

The Left and Venezuela

By Claudio Katz¹
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During the last two months Venezuela has been faced with a terrible wave of violence. It has already resulted in more than 60 deaths along with looted schools, burned public buildings, destroyed public transportation and emptied hospitals. The major media, however, simply engage in a running stream of gruesome denunciations of the government. They have installed the image of a dictator in conflict with the opposition democrats.

But the statistics do not corroborate that narrative, especially when it comes to those who have fallen. When the number had risen to 39, an initial report pointed to only four who were victims of the security forces. The remainder had died in looting or shoot-outs within the opposition mobilizations.² Another assessment noted that 60 percent of those killed had absolutely nothing to do with the clashes.³

These characterizations are consistent with the estimates that attribute most of the murders to snipers linked with the opposition. More recent inquiries report that most of the victims lost their lives through vandalism or settlements of accounts.⁴

There are numerous denunciations as well of incursions by paramilitary groups linked to the Right. And there are indications that much of the violence enjoys local protection from municipalities governed by the opposition.⁵

Those death tolls are consistent with the fascist brutality that led to setting afire persons associated with Chavismo.⁶ Burning alive a partisan of the government is a practice more closely linked to the Colombian paramilitaries or the criminal underworld than it is to the traditional political organizations. Some analysts even estimate that out of a total of 60 deaths 27 were of sympathizers of Chavismo.⁷

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² Marco Teruggi, Radiografía de la violencia en Venezuela, 14-5- 2017.

<http://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/columnistas/1/radiografia-de-la-violencia-en-venezuela>.

³ Pablo Siris Seade, Las nuevas víctimas de las guarimbas en Venezuela, 20-05-2017, <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=226887>.

⁴ Cieza, Guillermo. La derrota política de la derecha venezolana, 7-6- 2017, www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2017/06/07/la-derrota-politica-de-la-derecha-venezolana/.

⁵ Boron, Atilio. Venezuela sumida en la guerra civil, 26-5-2017, www.jornada.unam.mx/2017/05/26/opinion/018a1pol.

Boron, Atilio. La "oposición democrática" en Venezuela: peor que el fascismo 25-4-2017, http://www.cubadebate.cu/opinion/2017/04/25/la-oposicion-democratica-en-venezuela-peor-que-el-fascismo/#.WTx8T2g1_IU.

⁶ 6Aznárez, Carlos. La cuestión es impedir que el fascismo se adueñe de Venezuela, 22-5-2017, <http://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2017/05/22/la-cuestion-es-impedir-que-el-fascismo-se-adueno-de-venezuela-por-carlos-aznarez/>.

⁷ Pineda, Manu, La mentira como herramienta de guerra en Venezuela, 29/05/2017. http://www.eldiario.es/contrapoder/mentira-herramienta-guerra-Venezuela_6_648195186.html.

Others say that within the opposition marches there are some 15,000 persons trained as shock groups. They are using balaclavas, shields and home-made weapons to create a chaotic climate and establish “liberated territories.”⁸

The assessments presented by the opposition are diametrically opposite, but have been refuted by detailed reports on the victims.⁹ Since no one acknowledges the existence of “independent” assessments, it is appropriate to judge what is happening, bearing in mind the antecedents. In the *guarimba* of February 2014, 43 persons died, the great majority of them unrelated to the political clashes or police repression.

Similarly, we need to assess how the opposition reacted when faced with an equivalent challenge. Its governments finished off the “Caracazo” of 1989 with hundreds of deaths and thousands of wounded.

The situation in Venezuela is dramatic but this does not explain the centrality of the country in all the news reports. Situations of greater seriousness in other countries are totally ignored by the same media.

In Colombia, since the beginning of the year, 46 social movement leaders have been assassinated and in the last 14 months 120 have perished. Between 2002 and 2016 the paramilitary forces massacred 558 mass leaders, and in the last two decades up to 2,500 trade-unionists have been murdered.¹⁰ Why no mention by any broadcaster of repute of this ongoing bloodshed in Venezuela’s nearest neighbour?

More terrifying is the scene in Mexico. Every day some journalist is added to the long list of students, teachers and social fighters who are assassinated. In the climate of social warfare imposed by the “anti-drug trafficking actions,” 29,917 people have disappeared.¹¹ Should not this level of killings attract more journalistic attention than Venezuela?

Honduras is another hair-raising case. Along with Berta Cáceres 15 other militants have been murdered. Between 2002 and 2014 the number of assassinated environmental defenders has risen to 111.¹² The list of victims of the horror who are ignored by the hegemonic press could be extended to Peru’s political prisoners. Moreover, very few know of the suffering confronted by the Puerto Rican independence leader Oscar López Rivera during his 35 years of imprisonment.

The majority of the Latin American population simply does not know of the tragedies prevailing in the countries governed by the Right. The media’s double standard confirms that Venezuela’s prominence on the television screens is not due to humanitarian concerns.

Forms of a coup

The media coverage shores up the opposition’s promotion of a coup. Since they cannot carry out classic disturbances like those that led to Pinochet’s coup, they try to remove President Maduro through the dislocation of society. They repeat what was attempted in February 2014 in

⁸ Teruggi, Marco. Análisis del esquema de la ofensiva paramilitar, 24-5-2017,

<https://hastaelnocau.wordpress.com/2017/05/24/analisis-del-esquema-de-la-ofensiva-paramilitar/>.

⁹ Bracci Roa, Luigino. Lista de fallecidos por las protestas violentas de la oposición venezolana, abril a junio de 2017, 9-6-2017, <http://albaciudad.org/2017/06/lista-fallecidos-protestas-venezuela-abril-2017/>.

¹⁰ Restrepo Domínguez, Manuel Humberto. 46 líderes asesinados evidencian una política del horror, 22/05/2017. <http://www.alainet.org/es/articulo/185633>.

¹¹ TRIAL International, Informe de seguimiento presentado al Comité contra la Desaparición Forzada, 2-2- 2017 <https://trialinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/FINAL-InfomedeseguimientoCED-MEX2017.pdf>.

¹² TelsurTV. Asesinan a Berta Cáceres, líder indígena de Honduras. 3-3-2016.

<http://www.telesurtv.net/news/Asesinan-a-Bertha-Caceres-lider-indigena-de-Honduras--20160303-0016.html>.

order to commit an institutional coup similar to the ones carried out in Honduras (2009), Paraguay (2014) or Brazil (2016). They hope to impose through force what they will later validate in the ballot boxes.

The Right lacks the military force used in the past to return to government. But it is trying to recreate such intervention by staging skirmishes at military barracks, setting fire to police stations or marching on military headquarters.

Its plan combines sabotage of the economy with riots by armed groups which, in contrast to Colombia, act anonymously. These actions are mingled with the criminal underworld and they terrorize merchants.¹³

The actions include fascist methods sponsored by the most violent currents of anti-Chavismo. They appropriate the insurgent symbolism forged by the popular movements and present their pillage as a heroic gesture. Their leader Leopoldo López is not some innocent politician. Any court operating under the rule of law would have sentenced him to life imprisonment for his criminal liability.

The Right promotes a climate of civil war in order to demoralize the Chavista bases, affected by the lack of food and medicine. It is explicit in its call for foreign intervention and negotiates with the creditor banks an interruption in the country's access to credit.

The opposition hopes to lynch Maduro in order to bury Chavismo. It takes its battle to the streets, in the conquest of public opinion and the collapse of the economy. It considers elections as nothing more than a simple coronation of this offensive.

But it is confronting growing obstacles. The predominance of the violence in its marches alienates the majority of those who are discontented and wears down its own demonstrators. As it did in 2014 the rebuff of the fascists undermines the entire opposition. Maduro's steadfastness, moreover, deters attendance in the marches. They have not managed to penetrate the popular neighborhoods where they still confront the risk of an adverse armed conflict.¹⁴

The big bourgeoisie in Venezuela incites the coup with the regional support of Macri, Temer, Santos and Peña Nieto. For months it has been promoting a destabilizing plan in the OAS. But it has failed to get results in that area. Proposed sanctions against Venezuela have been unsuccessful because of the opposition of various foreign ministries; they have failed to achieve the unanimity with which Cuba was expelled from the OAS in the 1960s.

Notorious, as well, is the United States' promotion of coups with the aim of regaining control over the major crude oil reserve on the continent. The State Department wants to repeat the operations it used in Iraq or Libya, in the knowledge that after overthrowing Maduro no one will remember where Venezuela is. It suffices to see how the media omit any mention in the news of the countries where the Pentagon has already intervened. Once the adversary is liquidated, the news turns to other issues.

The strategic goals of imperialism are not registered by those who highlight the flirtation of some US newspaper with the Venezuelan president or the verbal ambiguities of Trump.¹⁵ They imagine that those irrelevant facts illustrate the absence of any conflict between the United States and Chavismo. But it does not register with them that the immense majority of the press is

¹³ Teruggi, Marco. Llegó la hora Venezuela, 28-5-2017, <http://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2017/05/29/llago-la-hora-venezuela/>.

¹⁴ Cieza, Guillermo. La derrota política de la derecha venezolana, 7-6- 2017, www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2017/06/07/la-derrota-politica-de-la-derecha-venezolana/.

¹⁵ Rodríguez Porras, Simón. Nueve errores de Claudio Katz sobre Venezuela, 11-5-2017. <http://laclase.info/content/nueve-errores-de-claudio-katz-sobre-venezuela/>.

maliciously attacking Maduro and that the multimillionaire in the White House denies each day what he said the previous day.

Trump is not indifferent or neutral. He simply delegates to the CIA and the Pentagon the implementation of a conspiracy that is designed through the Sharp and Venezuela Freedom 2 plans. Those operations include espionage, troop deployment and cover for terrorism.¹⁶ They develop in a stealthy way while the major media outlets discredit any condemnation of those preparations. They question especially the “exaggerations of the left” so that no one will disturb the conspirators.

Some analysts think the presence of Chevron in Venezuela — or PDVSA’s continued business in the United States — illustrate a tight association between the two governments.¹⁷ They conclude from this relationship that there is no coup scenario. But those connections do not alter in the least the Empire’s decision to overthrow the Bolivarian government.

The activities of US corporations in Venezuela (and of their counterparts in the United States) have persisted from the outset of the Chavista process. But Bush, Obama and Trump have sought to recover direct imperial control over the oil. They cannot get this through a strained relationship between partners or clients. They want to install the model of privatization that prevails in Mexico and to expel Russia and China from their backyard.

Attitude of the Left

If the diagnosis of a reactionary coup is correct, the position of the left should not give rise to disagreements. Our main enemies are the Right and imperialism, and to crush them is always a priority. This elementary principle must be reaffirmed at critical times when what is obvious can become confused.

Whatever our criticisms were of Salvador Allende, our central battle was against Pinochet. Similarly, we adopted a corresponding line of conduct toward the Argentine *gorillas* of 1955 or the saboteurs of Arbenz, Torrijos and the various anti-imperialist governments of the region. This position in Venezuela today points to the need for common action against the rightist escalation.

When a coup is on the horizon, it is indispensable to single out those who are responsible for the crisis. Those who cause a disaster are not the same as those who are powerless to resolve it.

This distinction applies in the economic field. The errors committed by Maduro are both numerous and unjustifiable, but those guilty of the present damage are the capitalists. The government is tolerant or incapable, but it does not belong on the same plane. Those who commit the monumental error of drawing a line of identity between both sectors¹⁸ confuse responsibilities of a different nature.

¹⁶ Cabrera, Ángel Guerra. Venezuela, situación de peligro, 25-5-2017, <https://lapupilainsomne.wordpress.com/2017/05/25/venezuela-situacion-de-peligro-por-angel-guerra-cabrera>. Luzzani, Telma. El plan destituyente del Pentágono y el secretario de la OEA, 30-3-2017, <https://www.tiempoar.com.ar/articulo/view/65767/el-plan-destituyente-del-penta-gono-y-el-secretario-de-la-oea-por-telma-luzzani>.

¹⁷ Rodríguez Porras, Simón. Nueve errores de Claudio Katz sobre Venezuela, 11-5-2017. <http://laclase.info/content/nueve-errores-de-claudio-katz-sobre-venezuela/>.

¹⁸ Rodríguez Porras, Simón. Nueve errores de Claudio Katz sobre Venezuela, 11-5-2017. <http://laclase.info/content/nueve-errores-de-claudio-katz-sobre-venezuela/>.

The government's mistakes have been demonstrated in the inoperative system of currency exchange rates, the unacceptable external debt, or in the lack of control over prices and smuggling. But the collapse of the economy has been caused by the affluent who manipulate the currencies, trigger inflation, handle imported goods and limit supplies of basic goods.

The Executive is unresponsive or acts mistakenly for many reasons: inefficiency, tolerance of corruption, protection of the bolibourgeoisie, connivance with millionaires disguised as Chavistas. That's why it does not cut support to the private groups that receive cheap dollars in order to import dear. But the collapse of production has been carried out by the ruling class in order to overthrow Maduro. Not to recognize that conflict is to display an unwonted level of myopia.

This blindness prevents recognition of another key fact at this time: the resistance of Chavismo to the rightist onslaught. Albeit with methods and attitudes that are highly questionable, Maduro is not surrendering. He maintains the vertical structure of the PSUV, he favours the banning of the critical currents, and he preserves a bureaucracy that strangles responses from below. But unlike Dilma or Lugo he does not give in. His conduct is the exact opposite of the capitulation carried out by Syriza in Greece.

This stance explains the hatred of the powerful. The government has made the excellent decision to withdraw from the OAS. It has abandoned the Ministry of Colonies and carried out the rupture that the left has always demanded. This decision should arouse the overwhelming support that very few have expressed.

Like any administration under attack from the Right, the government has resorted to force in its self-defence. The establishment media denounce that reaction with unusual hysteria. Forgotten are the justifications habitually made by governments of another character when they face similar situations. But Maduro has also been challenged conversely for his relative indulgence toward the fascists. He has simply adopted guarded measures in response to the opposition savagery.

In its response the government has of course committed injustices. That's the regrettable cost of any significant confrontation with the counter-revolution. These mishaps have been present in all battles with the reaction, from Bolívar to Fidel. There is a need to avoid self-indulgence in this delicate terrain, but without repeating the slanders propagated by the opposition.

Maduro is directing his fire against the Rightist brutality and not against the people. So it makes no sense to compare him with Gaddafi or Saddam Hussein. He has not carried out any massacre of left-wing activists or participated in war-mongering adventures instigated by the United States. The analogy with Stalin is more ridiculous, but it reminds us that the spectre of Hitler hovers over many of the opposition leaders associated with Uribe or nostalgic for a Pinochet.

Social-democratic positions

In recent months, as well, among the adversaries of the Right there has been an increase in views that blame Maduro for Venezuela's agony. These opinions repeat the old social-democratic posture of joining with the reaction at critical moments.

They question the legitimacy of the government, using the same arguments as the opposition. Instead of accusing the CIA, the *escuálidos* [the squalid ones, a Venezuelan phrase for the filthy rich], or the OAS, they concentrate their objections against Chavismo. They do this

in the name of a democratic ideal that is as abstract as it is divorced from the battle to determine who will prevail in the running of the state.

This position has affected various “critical left” thinkers [*pensadores del pos-progresismo*] linked to *autonomism*. Not only do they accuse Maduro for the present situation, they say he has reinforced an authoritarian leadership in order to maintain the model based on hydrocarbon rents.¹⁹

This characterization is very similar to the liberal thesis that attributes all of Venezuela’s problems to populist politics, implemented by tyrants who are squandering the resources of the state. Only they use language that is more diplomatic in its diagnosis.

Other views of the same order point more categorically to the responsibility of the Chavista leader. They call on us as well to avoid “the conspiratorial over-simplification of blaming the Right or imperialism” for the country’s troubles.²⁰ But are the conspirators of the reaction imaginary? Are the murdered, the paramilitaries and the plans of the Pentagon paranoiac Bolivarian inventions?

Without answering this elementary question, that position also dismisses any comparison with what happened in Chile in 1973. However, it does not explain why that analogy is inapplicable. It takes for granted that the two situations differ without noting the huge similarities in respect to the shortages, the conservative irritation of the middle class or the intervention of the CIA.

The disputed parallels with Allende are, however, accepted in the case of the first Peronist government, which is viewed as a direct antecedent of Chavismo. But is the resemblance located in the years of stability or in the moments prior to the coup of 1955? The preoccupation with the escalation of violence suggests that the similarity is in relation to that latter period. And in a situation of that type what was the priority? Confront Perón’s authoritarianism or resist the *gorillas*?

The social-democrats and “critical left” point to the authoritarian Maduro as the main cause of the current situation.²¹ That’s why they downplay the danger of a coup and reject the need to prepare some defense against the Right’s provocations.

But the consequences of this attitude are demonstrated whenever the oligarchs and their bandits return to government. The recent events in Honduras, Paraguay or Brazil do not even arouse alarm among those who demonize Chavismo.

They object as well to the extractivism, indebtedness and contracts with oil companies. But they do not explain if they are demanding anticapitalist and socialist alternatives to these obvious failings of Maduro. The same applies to the shortages and the speculation. Are they urging him to act with greater firmness against the bankers and the big commercial cartels? Do they propose confiscations, nationalizations, or direct popular control?

By adopting these initiatives one could imagine building bridges with the government, but never with the opposition. The detractors of Chavismo sidestep this difference.

¹⁹ Lander, Edgardo. “Sociólogo venezolano cuestiona la ‘solidaridad incondicional’ de la izquierda latinoamericana con el chavismo,” 23-3-2017. <https://ladiaria.com.uy/articulo/2017/3/sociologo-venezolano-cuestiona-la-solidaridad-incondicional-de-la-izquierda-latinoamericana-con-el-chavismo/>.

²⁰ Svampa, Maristella. CARTA ABIERTA AL CAMPO MILITANTE PROCHAVISTA DE LA ARGENTINA, 5-6-2017, <http://www.lateclaene.com/maristella-svampa>.

²¹ Svampa, Maristella; Gargarella, Roberto. El desafío de la izquierda, no callar, 8-5- 2017, <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/36336-encrucijada-venezolana>.

‘Critical left’ appeals

The social-democratic viewpoint characterizes the urgent call for peace signed by numerous intellectuals. This statement promotes a peace process, rejecting both the authoritarian turn of Chavismo and the violent attitude of right-wing sectors.²²

The call favours equilibrium to overcome the polarization and resorts to a language closer to that of the foreign ministries than to the popular activists. The tone is in conformity with the implicit attachment to a theory of two evils. Against both extremes it proposes to take the middle road.

But this equidistance was immediately belied by the fundamental responsibility it assigned to the government. And not only does it overlook the harassment of the Right, but imperialism is barely mentioned in passing.

The text was met with a [powerful reply sponsored by the REDH](#) [Network of Intellectuals, Artists and Social Movements in Defense of Humanity] and signed by many intellectuals. This criticism rightly objected to the fascination with conventional republicanism and noted the pre-eminent gravitation of extra-constitutional forces in critical situations.²³

The liberal relapse of the post-progressive or “critical left” thinkers recreates what happened with the social-democratic Gramscians in the 1980s. The animosity of that group toward Leninism and the Cuban revolution is comparable to the present hostility to Chavismo. A number of those who signed the call have passed through both periods.

But the present social-democratic variant is late and lacks the political reference once contributed by the Spanish PSOE. The social-liberal turn of that party has completely demolished its initial progressive imaginary. That it is now orphaned explains, perhaps, the present re-encounter with the old liberalism.

In some cases this evolution is the culmination of the division that has affected distinct variants of autonomism. The positions taken toward the Bolivarian process have triggered this fracture. Those who chose to line up with the opposition are suspicious of those who “cling to Chavismo.”²⁴

But this latter sector has thought through the previous insufficiencies and has come to understand the need to fight for the state power with socialist perspectives related to Latin American Marxism.

In contrast, the other segment continues navigating in the ambiguity of generalities about anti-patriarchism and anti-extractivism without offering any concrete example of what is proposed. Absorbed by the liberal universe, their enigmatic vagaries no longer enrich left-wing thinking. Between their forgetfulness of the class struggle and their fascination with bourgeois institutionality, their denunciations of extractivism are becoming a picturesque curiosity.

Absent-minded dogmatism

A discourse that is convergent with social democracy is also disseminated using sectarian arguments. In this case Maduro’s is portrayed as a corrupt government, submissive and

²² VVAA, LLAMADO INTERNACIONAL URGENTE A DETENER LA ESCALADA DE VIOLENCIA EN VENEZUELA. 30-5- 2017, <http://www.cetri.be/Llamado-internacional-urgente-a?lang=fr>.

²³ VVAA. ¿Quién acusará a los acusadores?, 5-6-2017, <http://www.humanidadenred.org.ve/?p=8134>.

²⁴ Svampa, Maristella. CARTA ABIERTA AL CAMPO MILITANTE PROCHAVISTA DE LA ARGENTINA, 5-6-2017, <http://www.lateclaene.com/maristella-svampa>.

adaptable, that is consolidating a dictatorial regime.²⁵ On other occasions that same illegitimacy is described with more indirect or sophisticated categories (*de facto* president, Bonapartist chief).

But all the variants coincide in underscoring the fundamental responsibility of an authoritarian government that is tearing apart the country. The harmony of this focus with the media narrative is striking. The main problem, however, is not in the rhetoric but in the practice.

Every day there are marches of the Right and of the government. The champions of socialist rigour have to ask themselves: Which of the two mobilizations will we join? With whom will we identify? If they think the government is the main enemy they will have to make common cause with the *escuálidos* of the *guarimbas*.

In Buenos Aires, for example, they called last May for a mobilization demanding the ouster of Maduro.²⁶ All the passers-by who observed this march understood clearly who would immediately occupy Venezuela's presidency if the present head of state were overthrown. And they noted the total coincidence between this demand and the messages issued daily by the news media.

This is not the first time that sectors of the left have so clearly converged with the Right. An antecedent in Argentina under the Kirchner governments was the presence of red flags in the soy farmers' marches and the demonstrations of the *caceroleros* [middle- and upper-class opponents of the government banging pots and pans]. But what was pathetic in Buenos Aires can turn to tragedy in Caracas.

Other visions compare Maduro with the opposition, arguing that under the masquerade of an apparent contraposition hide huge coincidences. So they speculate about the moment when this convergence will become explicit.²⁷

This curious interpretation contrasts with the pitched battles between both sectors that everyone else sees. So it is a bit difficult to interpret the *guarimbas*, assassinations and Pentagon threats as a fictitious quarrel between two relatives.

The sole logic of this presentation is to downplay the seriousness of the current conflict, to interpret it as a mere inter-bourgeois fight over the appropriation of the rent. That is why Maduro's totalitarianism is seen as a danger equivalent to (or worse than) the opposition.

The major problem in this focus is not its absent-mindedness but the implicit neutrality that it promotes. Since everyone is equal, the self-coup attributed to the government is compared with the coup promoted by the Right.

That equivalence is obviously false, however. In Venezuela there are not two reactionary variants in contention like, for example, jihadism and the dictatorships in the Middle East. Nor is it the type of competition between troglodytes that in Argentina opposed Videla to Isabel Perón.

The clash between Capriles-López and Maduro resembles the confrontation of Pinochet with Allende, of Lonardi with Perón or more recently of Temer with Dilma. Similarly the triumph of the Right over Maduro, far from an engagement between equals, would entail a terrible political regression.

Confronted with this alternative, neutrality is a synonym for passivity and represents a huge degree of impotence in the face of great events. It means renouncing participation and commitment to genuine causes.

²⁵ Rodríguez Porras, Simón. Nueve errores de Claudio Katz sobre Venezuela, 11-5-2017.

<http://laclase.info/content/nueve-errores-de-claudio-katz-sobre-venezuela/>.

²⁶ Nuevo MAS, Bajo la consigna "Fuera Maduro" escandaloso acto en Buenos Aires de un sector del FIT en apoyo a la derecha golpista venezolana, <https://www.mas.org.ar/?p=12538>.

²⁷ Altamira, Jorge. Constituyente "a la Maduro", 18-5-2017

<http://www.po.org.ar/prensaObrera/1458/internacionales/constituyente-a-la-maduro-1>.

Since this attitude takes for granted that Chavismo is finished, it limits its entire horizon to writing a balance sheet of that experience. But the biggest failure in political action never affects unfinished or frustrated processes. The worst thing is narrow-mindedness in the face of major epic events.

Whatever one's questions about Maduro, the outcome in Venezuela will define the immediate destiny of the entire region. If the reactionaries triumph, the result will be a scenario of defeat and a feeling of impotence in the face of the Empire. The end of the progressive cycle will be a fact and not a subject for evaluation among social science thinkers.

The Right knows this and for that reason is stepping up the campaigns against the intellectuals who defend Chavismo. The recent broadside attack in *Clarín* is a foretaste of the assault that is being prepared for a post-Maduro regional setting.²⁸ The sectarians do not register that danger.

Spurious elections

In the immediate future there are two political options at play: the Right demands that the general elections be moved forward, and the government has called a Constituent Assembly. The opposition is only willing to participate in elections that will ensure it first place.

Of the 19 elections carried out under Chavismo, the Bolivarians won 17 and immediately recognized the two that they lost. In contrast, the Right never accepted their adverse results. They always claimed there was some fraud or resorted to a boycott. When they won in by-elections they demanded the immediate fall of the government.

In December 2015 they obtained a majority in the National Assembly and proclaimed the overthrow of Maduro. Then they attempted in various ways to disregard the constitution, even by swearing in deputies illegally elected and falsifying signatures on petitions to recall Maduro.

Capriles, Borges and López are now calling for spurious elections amidst the economic war and provocation in the streets. They want elections like those in Colombia where, in one election after another, hundreds of popular activists are murdered. They hope to gain at the ballot boxes as in Honduras under the pressure of the murder of Berta. They want the kind of elections that are held in Mexico over the dead bodies of journalists, students and teachers.

It would be a terrible error to join in elections designed to prepare a Chavista cemetery. Maduro is being asked to carry out elections in a climate of civil war that would be unacceptable to any government.

Venezuela is going through a situation that bears some resemblance to the scene in Nicaragua at the end of the first Sandinista electoral term in office. The military siege and shortages wore out an exhausted population who voted for the Right out of simple fatigue. In those conditions elections have a pre-established winner.

On the other hand, comparison with the scenario that led to the fall of the Soviet Union makes no sense. Venezuela is not a big power imploding internally at the end of a lengthy divorce between the regime and the population. It is a vulnerable Latin American country under attack from the United States.

²⁸ Bazzan, Gustavo. El reclamo de Atilio Borón a Nicolás Maduro para "aplantar" a la oposición en Venezuela, 30-5-2017, https://www.clarin.com/mundo/reclamo-atilio-boron-nicolas-maduro-aplantar-oposicion-venezuela_0_rylWQfs-W.html.

Some thinkers take for granted the oppressive role of imperialism and suggest that this is not a decisive factor in the present crisis.²⁹ They assume that the persistent denunciations of that domination constitute “a fact already known” or a mere ritual of the Left. But they forget that it is never pointless to emphasize the devastating impact of aggression from the North on governments that have become enemies of Washington.

The entire spectrum of ex-Chavistas who are joining in the call for general elections confuse democracy with liberal republicanism. They have lost sight of the way in which the right to self-government is systematically blocked by bourgeois institutionality.

This impediment is why the great majority of constitutional regimes have lost legitimacy. It becomes more and more evident that the ruling class uses voting systems to consolidate its power. It uses this control to run the economy, the justice system, the news media and the repressive apparatus. Real democracy can only emerge in a socialist process of transformation of society.

It is true that Maduro cancelled the recall referendum, suspended regional elections and proscribed some opposition politicians. These measures are part of a blind reaction to the harassment. But the Chavista leader is confronting the hypocrisy of greater import exhibited by the defenders of the present electoral regimes.

It suffices to see how in Brazil the impeachment was carried out by a group of outlaws with the cover of the judges and parliamentarians who manipulate the system of indirect presidential selection. It never occurred to the OAS to intervene against that vulgar violation of democratic principles.

Nor did the establishment get indignant when the Electoral College anointed Trump after he had received a few million votes less than Hilary Clinton. A ruling monarchy in Spain or England seems natural to them, as do the clumsy schemes that are used to manipulate each election in Mexico. The sacrosanct democracy they ask of Venezuela is completely absent in all capitalist countries.

Possibilities of the Constituent Assembly

Obviously, the best opportunity for a transformative Constituent Assembly was lost several years ago. The present call is purely defensive and is an attempt to contend with an exasperating situation.

But it is useless to discuss only what has not been done. There is still time left for those balance-sheets. The important thing now is to determine how this call can reopen a road for popular initiative.

Before the call for the Constituent Assembly the government was limiting itself to developing a purely bureaucratic confrontation between one state power and another. It relied on a struggle from above by the Executive or the Supreme Court against the National Assembly. Now it is finally calling on the communal power and we will have to see whether this idea translates into a real mobilization.

There are numerous signs of weariness and scepticism within Chavismo. But no one chooses the conditions in which to fight and the main dilemma turns on whether to continue or

²⁹ Carcione, Carlos. Las “lecciones” de algunos intelectuales de la izquierda: ¿Quiénes son los sepultureros del proceso bolivariano?, 16-5-2017, <http://questiondigital.com/las-lecciones-de-algunos-intelectuales-de-la-izquierda-quienes-son-los-sepultureros-del-proceso-bolivariano/>.

abandon the struggle. Those who have resolved to dig in their heels are calling for a revival of the popular project.

Some left currents that are very critical of Maduro’s management think this convening of a Constituent Assembly could unleash a dynamic of communes against the bureaucratic operations.³⁰ They see the Constituent Assembly as an imperfect instrument to disentangle the dispute with corrupt bourgeoisified and bolibourgeois Chavismo.



Telesur

³⁰ STALIN PÉREZ BORGES .Movimiento EN LUCHAS: la convocatoria a la Asamblea Nacional Constituyente es un reto que debemos asumir, 9-5-2017, <https://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/n308188.html>.

The Constituent Assembly could also help to break the stalemate in recent months between *guarimbas* and pro-government mobilizations. If it is adequately tasked it could break down the opposition front, separating the discontented from the fascists.

But it is obvious that without drastic measures on the economic and social front the Constituent Assembly will be an empty shell. If the disaster in production is not attacked through nationalization of the banks, foreign trade and the expropriation of the saboteurs, there will be no recovery in popular support.

The palliative measures attempted in order to increase participation of the base organisms in the distribution of food are insufficient. Radical measures cannot be postponed.

Whatever the alternative, it will not be easy to redirect the economy after so many mistakes in regard to the debt, the creation of special investment zones or the tolerance of capital flight.

Chávez achieved a big redistribution of the rent through new methods of popular politicization, but he never managed to lay the foundations for a process of industrialization. He clashed with the opposition capitalists but not with the internal bolibourgeoisie and he was unable to deactivate the rentist culture that undermined all attempts to build up a productive economy. The hesitation to break with the capitalist structure explains the adverse results.

The present context is more difficult because of the sharp drop in oil prices and the blockage of regional integration projects under the conservative restoration. But it should also be noted that all revolutionary processes take off in adversity and the Constituent Assembly can provide a framework for regaining the initiative.

Some critics of this call object to the sectoral and communal form of election. They say that with this format the “assembly will be tricky, corporatist or illegitimate.”³¹ And here they repeat the endorsement the Right makes (when it suits them) of conventional constitutionalism. That demand is not surprising when it comes from establishment commentators but it is disturbing when it comes from enthusiasts of the Russian revolution.

After three decades of post-dictatorial regimes, many have forgotten the duplicities of bourgeois democracy. It might be remembered how Lenin and Trotsky defended in 1917 the legitimacy of the soviets and withdrew recognition of a Constituent Assembly that rivalled the revolutionary power.

The context in Venezuela today is very different. However, the Bolshevik revolution not only taught us to note the social background, the class conflicts and the interests at stake, it also indicated a path by which to go beyond the hypocrisy of bourgeois liberalism and it confirmed that acts of force against the reaction form part of the confrontation with rightist barbarism.

The Left will have to determine whether it converges with the opposition in the boycott or participates in the Constituent Assembly. There is also a third option, with a very small audience: “yes, no and the very opposite.”

In the rest of the region the need is for solidarity. As in Cuba’s special period, we have to put our shoulders to the wheel in difficult situations. Let us hope that many *compañeros* adopt this approach before it is too late.

³¹ Giménez, Gustavo. Venezuela: una Constituyente trucha, 11-5-2017, <http://mst.org.ar/2017/05/11/venezuela-constituyente-trucha/>.

Intellectual regroupment

Venezuela is not only giving rise to intense debates. It has also brought about significant regroupments of intellectuals that endorse counterposed appeals. This positioning has been more relevant than the controversial details of the distinct declarations. It has resulted in a great division between camps.

The REDH text refuting the social-democratic call was complemented by other compelling responses.³² The political demarcation has been very rapid.

Despite the tension created by the manifestoes, a number of signatories ask that the fraternal dialogue be maintained. That respect is indispensable but the indignant reactions are explained by what is at stake. If the Right prevails, there will be plenty of time for the lamentations and the seminars investigating what happened.

Since the social-democratic statement contains an appeal for peace, many thinkers rallied to it in the spontaneous hope of slowing down the violence. Taking a closer look at the contents of the document, some withdrew their support and others maintained it with defensive arguments. They highlight their continuing solidarity with the Bolivarian process or point out their differences with other signatories.

But most significant has been the rapid and generalized reaction that the anti-Chavista document aroused and the great rejection the social-democratic statement generated. That instinctive reaction led to a sudden convergence between left-wing intellectuals and radical nationalism. If this interface were to be consolidated, Venezuela will have awakened a re-encounter of critical thinking with the revolutionary traditions of Latin America.

Translated from the [original article](#) by Richard Fidler (with assistance from Federico Fuentes) and first published in [Life on the Left](#).

SUMMARY

The media keep silent about the violence of the Venezuelan opposition and the prevailing repression by the right-wing governments of Latin America. The Right's strategy of an institutional coup faces serious limits, but the Left must address this new threat, supporting anti-imperialist decisions and making a distinction between the capitalist boycott and the government's ineffectiveness.

Adhering to social-democratic standards, the post-progressive "critical left" objects to Chavismo, dismissing the danger of a coup, and mistakenly identifying authoritarianism as the main danger. The dogmatists overlook the main enemy and converge with the conservatives or slip toward passive neutrality.

The Right only wants elections it is sure it will win. In these very adverse conditions, the Constituent Assembly re-opens opportunities and points to a re-encounter with radical intellectual thought.

³² VVAA. Declaración sobre Venezuela: Intelectuales en solidaridad con el pueblo bolivariano, 5-6-2017, <http://www.barricadav.org/?p=6842>.

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