

Standoff in Venezuela

By [Steve Ellner](#) and [Federico Fuentes](#)

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Venezuela has been rocked in recent weeks by almost daily protests and counter-protests, as right-wing opponents of socialist President Nicolas Maduro seek to bring down his government.

While the media portrays these events as a popular rebellion against an authoritarian government, supporters of the pro-poor Bolivarian revolution initiated by former president Hugo Chavez say the country is witnessing an escalation in what is an ongoing counter-revolutionary campaign seeking to restore Venezuela's traditional elites in power and reverse the gains made by the poor majority under Chavez and Maduro.

Green Left Weekly's Federico Fuentes interviewed Steve Ellner, a well-known analyst of Venezuelan and Latin American politics and a retired professor at Venezuela's Universidad de Oriente, to get his views on recent events.

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When it comes to the current turmoil in Venezuela, the media have been unanimous in their version of events: the Maduro regime is on its last legs due to the overwhelming opposition it faces from the people, including among the poorest sectors that previously supported the government, and therefore its only recourse for survival is violent repression. How accurate is this media narrative?

It's hardly a far-gone conclusion.

There is no better indication of the deceptiveness of the mainstream media's narrative than the spatial nature of the anti-government protests in early 2014 known as the "guarimba" and again this year.

The protests are centred in the middle and upper class areas whose mayors belong to the opposition. The strategy behind the protests is for the mass civil disobedience, confrontation with security forces and widespread destruction of public property to spread to the poorer areas.

Certainly, the popular sectors have a long tradition of street protests, particularly over deficient public services. But the popular sectors have remained largely passive, although with more exceptions now than in 2014. Obviously the opposition is banking on greater active popular support than in 2014.



Along similar lines, the Chavista United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) has been more damaged by electoral abstention among disenchanted Chavistas than those who end up voting for the opposition. Such electoral behaviour is what explains the Chavista defeat in the December 2014 elections for the National Assembly.

But the Chavista leaders still have an impressive degree of mobilisation capacity, as was demonstrated in two recent marches, one on Venezuelan Independence Day on April 19, and the other on May 1.

The nation's precarious economic situation as well as the complete political turnaround in the hemisphere strengthens the opposition's hand. Whereas in past political crises, such as the coup attempt in 2002 and the general strike of 2002-2003, the Chavez government was able to count on backing from other Latin American nations including in some cases non-leftist ones.

Now Venezuela's neighbouring governments, in spite of their considerable unpopularity and internal discontent, have explicitly taken up the cause of the Venezuelan opposition.

But at this point I would describe the political situation in Venezuela as a standoff, a far cry from saying that the government is on its last legs. Of course, given the political volatility over the recent past, predictions have to be at best tentative.

In an ultimate sense, the popular sectors have the last word. If they were to join the protests, then the statement that the Maduro government is, as you say, on its last legs, would be accurate. The situation would then be similar to that of the Soviet Union in 1991 when the miners began to march against the government, thus signalling the collapse of the regime.

Even some former supporters of the government today speak of an authoritarian turn on the part of Maduro. Is there any truth to this accusation?

To answer your question it has to be pointed out that Venezuela is not in a normal situation, with what political scientists call a "loyal opposition" that recognises the government's legitimacy and plays by the rules of the game. Thus to talk about government actions without placing them in context – as the corporate media is prone to do – is misleading.

The opposition leaders of today are, for the most part, the same ones involved in the coup and general strike of 2002-2003, the same ones who refused to recognise the legitimacy of

the electoral processes in 2004 and 2005 and consistently questioned the legitimacy of the National Electoral Council except in those cases in which the government was defeated.



They are also the same ones who refused to recognise Maduro's triumph in the presidential election of 2013, resulting in about a dozen deaths, and then promoted the four months of protests in 2014 involving civil disobedience on a massive scale along with considerable violence, resulting in 43 deaths including six members of the national guard.

The current period commences with the opposition's triumph in the National Assembly elections of 2015 when the president of that body, Henry Ramos Allup, immediately announced that regime change would be achieved within six months; subsequently the National Assembly turned down the executive's budgetary allocations. All along the opposition has rejected the government's call for a national dialogue, demanding concessions as a precondition for negotiations.

The protests that have occurred in the last month are a repeat of the guarimba of 2014. Opposition leaders completely evade the issue of violence, other than declaring that they are opposed to it in an abstract sense.

Practically every day they call marches in the affluent eastern part of Caracas that attempt to reach the downtown area where the presidential palace is located. Government spokespeople have stated numerous times that downtown Caracas is off limits for the opposition marches; security forces commonly employ tear gas to prevent passage.

The reason for the government's refusal is obvious. With a massive number of opposition people in the downtown area for an indefinite period of time, massive civil disobedience, the surrounding of the presidential palace and violence would all ensue, along with uncontrollable chaos.

The confrontations would be aggravated by the coverage of the international media, which has always spun their reports to favour the opposition. The fact that every day for the last several weeks the main leaders of the opposition have called for marches to reach downtown Caracas, even though they know full well that confrontations will occur, would suggest that their strategy for gaining power envisions street disruptions and combat.

The spatial nature of the protests is key. You may say that the government is justified in avoiding the protests from reaching the centre of Caracas. But the question may be asked, would the Chavistas tolerate peaceful marches originating from the affluent eastern half of the city marching through Chavista strongholds in the popular sectors?

The question is clouded by the fact that the opposition marches almost invariably involve civil disobedience and violence.

Would you say that both the Chavistas and the opposition are assuming intransigent positions?

Both sides are playing hard ball, but a description of the political setting is indispensable in order to appreciate what is at stake. The fact is that the democratic nature of some of the government's decisions is questionable, two in particular.

A month ago, ex-presidential candidate (on two occasions), and governor of the state of Miranda, Henrique Capriles was stripped of his right to participate in elections due to charges of corruption.

In the second place, the gubernatorial and municipal elections which were slated for December 2016 have been delayed on grounds that other proposed electoral processes have pushed them into the future. Although Maduro has indicated that his party is ready to participate in those elections, a date has still not been set. If elections were held today, the Chavistas would very possibly suffer losses.

The hardliners in the Chavista movement headed by National Assembly deputy Diosdado Cabello are obviously calling the shots and they support an aggressive line toward the opposition. The most visible voice for the “soft-line” is former vice-president Jose Vicente Rangel, who favours gestures that would encourage negotiations and buttress those in the opposition who reject street confrontation.

Likewise, the radicals in the opposition are firmly in control. They have made clear that once in power, they would jail the Chavista leaders on grounds of corruption and violation of human rights. Their call for “No to Impunity” is a coded slogan. It means in effect a witch hunt against the Chavista movement and repression that would pave the way for the imposition of unpopular neoliberal policies.

Indeed, neoliberalism characterised Capriles’ platform in the two presidential elections of 2012 and 2013. There is a definite relationship between the radical tactics and intolerance displayed by the opposition, on the one hand, and the neoliberal program which would be imposed should the opposition return to power, on the other hand.

To sum up, the narrative that calls the Maduro government “authoritarian” is a blatant misrepresentation of what is happening. On the other hand, the Chavista leaders have on occasion distanced themselves from democratic principles. Their actions, however, need to be contextualised.

What has been the impact of interference by the US government and the Organization of American States, along with the changing attitude of certain governments in the region?

The foreign actors you refer to have failed to place themselves above Venezuela’s internal politics in order to promote a peaceful resolution to a conflict that could well degenerate into civil war. The statements issued by the White House as well as Luis Almagro, the OAS’ secretary general, coincide in their entirety with the opposition’s narrative and demands.



Rather than taking sides in Venezuela's internal conflict, the OAS should have called for a national dialogue and named a nonpartisan committee to investigate disputed events. The decision of the Maduro government to withdraw from the OAS was a reaction to the organisation's partisanship, which has served only to exacerbate the political polarization.

The OAS and other international actors reinforce the Venezuelan opposition's narrative that conflates pressing economic problems and the alleged authoritarianism of the Maduro government. This line inadvertently strengthens the hand of the hardliners within the opposition.

The only way to justify regime change by non-electoral means and the intervention of foreign actors, such as the OAS, is to attempt to demonstrate that the nation is headed toward a dictatorship and systematically violates human rights.

But the moderates within the opposition – although at this point they have no visible national leader – favour emphasising economic issues in order to reach out to the popular sectors of the population, attract some of the disenchanted Chavistas, and at the same time accept dialogue with government representatives. The moderates therefore place an accent mark on economic issues more than political ones.

In this sense, the intromission of foreign actors who question the Venezuelan government's democratic credentials only serves to bolster the position of the radicals in the opposition and to further polarise the nation.

In terms of the current economic problems: how serious are the shortages?

The problem of shortages of basic products is undeniable, even while media outlets like the *Wall Street Journal* claim that the nation is on the verge of mass starvation. Hunger is a scourge that afflicts the lower strata in other, if not all, Latin American nations. But the key index from social and political viewpoints is the contrast with standards in Venezuela in previous years. The deterioration has certainly been sharp with regard to the period prior to the sharp decline in oil prices in mid-2015.

What do you foresee happening in the immediate future? Is the Maduro government doomed? What do you think of the proposed Constituent Assembly?

Maduro's proposal for a constituent assembly is a mixed bag with regard to the possibility of achieving greater stability.

On the one hand it is an initiative – something new – that is designed to break the deadlock the nation finds itself stuck in. A favourable scenario would be that the Chavistas are able to activate their base as well as that of social movements and achieve an important degree of electoral participation.

Furthermore, in the best-case scenario, constituent assembly delegates would formulate viable proposals to deal with pressing issues, such as corruption, and the Chavistas in power would demonstrate genuine receptivity to them.

In short, a constituent assembly based on bottom-up participation could be a game changer.

In the case of the alternative scenario, the constituent assembly proposal will be viewed as a ploy to buy time and sidetrack the electoral process.

Steve Ellner is currently coordinating an issue on the class policies of progressive Latin American governments for Latin American Perspectives, a journal for which he is a participating editor. His "Implications of Marxist State Theories and How They Play Out in Venezuela" is slated to appear in the next issue of Historical Materialism.

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[Federico Fuentes](#)

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