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Another Failed Coup in Venezuela?

The Venezuelan opposition and its backers in Washington may have underestimated the Chavista grassroots.

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If you repeat your own lies enough—so goes the apocryphal Goebbels quote—you start to believe them yourself. For two decades, the Venezuelan opposition and its supporters in Washington have smeared Hugo Chávez and now his successor, Nicolás Maduro, as despotic strongmen kept in power solely through military force and paltry payouts to the poor. So it's no surprise that they are once again underestimating both Chavismo and the resilience of its supporters today.

Underestimating the People

We've seen this all before: On April 11 of 2002, the Venezuelan opposition—according to the most credible accounts—unleashed snipers on its own supporters and used the ensuing deaths to justify a coup against Hugo Chávez. But the opposition dramatically overplayed its hand and underestimated the Chavista grassroots, who it routinely smeared as the blind followers of a populist strongman. When coup leaders abolished all branches of government and scrapped the constitution, hundreds of thousands of poor Venezuelans poured into the streets demanding, and eventually forcing, Chávez's return to power.

Much has changed since 2002. A perfect storm of Chávez's death, collapsing global oil prices, a mismanaged system of currency controls, ferocious aggression from the opposition and—more recently—U.S. sanctions, has thrown the Venezuelan economy into a tailspin. Many of the impressive accomplishments of the Bolivarian Revolution—in health care, education and poverty reduction—have quickly evaporated, producing frustration, confusion and desperation among even Chavismo's most hardline supporters.

So when opposition backbencher Juan Guaidó declared himself interim president of Venezuela on January 23, he and his co-conspirators thought the military would quickly fragment before eventually falling in line behind the self-proclaimed president. Things didn't work that way: Aside from a handful of soldiers and the U.S. military attaché, the Venezuelan armed forces remained solidly behind Nicolás Maduro. And despite large demonstrations both for and against the government, there have been no signs of sustained, mass resistance in the streets in favor of the coup either.

Why? In part because the frustration many poor Venezuelans feel today is just that: *frustration*. They are fed up with the economic crisis, and many place at least a share of the blame on Maduro. But as in the past, most don't see frustration as justifying undemocratic regime change, much less foreign intervention—which the majority of Venezuelans oppose. What's more, wanting the economy to improve has not led many to identify with opposition parties that still represent the most elite sectors of Venezuelan society and have offered no

credible solutions to the economic crisis.

The Trojan Horse of Humanitarian Aid

But if much has changed, much has also stayed the same: Unable to believe that the poor might hold such a nuanced position, the opposition has again overplayed its hand and bet it all on yet another failed coup. February 23 marked one month since Guaidó's self-coronation, and also the expiration of the 30-day period during which any interim president must hold new elections. According to even the opposition's contrived reading of the Venezuelan Constitution, since Guaidó never called those elections, he has no remaining claim to the presidency. And so it was that on February 23, Guaidó resorted to increasingly desperate measures, attempting to provoke a crisis by forcing deliveries of US-provided "humanitarian aid" across the border.

It's not difficult to debunk this false humanitarianism. The United Nations refused to participate in what it deemed "politicized" aid shipments, and the Red Cross denounced the border charade as "not humanitarian aid"—and rebuked the unauthorized use of Red Cross insignia by opposition forces. Given that Contra war criminal Elliott Abrams is now in charge of U.S. policy in Venezuela, it's worth recalling that U.S.-backed Contras used the Red Cross insignia toward similar ends in Nicaragua.

And then there's also basic math: While the opposition mounted a spectacle to deliver a few million dollars in aid, U.S. sanctions have already cost Venezuela *billions*, and will cost billions more. Economist Mark Weisbrot estimates the death toll of the sanctions to be "in the thousands or tens of thousands so far," with more deaths from Trump's draconian tightening of the sanctions almost guaranteed.

In contrast, the Trump government essentially handed over the keys of Citgo's bank accounts and assets—worth around $7 billion—to Guaidó, who has also demanded control of more than a billion dollars' worth of Venezuelan gold held by the Bank of England. And if we harbored any illusions about the humanitarian credentials of the Venezuelan opposition, it's worth noting that it routinely attacks a social welfare infrastructure it associates with Chavismo—most recently burning a warehouse where subsidized food bundles known as CLAPs were packaged and distributed.

Provocation on the Border

On February 23, as in 2002, the opposition sought to sow blood and chaos to justify its coup, but this time it was unsuccessful. Any objective analysis of video footage from the Colombian border makes this clear: On the Venezuelan side, Venezuelan troops were standing in a single line behind riot shields. On the Colombian side, masked opposition protesters hurled molotov cocktails toward them. When two "aid" trucks suddenly burst into flames, Guaidó and most of the media immediately blamed the fire on Maduro. So overwhelming was this media narrative that few observers seemed to notice that the trucks never reached the Venezuelan side, and were almost certainly ignited by those same molotovs.

Desperate for any pretext to justify foreign intervention, Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) even blamed Maduro when an opposition lawmaker and his aide were "poisoned" on the Colombian side of the border. Despite an utter lack of any evidence, the international press ran with the story. But it turned out the assemblyman was apparently drugged and robbed

by sex workers he had brought back to his room after a night of partying. And when long-simmering tensions between the Venezuelan military and indigenous Pemones on the southern border with Brazil led to violent clashes and several deaths, their longstanding concerns were opportunistically folded into the opposition narrative about aid deliveries. Opposition parties had been stoking dissent among indigenous groups for years, and many of those involved in clashes were less concerned with aid shipments than with what they perceived as years of corrupt military activity in the region.

The opposition has been oddly silent about its own violence, however. When three defecting Venezuelan soldiers hijacked armored personnel carriers, driving them at full speed into the border barriers in order to defect to the Colombian side, they struck a crowd of civilians that included Nicole Kramm, a Chilean photojournalist. Kramm, who was nearly killed in the attack—and whose camera was running the entire time—later described the scene: "This was an attack on civilians. I can't believe they are being treated as heroes. If I didn't run, and was 15 centimeters closer, I would not be here to tell you this."

The Danger Isn't Over

"Plan A" failed on January 23rd and "Plan B" similarly failed a month later, leaving Guaidó in dire straits and without a clear path forward. When he attempted to reach out to disaffected Chavistas by tweeting that Hugo Chávez would not approve of Maduro's actions, Guaidó was attacked by his own supporters on Twitter, revealing old tensions simmering within the opposition coalition. And with all other options exhausted, Guaidó and U.S. vice president Mike Pence failed to convince the Lima Group—a regional coalition of mostly right-wing governments and Canada—to support military intervention. With the threat of U.S. intervention stirring dissension even within the cabinet of far-right Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, Guaidó's coup appears to be on its last legs.

This doesn't mean that the danger is over, however. On Monday, Guaidó made a less-than-triumphant return to Venezuela and, despite his violation of a travel ban, the government has opted not to arrest him for now. If anything, Maduro will protect him at all costs: Amid threats on Guaidó's life, the Lima Group has warned of dire consequences should anything happen to him. If Guaidó were to be killed, however, it would almost certainly be at the hands of a Venezuelan right-wing eager to provoke military intervention (the government has dismantled similar plots in the past).

In the coming months, U.S. sanctions will continue to tighten the economic screws, heaping suffering on those who always suffer most—the poorest Venezuelans—while waiting out defections from the military and the population as a whole. In 1990, Nicaraguans voted the Sandinistas out of power, knowing full well that if they didn't, both U.S. sanctions and the Contra War would continue. With many of the same people once again in charge of U.S. policy today, the strategy remains the same: to "make the economy scream," in Nixon's words. This coup may be failing, but Washington will fail and try again. Venezuela can't afford to fail even once.

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