Venezuela’s Agony

Civil war is now a real possibility.

News from Venezuela is coming fast and furiously. On July 30, the country held a highly controversial election to appoint a new Constituent Assembly, which will rewrite the Constitution and rule Venezuela for up to two years. The vote unfolded amid the worst violence that Venezuela has seen in the four-month-old conflict that broke out in April. At least 10 people, including a candidate for the Assembly, were killed. Opposition protesters attacked 200 voting centers, according to the government. And eight National Police officers suffered serious burns from a roadside bomb set off in the wealthy pro-opposition Caracas neighborhood of Altamira.

Since the vote occurred, Venezuela has been mired in controversy, particularly over the number of people who voted. (This figure is important because it is seen as a measure of the government’s level of popular support.) The government claims that over 8 million people voted. This number has been widely rejected as fraudulent not only by the opposition (which has a long history of falsely alleging electoral fraud), but also by Smartmatic, the company that supplied voting machines for the election; the sole opposition rector on Venezuela’s National Electoral Council (CNE); and a number of prominent dissident Chavista officials, most notably former attorney general Luisa Ortega and Andrés Izarra, communications minister under both Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro.

If electoral fraud has occurred, it would be a severe blow to the government’s legitimacy, as well as a major departure from the past, when, in Jimmy Carter’s words, Venezuela’s election process was “the best in the world.” It is difficult to dismiss the current claims of electoral fraud out of hand, for five reasons. First, the CNE did not follow the procedures typically used to guarantee the vote’s accuracy: Voters’ fingers were not marked with indelible ink; the vote was not audited in the normal manner (partly due to the opposition boycott of the election); and the CNE has yet to release the full results (e.g., the number of valid and null votes), something that is normally done within hours of an election’s end. Second, it is not just the “usual suspects” (the opposition and the US government) claiming fraud this time. Third, Smartmatic has supplied Venezuela’s voting machines since 2004, but this is the first time that it has stated the election results were altered. According to Smartmatic’s CEO, the government’s announced vote total was off by at least 1 million. Fourth, this is the first time that a CNE rector has invalidated an election result outright. Finally, the continuing deterioration of Venezuela’s economy makes it hard to believe that support for the government has increased by 2.5 million since December 2015, when 5.6 million people voted for the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in legislative elections. For their part, government supporters claim that not everyone who voted was Chavista: Some people allegedly voted not to support the government but rather to end the violence wracking the country. This claim is not implausible, but it does not address the first four points raised above.

The decision to push ahead with the Constituent Assembly has led to Venezuela’s growing international isolation. As of August 4, the day the Assembly was sworn in, 44 countries had condemned or refused to recognize it, while only six (Russia, Iran, and four left governments in Latin America) had expressed support. Even the Vatican, which has supported Venezuela’s government in the past, has called for the Constituent Assembly to be disbanded. On August 5, Venezuela was suspended from Mercosur, a regional trade bloc. Washington has repeatedly condemned the Constituent Assembly and has imposed sanctions on 14 top officials, including Maduro, in the past two weeks. The United States has threatened sanctions on Venezuelan oil, which would be devastating for ordinary citizens. Venezuela’s isolation is not only diplomatic but also physical, with half a dozen major airlines suspending flights in recent months due to security concerns.

The government’s actions in the week after the vote have been inconsistent. There are signs that repression and intolerance toward dissent are growing. One of the first acts of the newly installed Constituent Assembly was to suspend Attorney General Luisa Ortega, who has been outspoken in her criticism of the government in recent months. On August 1, state security forces transferred two prominent opposition leaders, Leopoldo López and Antonio Ledezma, from house arrest to prison. Days later, both were returned to house arrest, raising questions about the balance of “moderates” versus “hard-liners” within the government.

How should members of the international community, particularly those on the left who have supported Chavismo for many years, make sense of recent developments? Does Venezuela deserve the full-throated condemnation it has received from foreign leaders and the mainstream media? Is the government, whatever its faults, a more reliable protector of the interests of the people than the opposition? Should the global left refrain from criticizing the government, at least publicly, out of concern that such criticism may strengthen the hand of malignant domestic and foreign forces opposing Maduro? Is it true that Venezuela “faces a choice between deepening revolution and an elite-enforced rollback,” as George Ciccariello-Maher argues in a recent Jacobin article?

Some of these questions have straightforward answers, while others are far more challenging. (As an aside, this is why the left should engage in open, honest, and civil debate regarding Venezuela, rather than the circular-firing-squad style of argument that has, unfortunately, often prevailed recently.)

While the government deserves criticism for its recent actions, the international frenzy concerning Venezuela is unwarranted and reeks of hypocrisy. Western media, foreign governments, multilateral institutions, and the human-rights establishment employ a double standard (continued on page 8)
Bordering Crisis

In late July, the government of Colombia announced that it would grant special visa extensions to over 150,000 Venezuelans for up to two years. The move represents a “vote of confidence” in the Venezuelan citizens, said Christian Kruger, the head of Colombia’s migration office. But while Colombia is offering a helping hand to migrants, it remains locked in a bitter diplomatic standoff with the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Relations between the two nations have been strained for years. In 2015, Maduro abruptly closed their shared border and deported more than 1,000 Colombians. Since then, Maduro has repeatedly opened and closed the border in an effort to stymie the smuggling of subsidized goods into Colombia. In March, tensions escalated after Venezuelan troops were found operating on Colombian soil. Several days later, Colombia recalled its ambassador to Venezuela, and, most recently, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos accused Maduro of “installing a dictatorship [and] ending democracy.”

It is easy (though very much necessary) to criticize the hypocrisy of Western politicians and media vis-à-vis Venezuela. The same is true concerning opposition leaders who claim to favor democracy but have worked for nearly two decades to overthrow the elected government, and who bemoan the economic crisis and the suffering of the masses but have no concrete plans to revive the economy or ease that suffering. It is also easy to find fault with the Venezuelan government, not only for the highly questionable political actions discussed earlier, but also for its failure to resolve the economic crisis. It is much harder to say whether or not the international left should support the government, particularly in the passive sense of refraining from public criticism.

The agony of the crisis consists of this: Millions of Venezuelans are suffering profoundly. They cannot feed themselves properly or obtain the medicine they need. They have very limited access to basic goods like shampoo, diapers, and toothpaste. This makes daily life a struggle. The primary reason for this situation is the government’s inability or unwillingness to take the necessary steps (in particular, desperately needed currency reform) to ease the crisis. There is little reason to think that the Constituent Assembly will do anything useful, since it is led by the same people who have presided over Venezuela while the crisis has deepened. Most people inside and outside the country, including many Chavistas, seem to agree that the PSUV’s top leadership is rotten. The idea that this group will “deepen” the Bolivarian Revolution seems highly improbable. And yet it is far from clear that Venezuela’s popular sectors would fare any better under an opposition-led government, which would be likely to privatize state-owned resources, deepen the current de facto austerity regime (arising from government policies that make the poor bear the brunt of the crisis), and quite possibly engage in vindictive action against Chavistas, real and alleged. This is why millions continue to support the government, despite significant misgivings.

The country’s popular sectors are likely to suffer for years to come, whether the PSUV or the opposition is in charge. It is worth asking what series of actions (and inactions) led to this unenviable point. Are there decisions that could have led to a better outcome? If so, why were they not taken? It is also worth asking what Venezuelans will think about Chavismo in 10, 20, or 30 years. (At the moment, it is hard to imagine a positive answer.) These are important questions, but the most pressing one now is this: Of the various plausible scenarios that may unfold in Venezuela over the next few years, which would be most favorable—or, more accurately, least disastrous—for the country’s increasingly desperate majority?

Neither of the two scenarios already mentioned—a continuation of the status quo, or an opposition-led government—is particularly attractive. There is, however, an even worse alternative: civil war, which would only deepen the suffering and likely set Venezuela’s left back for decades. The following factors suggest that civil war is a real possibility: the opposition’s thirst for power and its willingness to engage in violence; the narrowing of space for institutional contestation; the government’s isolation; and a failed August 6 military uprising, which suggests that sectors of the armed forces may be willing to turn against the government.

The international left should do everything in its power to prevent civil war. This means supporting a negotiated solution to the conflict. To be effective, such a solution must offer something to both sides: a credible electoral calendar that provides the opposition with a peaceful path to office, lessening the chance of a military coup (and forcing the opposition to articulate concrete solutions to the crisis); and guarantees for those on the losing side of elections, decreasing the incentive for the government to avoid them at all costs. “Negotiated solution” is hardly a stirring rallying cry. Neither of the two scenarios already mentioned—a continuation of the status quo, or an opposition-led government—is particularly attractive. There is, however, an even worse alternative: civil war, which would only deepen the suffering and likely set Venezuela’s left back for decades. The following factors suggest that civil war is a real possibility: the opposition’s thirst for power and its willingness to engage in violence; the narrowing of space for institutional contestation; the government’s isolation; and a failed August 6 military uprising, which suggests that sectors of the armed forces may be willing to turn against the government.

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