

# Hands Off Venezuela! Right-wing Destabilization Campaign, Seeks to Seize State Power

What Has Been Happening Since February and Why It Matters

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*The recent destabilization campaign waged by the right-wing opposition has yet again made Venezuela a darling of the international media.*

*While there is always a deafening media silence when the Bolivarian government wins an electoral mandate, throughout the month of February 2014 viewers were assailed with images of “innocent” student protesters – mostly from the academic bastion of the Venezuelan elite, the Central University of Venezuela – being brutalized by state security forces.*



Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro announces new initiatives to address current economic problems, arguing that population’s universal welfare is a key aim behind policymaking.

Apparently the axe that has chopped budgets for investigative journalism has fallen heavily on Venezuela. Mainstream media outlets re-broadcast images from Twitter without bothering to fact-check, not realizing that they were actually from places like Egypt and Syria or that they depicted Venezuelan state security forces that had been disbanded two years ago. The February traumas were almost another “media coup” in the making.

The mainstream media’s attempts to manufacture consent and condone the opposition-sponsored violence against the Maduro government should ring alarm bells for anyone on the left. While we can have legitimate debates about how anti-capitalist the Bolivarian revolution has truly been, since Hugo Chávez took office in 1999 “the process” (as it is known in Venezuela) has achieved the greatest redistribution of social wealth since the Cuban Revolution in 1959. As well, “twenty-first century socialism” should be distinguished from earlier historical versions because of its commitment to democratic forms of decision-making. By fostering forms of democratic control over the economy through systems such as workers’ collectives and community councils, Venezuela is experimenting with what may be the most radical attempts to decentralize decision-making to the local level.

## Twenty-First Century Socialism

For these reasons, socialists ranging from Karachi, Pakistan to Toronto, Canada have demanded that imperialist powers keep their “hands off Venezuela.” Not only does Venezuela give us much to learn from this creative experiment with “twenty-first century socialism,” but it also continues to play a crucial role in Latin America and the rest of the

world – opening spaces for the election of left governments and inspiring extra-parliamentary movements that demand radical social change.

However, it is important to recognize that as with any socialist experiment, it has been riddled with contradictions and tensions. Nonetheless, the Bolivarian revolution is worth defending because of its importance to the region and its worth in its own right.

This is not the first time that the Venezuelan opposition has used extra-parliamentary and parliamentary tactics to try to force a “regime change.” In April 2002 Chávez was deposed for 48 hours in a U.S.-sponsored coup d’état, only to be restored to office by loyal members of the Presidential guard who were inspired by the hundreds of thousands of citizens who poured on to the streets of Caracas and demanded the return of their President.

The second extra-parliamentary attempt occurred a few months later from December 2002-January 2003 when the opposition-controlled oil company Petroleum of Venezuela organized a “strike,” shutting down production in an act of economic sabotage. In response, workers who identified with the Bolivarian revolution took matters in their own hands, taking over oil refineries and distribution centres, delivering domestic gasoline which eventually inspired the movement for worker-controlled factories.

Having failed with these tactics, in August 2004 the opposition resorted to parliamentary methods. Right-wing forces under the umbrella organization Súmate (funded by U.S. aid money) organized a referendum campaign to recall the president. Again, they lost as 58 per cent of voters cast ballots in favour of Chávez. Fed up with playing by the rules, in 2005 the opposition parties refused to participate in the presidential elections, allowing the Bolivarian forces to sweep the parliament, and then complaining that Venezuela was a “dictatorship” due to one-party rule.

Emboldened by the overwhelming show of support from the Venezuelan people, at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2005, Chávez declared for the first time that he was a “socialist,” having realized that social democracy would never achieve social justice or overturn the highly unequal structures of capitalism.

### Chávez’s Declaration

The February 2014 insurrection is yet another extra-parliamentary attempt by the opposition forces to topple the government. They aim to capitalize on a perceived moment of weakness in the Bolivarian revolution largely due to the death of Hugo Chávez.

Widely recognized to be an incredibly charismatic leader, he was often described as the “glue” that held the revolution together. Chávez’s charisma was undeniable. He had a wicked sense of humour; something he displayed weekly on his television talk show, *Aló Presidente* (Hello President). Not only was he smart and funny, but incredibly charming; often serenading the audience with traditional folk songs, or sharing his reflections on socialism, economic theory and love. (Who amongst us, I ask, would be able to stomach seeing Stephen Harper’s mug on TV every week. What a dreadful thought!)

While Chávez’s personal charisma undoubtedly played a role in “the process,” it also did little to change the political culture of the Latin American strongman and the widespread belief of Venezuela as a “magical state” in which the president had powers to transform oil into cars, constitutions, housing, etc. The socialists left of Chavismo whom Jeff Webber and I

[have interviewed](#) over the past five years suggest that such hero worship is a problem. As [Juan Contreras](#), a militant from one of the most revolutionary barrios of Caracas, once put it in an interview in 2012 (about seven months before Chávez died), “Chávez’s charisma is at once a strength and a weakness for the movement. When he got sick recently, there was a power gap, no one talked about ‘revolution,’ we were all paralyzed. Like any mortal, Chávez could die any day. Anything could happen to him; he could choke on a fish bone. This is why we need a collective leadership (‘direccióncolectiva’).”

## February Traumas

After winning his fourth presidential mandate by a wide margin in October 2012, Chávez succumbed to a battle with cancer in early March 2013. On April 4, 2013, Chávez’s successor, Nicolas Maduro, a former bus driver and one of Chávez’s most trusted advisers, won the presidential elections, this time only winning by a narrow margin of 1.7 per cent over the main opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles (compared with Chávez’s more decisive mandate of 11 per cent).

Sensing a withering of the Chavista forces, the opposition waited for a moment of “crisis” to organize protests against the government. Due to the hoarding of basic goods by opposition-owned and controlled distribution chains, Venezuela has been experiencing shortages of basic food products such as flour and cooking oil, and other essential goods such as toilet paper for months. While the situation might seem trivial, these shortages do wear down the people’s patience, particularly in a country that has grown accustomed to periods of material and consumerist abundance due to its vast oil wealth.

Stoked by main opposition leaders, the first protests were organized on “Youth Day” in early February 2014. Blockades were erected throughout eastern Caracas – the wealthy part of the capital city – but then spread into other wealthy neighbourhoods across the country. While the international media has reported on a government-sponsored “campaign of terror,” in reality the rich have barricaded themselves in their own neighbourhoods, facing off with the state security forces in nightly contests.

The poor, who overwhelmingly support the government, have been notably absent. Indeed, life has been more-or-less normal in the western part of Caracas. It is amazing how a few strategically placed cameras can give the outside world the impression that there is general mayhem.

And the poor, who are most affected by economic issues such as inflation and shortages, and who are the least to blame, do not have domestic servants to wait in line for goods and cannot afford to hoard supplies. Most tragically, a majority of the people who have lost their lives in the period of unrest have been innocent bystanders or government-supporters, including three motorcyclists (a method of transportation that is almost exclusively used by the poor) who were beheaded by invisible razor wires erected by opposition protesters.

While there are some real economic problems in Venezuela that affect the rich and the poor alike, as economist Mark Weisbrot reports from the front lines of Caracas, this is a revolt of the well-off, not a terror campaign by the government.

## What is Going to Happen Next?

The government has called for “dialogue” with the opposition. Thus far, hard-line opposition leaders Antonio Ledezma (former opposition Mayor of Caracas) and Maria Corina Machado

(a congress representative), who have openly called for violence in the streets, have boycotted any dialogue. Only the main opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles, who ran against Chávez and Maduro in the past year's presidential races, attended initial talks. Throughout this period, Capriles had been hoping to cast himself as the middle-of-the-road "good guy," less radical than his colleagues who basically foam at the mouth when they speak about the Bolivarian Revolution. Other opposition leaders like Leopoldo Lopez (the former Mayor of a wealthy area of Caracas and leader of opposition party Popular Will) and Daniel Ceballos (Mayor of San Cristobal) are currently in prison for supporting or encouraging the violence.

While the right-wing opposition has a unity of purpose – to seize state power so that they can once again channel wealth toward their cronies and restore a more brutal form of capitalism – the squabbles that are emerging in the wake of their defeat could divide them; at least temporarily.

The dialogue thus far has also exposed the corrupt practices, such as hoarding, of the Venezuelan opposition. As Chris Gilbert recently reported, some products "magically" appeared on shelves just a few days after the kingpin of Venezuela's largest food and beverage chain Polar, Lorenzo Mendoza, decided to join the dialogue organized by the Maduro government.

Other events that have developed include: two opposition mayors who failed to follow a Supreme Court ruling to remove the barricades have been arrested for their insubordination; the head of the National Guard was replaced immediately when some officers failed to obey government orders not to suppress the protesters; and there is a warrant out for the arrest of the officers that fired the shots that claimed the life of at least one opposition supporter.

In terms of the economic situation, in mid-February, Venezuela announced a new exchange rate system that seeks to undercut the black market in dollars, which was wreaking havoc on the value of the currency and fueling inflation. Gilbert argues that while it is too early to draw any conclusions, the reform is "off to a good start," and that it has already stabilized the rate of inflation which means that the value of peoples' salaries will not erode as quickly – a problem that weighs most heavily on the poor.

While the dialogue within the upper echelons of the state may bring more peace to the wealthy districts of Caracas, their importance for the rest of the process should not be over-emphasized. Whatever pacts may be signed between the opposition capitalists and the ruling government may bring toilet paper back to the shelves but they will have little bearing on the lives of the average Venezuelan. As long-time observer of Venezuelan politics, [Steve Ellner correctly observed](#),

"the final outcome of the process of transformation in Venezuela will be determined not so much by those on top, but rather by the rank and file of the PSUV and allied parties and social movements in a variety of venues including, to a great extent, the streets." •

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