereignty now apparently at stake, Maduro even drew a show of solidarity from the majority of Latin American countries, including from governments that oppose him ideologically and had, just days earlier, berated his administration for holding constitutionally questionable elections for an Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (National Constituent Assembly, ANC).

The Maduro government scheduled the elections for July 30. In a preemptive move, the MUD organized and held its own unofficial election, a referendum, on July 16, inviting Venezuelans to side with them on two subjects: their rejection of the government's ANC initiative, and their interest in possible political intervention by the armed forces, a call for military subversion that the MUD first made in late May.

It's impossible to know how many people really participated in each of the two votes, which took place against a background of violent protests that, in the last four months, cost more than 120 lives ([NotiSur, July 7, 2017](#)). In both cases, organizers said that more than 7 million turned out. Lawmaker Freddy Guevara, one of the spokespeople for Voluntad Popular (Popular Will, VP), an extreme-right party that wants to oust Maduro, said beforehand that after the elections, the opposition would begin "a permanent protest that will end the dictatorship." Instead, the opposite has happened: The street demonstrations have stopped.

Earlier, the Maduro administration faced a barrage of criticism from abroad. More than 30 presidents refused to recognize the legality of the ANC, and the Mercado Común del Sur (Southern Common Market, MERCOSUR)—a trade bloc that includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay—suspended Venezuela's membership sine die.

The government responded by calling for regional gubernatorial elections to be held on Dec. 10. The move caught analysts by surprise and presented the opposition with the difficult dilemma of whether or not to participate in the process. That, in turn, prompted an internal debate that accentuated divisions within the MUD and paralyzed it.

The 545 constituents chosen for the ANC on July 30 were sworn in Aug. 4. They declared themselves to be above the existing powers, took over the legislative functions of Venezuela's unicameral

parliament, the Asamblea Nacional (National Assembly), and created a “truth, justice, and reconciliation committee” to settle responsibility questions regarding the bloody events of the past several months. The ANC’s primary job will be to rewrite the 1999 Constitution and issue laws and decrees to “restructure the country’s political, economic, and institutional systems.” This transcendental process will take place without any involvement from the opposition.

An article by the Inter Press Service news agency and published Aug. 11 in the Uruguayan magazine Brecha offered a summary of the dizzying days in Venezuela. “There’s no rest in the country,” the article reads. “On Aug. 6, there was an attack by dissident soldiers on a barracks, with deaths, injuries, arrests, and stolen weapons; political prisoners who’d been sent to their homes and then returned to jail went back to being under house arrest; a general was taken from a prison, and now his whereabouts is unknown; the attorney general was ousted and replaced by an ombudsman; the Supreme Court’s constitutional chamber removed, disqualified, and arrested opposition mayors for failing to stop street protests in their municipalities; the top brass of the armed forces declared itself to be anti-imperialist and reaffirmed its support for Maduro and the ANC process; the opposition, despite declaring itself in disobedience, agreed to register candidates for the regional gubernatorial elections on Dec. 10.”

Divisive dilemma

Until two months ago, the MUD had been insisting that regional elections be held. Now, its most extreme wing thinks the opposition should forgo the elections and instead concentrate on “permanent protest” in the streets with the aim of toppling the government “by any means necessary,” a repeat of the violent strategy applied in April 2014 and known as “La Salida” (the way out) ([NotiSur, April 4, 2014](#)).

Others in the opposition think the MUD ought to take part in the elections lest they lose even more representation, as they did in 2005, when the right boycotted the legislative elections and left the Asamblea Nacional, as a result, under the absolute control of the PSUV ([NotiSur, Dec. 16, 2005](#)). With the language they’re employing, the two opposition factions seem more like enemies than coalition partners.

“The only option we have is the electoral one,” said lawmaker Henry Ramos Allup, leader of Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, AD), the country’s oldest political party. “Nobody took to the streets to insist on the [high] abstention rate or challenge the [ANC] elections. And don’t keep trying to use the deaths as an excuse, because the people who died weren’t even from your side, nor were they disavowing the elections.”

Corina Machado, leader of Vente Venezuela (Come Venezuela, VV) and one of the major proponents of “La Salida” fired back, saying, “To participate is to betray.” Machado, a former lawmaker, announced VV’s withdrawal from the MUD and warned, in reference to Ramos Allup, “They’re going to end up alone. The streets are empty of protests because Venezuelans feel betrayed by you people, who by agreeing to participate in rigged elections are validating a criminal dictatorship.”

Antonio Ledezma, a former mayor of Caracas and one of the country’s best-known prisoners, agrees. “We can’t give up now,” he said. “It’d be impossible to get any more support from the people than we’ve had, impossible to get any more support from the international community. Participating [in the election] would be to betray them.”

VP, Alianza Bravo Pueblo (Brave People Alliance) and another five of the 20 groups that make up the MUD feel similarly and use the same insulting arguments put forth by Machado and Ledezma.

“With the ANC, they’ve already formed an alternate government. We can’t validate these elections,” lawmaker Juan Requesens told journalist Vanessa Davies during an Aug. 6 broadcast on the private radio station Unión Radio. “The important thing now is to bring the country to a standstill. There’s a war coming, people! In order to trigger the intervention that will save us, we need to take this step.”

Requesens is a member of Primero Justicia (Justice First, PJ), the party of MUD leader Henrique Capriles. His surprising declaration isn’t representative of the PJ as a whole. And yet, neither Capriles—a two-time presidential candidate ([NotiSur, Oct. 19, 2012](#))—nor anyone else in the party attempted to censor the lawmaker.

‘The military option’

Until that point, no leader had come out publicly in favor of outside intervention. Instead, there is widespread agreement that any kind of armed intrusion into internal affairs—more specifically, intervention by the US, which is what’s really being talked about here—would only serve to bring the Venezuelan people and government closer together.

In a July 26 column in *The New York Times*, David Smilde, a senior fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), suggested that a mediation effort be made by a group of four or six friendly Latin American countries but warned, firmly, that the US “must stay at the margins.” Smilde, a Venezuela expert and professor at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, said the Trump administration could help by facilitating “diplomacy around the negotiations” but insisted that it “refrain from trying to lead and must resist adopting distracting unilateral actions.”

Another WOLA pundit, Program Director Geoff Thale, also questioned the wisdom of unilateral action and said that US intervention would just give Maduro the pretext he needs to whip up nationalist sentiment among the Venezuelan people. Latin American leaders who are friendly with the US, such as Chile’s Michele Bachelet or Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay, also came out strongly against any kind of intervention.

The various reactions followed a series of confusing threats Trump made about US Treasury Department sanctions against 22 top Venezuelan officials. The Treasury Department first slapped sanctions on 14 officials, including Maduro himself. Then, on Aug. 9, eight more names were added to the list, including Adán Chávez, older brother of former president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), the deceased leader of the Bolivarian Revolution. The measure implies the freezing of assets and bars US citizens from negotiating with the Venezuelans in question.

Finally, on Aug. 11, Trump crossed the line from talking about individual Venezuelan officials to threatening a military attack on the country as a whole ([SourceMex, Aug. 16, 2017](#)). “We have many options for Venezuela,” he said. “And by the way, I’m not going to rule out a military option. We have many options or Venezuela. This is our neighbor. We’re all over the world, and we have troops all over the world in places that are very, very far away. Venezuela is not very far away, and the people are suffering, and they’re dying.”

Two days later, US Vice President Mike Pence kicked off a tour of Latin America that took him to Colombia, Argentina, Chile, and Panama, where he delivered the message of Trump's military intentions directly.

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