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Venezuela in Crisis: Too Much US intervention, Too Little Socialism

By W. T. Whitney
July 14, 2016

Lisa Sullivan was worried: her neighbor was “up and waiting in line since 2 am, searching, unsuccessfully, to buy food for her large family.” The U. S. native living in Venezuela for decades is concerned too about Venezuela’s worsening economic and political crisis.

Most Venezuelans have experienced major social gains courtesy of the Bolivarian Revolution, which according to its leader Hugo Chávez, president from 1999 until 2013, was a socialist revolution. Oil exports fueled these gains and currently low oil prices are shaking the foundations of Venezuela’s social democracy.

Now as before U. S. intervention is on full display. The U. S. Senate in April passed a bill renewing economic sanctions against Venezuelan leaders originally imposed in 2014. The House of Representatives followed suit on July 6. President Obama will be signing the bill. In an executive order he declared Venezuela to be a threat to U. S. national security.

The State Department on July 7 alerted U.S. travelers to “violent crime” in Venezuela and warned that “political rallies and demonstrations can occur with little notice.” Venezuela’s government denounced the “illegitimate sanctions” as “imperial pretensions.”

The U.S. government backed an unsuccessful coup against the Chávez government in 2002 and since has distributed tens of millions of dollars to opposition groups. After three years, it still

withholds recognition of Nicolas Maduro as Venezuela's president. These actions speak of a U. S. goal of regime change.

A document attributed to Admiral Kurt Tidd of the U.S. Southern Command and circulated in early 2016 testifies to a military component of U. S. plans. Citing the “the defeat in the [parliamentary] elections and internal decomposition of the populist regime,” the text refers to “the successful impact of our policies [against Venezuela] launched under phase one of this operation.”

A divided rightwing opposition did score a decisive electoral victory in December 2015 as it gained a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. Maduro's election by a narrow margin in 2013 advertised his vulnerability. He will likely be facing a recall vote in the coming months.

Solidly opposed to the Bolivarian government, Venezuela's business class holds court over the economy, which has been devastated through inflation that mounted over three years and is now at astronomical levels. Shortages of essential items are causing major distress.

Businesses and merchants depend on imported goods and materials. After 15 years of the Bolivarian revolution, Venezuela still has to import 70 percent of its food. The government facilitates imports by selling dollars to importers at low exchange rates. Many of them profit by selling imported products at inflated prices through the black-market.

Meanwhile goods people need for survival don't arrive at stores serving poor people, especially markets selling government – subsidized food and household supplies. Importers and wholesalers are accused of hoarding for the sake of profitable sales later on.

Nevertheless, the “majority of Venezuelans” support neither the opposition nor the Maduro government, according to Lisa Sullivan. But, she says, “This doesn't mean that [they] are not fans of *chavismo*.” She has seen “a whole generation of my neighbors and friends gain access to dignified housing, free education, stable jobs with honorable wages, and free health care.”

Analysts attribute the government's defeat in the 2015 parliamentary elections to Bolivarian voters withholding their votes, not to their having backed the opposition. They objected to governmental corruption, divisions within Maduro's United Socialist Party of Venezuela, and disregard by officials of problems at the grassroots.

Journalist Tamara Pearson suggests that despite “food shortages, inflation, and queues ... millions of people” have “defied right-wing and general expectations, and even perhaps the expectations of the Maduro government, and have become stronger and better organized.”

Whether or not Venezuela's military remains loyal to the socialist government will help determine its fate. President Chávez, a former army officer, counted on allegiance from the military. As reported by analyst Milton D'León, Chávez instituted “a dizzying increase in arms spending, the creation of military schools and universities, greater presence in political decisions, higher salaries for officials, and privileges of all kinds.”

Maduro's 30-member cabinet includes 10 active or retired military leaders. His government has created a "socialist military economic zone" that hosts businesses whose activities contribute to the military's economic development. *D'León* warns of danger for "working people [from] the growing role of the military ... whether it is supporting Maduro, or spilling over to support a 'transition' by striking a deal with the right-wing [and] imperialism."

Marxist analyst Edgar Meléndez sees a constricted future for the Bolivarian government mainly because its socialist project stagnated. He points out that the socialist state accounts for 96.6 U.S. dollars out of every \$100 gained through exports. Yet these resources eventually "drain" to the private sector. Thus "private accumulation is prioritized over resources the state produces. This is opposite to the interests of working people."

He condemns "mono-production of petroleum accounting for 94 percent of Venezuela's 2014 exports." That and "a parasitic bourgeoisie" are "two of the most noxious characteristics of the Venezuelan economic model ... This situation, within the framework of capitalism itself, is a brake on the development of productive forces in our country."

Lisa Sullivan is a witness to one striking failure of Venezuela's version of socialism. Her neighbors are now growing food, she reports. That would be in response to the nation's over-reliance on imported foods, never remedied by Bolivarian leaders. In terms of socialist development, food sovereignty typifies wealth produced for all through work. The government apparently lacked the vision or capacity to move beyond the short-term, capitalist way of doing things. It remains stuck in generating wealth almost exclusively through the extraction of oil.