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Debate

Which Way Out of the Venezuelan Crisis?

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As Venezuelans go to the polls this Sunday, the country faces a choice between deepening revolution and an elite-enforced rollback.

When revolutions stagnate, confusion reigns, and both are palpably true of Venezuela today. Amid a deep economic, political, and now institutional crisis, many on the ground in Venezuela and even more observing from abroad don't know what to think or to do. But rather than abandon the Bolivarian Process by echoing mainstream denunciations of the government of [Nicolás Maduro](#) as undemocratic, repressive, and even authoritarian, it is precisely in this most difficult of moments that revolutionaries must think clearly and carry the fight forward.

An Institutional Crisis

The causes of the crisis are many and their explanations well-worn. The 2013 death of Hugo Chávez left a symbolic crater at the heart of the Bolivarian Revolution, and coincided with a collapse in global oil prices that severely limited the maneuvering space of a Maduro government already faltering out of the gate. Seizing upon this weakness, conservative elites at the head of the US-backed opposition went on the offensive in the streets in [April 2013 protests](#) that left eleven dead and set into motion a strategy of tension that continues four years later.

Rather than acting decisively from the outset, the beleaguered Maduro government opted for a pragmatic approach. A failing system of currency controls governing the distribution of oil income was never fully dismantled. The result was a destructive feedback loop of black-market currency speculation, the hoarding and smuggling of gasoline and food, and an explosion of already rampant corruption at the intersection of the private and public sectors. Confronted with street protests and food shortages, Maduro responded erratically, supporting grassroots production by communes while simultaneously courting private corporations in a bid to keep food on the shelves.

The whirlwind that has ensued is not the one we had hoped for. As is often the case, the pragmatic path promised to be safest when it was in fact the most treacherous, and Maduro's hesitance backfired spectacularly when the opposition won a decisive victory in the [December 2015 National Assembly elections](#). What has followed is a full-blown institutional crisis in which the [opposition has sought to stoke crisis](#), destabilize the government, and to make the country ungovernable.

Having seized one branch of government, opposition forces immediately demanded all three, constantly violating Supreme Court rulings and brazenly attempting to topple the executive. They continue to encourage violent protests in the streets that have left more than one hundred dead — where the cause is known, most have been killed directly or indirectly by the protestors themselves. This is not the picture of government repression painted by the international media, and in a country where 55 percent of Venezuelans continue to approve of Chávez and nearly half are opposed to the opposition's violent tactics, those seeking to overthrow Maduro do not enjoy any great popular legitimacy.

The international media has played its role, framing the question as simply a matter of time: when will the democratically elected and legitimate president step down? Never mind that, even amid the crisis, Maduro is still more popular than Mexico's Enrique Peña Nieto, Colombia's Juan Manuel Santos, and the unelected and illegitimate Brazilian coup-president Michel Temer. These important details disappear in the fog of a relentless media onslaught, backed by both the CIA and the Trump administration.

Which Way Out?

It's difficult to find a path forward. There is talk of dialogue — the liberal panacea of panaceas — but it remains unclear with whom the dialogue should take place, or what kind of solutions it might bring. While arguably necessary to stop the violence, absent concrete solutions to the underlying contradictions of the petro-state, such dialogue would merely ease the political crisis at the expense of resolving the economic crisis. The situation that prevails is not the result of too much socialism, [but too little](#), and any path that attempts to split the difference between socialism and capitalism will endure the worst of both worlds.

In the context of this acute institutional crisis, Venezuelans go to the polls this Sunday to elect a Constituent Assembly empowered to revise the nation's Constitution for the second time since the emergence of Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution. In the elections, Venezuelans will elect not only 364 regional representatives, but also 8 indigenous representatives and 173 additional sectoral representatives, including workers, farmers, disabled people, students, retirees, and representatives of businesses, communes, and communal councils.

This process is far from perfect and faces many obstacles, including an unresolved legal debate fostered by an apparent contradiction over who can convene a constituent assembly: is it “the people” (Article 347) or the president among others (Article 348)? Claiming that Maduro has violated the former but refusing to cite the latter, the opposition is threatening to boycott Sunday's election and even physically obstruct polling places. After previously courting the idea of calling a constituent assembly to undermine Chavismo, opposition leaders now recoil at the idea of an assembly that might deepen the Bolivarian process rather than rolling it back.

The opposition has suffered the disastrous consequences of electoral abstention in the past: after boycotting the 2005 Assembly elections, they were left without a voice in the legislature. But 2017 is not 2005, and the ebullience of early Chavismo has given way to a deep and sustained crisis that has its opponents looking for an endgame to bury its gains once and for all. Months of street blockades and looting have developed into bombings and infrastructural attacks on public transport, hospitals, state television and, recently, state milk production facilities. The opposition has threatened to name a new government-in-resistance, and promises heightened clashes this weekend, including a possible march on the presidential palace much like the one that provoked the 2002 coup against Chávez.

Being Dishonest About Venezuela

In such difficult circumstances, what is a revolutionary to do? The Constituent Assembly is not perfect, but we are not in the terrain of perfect solutions. Blind support is not useful, but nor is the opposite path, what we might call — borrowing a phrase from Lenin — an “uncritical criticism” that refuses to get to the heart of things and grasp revolutionary change as a dynamic process. Nothing is harder than making a revolution, and little is easier than prematurely forecasting failure.

In a recent article, Mike Gonzalez pronounced the Bolivarian Revolution dead: “This project has failed.” Needless to say, this cavalier suggestion would come as a surprise to those on the ground still fighting for revolutionary change, precisely because they have no other option. For an article entitled “Being Honest About Venezuela,” Gonzalez begins with a strange conspiracy theory: that a helicopter attack against government targets was really a false flag operation carried out by the government itself. Unfortunately for him, this unsubstantiated innuendo — which echoed right-wing talking points — didn't age well: less than a week later, [Oscar Pérez](#) made an appearance at an opposition rally.

Gonzalez's goal is to reveal Maduro's “betrayal” of the Revolution, but this betrayal takes the form of a catch-22: the

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government is ineffective, but if it attempts to act, it is authoritarian; when it defends itself in a far less heavy-handed fashion than most governments would, it is repressive; it is fiscally irresponsible, but criticized for turning out of desperation to extractive projects like the Arco Minero; if it fails to fill the shelves, it is useless, but collaborating with private companies to do so is high treason; and when an admittedly problematic socialist party (the [PSUV](#)) acts in a partisan way — this being, after all, what revolutionary parties are meant to do — it becomes an “instrument of political repression.”

Amid hyperbolic denunciations of the “systematic undermining of democracy, the demonization of dissent,” Gonzalez dismisses the Constituent Assembly in a paranoid fashion: “There will be no debate, no transparency,” he tells us, with no need to explain. And for a revolutionary socialist, the author seems to hold liberal democracy in high esteem, misleadingly decrying Chavismo’s “packed institutions” and deeming the government “increasingly antidemocratic” without specifying by what measure. Gonzalez claims that the government is “prevent[ing] the constitutionally protected right to protest” — this would come as a surprise to those whose neighborhoods have seen nothing but protest for months on end.

With little more than a nod to imperialism, global capital, or the brutality of the Venezuelan opposition, Gonzalez heaps blame on Maduro’s shoulders. Corruption thus appears as state policy with no mention of the private “briefcase companies” that simply took billions in government funds before disappearing into thin air. Empty shelves are left to speak the truth of a failed political project, with no mention of capitalist sabotage of production. And Gonzalez points cryptically to the murder of indigenous cacique Sabino Romero, while failing to mention that he was killed by wealthy landowners. The “gains of Chavismo” are indeed slipping away, but this does not absolve us from the task of explaining why.

Ultimately, for Gonzalez, Chavista elites and the bourgeoisie who have “happily colluded” with them are one and the same. But this leaves him unable to answer the most basic question of all: if they are the same, then why are they fighting a bloody battle in the streets? The answer is that, however imperfectly, the Maduro government still stands for the possibility of something radically different, as the many grassroots revolutionaries that continue to support the process can attest.

By portraying a chaotic constellation of facts without explaining their causes, by heaping blame onto the government while letting the opposition and imperialism off the hook, Gonzalez’s account shares much with its professed adversaries. Like the mainstream media, he doesn’t tell us who is responsible for the deaths in the streets, and like the mainstream media, he offers decontextualized tragedies as proof of the government’s failure. But most of all, like the mainstream media, he erases the very same revolutionaries that he claims to speak for: left almost entirely out of this picture are the hundreds of thousands [struggling for socialism on the grassroots level](#) and having to make difficult decisions — with real consequences — amid the crisis of the present.

“We should support those in struggle in rebuilding the basis for a genuinely democratic society,” Gonzalez writes. In order to do that, he might heed José Miguel Gómez, a revolutionary organizer from the PÃ-o Tamayo Commune in Barquisimeto who has long been struggling for communal power:

The government is not the Bolivarian project, which goes far beyond the presidency — this is why they haven’t been able to defeat it and why it is still in the streets today. We need to continue to resist and to build a truly revolutionary option that can transform the very structure of the state. The Constituent Assembly is a step toward this, but we also need to cleanse the government and the institutions, where there is too much corruption and bureaucracy. We have to wrest power away from the military. There are too many financial mafias — we need to eliminate the currency controls and nationalize banking and foreign exchange. The Right will never be an option. We must be critical toward the government and build a true alternative capable of governing.

Here, Gómez expresses many of the same critiques voiced by Chavismo's critics, but he tethers them to a revolutionary vision of social change and an understanding of what would happen if the opposition were to seize power.

The Right Waits in the Wings

We should be clear about the stakes of the coming weeks and months: victory for the Right means austerity at best, and civil war at worst. We know this because we know exactly who they are: the opposition leadership is drawn from the most reactionary sectors of the old elites, and the masked youth in the streets — as I show in *Building the Commune* — are the fruit of a dangerous alliance with the forces of Latin American fascism under the leadership of Colombian death squad guru [Álvaro Uribe](#). Their return, which promises to reestablish the smooth functioning of capitalism, would only do so — as Marx insists that it always has — through the most brutally repressive means.

Of course, the opposition's undemocratic aspirations come draped in the language of democracy. A recent opposition "consultation," carried out entirely informally and without official support from the electoral council, spoke of defending the 1999 Constitution. Meanwhile, it tacitly asked the Armed Forces to take a side in the conflict by "supporting the decisions of the National Assembly" (one branch of government), and called for "the establishment of a government of national unity" through early elections — in clear violation of constitutional norms.

Despite opposition claims about government repression, few can forget the bloody retribution exacted by the opposition during the brief 2002 coup, in which Chavista leaders were hunted and beaten, and sixty were killed in less than two days. The fact that several people have been lynched, burned to death, and even killed with homemade mortars in recent months for looking too much like Chavistas (i.e., too dark-skinned and poor) is only a taste of what is to come if the opposition destabilization campaign succeeds.

Building a True Alternative

There is no coherent understanding of revolution that doesn't involve defeating our enemies as we build the new society. Corruption, bureaucracy, and the complacency of new elites are all plagues to be fought and defeated — but merely criticizing these does not make a revolution. We cannot defeat such dangers without weapons, the most important of which are the [weight of the masses in the streets](#), popular grassroots struggles for self-determination, and control of territory and production. While the Bolivarian government — from Chávez to Maduro — has helped to sharpen those weapons, it has also relied on them for its own survival.

Revolutions are made by the masses in motion, gripped by revolutionary ideas. No single individual was more effective at helping to set the Venezuelan masses into motion than Hugo Chávez. And yet that motion collides inevitably with obstacles in its path to be struggled with and overcome, from economic realities to the ferocious enemies of change. In that process, and even without it, a certain slow exhaustion is inevitable. This goes by the name *desgaste* in Venezuela today — a wearing-down of revolutionary fervor, especially when times are tough.

For the Trinidadian revolutionary [C.L.R. James](#), there existed an undeniable gap between the Jacobin leadership of the French Revolution and the grassroots fury of the sansculottes. The former, like Robespierre, were authoritarians; the latter, radical democrats. But they coincided momentarily and strategically toward the goal of defeating a brutal enemy on the field of battle: "Never until 1917 were masses ever to have such powerful influence — for it was no more than influence — upon any government."

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No one would claim that the Venezuelan masses are in power today, but the past twenty years have seen them come closer than ever before. Their enemies and ours are in the streets, burning and looting in the name of their own class superiority, and we know exactly what they will do if they are successful. The only path forward is to deepen and radicalize the Bolivarian process through the expansion of the radically democratic socialism embodied in Venezuela's grassroots communes, which help to overcome the economic contradictions of the petro-state while expanding participatory political consciousness.

The only way out of the Venezuelan crisis today lies decisively to the Left: not in the neither-nor of "que se vayan todos" ("out with them all"), but in the construction of a real socialist alternative that will emerge alongside the Maduro government if possible, but without it if necessary.

PS:

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