

Don't Believe Mainstream US Media Coverage of Venezuela

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Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro speaks at rally in Bolivar Square to commemorate International Women's Day in Caracas on March 8, 2014. (Photo: AP / Alejandro Cegarra)

Diplomatic relations between Venezuela and the U.S. have just taken a big hit, with the government of Nicolas Maduro demanding that the American Embassy in Caracas [reduce its staff](#) by 80% and that U.S. visitors [apply for visas](#).

Most symbolically, Venezuela has now [barred](#) a number of U.S. officials from visiting, including George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. The backdrop to these political moves is a new crisis within Venezuela that has an old script: right-wing leaders plan a coup, with the U.S. deeply implicated; wealthy protesters take to the streets; and the Western media cover both stories with great sympathy while openly mocking the democratically elected government for attempting to defend itself.

The latest crisis began when authorities acting on Maduro's orders arrested Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma in mid-February. A well-known right-wing opposition figure, Ledezma will face trial for conspiracy against the government in what is now being called the "blue coup." Among the pieces of [evidence](#) the government says it has collected are phone calls made by the mayor to a U.S. phone number, as well as a cache of weapons, including Molotov cocktails, grenade-like explosives and gas masks, found in the office headquarters of the opposition political party.

Ledezma is being held in the same facility as another right-wing politician, Leopoldo Lopez, who was arrested last year for overseeing a plan called *La Salida*, or "the exit," to overturn the government. Lopez has had [dealings](#) with U.S. government figures including Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore. According to Wikileaks, the two apparently "discussed possible media strategies with Lopez, and methods for getting his positive message to audiences in the U.S." Just before Ledezma's arrest, he, Lopez and other right-wing opposition leaders, including Maria Corina Machado, had signed a document calling for a "National Transition"—a move the government says was a precursor to a U.S.-backed coup.

The U.S. has long been involved in attempts to destabilize Venezuela's socialist government. Its role in the 2002 coup against Hugo Chavez is [well-documented](#). Over the years, many organizations, including ones in which right-wing opposition figures are involved, have received funding from the likes of [USAID](#) and the [National Endowment for Democracy \(NED\)](#), both U.S.-based agencies notorious for fomenting unrest in countries hostile to U.S. interests. For example, Machado headed an organization named [Sumate](#) that has received funding from the NED.

U.S. officials have also made no secret about their hostility to Venezuela. Last year the Obama administration [imposed sanctions](#) on a number of Venezuelan officials it claims are implicated in human rights abuses and corruption, although it is keeping the list of names secret. In President Obama's [2015 National Security Strategy](#), he announced that the U.S. would "stand by the citizens of countries where the full exercise of democracy is at risk, such as Venezuela."

Despite this documentation of American animosity toward Venezuela, media outlets continue to harbor an inexplicable blind spot on the U.S. role. The New York Times [opined last week](#) in what we can consider Exhibit A in the case against media coverage of Venezuela:

Listening to embattled President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela ramble for hours about an international right-wing conspiracy to oust him, it's clear that he would use any fabricated pretext to jail opposition leaders and crack down on dissent. In recent days, the government's claims have become outlandish and its repression of critics even more vicious.

Professor [Miguel Tinker Salas](#), one of the few U.S.-based experts on Venezuela, has written a book that will be [released](#) May 4 titled "Venezuela: What Everyone Needs to Know." In an [interview](#) on "[Uprising](#)," he responded to the editorial, saying, "We know that there was a historical amnesia on the part of the New York Times that celebrated the 2002 coup against Hugo Chavez."

Salas was referring to the paper's [mea culpa](#) at initially celebrating that coup and then retracting its words days later when it was overturned. In its new editorial, the paper failed to raise the historical context of U.S. backing for the 2002 coup or its own contradictory stances dismissing Maduro's concerns.

Exhibit B is [The Economist](#), which went as far as headlining the current crisis in Venezuela "A slow-motion coup." If by "coup" the magazine means "coup d'état"—which is generally defined as the illegal takeover of a government—then it is unclear what the writers mean, for the article claims the "regime is lurching from authoritarianism to dictatorship." (Is Maduro's government organizing a coup against itself?) The magazine also goes on to assert that "Crackpot economic policies have brought food shortages, soaring inflation and rising poverty."

Salas explained that the writers are irked by the fact that "[s]ixty percent of the government's budget actually goes to social programs and [the opposition] would rather it go to infrastructure and oil companies so that they can produce more oil and have a larger supply of oil on the world market, and have it be privately owned."

Thanks to this type of media coverage, the Venezuelan right-wing opposition has been extremely successful at generating sympathy, especially among the U.S. public, and even among American celebrities. Last year's right-wing protests inspired a [shout-out](#) by actor Jared Leto during his Oscar acceptance speech, a [supportive blog post](#) by Kevin Spacey and even a [social media post](#) by singer Madonna.

What neither the Times nor The Economist nor the supportive celebrities notice are the troubling double standards of criticizing Venezuela when a close U.S. ally such as Mexico suffers from far worse problems of anti-democratic corruption and violence. Salas pointed

out the hypocrisy, saying that 43 people were killed in Venezuela last year on both sides of the divide, and still, “The New York Times blames the government for these deaths, and yet they remain silent about the 43 students that were killed in Mexico.” Additionally, Salas pointed out, although Mexico has “100,000 dead and a real humanitarian crisis,” the Times says “almost nothing, while on Venezuela they ... mock the government.”

A [November 2014](#) editorial by the Times on Mexico’s 43 missing students expressed not nearly as much vitriol for that country’s clearly corrupt and discredited government as the paper reserves for Venezuela’s Maduro, whom it called “authoritarian,” “erratic” and “maniacal.”

Additionally, The Economist’s mocking of Venezuela’s economic crisis is also hypocritical because, according to Salas, in Mexico, “fifty percent of the population lives in poverty” and yet the country “is portrayed as a model for Western development and neo-liberal economics.” And while media outlets make fun of Venezuela’s [toilet paper shortage](#), Salas counters that in Mexico, which is a U.S. ally, huge numbers of “people don’t even have access to basic services and foods.”

Media coverage of Venezuela is so skewed that even the contentious issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems to generate fairer coverage these days. Salas attributed the bias to the savvy organizing of right-wing Venezuelan groups, who he says have “learned the lesson very well from Cuban Americans in Miami and South Florida, so they know how to target the media, they know how to create public opinion and they have done that very well.”

But Salas thinks there is another explanation, and that is “the lack of knowledge that existed about Venezuela in the U.S. before Hugo Chavez came to power.” Most of what Americans knew about the country other than that it had abundant oil reserves was the fact that it once won a Miss Universe contest and was home to a few good baseball players. That ignorance has been a perfect blank slate on which the U.S. government, mainstream media and right-wing opposition parties have been able to carve their warped perspectives about Venezuela’s left-wing government.

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