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Mexico, Venezuela Feud Over OAS Resolution Denouncing Maduro Government

by Carlos Navarro

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The uneasy relationship that has existed between Mexico and Venezuela over the past 15 years exploded into a public spat after the Mexican government denounced a move by Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro to dissolve Congress and call for a constituent assembly (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, ANC) to rewrite the country's charter ([NotiSur, July 7, 2017](#)).

Mexico also angered the Maduro administration by denouncing Venezuela's ongoing repression against protestors and criticizing its decision to dismiss the country's top prosecutor, Luisa Ortega Díaz. The prosecutor, who had been a Chávez loyalist, had denounced Maduro's plan to rewrite the Constitution. "The Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (Foreign Ministry, SRE) and the Procuraduría General de la República (Attorney General's Office, PGR) deplore and condemn the destitution of the prosecutor," the two Mexican ministries said in a joint statement.

The SRE introduced a resolution at a meeting of members of the Organization of American States (OAS) in June to denounce the Venezuelan government's actions. "Mexico will not stop using all diplomatic channels, including the OAS, in order to have a constructive impact on achieving a peaceful solution to the restoration of democracy. We have a country that, in fact, is no longer a functional democracy. Today, it is not a democracy," Foreign Affairs Secretary Luis Videgaray said in an interview.

Maduro calls Mexico a 'sell-out'

Venezuela replied to the Mexico-led effort in the OAS by denouncing Mexico's own violation of human rights, particularly the lack of resolution to the disappearance—and presumed murder—of 47 students from a teachers' college in Guerrero state in September 2014 ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014, Dec. 16, 2015, Sept. 28, 2016](#)).

Maduro also went out of his way to call Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, along with Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, "entreguistas" (sell-outs) for siding with the US in condemning Venezuela's actions.

Some observers said Videgaray has taken the lead in crafting Mexico's response to Venezuela. "Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Videgaray has unveiled a diplomatic activism to counter the position of Venezuela that has greatly bothered that country's government," said the online business news site *Expansión*.

The Peña Nieto government was also behind an OAS statement that called the jailed opponents of the Maduro policies "political prisoners," *Expansión* noted.

Some observers said Mexico has important reasons for taking a leadership role in the campaign against Maduro. "[They] range from the desire to lower the rising levels of government-backed violence in this overwhelmingly democratic region to a hope to position itself as a stronger regional

leader at a moment when many Latin American countries are tied up in their own political and economic crises,” said The Christian Science Monitor.

According to TheMonitor, another reason might have to do with Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is leading the very early polls for the 2018 presidential election in Mexico ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2017](#)). “By highlighting Venezuela’s woes and linking them to its leftist leadership, the ruling party in Mexico can send a message that it understands and knows how to fix ‘leftist errors,’” the newspaper said, quoting analysts.

It started with a Fox-Chávez spat

The tense relationship between Mexico and Venezuela has existed to some degree for the past 17 years. In 2005, then-President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), a member of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), clashed with the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) over Latin American trade policy and other regional matters. The conflict was exacerbated by the strong personalities of the two former presidents, who resorted to calling each other names ([SourceMex, Nov. 16, 2005](#)).

The differences over trade policy came to a head during a review of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which the US first proposed in 1994 ([NotiSur, Dec. 15, 1994](#)). Chávez had a different vision about an inter-hemispheric economic and trade integration pact— an economic bloc known as the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA), which excluded the US and Canada ([NotiSur, July 13, 2012](#)).

At the fourth Summit of the Americas, held in Buenos Aires in 2005, Fox criticized Chávez for opposing the FTAA and suggested that the Venezuelan leader was merely trying to divert attention from some controversies at home. “We have some presidents, fortunately a minority, who blame other countries for all their problems,” Fox said in reference to Chávez.

Fox’s comments angered Chávez, who issued strongly worded statements calling him the “lapdog of imperialism,” in reference to Fox’s close relationship with the administration of then-US President George W. Bush (2001-2009).

A year after the public spat with Mexico, Chávez withdrew Venezuela from the Group of Three Agreement (G-3), a free-trade bloc formed by Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela in 1994 ([SourceMex, May 18, 1994](#), and [April 22, 1998](#)). “Venezuela is studying the possibility, and it is a strong possibility, of abandoning another old accord that is hurting our country and benefiting only a few companies,” the Venezuelan leader said at the time ([SourceMex, May 17, 2006](#)).

Colombia and Mexico dissolved the G-3 and jointly entered into other multilateral agreements, replacing the accord with the Pacific Alliance, which also incorporated Peru and Chile ([SourceMex, Dec. 7, 2011](#)).

Relations between Mexico and Venezuela remained tense during the administration of President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), although the degree of conflict was not as high as during the Fox years. The two countries initially clashed over the perception that Venezuela had played a role in Mexico’s 2006 presidential election, which Calderón, also a PAN member, won by a very narrow margin over center-left candidate López Obrador ([SourceMex, July 12, 2006](#), and [Aug. 30, 2006](#)).

During the campaign, Calderón on several occasions linked López Obrador to Chávez ([SourceMex, May 3, 2006](#), [June 7, 2006](#), [Dec. 8, 2010](#)). The Calderón campaign itself was accused of using outsiders to shore up its electoral fortunes when the PAN candidate received an unofficial endorsement from Spain's conservative former Prime Minister José María Aznar (1996-2004) ([SourceMex, March 1, 2006](#)).

Calderón's allegations displeased Chávez, whose government declined to recognize the president-elect.

"[Calderón] simply destroyed the possibility of improving relations with Venezuela," Chávez said in an interview with CNN en Español in 2007. "Not only that. We feel the election was stolen from López Obrador."

Calderón, Peña Nieto tried to mend fences

Notwithstanding the charges of electoral interference, disagreements between Mexico and Venezuela did not escalate further during the Calderón years ([SourceMex Feb. 21, 2007](#)), even though there were some disagreements over economic policy, such as Venezuela's nationalization of the assets of Mexican cement giant CEMEX in 2008 ([SourceMex, April 16, 2008](#)).

Under Calderón, the two countries even took the conciliatory step of restoring their ambassadors, which had been withdrawn because of the Chávez-Fox disputes. Furthermore, during a meeting of Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, CELAC) in Caracas in 2011, Calderón and Chávez agreed to make official state visits to one another's countries ([SourceMex, Dec. 7, 2011](#)).

The visits did not materialize. Calderón concluded his term without traveling to the Venezuelan capital, and Chávez, who was dealing with an illness, was unable to travel to Mexico City. He died in 2013.

Shortly after taking office, Peña Nieto recognized Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, as Venezuela's legitimate leader despite some hesitation from other countries. In moving to repair bilateral relations, Peña Nieto said he wanted to restore the strong economic ties that the two countries had enjoyed when the G-3 accord was negotiated ([SourceMex, Nov. 13, 2013](#)).

Mexico's relationship with Venezuela remained fairly stable until tensions erupted over Maduro's moves to replace the democratically elected Venezuelan Congress.

Following up on the OAS resolution, Mexico participated in a meeting of foreign ministers from 12 Latin American countries in Lima on Aug. 8. The ministers issued a declaration indicating they would not recognize any action taken by Venezuela's "illegitimate" new constituent assembly.

The group—which included Videgaray, Heraldo Muñoz of Chile, and Ricardo Luna of Peru—also condemned Venezuela's "systematic violation of human rights and fundamental liberties, violence, repression, and political persecution, the existence of political prisoners, and the lack of free elections."

Maduro responded to the Latin American foreign ministers by accusing them of colluding with the US to bring down his government. However, another factor brought the Latin American ministers together on an issue where they appeared to side with Maduro. They issued a joint statement denouncing US President Donald Trump's threat to use force against the Venezuelan government.

On Aug. 11, Trump said he would not rule out a “military option” in Venezuela in the aftermath of Maduro’s efforts to consolidate power.

“The possibility of a military intervention shouldn’t even be considered,” Colombia’s Santos said during a press conference with US Vice President Mike Pence, who was on a tour of Latin America. “America is a continent of peace. It is the land of peace.”

Pence downplayed Trump’s comments.

“The president has made it clear, as well, that the United States has many options, and we reserve those options, but we truly believe that by increasing economic and diplomatic pressure on the Maduro regime, not just across the Americas but across the wider world, that we can achieve the restoration of democracy in Venezuela by peaceable means,” Pence said on Aug. 15 during a joint news conference with Argentina’s vice president, Gabriela Michetti, in Buenos Aires.

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