

Venezuela: Chavistas Gain Upper Hand, Big Challenges Remain

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US President Donald Trump told the media on August 10 that he would not “rule out” “military options” for dealing with what he has described as the “Maduro dictatorship” in Venezuela.

His comments represent the latest ratcheting up of threats on the government of democratically-elected President Nicolas Maduro that have come in the wake of the country’s July 30 vote for a National Constituent Assembly (ANC) and its subsequent inauguration on August 4.

Proposed by Maduro as a way to find a peaceful and democratic solution to months of political turmoil in the country, the ANC will have plenipotentiary powers to deal with the current economic and political crisis. It will also discuss proposals to reform the constitution, though any official amendments will have to be put to a referendum.

The ANC has been opposed by the opposition who boycotted the elections and attempted to stop the July 30 vote going ahead.

In response to Trump’s latest threats, a mass demonstration was held in Caracas on August 14.

To get a better sense of the situation on the ground in Venezuela, *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.

In our [previous interview](#) you referred to the situation in Venezuela as a stand-off. What were Maduro’s objectives in calling for elections for the ANC on July 30? Can you describe the situation leading up to the elections?

Yes indeed, Maduro’s decision to call elections for the ANC was designed to break a deadlock.

For exactly four months prior to the elections, the opposition had engaged in illegal and sometimes violent protests (known in Venezuela as *guarimbas*), disrupting traffic and clashing with security forces. There were over 100 fatal casualties, more than double the number of those produced by the protests during nearly the same lapse of time in 2014.

But this time the situation was not exactly the same. In the first place, the protesters gathered in smaller units to completely paralyse larger areas, sometimes entire cities. Roadblocks very often consisted of just a handful of protesters, from 3 to 10.

The violent protesters were bolder and more aggressive than in 2014 and they even attacked military bases. They evidently had some degree of training and their weapons, although apparently home-made, were in some cases fairly sophisticated.

In addition, the protesters counted on more international support. Almost all of South America has gone from left to right and even though those governments are discredited – with the popularity of presidents at 20% or less, and in the case of Brazil less than 5% – that hasn't held them back from playing an active role in condemning the Maduro government for supposed violation of human rights.

Finally, the protests in 2014 were concentrated almost exclusively in wealthy municipalities whose mayors belonged to the opposition. Now in addition to that, there were roadblocks in the middle class areas of Chavista municipalities.

But the deadlock was due to the fact that just like in 2014, the protests did not resonate in the barrios, nor did they trigger a positive response in the military.

The [attack on the military base in Valencia on August 6](#) was hardly a military uprising as some of the corporate media claimed. The perpetrators were non-military mercenaries, except the guy who led it who had been discharged from the military some time ago.

In short, the ANC elections were basically an initiative designed to introduce a new element in order to change the scenario and avoid a prolonged armed confrontation with no end in sight.

What about the opposition? It seems that street protests have diminished, at least compared to before the ANC vote, and there is talk of participation in the regional elections. What do you see happening?

For the first time in two years, it can be said that the Chavista movement has gained the upper hand vis-a-vis the opposition. But it's a very fragile upper hand.

The calling of the ANC was a calculated risk. There was the possibility that the opposition could successfully rally behind rejection of the ANC. They attempted to achieve that objective by putting forward the argument that Maduro should have called a referendum to obtain popular approval for his ANC proposal.

I personally believe that that argument was weak. What is important is that Maduro is committed to submitting the ANC's final document to a referendum.

Furthermore, how many times throughout history has the convening of a constituent assembly been approved by popular vote? That was the case in 1999, but it certainly wasn't the case with the previous constitution of 1961, nor in 1946 when delegates were elected to a constitutional assembly but there was no referendum. And in what other countries has such a referendum been called?

The *guarimba* protests more or less terminated following the July 30 vote, in spite of the

opposition's empty threat of a "[zero hour](#)." This occurred because the *guarimbas* were not sustainable over time, just as was the case in 2014. And in both cases – as well as in the case of the general strike of 2002-2003 – the opposition lacked a fall-back plan, a "plan B," in order to save face.

The protests were also discontinued because opposition parties now want to participate in the gubernatorial elections to be held in December. Opposition leaders are thus in the embarrassing position – "embarrassing" to say the least – of claiming that electoral fraud was committed on July 30, while participating in new elections.

The parties that participate in those elections cannot easily question the legitimacy of the electoral council, the CNE, because if they do their people will not go out and vote. People will say, and they do say, if you don't believe that the referee is impartial, you have no reason to participate in the game. That's true with sports and it's true with politics. You can't have it both ways.

For these reasons, I say that the Chavistas have the upper hand for the time being. The opposition is evidently divided over participation in the electoral process. Some people are loath to vote in the elections because doing so is a tacit recognition that the *guarimbas* was a mistake. Participation delegitimises the decision to have engaged in the *guarimba*. That's a very emotional point because of the number of deaths and injuries resulting from the protests.

Finally, the calling of the ANC is an initiative that allows the Chavistas to rein in numerous sceptics within their movement who now say, "let's give this a chance". It sure beats the uncertainty and violence of the last four months.

Were the parties of the opposition grouped in the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) coalition calling the shots during the *guarimbas*?

It is true that the protesters, who were overwhelmingly young people who called themselves "the Resistance", were characterised by an anti-party attitude. But the parties of the opposition obviously encouraged their actions and were thus partly responsible for the violence.

Day after day, MUD leaders such as Henrique Capriles issued calls for protest marches to reach downtown Caracas, even though they knew full well that the government would not allow it. The government feared a repetition of April 11, 2002 (when violence erupted after an opposition march headed to downtown Caracas, leading to the coup). But beginning on April 1, opposition leaders called the marches anyway, resulting in violent clashes with security forces on a daily basis.

The fact that the *guarimbas* ceased practically overnight shows that there was a political decision that was made, obviously by the leaders of the MUD. This shows that the *guarimbas* was hardly leaderless and spontaneous. And it shows that there was an articulation between the MUD leaders and the protesters, both the peaceful and the violent ones.

You say the decision to convoke the ANC was a calculated risk. Does this mean you're not sure of the outcome? Some view the ANC vote which, with its 8 million votes, as a reinvigoration of Chavismo and its popular class base?

As I said, the Chavista advantage over the opposition at this moment is tenuous.

It is true that in the months leading up to the ANC, the Chavistas demonstrated a mobilisation capacity. Their mobilisation capacity is impressive not only because of the numbers but because the mobilisations have been ongoing over such a considerable period of time, actually 20 years since it dates back to the 1998 presidential campaign.

This has been one of Maduro's strong points. Unlike Lula and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil in 2016, Maduro mobilised the Chavista rank and file as a response to the challenge posed by the *guarimbas*. The very calling of the ANC elections is an example of the mobilisation.

But Maduro's hard core backing stands at about 20% of the voting population. There is an even greater number of people who supported [late president Hugo] Chavez but have become disillusioned under Maduro and many of them (about two million) decided not to vote in the National Assembly elections of December 2015, and as a result the opposition won by a large margin.

These people (the "light Chavistas") participated on July 30 for three reasons: rejection of the *guarimbas*; rejection of foreign interference in Venezuelan politics, which under Trump has been more blatant or "indiscrete" than Obama; and because they want to see if something will come of the ANC.

If the ANC fails to deliver, these people will be alienated even more so than before and it's hard to predict how their disappointment may get expressed. It will be especially intense because Maduro and the other Chavista leaders have been touting the ANC practically as a panacea for the nation's urgent problems.

How do you explain the disillusionment?

I asked Jorge Arreaza, the current Foreign Minister, about a month ago what the key factor is that explains the contraction of the size of the Chavista movement. He claimed with a great amount of certainty that the fundamental problem has to do with the pressing economic problems such as scarcity of basic commodities and triple-digit inflation. The economic situation in Venezuela is quite difficult, particularly for the non-privileged sectors but also the middle class.

Thinking about Arreaza's statement, I have drawn the conclusion that while economic problems are the primary concern of the broad base of the Chavista movement, the issue of corruption and bureaucracy is what most undermines the commitment and zeal of the movement's activists. At least that's been my impression. The activists are key players for any political or social movement

Will the ANC deal with the problem of corruption and bureaucracy?

I'm not at all sure. Up to now the ANC delegates seem more inclined to clamp down on those who engaged in and were responsible for the illegal protests as well as the "economic war" consisting of hoarding and speculation.

Corruption is a thorny issue. I am surprised at how little discussion there was about it during the campaign for the ANC. The opposition's discourse places the blame exclusively on Chavistas and their allies in the private sector.

But the fact of the matter is that much of the blame for the notorious sale of preferential dollars for bogus imports falls on the shoulders of businesspeople who belong to the traditional bourgeoisie, which for the most part opposes the Chavista government, as well as the multinationals. But needless to say government officials are also involved.

You wrote an [important article](#) in response to those on the left who have taken a “plague on both your houses” approach to the Venezuelan opposition and Maduro government, pointing to areas of convergence and disagreement. Why do you feel it is so important that the left take a side in this dispute?

I believe that failure to recognise the positive aspects of the Maduro presidency undermines efforts at international solidarity, which is very much needed at this moment of such intense hostility and threats on the part of European, North American and South American governments.

Leftists who support the “plague on both your houses” position deny this assertion and claim that they fully support the defence of Venezuelan sovereignty. However the facts as well as common sense demonstrate that harsh criticism of a government interferes with solidarity in defence of that nation’s sovereignty.

It’s hard to imagine someone working with enthusiasm and zeal in defence of a regime that they despise. Consider the difference between the Vietnam War movement in the US and elsewhere and opposition to the war in Afghanistan. Ho Chi Minh was a hero for the New Left that spearheaded the anti-war movement in the 60s. Is there a comparable movement in opposition to US intervention in Afghanistan? Certainly the Taliban does not inspire people to go out and protest, notwithstanding the absurdity of US involvement in that nation and the fact that it is by far the longest war in US history.

Steve Ellner taught economic history and political science at Venezuela’s Universidad de Oriente from 1977 to 2003. His latest article is “Implications of Marxist State Theories and How They Play Out in Venezuela,” published in Historical Materialism (2017). Another article, tentatively titled “Venezuela’s Chávez Experience: The Knotty Issues and the Lessons,” will appear in the October issue of Monthly Review.

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