

Venezuela “Propaganda Blitz” to Justify “Humanitarian Intervention”: “Tyrants Don’t Have Free Elections”

By [Media Lens](#)

Global Research, February 07, 2019

[Media Lens](#) 5 February 2019

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State](#)
& [Civil Rights](#)

In our [new book](#), we describe a ‘Propaganda Blitz’ as a fast-moving campaign to persuade the public of the need for ‘action’ or ‘intervention’ furthering elite interests. Affecting great moral outrage, corporate media line up to insist that a watershed moment has arrived – something must be done!

A classic propaganda blitz was triggered on January 23, when Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó declared himself ‘interim President’. This was presented as dramatic new evidence that the people of Venezuela had finally had enough of Nicolas Maduro’s ‘regime’.

In reporting this news the following day, the BBC website featured a disturbing [graphic](#) of a captive with arms tied behind his back being tortured. The caption read:

‘Inside Venezuela’s secret torture centre’

Perfectly on cue, the BBC’s regime change propagandists – veterans of earlier campaigns in Iraq, Libya and Syria – move into overdrive <https://t.co/kW6FOK3Xir> More of the same discussed here <https://t.co/0M4il1wGna> [pic.twitter.com/4VTjMKpNIR](https://t.co/0M4il1wGna)

— Media Lens (@medialens) [January 24, 2019](#)

The image [linked](#) to a complex interactive piece that allowed readers to explore the torture centre. There was also a long [report](#) on the same centre. The interactive report included this [statement](#) by a former prisoner, Rosmit Mantilla:

‘In a country like Venezuela there’s no difference between being in or out of prison. You are equally persecuted and mistreated, and you can die either way.’

Venezuela, then, is a giant gulag. The interactive piece had clearly taken a good deal of time and effort to produce – odd that it should appear on the same day that news of Guaidó’s coup attempt was reported. The BBC followed this up with a [piece](#) on January 25 openly promoting ‘regime’ change:

‘Venezuela’s Maduro “could get Amnesty”

‘Self-declared leader Guaidó also appeals to the powerful army, after receiving foreign backing.’

Another openly pro-regime change front page from the BBC.
[pic.twitter.com/ajQbORNjJm](https://www.bbc.com/pic.twitter.com/ajQbORNjJm)

— Media Lens (@medialens) [January 25, 2019](#)

In fact, Guaidó, also received foreign *rejection* from China, Russia, Turkey, Greece, Syria and Iran. On January 29, the BBC front page headline [read](#):

‘Venezuela, “living under dictatorship”

‘The opposition leader tells the BBC President Maduro has abused power, and renews calls for polls.’

Echoing the BBC’s ‘amnesty’ front page story, the Guardian’s Simon Tisdall, also [talked up](#) the merits of the coup:

‘It seems clear that Juan Guaidó, the opposition leader, has the backing of many if not most Venezuelans.’

A remarkable claim, given that George Ciccariello-Maher [reported](#) in The Nation that an opinion poll in Venezuela conducted between January 7-16 had [found](#) that 81 per cent of Venezuelans had never heard of Juan Guaidó. But then this is the same Simon Tisdall who [wrote](#) in 2011:

‘The risky western intervention had worked. And Libya was liberated at last.’

The Guardian may currently be Guaidó’s greatest UK cheerleader. After the opposition leader gave the paper an exclusive interview, former Guardian journalist Jonathan Cook [tweeted](#):

‘Extraordinary even by the Guardian’s standards. Juan Guaido, the CIA’s pick to lead a coup against Venezuela’s govt, gives the paper one of his first interviews – and it simply acts as a conduit for his propaganda. It doesn’t even pretend to be a watchdog’

On February 1, Cook [added](#):

‘Oh look! Juan Guaido, the figurehead for the CIA’s illegal regime-change operation intended to grab Venezuela’s oil (as John Bolton has publicly conceded), is again presented breathlessly by the Guardian as the country’s saviour’

The BBC continues to administer a daily dose of propaganda. On January 31, the big morning news [story](#) was:

‘Venezuela opposition “speaking to army”

‘Opposition leader Juan Guaidó says his team has held talks with the army about regime change’

This is the BBC in full Propaganda Blitz mode, keeping the 'regime' change narrative top of the news page.

Imagine what would happen to a US political leader who admitted this – life in jail, for sure, probably the death penalty <https://t.co/8JFOsYlat3>

— Media Lens (@medialens) [January 31, 2019](#)

As we noted, if a US version of Guaidó made that admission in public, he would soon be paid a visit by Navy Seals, perhaps shot on the spot and dumped at sea, or bundled away to a life on death row for probable later execution.

On February 4, the front page of the BBC website featured a heroic [picture](#) of Guaido’s mother kissing her son on the forehead at a protest rally. Sombre, stoic, the saviour’s head appears bowed by the weight of the hopes and expectations of his people (people who, until recently, had no idea who he was and had never voted for him). This was a pure propaganda image. More will certainly follow. We discussed earlier BBC efforts [here](#).

‘Tyranny’ As A Motive For Corporate Media Concern

The BBC, of course, is not alone in promoting the view that Venezuela is a ‘dictatorship’. The Times [offered](#) a typically compassionate ‘view on Venezuelan protests against Maduro’:

‘paradise lost – A ruthless dictator has driven his people to the brink’.

The reference to ‘paradise lost’ recalled a famously foolish [remark](#) on Venezuela made by BBC journalist John Sweeney in the Literary Review in 2013:

‘The country should be a Saudi Arabia by the sea; instead the oil money has been pissed away by foolish adventurism and unchecked corruption.’

Apart from any obvious issues of head-chopping tyranny, the fact is that Saudi Arabia *is* ‘by the sea’.

The Economist [focused](#) on:

‘How to hasten the demise of Venezuela’s dictatorship

‘Recognising an interim president instead of Nicolás Maduro is a start’.

The Mail on Sunday [wrote](#) of the 'despot of Venezuela'. In the Telegraph, Ross Clark [discussed](#) 'brutal dictatorships like Venezuela and Zimbabwe'. The editors of the Sun [appeared](#) to be holding a vigil for the suffering people of Venezuela:

'We hope too that Venezuelans finally topple Nicolas Maduro, the crooked hard-left tyrant Corbyn once congratulated, and rebuild their economy.'

The Sun's Westminster correspondent Kate Ferguson [reported](#) that John McDonnell, the shadow chancellor, was backing 'the hard-left Venezuelan despot Nicolas Maduro'. The Express [wrote](#) of 'the corrupt regime in Venezuela'.

Writing in The Australian, Walter Russell Mead observed that 'dictator Nicolas Maduro clings to power'. (Walter Russell Mead, 'Moscow savours latest Latin American crisis to destabilise region,' The Australian, 31 January 2019)

Under the title, 'Venezuelan spring,' Mary Anastasia O'Grady [wrote](#) in the Wall Street Journal:

'The latest Venezuelan effort to topple dictator Nicolas Maduro is a pivotal moment in Latin American history...'

The Guardian habitually [uses](#) the term 'regime' to signal the illegitimacy of the Maduro government.

An emotional Minister for Europe, Sir Alan Duncan – who once worked as a trader of oil and refined products, initially with Royal Dutch Shell, and who, in 1989, set up Harcourt Consultants, which advises on oil and gas matters – [told](#) Parliament:

'The UK and our partners cannot and will not stand by and allow the tyranny of Maduro's regime to continue. He has caused endless suffering and oppression to millions of his own people...'

'The people of Venezuela do not need the weasel words of a letter to The Guardian, from assorted Stalinists, Trotskyists, antisemites and, apparently, dead people, and also from members of Labour's Front Bench. What they need is our solidarity with the legitimate, elected, social democratic president of the National Assembly: interim President of Venezuela, Juan Guaidó.'

Writing in the Independent, Patrick Cockburn [commented](#) in September 2016:

'Sir Alan does have a long record of befriending the Gulf monarchies, informing a journalist in July that Saudi Arabia "is not a dictatorship".'

Sir Alan [tweeted](#):

'The dictatorial abuses of Nicolás Maduro in #Venezuela have led to the collapse of the rule of law and human misery and degradation.'

We [replied](#):

‘How much human misery and degradation did *you* cause by [voting](#) for war on oil-rich Iraq in 2003 and by supporting oil-rich Saudi tyrants attacking famine-stricken Yemen? Your compassion for the people of oil-rich Venezuela is completely and utterly fake.’

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also [tweeted](#):

‘We stand with the people of #Venezuela as they seek to build a better life. We cannot ignore the suffering or tyranny taking place in this proud nation. Neither should other countries who care about freedom and prosperity.’

Political analyst Charles Shoebridge [commented](#):

‘now speaking of “US standing with the people of #Venezuela against tyranny”, when just days ago he was also speaking of the US standing with US allied repressive tyrannies such as UAE Saudi Arabia Bahrain’

Glenn Greenwald made the same point, [adding](#):

‘I’d have more respect for the foreign policy decrees of US officials if they’d just admit what everyone knows – “we want to change this country’s government to make it better serve our interests” – rather than pretending they give the slightest shit about Freedom & Democracy.’

Writing on the Grayzone website, Dan Cohen and Max Blumenthal [describe](#) how:

‘Juan Guaidó is the product of a decade-long project overseen by Washington’s elite regime change trainers. While posing as a champion of democracy, he has spent years at the forefront of a violent campaign of destabilization.’

Almost entirely overlooked in ‘mainstream’ coverage, the New York Times [reported](#) last September:

‘The Trump administration held secret meetings with rebellious military officers from Venezuela over the last year to discuss their plans to overthrow President Nicolás Maduro, according to American officials and a former Venezuelan military commander who participated in the talks.’

Associated Press [reported](#) last week:

‘The coalition of Latin American governments that joined the U.S. in quickly recognizing Juan Guaidó as Venezuela’s interim president came together over weeks of secret diplomacy that included whispered messages to activists under constant surveillance and a high-risk foreign trip by the opposition leader challenging President Nicolas Maduro for power, those involved in the talks said.

'In mid-December, Guaido quietly traveled to Washington, Colombia and Brazil to brief officials on the opposition's strategy of mass demonstrations to coincide with Maduro's expected swearing-in for a second term on Jan. 10 in the face of widespread international condemnation, according to exiled former Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma, an ally.'

Labour MP, Chris Williamson, virtually a lone honest voice on this issue in the UK Parliament, [commented](#):

'Donald Trump, who received nearly 3m fewer votes than Hillary Clinton, throws his weight behind a guy [Guaidó] who didn't even stand in last year's Venezuelan presidential election and UK foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt, gives Trump his servile support'

Williamson was impressively rational in this [interview](#) with Going Underground. Sir Alan remains unimpressed, [commenting](#) shamefully of Williamson in Parliament:

'I'm astonished he's even been prepared to show his face in this House today.'

Lack Of Free Elections As A Motive For Corporate Media Concern

As we have seen, the corporate media's first great reason for opposing Maduro is that he is a ruthless 'dictator'. This label is credible only if he prevents free elections, which of course are intolerable to any self-respecting tyrant.

Again, corporate media are as one in their opinion. The Guardian's Latin America correspondent, Tom Phillips, [writes](#) that Maduro was 're-elected last May in a vote widely seen as fraudulent'. The 'impartiality' of Phillips' reporting on Venezuela is clear even from the [tweet](#) 'pinned' to his Twitter feed:

'It is 20 years since Hugo Chávez's election kicked off his ill-fated Bolivarian dream.'

A Guardian editorial [noted](#) that Maduro had won a 'dodgy presidential vote boycotted by the opposition'. The Economist went [further](#): 'The election he won in May was an up-and-down fraud.' Ross Clark in the [Telegraph](#):

'Opposition politicians have been jailed, while observers in last May's election reported inflated vote tallies.'

The Observer editors [opined](#) on January 27:

'Nicolás Maduro was re-elected Venezuela's president last May by fraudulent means, as regional governments and independent observers noted at the time, and his leadership lacks legitimate authority.'

Echoing its positions on earlier 'regime change' efforts that brought utter catastrophe to Iraq

and Libya, the Observer added:

'Given this grim record, Venezuela would be well rid of him and the sooner the better. If Maduro truly has the people's best interests at heart, he should recognise that he has become an obstacle to national renewal – and step aside.'

Venezuela needs 'national renewal', or 'modernisation' in Blairpeak. Like the Guardian, the Observer then insisted that reasonable options 'emphatically do not include US intervention in Venezuela'. Nobody should be fooled by this apparent anti-war sentiment. US media analyst Adam Johnson of FAIR [made](#) the point:

'I love this thing where nominal leftists run the propaganda ball for bombing a country 99 yards then stop at the one yard and insist they don't support scoring goals, that they in fact oppose war.'

A further prime example of propaganda ball-running was [supplied](#) by The Intercept's Mehdi Hasan:

'I'm no expert on Venezuela but I'm pretty sure you can think Maduro is a horrible/bad/authoritarian president *and* also think it's bad for the US to back coups or regime change there.'

Beyond the 'mainstream', credible voices have argued that last May's elections were free and fair. Human rights lawyer Daniel Kovalik of the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, writing for Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, [commented](#):

'I just returned from observing my fourth election in Venezuela in less than a year. Jimmy Carter has called Venezuela's electoral system "the best in the world," and what I witnessed was an inspiring process that guarantees one person, one vote, and includes multiple auditing procedures to ensure a free and fair election.

'I then came home to the United States to see the inevitable "news" coverage referring to Venezuela as a "dictatorship" and as a country in need of saving. This coverage not only ignores the reality of Venezuela, it ignores the fact that the U.S. is the greatest impediment to democracy in Venezuela, just as the U.S. has been an impediment to democracy throughout Latin America since the end of the 19th century.'

More than 150 members of the international electoral accompaniment mission for the elections [published](#) four independent reports. Their members 'include politicians, electoral experts, academics, journalists, social movement leaders and others'. The mission's General Report [concluded](#):

'We the international accompaniers consider that the technical and professional trustworthiness and independence of the National Electoral Council of Venezuela are uncontestable.'

The Council of Electoral Experts of Latin America, a grouping of electoral technicians from across the continent, many of whom have presided over electoral agencies, [commented](#):

‘The process was successfully carried out and that the will of the citizens, freely expressed in ballot boxes, was respected...the results communicated by the National Electoral Council reflect the will of the voters who decided to participate in the electoral process.’

The African [Report](#):

‘Our general evaluation is that this was a fair, free, and transparent expression of the human right to vote and participate in the electoral process by the Venezuelan people, and that the results announced on the night of May 20 are trustworthy due to the comprehensive guarantees, audits, the high tech nature of the electoral process, and due to the thirteen audits carried out previous to and on the day of elections which we witnessed.

‘We can also conclude that the Venezuelan people who chose to participate in the electoral process of May 20 were not subject to any external pressures.’

And also the Caribbean [Report](#):

‘The mission was satisfied that the elections were conducted efficiently in a fair and transparent manner. All of the registered voters who wanted to exercise their right to vote participated in a peaceful and accommodating environment. Based on the process observed, the mission is satisfied that the results of the elections reflect the will of the majority of the voters in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.’

If all of this has been ignored in the current debate, it is because corporate media in fact do not care about free elections in Venezuela.

Consider the elections held in Iraq on [January 30, 2005](#). On the BBC’s main evening news that month, reporter David Willis talked of ‘the first democratic election in fifty years’ (Willis, BBC News at Ten, January 10, 2005). A Guardian [leader](#) referred to ‘the country’s first free election in decades’. The Times, the Financial Times, the Telegraph, the Sunday Telegraph, the Observer, the Independent, the Express, the Mirror, the Sun and numerous other media repeated the same claim hailing Iraq’s great ‘democratic election’.

But this was all nonsense. Iraq was not just under illegal, superpower occupation; invading armies were waging full-scale war against the Iraqi resistance. Just weeks before the election, Fallujah, a city of 300,000 people, was virtually razed to the ground by US-UK forces. Six weeks before the election, the UN [reported](#) of the city that, ‘70 per cent of the houses and shops were destroyed and those still standing are riddled with bullets.’ A quarter of a million people had been displaced from this one city alone by the onslaught. One year later, The Lancet [reported](#) 655,000 excess Iraqi deaths as a result of the 2003 invasion.

There was obviously no question of a free election under these lawless, extremely violent conditions. The corporate press was not the least bit interested or concerned. Indeed, our [search](#) of the LexisNexis media database at the time of the elections showed that there had not been *a single substantive analysis of the extent of press freedom in Iraq under*

occupation anywhere in the UK press over the previous six months. And yet the media were all but unanimous in describing the elections as free and fair.

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