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The Class Conflict in Venezuela

A Classic Struggle of Left v. Right

by MARK WEISBROT

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The current protests in Venezuela are reminiscent of another historical moment when street protests were used by right-wing politicians as a tactic to overthrow the elected government. It was December of 2002, and I was struck by the images on U.S. television of what was reported as a “general strike,” with shops closed and streets empty. So I went there to see for myself, and it was one of the most Orwellian experiences of my life.

Only in the richer neighborhoods, in eastern Caracas, was there evidence of a strike, by business owners (not workers). In the western and poorer parts of the city, everything was normal and people were doing their Christmas shopping – images unseen in the U.S. media. I wrote an article about it for the *Washington Post*, and received hundreds of emails from right-wing Venezuelans horrified that the *Post* had printed a factual and analytical account that breathed air outside of their bubble. They didn’t have to worry about it happening again.

The spread of cell-phone videos and social media in the past decade has made it more difficult to misrepresent things that can be easily captured on camera. But Venezuela is still grossly distorted in the major media. The *New York Times* had to run a correction last week for an article that began with a statement about “The only television station that regularly broadcast voices

critical of the government ...” As it turns out, all of the private TV stations “regularly broadcast voices critical of the government.” And private media has more than 90 percent of the TV-viewing audience in Venezuela. A study by the Carter Center of the presidential election campaign period last April showed a 57 to 34 percent advantage in TV coverage for President Maduro over challenger Henrique Capriles in the April election, but that advantage is greatly reduced or eliminated when audience shares are taken into account. Although there are abuses of power and problems with the rule of law in Venezuela – as there are throughout the hemisphere– it is far from the authoritarian state that most consumers of western media are led to believe. Opposition leaders currently aim to topple the democratically elected government – their stated goal – by portraying it as a repressive dictatorship that is cracking down on peaceful protest. This is a standard “regime change” strategy, which often includes violent demonstrations in order to provoke state violence.

The latest official numbers have eight confirmed deaths of opposition protesters, but no evidence that these were a result of efforts by the government to crush dissent. At least two pro-government people have also been killed, and two people on motorcycles were killed (one beheaded) by wires allegedly set up by protesters. Eleven of the 55 people currently detained for alleged crimes during protests are security officers.

Of course violence from either side is deplorable, and detained protesters – including their leader, Leopoldo López – should be released on bail unless there is legal and justifiable cause for pre-trial detention. But it is difficult to argue from the evidence that the government is trying to suppress peaceful protests.

From 1999-2003, the Venezuelan opposition had a strategy of “military takeover,” according to Teodoro Petkoff (PDF), a leading opposition journalist who edits the daily Tal Cual. This included the military coup of April 2002 and the oil and business owners strike from December 2002 – February 2003, which crippled the economy. Although the opposition eventually opted for an electoral route to power, it was not the kind of process that one sees in most democracies, where opposition parties accept the legitimacy of the elected government and seek to co-operate on at least some common goals.

One of the most important forces that has encouraged this extreme polarization has been the U.S. government. It is true that other left governments that have implemented progressive economic changes have also been politically polarized: Bolivia, Ecuador, and Argentina for example. And there have been violent right-wing destabilization efforts in Bolivia and Ecuador. But Washington has been more committed to “regime change” in Venezuela than anywhere else in South America – not surprisingly, given that it is sitting on the largest oil reserves in the world. And that has always given opposition politicians a strong incentive to not work within the democratic system.

Venezuela is not Ukraine, where opposition leaders could be seen publicly collaborating with U.S. officials in their efforts to topple the government, and pay no obvious price for it. Of course U.S. support has helped Venezuela’s opposition with funding: one can find about \$90 million in U.S. funding to Venezuela since 2000, just looking through U.S. government documents available on the web, including \$5 million in the current federal budget (PDF).

Pressure for opposition unity and tactical and strategic advice also helps: Washington has decades of experience overthrowing governments, and this is a specialized knowledge that you can't learn in graduate school. Even more important is its enormous influence on international media and therefore public opinion.

When John Kerry reversed his position in April and recognized the Venezuelan election results, that spelled the end of the opposition's campaign for non-recognition. But the opposition leadership's closeness to the U.S. government is also a liability in a country that was the first to lead South America's "second independence" that began with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998. In a country like Ukraine, political leaders could always point to Russia (and more so now) as a threat to national independence; attempts by Venezuelan opposition leaders to portray Cuba as a threat to Venezuelan sovereignty are laughable. It is only the United States that threatens Venezuela's independence, as Washington fights to regain control over a region that it has lost.

Eleven years since the oil strike, the political lines that divide Venezuela have not changed all that much. There is the obvious class divide, and there is still a noticeable difference in skin color between opposition (whiter) and pro-government crowds – not surprising in a country and region where income and race are often highly correlated.

In the leadership, one side is part of a regional anti-imperialist alliance; the other has Washington as an ally. And yes, there is a big difference between the two leaderships in their respect for hard-won electoral democracy, as the current struggle illustrates. For Latin America, it is a classic divide between left and right.

Opposition leader Henrique Capriles tried to bridge this divide with a makeover, morphing from his prior right-wing incarnation into "Venezuela's Lula" in his presidential campaigns, praising Chávez's social programs and promising to expand them. But he has gone back and forth on respect for elections and democracy, and – outflanked by the extreme right (Leopoldo López and María Corina Machado), last week refused offers of dialogue by the president. At the end of the day, they are all far too rich, elitist, and right wing (think of Mitt Romney and his contempt for the 47 percent) for a country that has repeatedly voted for candidates running on a platform of socialism.

Back in 2003, because it did not control the oil industry, the government had not yet delivered much on its promises. A decade later, poverty and unemployment have been reduced by more than half, extreme poverty by more than 70%, and millions have pensions that they did not have before. Most Venezuelans are not about to throw all this away because they have had a year and a half of high inflation and increasing shortages. In 2012, according to the World Bank, poverty fell by 20 percent– the largest decline in the Americas. The recent problems have not gone on long enough for most people to give up on a government that has raised their living standards more than any other government in decades.