

A woman with dark hair, wearing a green cap and a black t-shirt, is holding the Venezuelan flag. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The flag is draped behind her, showing its characteristic horizontal stripes of yellow, blue, and red, with white stars on the blue stripe.

Santiago **Arconada** | Karina **Arévalo** | Javier **Biardeau** | Atilio **Boron**  
Ana Esther **Ceceña** | Reinaldo **Iturriza** | Claudio **Katz**  
Claudia **Korol** | Edgardo **Lander** | Miguel **Mazzeo**  
Juan Carlos **Monedero** | Nildo **Ouriques** | Isabel **Rauber**  
Maristella **Svampa** | Marco **Teruggi** | Zuleima **Vergel** | Raúl **Zibechi**

# VENEZUELA

PRESSING PERSPECTIVES FROM THE SOUTH

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# Introduction:

## Rethinking Venezuela from the left and against indifference

**Daniel Chavez, Hernán Ouviña and Mabel Thwaites Rey**

*Indifference is the deadweight of history. Indifference operates passively, but it operates. It is fate, that which cannot be counted on. It twists programmes and ruins the best-conceived plans. It is the raw material that ruins intelligence.*

*What comes to pass, either the evil that afflicts everyone, or the possible good brought about by an act of general valour, is due not so much to the initiative of the active few, as to the indifference, the absenteeism of the many.*

**Antonio Gramsci, 1917**

### Sense and objectives of this publication

Since March 2017—as politics has become increasingly polarised in Venezuela with the publication of interviews, collective pronouncements and statements by progressive intellectuals and political and social activists—the Latin American left has been immersed in a profound and highly passionate debate over the present, the past and the possible future of the Bolivarian process.

The deep chasm that has opened between the participants in this discussion can be seen in messages circulating over social networks in recent months that discredit anyone who may disagree with a particular position. While from one side the supposed collaborators with imperialism are denounced and alarms sounded of a conspiracy by the global right, from the other the alleged silence before or complicity with authoritarian or repressive practices is criticised. While some analysts have argued that criticism of the government is brought to bear in the advance of regressive forces and weakens the revolution, others have responded that the left needs to abandon its dogmas, condemn authoritarian deviations, and learn from past errors about the unconditional defence of the failed socialist processes of the previous century.

In releasing this publication amid this panorama we make the implicit assumption that the seemingly antagonistic perspectives are not necessarily irreconcilable, and that the Latin American left is not irreversibly fractured in its interpretation of the Bolivarian process. The ideas presented in this report demonstrate that someone can defend the Bolivarian process and, at the same time, remain critical of some of its most obvious limitations or errors, or be

critical of the government and at the same time defend the many victories and achievements of the same process.

This publication is also an implicit recognition that no transformative process is chemically pure in terms of its objectives, driving forces or results. As Atilio Boron expresses in the final pages of this paper, it is not a question of “silencing our criticisms of the Bolivarian government,” but of identifying concrete problems and proposing alternatives through frank and fraternal debate “to improve its performance.”

The purpose of this publication is thus to contribute to the creation of a space for debate that could help to overcome the defensive and largely sectarian logic that defines current discussions within the Latin American left. This implies mutual reflection over opinions and data that may be perceived as conflicting or mistaken, endeavouring to exchange relevant and productive knowledge—particularly to the benefit of the popular sectors of Venezuela—without attempting to coerce those who do not necessarily share one’s own ideas. This does not mean ignoring different approaches nor attempting to force a consensus, but clarifying the diverse perspectives and readings of the current crisis and initiating a new type of dialogue.

None of the participants in this conversation can be assumed neutral in view of the current situation in Venezuela. Quite obviously, there are differing sensibilities and theoretical-ideological communities at work within the Latin American left in general, and in Venezuela in particular, but beyond whatever interpretations of the country’s current reality may exist, none of the participants in this exchange is a member of the right. There are, there have been and there will likely continue to be many discrepancies, but always from an emancipatory perspective. None of us remains indifferent, in the sense suggested in Gramsci’s above quotation.

In short, each of us participating in this initiative set out to contribute what s/he truly thinks about one of the richest and most dynamic experiences of social and political change. We aspire to contribute to an exchange that functions not as a mere intellectual exercise in analytical comprehension or academic inquiry, but as a useful tool for reflection both inside and outside Venezuela. Above all we value our comrades in that country who now face an extremely tense situation, in which the destinies of a people who suffer and struggle are being played out. We are not indifferent to how this crisis is resolved, because its consequences will be paid, primarily, by the humblest and most vulnerable citizens, as well as the most tenacious and committed.

Together we seek to counteract the media bombardment and Manichean positions that tend to distort and/or erase the most problematic issues and factors of the Venezuelan process, by contributing, from myriad angles and viewpoints, to a detailed, rigorous and critical analysis of its complex reality. We have no doubt that the denouement to the acute crisis that the Bolivarian process is going through—and that the people themselves must resolve by exercising their full right to self-determination—will spell the fate of other struggles throughout Latin America and the Global South. As Edgardo Lander points out in the second chapter of this report, the resolution of the crisis in Venezuela will have an effect

not only on Latin America, but also on emancipatory aspirations, struggles for social change and the projects of the left in diverse parts of the world, since Venezuela has become a very important reference point for many movements attempting to spur radical

changes in their own countries. If the Venezuelan process is defeated, the political consequences will be deep and affect other nations around the globe.

## Methodological notes

Thinking together and debating fraternally and respectfully with our Venezuelan peers through this difficult stage of the Bolivarian process demands the utmost care. Conscious of this need, this initiative started with an invitation to a broad and diverse group of researchers and activists from various countries in Latin America (plus a Spaniard with a long career of academic and political work in the region) by the Transnational Institute (TNI) and the Institute for the Study of Latin America and the Caribbean at the University of Buenos Aires (IEALC/UBA), with support from the CLACSO Working Group on Counter-Hegemonic Alternatives from the Global South. Each participant was asked to share his or her vision with regard to the roots and features of the current crisis in Venezuela and the prospects for resolving it. The proposal to convene diverse views from different countries was very well received by our Venezuelan peers. In the words of Javier Biarreau:

One has to pay close attention to what's happening in Venezuela on a daily basis, because the pace of events is very fast, and as an actor who is in a sense involved in what is happening inside the country as a key witness, as an analyst of the situation, one also has to get the view from outside. Those not living in the country can, in some cases, take a cooler-headed approach to try to get the whole picture of how the various forces relate to one another right now within Venezuela and upon Venezuela, and thus clarify how to proceed most effectively.

The exchange of ideas was structured on the basis of four key thought-provoking questions referred to in the title of each chapter of the report. In order to stimulate the collective debate and the exchange of views on and interpretations of the Bolivarian process, and the possible ways to resolve the difficult situation that the country is now embroiled in, we asked the participants to reflect on Venezuela's recent history and the internal, regional and global factors that have brought on the current crisis. Based on the responses received—whether from oral interviews or written contributions—we reordered and edited the reflections submitted by each participant around a series of relevant sub-questions, in an attempt to make the final document more dynamic and easier to read.<sup>1</sup>

At TNI and IEALC/UBA we consider it essential to commit ourselves to ideas and at the same time to take on a commitment to support emancipatory processes as they evolve. Venezuela remains an inescapable point of reference owing to the boldness and paradigm-breaking that the Bolivarian process—if not without contradictions—managed to bring off in the late 1990s. Since then, critical thinking has on numerous occasions been nurtured by, and has contributed to, struggles and initiatives as they develop in the volatile territory of Latin America.

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Antonella Alvarez for her valuable collaboration in putting together the original contributions. Javier Biarreau's reflections are part of a longer interview that was originally published in Spanish. Karina Arévalo and Zuleima Vergel jointly answered our questionnaire as members of the National Coordination of the Venezuelan organisation *Corriente Revolucionaria Bolívar y Zamora*.

## Postscript

This publication was produced and originally published in Spanish in early July 2017, a few weeks before an election to install a constituent assembly to redraft the country's institutional framework.

Venezuelan electoral authorities have officially announced that more than 8 million people voted on 30 July, but the turnout—equivalent to more than 41 percent of the electorate—and the legitimacy of the vote have been contested by the opposition.

The constituent assembly was sworn in on 4 August, followed by a series of significant developments in national and regional politics. Among other events that have not been addressed by the conversation condensed in this report, it is worth mentioning the following:

- On 5 August, Venezuela's chief prosecutor, Luisa Ortega was sacked from her post as Attorney General. It was one of the first decisions taken by the new assembly, sworn in the day before.
- On 5 August, the South American trade bloc Mercosur suspended Venezuela indefinitely. The foreign ministers of Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil announced that they had triggered the "democratic clause" and decided "unanimously to suspend Venezuela from the bloc for a rupture of the democratic order".
- On 6 August, a group of 20 men in military uniforms attacked Fort Paramacay army base in the city of Valencia, in the state of Carabobo. According to official statements, two of the attackers were killed and one injured. The Venezuelan government called it "a terrorist paramilitary-type attack" and informed that peace and order had been fully restored.
- On 8 August, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published the conclusions of an investigation that decried "widespread and systematic use of excessive force" against demonstrators in Venezuela, claiming that security forces and pro-government groups were responsible for the deaths of at least 73 protesters.

## [1] Origins, scale and determinants of the current situation in Venezuela

### What structural or historical factors have conditioned the origin and evolution of the current situation?

**Atilio Boron:** There are numerous structural determinants. First of all, we must consider the difficulties of the rocky transition from an oil-based economy to a more diversified and integrated economic structure that, because of this, cannot locally produce most of the goods people require. Secondly, there are the conflicts that arise in any process of radical change, like Chavismo, that challenge the positions of powerful local actors who have historically been the main, if not exclusive, beneficiaries of oil revenues. Third, state corruption, an endemic vice in Venezuela, but which under conditions of intense social conflict, undersupply, shortages and heightened inflation rears its ugly head in social life. And the government has not done all it can, if not to eradicate it, at least to keep it under control. Fourthly, US imperialism, a fundamental player in our America, which, in collusion with the local ruling classes and their allied groups, has relentlessly sabotaged the entire Bolivarian process.

**Marco Teruggi:** We must consider two main variables. The first has to do with the attack on the Bolivarian process, with its methods and aggressiveness deepening since the start of Nicolas Maduro's term. Such aggression has been deployed simultaneously on numerous fronts: economic, diplomatic, communicational, institutional, in an unrelenting and increasingly violent onslaught. The government and society had to confront a kind of anonymous aggression, as no one ever publicly acknowledged who has been behind the attacks. This made the struggle to interpret the facts a central element.

The other variable has to do with the errors and limitations in direction and process. The right dealt a strategic blow where it knew it would have an optimal effect: the economy. This is where Chavismo demonstrated a shortcoming in that it was unable to reverse its dependence on oil revenues. That doesn't mean that no attempts were made during the revolutionary years, but things didn't turn out as expected, and with production in the hands of the state and organised communities, there was a failure to fashion the necessary productive structure. For various reasons, including lack of preparation or not having monitored or penalised errors. Due to the recurrent absence of sanctions, corruption brewed, to become one of the factors that today complicates the policies of Chavismo. These two variables, which intersected at certain points, and with the complicity of corruption and economic attacks created the current picture.

**Ana Esther Ceceña:** Venezuela is a rich land. A country with some of the largest oil reserves, it has a long history of simultaneous prosperity and economic fragility. Despite its great wealth it is not a self-sufficient country, not even in relative terms. Its economic strength stems from its export capacity and that, in a geopolitical context of redefining powers and hegemonies, becomes a major problem, which Chávez faced by promoting, to little effect, the diversification of production, while promoting, quite successfully, regional integration and compensation structures.

The imbalance in the economy tended to favour internal food production and agricultural development, but a petro-rentier culture needs time to be transformed, and achievements in that area remained limited. Thus, the sharp drop in oil prices, which resulted from a struggle among world powers to

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**Edgardo Lander**

weaken the holders of reserves, is tending to reinforce the export-driven scheme. Today, gold and other such valuable minerals as coltan and thorium are emerging as geopolitical pawns in the clash of powers.

The outstanding wealth of Venezuelan territory is complemented by a privileged geographic position that links the Greater Caribbean to the Amazon basin, in addition to its strategic proximity to the Panama Canal. Nothing could be more appealing. These same advantages nurtured a cosy and comfortable oligarchy that fed parasitically off the oil wealth, and became ideologically and culturally akin to Miami-style prosperity. Inefficient and stateless, avid for dollars and power, under the wing of Washington, this oligarchy seeks to impose its will over its compatriots.

**Edgardo Lander:** The crisis that Venezuela is experiencing today is not a recent crisis. It's a crisis that has deep structural roots and is longstanding. To understand the current situation it's important to recognise that the country has undergone a very long crisis for a long time. The crisis is not just what we've experienced in the last three years, nor is it limited to the Chávez era. It's a deep crisis that has been developing since at least the early 1980s. It is a crisis stemming from the exhaustion of the petro-rentier model. The oil has not run out (Venezuela still has the largest reserves on the planet), but the model has reached its limit, with a social structure, state formation, cultural pattern and institutional configurations conforming to those countries that remain highly dependent on the exploitation of oil.

Let's consider one basic and essential indicator to understand the current situation: per capita oil income has been declining steadily, despite some cyclical variations. Consequently, in the 1980s and 1990s Venezuela entered a severe economic crisis that also became a political crisis, a crisis of legitimacy. The steady decline in oil revenue was severely limiting the state's ability to meet the demands and expectations of the population. At the same time, the traditional parties, Democratic Alliance and COPEI, were distancing themselves from their popular base to become strictly electioneering political organisations, representing the interests of the business sectors while losing all ties to popular organisations. Discontent with the political system was building up and came to a head with the structural adjustment reforms introduced during the second term of Carlos Andres Perez's government. In 1989 came a major reaction known as the *Caracazo*, the first great popular uprising in Latin America against neoliberal policies. This social reaction marked a final break with the legitimacy of the political system and paved the way for Hugo Chávez's subsequent rise to government.

**Miguel Mazzeo:** The Bolivarian process has a contradictory nature. There have been and there remain tensions between the extractivist, neo-developmental and state-driven plan, now in a crisis stage, and the communal-socialist plan, which has yet to complete the consolidation process and is not adequately promoted by the state. There is a manifest incompatibility between the so-called Chavista official who operates as a conscious or unconscious disseminator of a capitalist logic, who aspires to 'social ascent', and the 'critical politician', the 'organic intellectual', in



short, the rank and file Chavista militant. The necessary unity against the counterrevolution fails to hide this contradiction, although it usually provides valid arguments to downgrade and minimise it. We don't rule out the possibility of a path that resolves the contradiction in line with the interests of the Chavista people that is at the same time capable of forging a united front against the counterrevolution, a unity built upon more solid foundations.

**Edgardo Lander:** During the first decade of the new century it seemed that Venezuelan society had adopted a fresh impetus and tried to find new ways out of the crisis. From today's perspective, we can conclude that what actually happened at that moment was a combination of two absolutely fundamental factors: first, the emergence of Chávez's extraordinary and charismatic leadership, capable of offering a sense of direction, the possibility of change and emancipatory alternatives to the popular sectors. Secondly, shortly thereafter, an extraordinary

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**Nildo Ouriques**

rise in the price of oil occurred in the world economy. The combination of these two factors facilitated the creation of a whole movement of transformation and social and organisational energy in parallel with the expansion of the national economy, providing resources for new and ambitious social policies to improve people's living conditions and truly momentous changes in popular political culture. All these changes constituted the so-called Bolivarian Revolution, which was built on two fundamental pillars: the figure of Chávez as an intelligent, charismatic leader, capable of making sense of the process of change,

and the rise in the price of oil to more than 100 dollars per barrel.

When in the years 2013 and 2014 these two pillars vanished almost simultaneously, first with the death of Chávez and shortly after with the collapse in oil prices, the political and economic situation changed radically. But it's not a new crisis; it is the same structural crisis that had been postponed for a decade. Thus Venezuela returned to the previous chronic situation, but now with a much weaker economy, since dependence on oil has increased substantially during the years of the Bolivarian Revolution. In terms of dependence, oil came to represent, at the time of Chávez's death, 96 percent of the total value of exports. In a country that has suffered for many decades from a profound case of 'Dutch disease' (the pernicious effect brought on by a significant increase in a country's foreign exchange earnings from the exploitation of a natural resource, in particular oil or minerals), that same condition became even more virulent when the Venezuelan state no longer had access to the revenues previously available for the import of food and other basic goods, in a context of deep economic depression.

**Nildo Ouriques:** The first thing to mention is the inability of the Bolivarian Revolution to overcome rent-seeking capitalism. It is not, of course, a simple process, but a revolution either sets out to accomplish great things or isn't worthy of the name. We need to point out a decisive distinction: there has been a Bolivarian revolution and there is a Bolivarian government; these two are very different phenomena. The revolution is a historic experience that remains strong within the people as an experience of struggle, resistance and creative ability. The same cannot be said for the government, especially after the death of Hugo Chávez. The third crucial issue is economic mismanagement and the government's inability to control inflation. Beyond the boycott of imperialism and the disruptive actions of the capitalists—which are real, obviously—the government maintains open capital accounts and exchange control, thus encouraging the permanent flight of capital. Nobody can't control inflation, much less oil revenues, in such a context. Even the International

Monetary Fund's manuals advise against taking such a course of action. If it does occur, it's because the banking sector amasses immense wealth while the people have to fight for survival in the face of rising prices and shortages. In short: either the government controls and nationalises the banking system, or the Bolivarian Revolution will not keep up the pressure. Furthermore, the bankers' grip on government must be done away with.

**Miguel Mazzeo:** Of course, one must ponder the difficulties related to building a productive, diversified and autonomous economic model. Not only was the extractivist policy not overcome, it was actually consolidated under new conditions. In addition, that policy strengthened sectors that, via the state or other positions of power, create conditions of inertia and constrain potential advances in alternative directions. An 'alliance' has emerged between sectors of the middle-class and sectors of the state bureaucracy that see Chavismo as nothing more than the 'progressive management' of the cycle within the framework of the post-neoliberal extractivist model. The fall in international oil prices has conspired against this model, deepened the crisis and advanced the reaction, but has also exposed some structural limitations of the Bolivarian Revolution.

In this sense, it should be noted that the bourgeoisie (local, transnational, lumpen-bourgeoisie, *Boli-bourgeoisie*; by this point the distinction matters little) has lost much of its political power in recent decades but retained material power and continued to manage entire regions of the economy, the state and the media. It now launches its successive offensives from those positions.

Amid this climate, the popular classes, the Chavista people, are strongly inclined to resist. By this we mean that the crisis also relates to the capacity

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**Miguel Mazzeo**

for struggle of a people who have learned substantial political lessons. This capacity is the best argument to refute those who point to the strategies of 'co-optation' or 'subordinate integration' to explain the link between the Bolivarian Revolution and the subordinate classes.

Against this backdrop of civil confrontation, people are reluctant to consume the discourse of the powerful and

meekly accept the plans and values of the ruling classes and imperialism. The Chavista people have not given up. The Chavista people have not surrendered despite the difficulties. And they continue to consider the government of Nicolás Maduro a holdout against the reaction.

To a large extent, the most recent economic and political problems can be attributed to unresolved structural factors. Of course, these conditions may be difficult to resolve immediately, and leaving aside social and political power relations, at the local and international level it doesn't make much sense to discuss the need for Venezuela (and to a greater or lesser extent the whole world around it) to radically restructure its production. That is obvious. Abstract approaches and the fetishisation of extractivism are of little use at this point.

**Maristella Svampa:** The causes of the current crisis are numerous and complex. From Arturo Usler Pietri, Rodolfo Quinteros and Orlando Araujo to Fernando Coronil, many specialists have reflected on the consolidation of the petro-state in Venezuela, its relationship to a parasitic middle-class and a rentier social culture. Along those lines and in structural terms, Chavismo entailed a deepening of the rentier state, based on petroleum exports. Remember that when Hugo Chávez took power in 1999, the price of a barrel of oil was 7 dollars; in 2008 it reached 120. Indeed, as occurred throughout Latin America, with the boom in commodity prices between 2001 and 2011, Chávez increased social spending, achieving a

significant reduction in poverty. At the same time, beyond the expressed need to diversify the productive policy, Chavismo actually deepened the mono-productive rentier nature of the state, which had recently been boosted by new development plans based on the expansion of the oil and mining sectors.

On the other hand, Chavista populism arrived amid an unstable political scene due to non-stop harassment by right-wing sectors. However, Chávez's

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leadership—which took on both regional and international dimensions—was there to temporarily suture the gaps opened by political polarisation. The death of Chávez in 2013, combined with the fall in oil prices, left the achieved social gains on shaky ground and exacerbated structural and short-term failures. Currently, the consolidation of a rentier state manifests itself in different ways: from the

inability to produce basic goods for the population to an astronomical increase in corruption, which cuts across key sectors of the ruling class (which includes the military, now holding upper ministerial and government positions). In political terms, the crisis of the Chávez regime exacerbated the government's authoritarian tendencies against a background of heightened polarisation pushed by the right-wing opposition.

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** I believe that the Latin American governments of change, starting in 1998, joined forces to respond to the neoliberal model and succeeded in curbing the rise in inequality and poverty. They also managed to sever ties with the toxic international financial centres and take advantage of the new geopolitical climate to construct a new global order. But they failed in two things, because they weren't on their agenda. On the one hand, they failed to break the neoliberal logic. The governments of the Latin American left took millions of people out of poverty, but more than turning them into citizens, they made them consumers and customers, so that they've always been beholden to a logic that we might characterise as clientelistic.

Secondly, they have also failed to address historical problems and structural deficits, particularly in Venezuela, a country that never achieved the status of viceroyalty in colonial times because it had neither mines nor an efficient state. This explains, on the one hand, the role of the military as the only effective bureaucratic structure, but at the same time accounts for a profound inefficiency that, coupled with the rentier nature of Venezuela, gave rise to very large pockets of corruption that hampered the formation of an anti-capitalist logic.

**Isabel Rauber:** It's been quite a while since I employed the concept of *cause* to analyse society, because cause leads me to consequence and brings to my mind a certain linearity and mechanism that has nothing to do with social dynamics. Problems don't respond to causes, but have a historical origin, a genealogy marked by the interests of classes that intervene in the configuration of certain realities. Instead of structural I would use the term *rootal* [*raizal*, in Spanish].

I believe there's an economic war being waged in Venezuela, which is combined with a heavy dose of rent-seeking derived from the country's dependence on oil, much as it does in sugar- or coffee-producing countries. Hence the huge impact of the drop in oil prices. But furthermore, the psychology, the culture, the way of life that rent-seeking promotes in the internal development of social subjects are of fundamental importance. Cultural changes do not come quickly, and the promotion of an alternative productive development that supports autonomy and empowerment is a process that takes time.

**Raúl Zibechi:** From a structural and historical perspective, I see a struggle between a sector of the Venezuelan ruling class, whose control of the state apparatus is being removed or has been removed, and an emerging middle class that makes use of the state to become the ruling class. In a way this process is very similar to how Spaniards and Creoles were pitted against each other during the wars of independence. On this point, it should be understood that both sectors, with the progressives having a greater chance of success, seek the support of the popular sectors to tip the balance in their favour.

We know too well what happened once independence was achieved in our region: the new class in power set itself against the popular sectors, with campaigns such as the 'Conquest of the Desert' in Argentina and the 'Pacification of Araucanía' in Chile, to mention just two cases. The new republics acted even more aggressively against native peoples, blacks and mestizos. Because the nation-state was built on the basis of the colonisation of power, as Aníbal Quijano has explained it. So I think now it's a question of ensuring the independence or autonomy of the popular sectors, so that their historic project of class, ethnicity or gender emancipation is not usurped by the so-called progressives in their struggle against conservatives.

**Santiago Arconada:** If I were to say that the structural cause of the situation we're facing is capitalistic voraciousness, I wouldn't be lying. I'd be telling the truth, but that wouldn't clarify anything. If I say that the capitalistic voraciousness of the past five years has been demonstrated—fundamentally but not exclusively—by monumental embezzlement, plotted by the Bolivarian government with the

opposition's complicity, then not having the 300 billion dollars we should have in the Central Bank of Venezuela—to cite a figure that is considered modest among those who have researched recent frauds—becomes more 'structural.'

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**Isabel Rauber**

In conventional terms, it's hard to take seriously when something transitory like embezzlement is put under the category of the structural causes of a country's situation, namely the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. But I think we're at one of those junctures where the quantitative becomes qualitative.

The expoliation was so oceanic, and the 'corporatised corruption' (to use the expression of Elías Jaua, current Minister of Education and Chairman of the Presidential Commission for the National Constituent Assembly) so massive that the future has been regrettably de-structured, meaning that tens of thousands of boys and girls can no longer ingest the minimum proteins necessary for proper growth in the future. If something so shamefully annihilates our future, would that be structural or transitory?

## **What momentary elements or reasons bear on the definition of the nature and severity of the current crisis?**

**Atilio Boron:** To put it succinctly, short-term factors include the fall in oil prices; certain errors in macroeconomic decisions, for example underestimating the impact of inflation; the inefficiency of the public sector in thwarting the plans of the right, for example in terms of shortages of food and medicine; and the aggressiveness of the Colombian government and Uribism [the political current led by former Colombian president Álvaro Uribe] with its paramilitaries and narco-gangs, which has exacerbated the situation.



**Miguel Mazzeo:** There are several causes that should be taken into account. At the top of the list is the relentless harassment of the Bolivarian Revolution by imperialist forces, from the very beginning. The last two decades of Venezuelan history are marked by a series of macro-economically destabilising offensives for political ends carried out by various direct or indirect agents of imperialism, always in collusion with local groups. This harassment has taken the form of shortages, speculation, financial shocks, sanctions on production, violent uprisings—known in Venezuela as *guarimbas*—paramilitary activity, assassinations of Chavista leaders and systematic disinformation campaigns, to which we should add the various diplomatic initiatives by the international right aimed at isolating and delegitimising Venezuela. That is, economic warfare, political warfare, media warfare and diplomatic warfare, all calculated to wear down the Bolivarian Revolution and undermine its support base.

**Reinaldo Iturriza:** First off, it should be said that the revolution in Venezuela became radicalised in response to attacks against the Bolivarian movement. Its clearly nationalist and popular orientation eventually took the socialist path with an anti-capitalist, radically democratic agenda. Second, most of the population is now suffering as much from the exceedingly violent anti-Bolivarian siege as from the economic aggression of the oligarchy. Not only are natural resources at stake in Venezuela, but also the political capital built by Chavismo all these years. And

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when I say 'Chavismo', I'm referring to the political identity adopted by the majority of Venezuelans until quite recently. That situation has changed: right now Chavismo is the country's chief political minority. Most of the population rejects the political class as a whole.

What the Chavista political class has experienced echoes what other scholars have already said about petro-rentier capitalism in Venezuela: its decline in the late 1970s in no way prefigured a new model for society. Chavismo was just the political force needed to fashion a societal alternative, a revolutionary transformation of society. Well then, this weakening of Chavismo does not foreshadow the emergence of a political force capable of offering a national project to a popular majority that became politicised under Chávez. This is the historical juncture in which we now find ourselves.

**Ana Esther Ceceña:** At a time when capitalism's rapacious vein runs deep and natural resources like Venezuela's top the list of strategic booty, a programme like Chavismo upsets the composure of the rent-seeking oligarchy and places Venezuela at the epicentre of the US strategy for continental domination. A joint and coordinated strategy of diffuse warfare that triggers general destabilisation by inserting disruptive elements into the fabric of communities and launches financial, monetary and trade assaults from outside, that constructs a narrative to delegitimise and satanise the Chavista process, and favours a strategy of open warfare through incidents of heightened violence, of attacks on institutions, basic public services and on the people themselves—burning them alive, for example—is being implemented at top speed.

**Javier Biardeau:** The situation in Venezuela has rapidly deteriorated in recent months in terms of conflict between governmental authorities and the opposition. And the international situation has reignited over Venezuela. It had calmed down a bit following the government's decision to leave the Organisation of American States (OAS), but blew up again after May 1st, when President Nicolás Maduro called for

a constituent assembly.

Furthermore, sectors that were formerly close to the Bolivarian process have raised concerns, questioned, criticised and expressed unease with the course of the constitutional debate in Venezuela.

We are in a war of attrition. We've experienced an atmosphere of confrontation between the government and the opposition bloc for several weeks, but also since the two judgments by the Constitutional Chamber of the Constitutional Court of Venezuela: the first regarding the parliamentary immunity of deputies in the National Assembly, the second regarding the possibility that the Venezuelan government, bypassing parliamentary control, could establish joint ventures with foreign capital. These two judgments have spurred an intense conflict between the Attorney General's Office and the Constitutional Court. That conflict was mediated initially by President Maduro via an organ whose name alone could raise eyebrows in other countries, the National Security Council. Maduro sought to reconcile the conflict between the prosecution and the court, there was white smoke at one point, but friction renewed when the president decided in early May to convene a constituent body without calling for a referendum. That is, to convene it by presidential decree. That revived political memory with regard to the

constitutional process in Venezuela, and once again fissures appeared in the support that the president had amassed with the first negotiated solution to the conflict.

*The current dilemma is not irrelevant to the peoples of America, who while they understand the difficulties in the Bolivarian process, realise that therein remains a stronghold of dignity, even as a fascist and revanchist power seeks to crush it.*

**Claudia Korol**

The issue of the constituent assembly has generated a great deal of political controversy. The background of the economic and social situation is quite delicate, inflation is accelerating and Venezuela is going through a very difficult period. It's setting the stage for a perfect storm, as

international forces stemming from historical factors intervene to conspire against the Bolivarian process, but also the way the government is handling the internal situation is oriented not toward strengthening governability, but to opening new fronts of struggle, which ends up making things worse.

**Claudia Korol:** The Maduro government has committed itself to convening a constituent assembly, which would enable a democratic way out of the situation by appeasing the country and reaching a new majority consensus. The opposition, meanwhile, has come out against elections for the constituent assembly, and for torching that option, literally. The current dilemma is not irrelevant to the peoples of America, who while they understand the difficulties in the Bolivarian process, realise that therein remains a stronghold of dignity, even as fascist and revanchist powers seek to crush it.

**Javier Biardeau:** The president's evident, explicit objective in convening the constituent assembly has been to construct a zone of peace, dialogue, political conversation, because the opposition has en masse rejected the possibility of sitting down and talking with the president and adopted an extremist stance focused on two demands: the president's resignation and a call for early elections, which is not stipulated in the Venezuelan Constitution. They are asking the president to withdraw the proposed constituent assembly and hastening to propose a politically distinct agenda: to hold parliamentary elections by the end of this year and set a clear timetable for presidential elections in 2018.

In accordance with the National Electoral Council (CNE), the president has set the constituent assembly for late July this year, but insiders have voiced reservations due to the highly unusual nature of some of its features. The first of these is the procedure, i.e. the presidential call, because although the initiative may be put

forward by the president, there is some controversy, which the Supreme Court made attempts to resolve, over whether or not the president can directly convene it without holding a referendum. The second relates to the electoral bases: the president has set elections by sectors and territories, which hasn't been tried before in Venezuela. He has segmented the electoral body, and he is being accused primarily of allowing some degree of over-representation through the election by sector on the one hand, and underrepresentation in the territories, thus formulating electoral rules to ensure the government has a majority. Thirdly, there is intense argument over whether or not to amend the Constitution and over the establishment of a constituent assembly, which the president deems should have three features: that it is original, supra-constitutional and plenipotentiary, thus having the option of annulling other powers by means of constituent acts that cannot be regulated by the constituted powers, including the Constitutional Court of the Republic. There is thus the possibility of a profound reconfiguration of the Venezuelan state, a new reordering of the judiciary and a new constitution.

All this has had a major impact on politics in Venezuela, a country that 18 years earlier had another constitutional process. This is as much due to the fact that it has not been summoned via referendum, as to the possibility that the text that comes out of the debate in the constituent assembly will not be ratified by referendum.

**Claudio Katz:** In recent months Venezuela has faced a terrible wave of violence. Dozens of deaths have been registered, schools looted, public buildings torched, public transport destroyed and hospitals evacuated. All the mainstream media broadcast are macabre allegations against the government. They erect an image of a dictator

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batting the democrats of the opposition. But the details of what actually happened don't corroborate that story. Numerous investigations show the presence of snipers linked to the opposition and victims outside the conflict. These assessments are in tune with the level of brutality witnessed in the torching of people aligned with the Chavistas. It's worth recalling that most of the ones who fell in the lead-up to February 2014 were not victims of police repression and that a previous right-wing government settled the *Caracazo* of 1989 by killing hundreds.

Like any administration beset by the right, the government must resort to force to defend itself. The media in the Latin American establishment have reported that reaction with an unwarranted degree of hysteria. The justifications granted to all their governments facing similar situations are conveniently forgotten.

**Javier Biardeau:** At one point the opposition virtually took two states by force, namely Tachira and Merida, both bordering Colombia, and opposition demonstrations in Caracas have been exceedingly violent. There's been an escalation around the notion of a so-called 'final and decisive battle' to overthrow the government in the opposition's discourse, which hasn't had much media impact, but it's had its ups and downs in the climate of protest. I think something that many people don't understand—and it's worth stressing—is that the president is calling for a constituent process right in the middle of a state of emergency, and that highly paradoxical situation is key to understanding Venezuelan politics right now.

The heightening state of emergency has obliged the armed forces to implement a plan, known as the Plan Zamora, with different phases of deployment throughout the territory to ensure the maintenance of internal order. The armed forces have

remained a key factor in guaranteeing constitutional stability and strive to avoid confrontations as right-wing sectors seek to escalate the conflict. The military has attempted to neutralise, deescalate and reduce violent demonstration—acting more as police than military—by dispersing, dividing or neutralising it, though to those of us in the historically leftist sectors their methods have always seemed absolutely hostile, because they've always reminded us of how an organ of state repression would behave.

This situation demonstrates a hegemonic weakness on the part of the ruling party in its inability to control the situation. I don't want to mention polls because they essentially reflect the general feeling of malaise as regards the government's performance at this time. But the reality is that the government's economic policy has fundamentally failed to address the problems of shortages and inflation, and the armed forces are playing a role of containment, which I think is appropriate to procedures set down in the constitution. There is no threat that the armed forces will stage a coup, but there is indeed some discontent over the repressive methods and approach. Especially in the National Guard, the military component that handles internal order, because their use of force in certain cases has obviously been neither differential nor proportionate nor gradual, in response to a new style of protest and demonstrations by the right that initially threw off and stunned security forces. The government has determined that a mobilisation of popular sectors to face the political activism of right-wing sectors could lead to violent confrontation between those already politicised sectors, which would be seen as an excuse to claim that the government had lost control over the internal situation.

**Maristella Svampa:** The regime that Maduro heads—to be sure, amid a climate of unprecedented social and economic crisis—reinforced the worst elements of Chavismo (a rent-seeking state, concentration of power, massive corruption, radicalisation of extractivism, among others), as it served up a blend of the best it had to offer in terms of plebeian populism and in the form of participatory democracy, empowerment of the grassroots, and redistribution of wealth. This dynamic, in which the Executive initially remained ignorant of other branches of power (the National Assembly in particular) where the opposition now holds a majority after its electoral victory in December 2015, was exponentially exacerbated and heightened by the subsequent obstruction and delay of the recall referendum—a democratising tool set forth in the Chavista constitution itself—the postponement of last year's gubernatorial elections, the failed self-imposed coup by the Executive, and finally the call for a constituent assembly, which has been characterised by many experts as unconstitutional. All this engendered a new political

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**Maristella Svampa**

panorama, marked by violence and ungovernability, whose dramatic consequences are illustrated in the daily increase in victims from clashes between opposition and government forces, within a context of growing institutional repression. Along these lines, and without discounting the putschist tendencies of certain sectors of the right, I'm one of those who believe that the one most responsible for the situation in Venezuela is the state, currently in the hands of government authorities unable to defend basic rights and control the repressive apparatus.

**Isabel Rauber:** Those who hold power, particularly with regard to food, have attempted to impede the Bolivarian process from the start, but the government's lack of foresight or prevention led, unfortunately, to the current situation of shortages



and hoarding. Chávez, foreseeing confrontations with the economic powers, saw the *comunas* (communes) as an exercise in governance, people power, managed autonomously by local people; the communes as protagonists in production planning, collection, distribution and circulation, ensuring patterns of consumerism. It's not easy to do this, it takes time, but it also leads to tensions and conflicts. Self-management inevitably promotes fear in the sectors of the superstructure, because it is something over which they have no control. Although now is not the time to discuss these issues, because Venezuela is experiencing a brutal aggression, now verging on civil war.

**Raúl Zibechi:** In the short run, I see a strong reaction from a sector of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie and urban middle classes that want to overthrow the government of Nicolás Maduro. Contrary to what many people think, I believe that this sector has its own plan, which for now is to regain power, and that plan has international support. But it should be stressed that, rather than puppets of the imperialists, they're acting on their own initiative. The imperialists can negotiate with Chávez, as they've negotiated with the governments of Vietnam in the past, and now Bolivia and Ecuador. But the ones who are really affected by the empowerment of the popular sectors are the sectors that feel displaced.

**Santiago Arconada:** The polarisation induced by the media, solely in the interest of the government and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), and the opposition—particularly the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD)—is one of the reasons, in my provisional judgment, that we appear to be permanently on the brink of civil war between the country's two supposed halves.

The misrepresentation and distortion of reality turn almost 60 percent of the population invisible, while they—according to recent and varied opinion surveys—don't feel they are represented by either the government or the PSUV, or the opposition and the MUD, and it's one of the most perverse causes of this panorama where outbreaks of violence and destruction of the constitutional order occur on both the macro and micro levels. Civilians are being prosecuted in military courts: on the macro level. Not even traffic lights are respected: on the micro level.

## **What has been the impact of the passing of Hugo Chávez on the Bolivarian process? What is the significance of the figure of Nicolás Maduro?**

**Karina Arévalo:** Since the passing of our *Comandante* Hugo Chávez on March 5, 2013, certain internal and external factors have become more pronounced to bring the Bolivarian revolution to a crucial moment in history. All of the revolutionary processes have undergone major crises following the physical disappearance of their leaders. The death of Simón Bolívar, for example, impacted the Latin American revolutionary emancipatory process in the early 19th century. The leadership crisis left by the absence of Hugo Chávez is not President Maduro's responsibility, but a figure of such magnitude, who played such an important role even as a world leader, is hard to supplant. The building of collective leadership for the process of social change perhaps remains an unfinished business for all emancipatory processes, not just Venezuela's.

**Edgardo Lander:** It's clear that Nicolás Maduro is nowhere near the authoritative figure that Hugo Chávez was. Maduro became president with an electoral margin of just 1.5 percent and he didn't have the ability to control all the political currents within Chavismo, unlike Chávez, whose great capacity for leadership was respected by all his followers. Today we have a much weaker government, with far less legitimacy,

against the backdrop of a severe economic crisis. The social reaction seen in Venezuela in recent months is not just due to the actions of the right-wing parties, but is a demonstration of the growing discontent now expressed by most of the country's population. Today we're witnessing a serious loss of legitimacy, of both the government and the opposition, as people are beset by extraordinary difficulties in their daily lives due to insecurity, inflation and scarcities, with a growing sense that the constitutional avenues have closed as a means to formulate alternatives.

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** The absence of Chávez shows that the political equilibrium he had achieved could not be carried over, either at the national or regional level. One problem with Maduro is that he hasn't inherited the power bloc that Chávez built, while the collapse of oil prices has weakened economic growth. At the same time, Maduro, despite having been foreign minister for a long time, is unable to sustain regional balances, which were highly dependent on a figure of the magnitude of Chávez.

**Reinaldo Iturriza:** We also ought to mention the conservative forces and 'reformist' forces present within Chavismo, whose political culture respond more to the codes from the old Democratic Alliance (the political counterpart of rent-seeking petro-capitalism), or those coming from the more traditional left, who see politics as welfarism, clientelism or tutelage, and who have zero confidence in the possibilities for popular self-government, which is one of Chavismo's most significant advances. At almost all times Chávez managed not only to mediate in internal conflicts, tipping the balance towards the more progressive forces and policies, but also forced the more conservative elements of Chavismo to work toward them. With Chávez's death, it was up to Nicolás Maduro to deal with these stresses amid an array of mounting economic troubles, and with anti-Chavistas inclined to marshall all their energy toward the demobilisation and demoralisation of Chavismo, impacting its material and spiritual bases, and creating the conditions for the progressive deterioration of social initiatives created by Chavismo, mainly through attacks on the economy.

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** I think that Chávez never wanted to be Simón Bolívar, but always tried to be Simón Rodríguez [a Venezuelan philosopher and educator, notably Simón Bolívar's tutor and mentor]. That is, he endeavoured to change the rent-seeking structure, the political conscience of Venezuelans, who were held hostage by the practice of removing the surplus value that causes a weak relationship to the state. Often your only relationship is with the state's most

*Venezuela's greatest problem is the absence of a virtuous public sphere, where everything really belongs to everyone and not to no one. That is, not to the first one who grabs it. In short, I think the building of an efficient state failed when it came to instilling political awareness.*

**Juan Carlos Monedero**

repressive elements, the police, the border patrol, though at the same time you lower your standards when it comes to addressing what I think is Venezuela's greatest problem: the absence of a virtuous public sphere, where everything really belongs to everyone and not to no one. That is, not to the first one who grabs it.

In short, I think the building of an efficient state failed when it came to instilling political awareness, but at the same time, not to be unfair, it must be said that this failure has

affected one part of the population and not another. And I think if Nicolás Maduro holds on, with an 80 percent drop in oil prices and the United States pledged to take him down, it's because there is a significant portion of the citizenry in whom a new democratic discourse has indeed caught on, and a new breed of conscious people, with a strong link to the rest of the region and aware that it is impossible to understand Latin America without mentioning imperialism.

**Claudio Katz:** A key element in the conflict is Chavismo's resistance to the right-wing onslaught. In the face of this onslaught, with its highly questionable methods and attitudes, Maduro will not back down. True, he maintains the verticality of the PSUV, favours outlawing critical views and preserves a bureaucracy that stifles bottom-up responses. But unlike Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, or Fernando Lugo in Paraguay, he doesn't give in. His position is diametrically opposed to the capitulation that toppled Syriza in Greece. That position explains why he's so hated by the powerful.

The government made the excellent decision to withdraw from the OAS and leave the 'US Ministry of Colonies' [a term coined by Fidel Castro in a 1962 speech], finally making the break that the left has always demanded. This decision should elicit the sort of robust support that few have voiced.

## Which sectors make up the opposition, what is their ideological profile, and what essential elements define their political agenda?

**Maristella Svampa:** Certainly there are extremist sectors in the opposition that seek a violent way out of the conflict. These groups have had, at least since the coup of 2002, political and financial support from the US State Department. But it also needs to be recognised that today, as shown by the demonstrations, there isn't just one Chavismo. The opposition is very broad and diverse and includes political sectors identified with the early stages of Chavismo, as well as popular sectors suffering from shortages.

**Reinaldo Iturriza:** Rather than just getting support from Washington, the Venezuelan opposition receives direct orders. It's really terrible for a political force that claims the title of 'liberators' for itself. It brings to mind the 'Freedom Fighters', which is what Reagan called the Nicaraguan Contras. This hasn't changed a bit. It's gotten worse recently with the defeat of allied governments, particularly in Brazil and Argentina, and before that in Paraguay and Honduras. On top of this, there is the way news corporations report what's going on in Venezuela, and how this situation is used as a pretext by hardly democratic governments, such as Spain's, Mexico's or Colombia's to avoid discussing the serious problems in their own countries.

**Marco Teruggi:** The Venezuelan right plays a tactical role as a subordinate to the US government's strategy. The war plan that is currently under way, which includes among other things the deployment of forces throughout the territory with sieges by armed groups in various cities, is of American design. You cannot understand the gravity of the situation until you realise that the United States has given the funding, the orders, the green light for the riots, and enables the Venezuelan right to remain unified, even now amid the current disputes within the right.

*Right now the right lacks the military force it has used in the past to depose governments. But it's pushing to recover that style of intervention.*

**Claudio Katz**

The dimension of the conflict is thus international, as can also be seen as Russia and China take their positions. The way it is resolved will have an impact on the possibilities for progressive and revolutionary development throughout the continent. The right seeks not only to take back direct political power and once again subordinate the economy to American needs, but to tear down the notion of Socialism of the 21st Century and get even with the masses. The right wants to deter any new attempts at social change, not only at home but throughout Latin America. To do that, they need to destroy ideas and make words like socialism, Bolivar and people power look like historical mistakes, a course that should never be reattempted.

**Claudio Katz:** The Venezuelan situation is indeed dramatic, but that doesn't account for

its centrality in the news. Much more serious situations in Colombia, Honduras and Mexico are completely ignored by the media. Media coverage holds up the opposition's pro-coup tendencies. Since they can't perpetrate a classic Pinochet-style coup, they attempt dismissive processes aimed at societal disruption. They seek to perpetrate an institutional collapse similar to the one staged in Honduras in 2009, Paraguay in 2014, and Brazil in 2016. They want to force their way in, then validate that triumph at the polls.

Right now the right lacks the military force it has used in the past to depose governments. But it's pushing to recover that style of intervention. Its plan is a combination of economic sabotage and street violence. All the fascist methods are brought to bear to usher in the most violent forms of anti-Chavismo. They foment a climate of civil war to demoralise the Chavista grassroots still facing a lack of food and medicine. The opposition intends to lynch Maduro so as to bury Chavismo. They settle scores in the streets, through the conquest of public opinion and by hastening the collapse of the economy. They consider the elections nothing more than a way to crown that offensive. But they face mounting obstacles. The prevalent violence in their marches scares off the bulk of the disaffected elements and wears down the protesters themselves. As happened in 2014, rejection of the fascists undermines the whole opposition. In addition, Maduro's longevity also discourages attendance at marches. They have failed to penetrate inner-city neighbourhoods, where they always face the risk of adverse confrontation.

**Zuleima Vergel:** The opposition has also engaged in psychological warfare, using social networks and the 'repeated lie' (or *post-truth*), turning Venezuela into a great laboratory and symbolic battlefield. Let's just take a look at the world's newspapers and WhatsApp chains in Venezuela's small towns to discover the sinister network of these imperialist neo-war tactics. We must also consider economic manipulation in what's termed the 'parallel dollar,' driven from outside our borders but with an unprecedentedly disruptive and economically violent impact on the population.



## [2] Venezuela, the region and the world: actors, processes and international impacts

### What significance have regional and international actors and processes had for the origin and development of the current crisis?

**Claudia Korol:** We know that Venezuela is being attacked by the world powers, that they've embarked on wars of high, medium and low intensity on other continents to restore hegemony via their military superiority, and that they're getting ready to do the same in our America, slipping in through the knocked down gate of the last popular revolution. Therefore, the first issue to point to is power itself. Alternatives to this crisis are possible to the extent that the spaces for people power in the revolutionary spirit aren't closed. Otherwise, there's no 'alternative' but to see all the hard-won rights swept away all.

**Edgardo Lander:** For quite some time we've suffered from a strong dose of US political and economic interference throughout the length and breadth of Latin America. In the particular case of Venezuela, we must also consider the permanent intervention of paramilitary groups and Uribism from our neighbouring country. It is important to remember that Chávez had his first electoral victory under unfavourable political conditions, at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of so-called 'real socialism'. For many of us in the Latin American left this situation signalled a loss of horizons and an urgent need to build new emancipatory alternatives. But also, almost all Latin American countries at that time had governments that could be described as right-wing and neoliberal.

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subsequent development of these governments, including the provision of political and financial support. Unlike the time when Chávez took office, a few years later we found several other governments that could be denominated 'progressive' in Brazil, in Ecuador, in Bolivia, in Argentina, in Uruguay, and for a brief period in Paraguay.

In addition, new major regional organisations were created, such as the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), which I think was a significant arena for the construction of an alternative regional political framework. This is where Venezuela played an important role, also offering financial support to Caribbean countries by means of oil sector subsidies. We went through a time when there was very intense and very rich mutual reinforcement of the processes of social change at the regional level, including the opening of new possibilities for trade relations and increased food imports to Venezuela from Argentina and Uruguay.

But when the crisis got worse, owing to the loss of essential support from oil, the economic crisis deepened in the context of some very important political changes that were appearing throughout the continent, as several governments shifted to the right. In the past two years there's been a coup in Brazil, the electoral defeat of

Kirchnerism in Argentina, and the weakening of transformative capacity in the governments of Ecuador and Bolivia, among other changes. The current international context thus greatly weakens the capacity for solidarity and collective response as the way is paved for aggression or external pressure against emancipatory change in Venezuela.

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** Chávez, who was an exceptional figure and knew it was impossible to have democracy in just one country, realised that Venezuela could not experience change if neighbouring countries didn't change as well. This is why he supported the electoral victories of Lula da Silva, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa and Ernesto Kirchner in their respective countries. One of his major efforts was to create Unasur and break away from Latin America's most pernicious nexus, the OAS, or the 'Ministry of Colonies'. I think that Latin America's geopolitical condition as the United States' backyard is key. To the geopolitical question must be added the economic one: Latin America possesses minerals, oil, aquifers, biodiversity, the essentials for predatory and extractivist capitalism, which is neoliberal capitalism, with the United States at the top of the heap.

**Atilio Boron:** Unfortunately, regional actors and processes have had little influence on the Venezuelan crisis, and what little they have had worked against the country. Unasur has remained paralysed since the death of Chávez, and Argentina and Brazil now have right-wing governments that are spearheading the imperialist charge against Venezuela. These governments want to kick Venezuela out of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), and along with others in the region serve as sounding boards for right-wing campaigns and condone their crimes and the seditious, violent strategy to shut down the Bolivarian process.

**Ana Esther Ceceña:** The US intervention to create the conditions for a radical change of course in the Venezuelan process—by joining, instigating, sponsoring, financing and advising local opposition groups—has been documented in many ways. Illegal or covert activities has been detected in Venezuela with the complicity and active collaboration of other Latin American regimes. Colombia, Mexico and Brazil have

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**Ana Esther Ceceña**

led the siege and encirclement of Venezuela in international forums such as the OAS—a sad story. However, it only highlights the rebelliousness of another coalition of countries in the region that has remained steadfast in defending the principles of non-intervention and people's self-determination. And a similar correlation can be seen in various other areas and at other levels.

Increased tensions in Venezuela boil over into the surrounding region in different ways. Clearly, a war in Venezuela would tend to spill over quickly to other countries seeking social change (to Bolivia, in particular). It would also encourage disruption in countries that are still stuck in violent conflicts (Colombia, for example).

The more strategic battleground is that of building ideals and communities that provide a place for dissident or confrontational narratives about the Venezuelan process. To be sure, the most significant and widespread positions in this area have come from the opposition, to a much greater extent from outside than inside.

The mass media, predominately spokespersons for the visions that emanate from the great powers, relentlessly wheel out half-baked, distorted or even doctored stories and images, which set the ground for a disruption of the process with the silent and complicit consent of much of the world. However, it cannot be stressed enough that several Latin American countries have demanded unequivocal non-

intervention in Venezuela, and that some countries in other regions of the world, particularly Russia and China, have taken similar positions.

**Karina Arévalo:** At the start this decade, and after more than a decade of progressive governments in the region, foreign interests are again putting pressure on our countries, and today we see how Brazil and Argentina—both key players in the integration processes of the first decade of the century—are back in the hands of the ruthless neoliberal oligarchy, which in just a few months has tried to halt what's taken many years to build. The relationship between international forces has changed, and for a country that, despite the great efforts it's made, hasn't managed to break its dependence on oil exports as the only dynamic area of the economy, that's no small thing. The drop in oil prices had a strong impact on the redistributive policies that the Bolivarian government has implemented over the past 18 years.

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** The whole framework that was in place during the time Chávez was the principal leader in the region has been weakened. No other Latin American head of state has had his capacity for leadership, and the United States will take advantage of that too, as that country has learned from the blunders it made in the Middle East and by letting up pressure on Latin America, to make up for lost ground.

**Isabel Rauber:** In the current period of globalisation, the class interests of the oligarchic, commercial and financial powers operating in Venezuela are linked to the imperialist powers. That is, to the power of structured global capital, global

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**Isabel Rauber**

neoliberalism. To make an attempt in today's world—and what I say about Venezuela goes for almost all popular processes—to depart from the established order and take an autonomous path, independent of the dominant power, is very complicated indeed: that road would inevitably entail a clash at the start or finish.

The situation in Venezuela is a response to a chain of structural, entrenched processes, in which global, regional and national situations are woven together and sprout up under certain circumstances. Aside from the economic, geopolitical and geostrategic issues, there is a symbolic struggle at stake: it is a matter of stamping out anyone who dares consider that it may be possible to chart a different way of life to what now rules the planet, by any means necessary.

Cuba has waged 58 years of revolution and it continues to pay the high price for daring to live differently, outside the aegis and decisions of the imperialist powers. Cuba, a poor country that is no threat to the United States, which has historically cultivated bonds of friendship with the American people, is nevertheless punished by the imperial hegemon for daring to be, think and exist without the empire's permission. In the case of Lula in Brazil, the greatest crime he committed was to dare to put a hot meal in front of every human being. Putting an end to hunger is a deeply revolutionary act and an affront to the powerful, who'd rather have people starving so they can make them beg on their knees to be exploited so they can survive another day. If you don't understand that, you don't understand anything.

**Zuleima Vergel:** It's important to emphasise the solidarity of the peoples of the world. Social movements in every country, progressive personalities and leftist intellectuals have expressed their support for the Bolivarian Revolution and the Chavista process, so it's important to recognise that this process is not only for Venezuelans, but also has a bearing on the lives and hopes of millions of

oppressed people around the world. As a social movement we are part of various organisations such as the ALBA Movements and the Latin American Coordinating Committee of Rural Organisations-Via Campesina, forums for the voice of our people, and we've also received a great show of solidarity from other movements.

## What role does the US government play in the contemporary Venezuelan political dynamic?

**Edgardo Lander:** To the difficult internal situation in Venezuela we must add a systematic offensive by the US government. That government has tried to undermine the Bolivarian Revolution from the beginning, which is evident from the support that Washington provided to the military coup of 2002 and the political and economic support for the corporate oil stoppage that paralysed the country for two months in 2003. To this day, support for the most radical sectors of the Venezuelan right comes from Washington, which also influences media coverage of Venezuela internationally.

**Marco Teruggi:** You can only understand the current scenario when you take into account that the attacks from the right are part of a fourth-generation war led and financed by the United States. Disregarding this can make you compare responsibilities, an analysis that leads to an error of positioning. Chavismo isn't facing a democratic opposition, it's facing a war.

**Zuleima Vergel:** Imperialist forces have pushed us to this juncture. They spent the first decade in the Middle East, and in the face of the terrible defeat that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq represented they turned their attention to their own backyard: our region. Revolutionary and progressive governments had emerged as a result of many years of popular struggle and had undermined certain bases of imperialist power in our economies. Beyond internal disputes, everyone in the United States agrees on the 'America for Americans' doctrine and thus finds the challenge posed by Venezuela totally unacceptable.

**Javier Biardeau:** We, Venezuelans, found it symptomatic that just before May 1st, the day the call for the constituent assembly was announced, the security agencies and the media of the United States began to disseminate the notion that the Maduro government was handing out weapons to civilians and that there'd been a proposal to arm civilian militias against the democratic opposition. That was meant to spark not only nationwide instability in Venezuela, but regional instability across the continent.

**Miguel Mazzeo:** It's clear that US imperialism won't back down until it's defeated the Bolivarian revolution on all fronts. It will spare no resources, arbitrary acts or abuses to wipe out all vestiges of Chavismo. Because Venezuela is not only the largest oil reserve in the world; it also holds great strategic and geopolitical importance in the region. And furthermore, the Bolivarian Revolution has officially been designated one of the chief political and systemic adversaries of the United States, in recognition of its significance as a political vector against global imperialist policies. If you overlook this general condition and focus on particular aspects, you run the risk of seriously distorting the view of the Venezuelan situation.

*You can only understand the current scenario when you take into account that the attacks from the right are part of a fourth-generation war, led and financed by the United States.*

**Marco Teruggi**

**Karina Arévalo:** The ruthless war being waged against the Venezuelan people has gotten worse in recent months, due to the emergence of violent fascist groups funded by the opposition and imperialism. Not only have they besieged the population, but also obstructed the movement of food and essential goods, which



has had a fierce impact on people's daily lives. The development of irregular forces is part of a fourth-generation warfare strategy formulated by the imperial powers. Examples of these abound, from the support granted to counterrevolutionaries in Sandinista Nicaragua in the 1980s and 1990s, to the support provided to rebel groups (including the Islamic State) in Iraq and Syria today.

**Claudia Korol:** The government of Donald Trump—like that of Barack Obama before him—the CIA, the Pentagon and other imperialist agencies need to keep a tight rein over their 'backyard' and defuse the Venezuela factor and the network of alliances between the Cuban and Venezuelan revolutions and the ALBA governments. The tensions arising in Venezuela are submerged in the gigantic global dispute over territories, common assets, biodiversity.

It is said that the United States and transnational corporations are after Venezuela's oil, biodiversity, its privileged position in world geopolitics. And that's true. But they also seek to do away with the example it sets for other peoples of the world: that the power of the people can act with relative autonomy before the dictates of the world's powers and try to create and follow their own paths to emancipation, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-patriarchal revolution, which has become known as Socialism of the 21st Century. It is therefore not just a political, economic and military war but also a cultural, ideological and symbolic one.

It is to root out this example that they need to undermine the revolution from within. Destabilising it, starving and antagonising the popular sectors that historically form the backbone of the revolution, goading people against people, discouraging the most disadvantaged sectors of society by means of an economic crisis arising from shortages—which proved so crucial to the Chilean and Nicaraguan experiences—devaluation of the currency, official corruption, the systematic smuggling of food and medicine, and street violence. The intervention of Colombian paramilitary forces, especially at the border but also by inciting 'incidents' all over the country, training youth to cause violent disruptions and the lynching of Chavista activists, are all actions that seek to demoralise Chavismo and make it suicidal. A suicide that would outright forfeit the strategic horizons of its popular revolution.

All these factors should be easy to interpret, because the script keeps on being used the same way in all counterrevolutionary processes. What has changed in this case is the resistance that continues to run deep in people despite the harsh conditions under which they must pursue their daily lives. It's amid this panorama, in which Chavismo's main battle is waged, that the challenge of deepening and radicalising the revolution is forged and the communes take on a greater role, and the bastions of the state bureaucracy that have turned corrupt are curtailed or removed, and the interests of the group rather than the individuals are defended. As Chávez was quoted in his posthumous legacy, the dilemma remains *Comuna o Nada* ['Commune or Nothing'].

**Edgardo Lander:** We shouldn't forget that Barack Obama, in one of his last administrative acts, renewed a presidential decree stating that Venezuela represents 'an unusual and severe threat' to national security and to US foreign policy. Obama went no further, but that still sounds a lot like a threat. Recently the head of the Southern Command of the US military told the Defence Committee in the Senate that, given the deteriorating situation in Venezuela, regional intervention to address the causes of the crisis would likely be required in the short term. To sum up, the possibility of a Washington-led aggression against Venezuela is not just a theoretical concern or a look backward at the old story of

imperialist intervention in Latin America, but is a renewed and present danger. This is most clearly expressed at this time by the United States' robust financial and political support for the most radical sectors of the Venezuelan right and the permanent tension at the Colombian-Venezuelan border.

**Zuleima Vergel:** The arrival of Donald Trump as president of the United States, rather than altering the policy of harassment implemented by Obama when he signed the disastrous 2015 decree that declared Venezuela to be a threat to national security, actually signals a more belligerent stance, as reflected in his language, which is far more warmongering than that of his predecessor.

It is also necessary to analyse the role of the major international media, which have become executors of the psychological warfare policies designed by the US government. WE, the members of the Bolívar and Zamora Revolutionary Current (CRBZ), have argued that these supposed communications media have become weapons of fourth-generation warfare, in which it's no longer necessary to drop bombs, being enough to merely broadcast so-called news—as Michel Foucault had already warned in the 1970s—to activate the collective consciousness of much of the population, now besieged by fear, paranoia and misinformation.

**Claudio Katz:** It is widely known that United States plays a central role in staging coups to regain control of key continental oil reserves. The State Department wants to repeat the strategy applied in Iraq or Libya, knowing that no one will remember where Venezuela is after Maduro is overthrown. Just look at how the media currently ignore any mention of countries where the Pentagon has already intervened. Once the adversary has been dealt with, the newsmakers move on to other topics.

Donald Trump is neither indifferent nor neutral. He simply gets the CIA and the Pentagon to implement the conspiracies outlined in the Sharp and Venezuela Freedom 2 plans. These operations include spying, troop deployment and terrorism. They unfold stealthily, while the mainstream press dismisses any

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**Juan Carlos Monedero**

reports of the arrangements. They especially call the 'exaggerations of the left' into question, so that no one disturbs the conspirators.

The presence of Chevron in Venezuela and the ongoing business operations of PDVSA in the United States in no way alter this scenario. They've persisted since the beginning of the Chavista process and like both Bush and Obama previously and Trump today, they have sought to regain the

direct imperialist control of oil. They can't afford to have any friction with their partners or customers. They intend to establish the prevailing model of privatisation in Mexico and to kick Russia and China out of Venezuela, or any other countries in the region they consider their backyard.

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** Chávez got it right when it came to reconfiguring the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to get oil prices to better conform to the reality of energy consumption in the western world and existing resources, and to break the dependence on oil that had much of Latin America in thrall to the American chequebook though no funds ever reached anyone but the few elites with ties to Washington. This geopolitical change enabled the breakdown of American hegemony. I remember spectacular votes at the United Nations where Venezuela was on equal terms with the United States.

Today we see that American pressure means a regional economic pressure, and in that regard those in Washington have known from the outset that the fall of

Venezuela would have a domino effect on neighbouring countries. Just like the pressure on the second republic in 1930s Spain, on the Chile of Salvador Allende in the 1970s and on Venezuela in the last two decades, the aim is to eliminate any country that dares to challenge the global balance of power.

**Atilio Boron:** For the United States, taking over Venezuelan oil is a non-negotiable strategic imperative, and hence its central role in this crisis.

**Reinaldo Iturriza:** For the United States the Bolivarian revolution must be defeated to take full control of our resources, but mostly because any experience of democratic radicalisation, as in the case of the Bolivarian revolution, sets a bad example for the world, particularly for their area of influence, which it believes it has a full right to. Washington is willing to invest considerable resources to achieve its mission.

**Maristella Svampa:** The idea that there is a powerful regional conspiracy (led by Colombia) and an international one (originating in the United States) doesn't suffice to explain the Venezuelan debacle. True, the right-wing coup of 2002 had the support of Washington. It is no coincidence that the Chávez government promoted an alliance with China (chiefly commercial) to distance itself from the United States. However, despite the anti-imperialist rhetoric, Venezuela never severed trade ties with the United States, which remains one of the main buyers of oil and the place from which luxury consumer goods are imported.

## **To what extent is the fate of Venezuela tied to the political, economic and social processes elsewhere in Latin America?**

**Claudia Korol:** The crisis provoked by the advance of the fascist right on the Bolivarian Revolution is part of the reality of our America, where after a period of uncertainty for transnational and local groups in the face of popular mobilisation, the map of power has been 'redrawn', torn up or conditioned—along with the necessary violence as a function of the people's resilience and processes of change, weak as they may have been.

**Miguel Mazzeo:** With the right-wing advances in the world and the region, the list of states allied to Venezuela has diminished. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America - Peoples Trade Treaty (ALBA-TCP), the subregional organisation that openly questions American Imperialism—undoubtedly one of the most distinctive Chavista creations in terms of international politics—has been markedly weakened. The same goes for other supranational and less ambitious but yet wide-ranging and practical forums.

Foreign policy guided by principles of complementarity, cooperation, intercultural dialogue and respect for people's self-determination has been losing ground in the region and the world. It's getting increasingly difficult for Venezuela to develop a form of internationalism capable of presenting constructive horizons for the dominance of the subordinated and oppressed classes at the regional and global levels—horizons for communal power and people power (within civil society and within the state) under the auspices of a bottom-up popular government.

At present, Venezuela's resistance against commercial exploitation, foreign ownership and neo-fascism is becoming strategic, beyond its ambiguities and inconsistencies. To an extent, it's comparable to the situation in Cuba during the 1990s. In this regard, in the face of the increasingly violent and direct onslaught by the right and by imperialism, the key is to adopt a strategy of comprehensive defence and unconventional asymmetric warfare at the international level, along

with the ratification and refinement of a patriotic doctrine for the armed forces, based on the defence of national and popular sovereignty. That is, a doctrine whose basis is the coordination of security and people power.

**Karina Arévalo:** The Bolivarian revolution has in this century led the way in promoting processes of inclusion and social change throughout the region, just as the Cuban Revolution did in the last century. Attacking the 'bad' example of Venezuela is one of the chief objectives of the conservative forces of the international right. The role of the OAS, and particularly its secretary general, Luis Almagro, has been to take the 'diplomatic front' in the declared war against our country. The 'Ministry of Colonies' has been the main mouthpiece for the State Department. Far from adhering to the rules of conduct, the OAS has violated all internal protocols, as evidenced by such blatant acts as 'skipping' the Bolivian foreign ministry as rotational president of the bloc because he wasn't in favour of the plans against Venezuelan sovereignty.

Almagro, along with the governments of the European Union as well as the new presidents of Argentina and Brazil, have taken very active roles in the face of the Venezuelan oligarchy's inability to articulate an effective position. This has also led such integration-oriented bodies as Unasur and Mercosur, controlled by the two major Southern Cone countries, to change their positions on the defence of emancipatory processes throughout the continent, as they did on previous occasions.

**Claudio Katz:** The Venezuelan bourgeoisie instigated a coup with regional support from Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Michel Temer in Brazil, Juan Manuel Santos in Colombia and Enrique Peña Nieto in Mexico. A plan for destabilisation has been pushed within the OAS for months. But it's had no success on that front. The sanctions against Venezuela were unsuccessful due to opposition from several foreign ministries, and the unanimity of the 1960s for the expulsion of Cuba was effectively blocked this time around.

**Marco Teruggi:** The Latin American scene has changed, as is evident from the electoral victory of Mauricio Macri in Argentina and the parliamentary coup in Brazil. Within the regional scenario, those two governments had enabled the continent to maintain a higher level of independence from US interference. With the right governing in direct alignment with the US, Venezuela found its position weakened at the regional level, with only governments of limited influence to provide support. To this can be added the shift away from a progressive agenda by governments such as Uruguay, so Venezuela's foreign policy was left without the allies that had been key players of continental scope.

**Claudia Korol:** Venezuela has been in the eye of the hurricane from the moment it initiated—under the leadership of Hugo Chávez—a process of gaining autonomy from global capitalist power. We are not looking at the first coup attempt against Venezuela by the Americans, nor is it the first coup on the continent in the 21st century. The current situation in Venezuela goes back to a key moment in June 2009, with the coup against the government of Mel Zelaya in Honduras, then in June 2012, with the coup against the government of Fernando Lugo in Paraguay. These situations, to which can be added the election of Mauricio Macri to the Argentine government, and the coup in Brazil—which put Michel Temer in the country's leading role—changed the balance of power on the continent and put popular processes on the defensive.

**Zuleima Vergel:** Among the governments in the region, Colombia, traditionally allied to imperial interests, has been one of the busiest. The presence of military bases in Colombia is no small thing, nor is the vastness of the shared border or the

mobilisation of counterrevolutionary armed groups, the offspring of the conflict in the neighbouring country. These elements, supported by diplomatic attacks—first by the foreign minister and then by President Santos, who is in breach of the peace agreements with his neighbour—have paid close attention to the internal conflicts in our country.

On the other hand, the Caribbean countries, partners of Venezuela, have opposed the manipulation by the OAS, thwarting its plans for automatic implementation of the Democratic Charter. These countries, which have benefited from the policies of trade and integration designed by the Bolivarian Revolution, favoured dialogue and non-intervention in internal affairs. Cuba's role as a key supporter in denouncing the harassment of Venezuela, has also been an important element. Rather than falling into the trap of supposed realigned relations with the United States, its government has always come out in favour of Venezuela, never allowing it to be blackmailed.

**Claudia Korol:** The imperialist offensive has perfected its mechanisms for violent control of the population through overtly repressive policies focused on incarceration or even assassination—as has been the case with Berta Cáceres in Honduras and a number of social leaders in Colombia, Mexico and other countries—terrorising society through the criminalisation of poverty and protest, and through violence against women. In their game plan, it's essential to get rid of the Bolivarian resistance. Their success would mean a substantial setback for the people.

**Edgardo Lander:** The resolution of the Venezuelan crisis will have a major impact on other countries in Latin America. If the situation worsens and we're unable to find a suitable way out, we face a real risk of civil war, a military coup or foreign intervention.

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**Zuleima Vergel**

If those are the only options, clearly the resolution of the crisis in Venezuela will have an extremely negative effect not only on Latin America, but also on emancipatory aspirations, struggles for social change and the projects of the left in diverse parts of the world, since Venezuela has become a very important reference point for many movements

attempting to spur radical changes in their own countries. If the Venezuelan process is defeated, the political consequences will be deep and affect other nations around the globe.

**Raúl Zibechi:** Certainly, whatever happens in Venezuela will be important for the balance of power in the region, but above all it will have an impact on the morale of those people who believed that the country had undergone a revolution. Anyway, it's been a while since Venezuela has had an influence on South America or the Caribbean. I think what happens in Brazil will be more important in the short term.

**Nildo Ouriques:** The Venezuelan process has been a point of reference since Chávez ushered in the Bolivarian Revolution. But the balance of power has changed throughout the region, because neo-developmentalism can't pull our countries out of the crisis, let alone offer real alternatives to the majority. On the contrary, neo-developmentalism—as clearly demonstrated in Brazil and Argentina—creates much more complicated problems for the left.

During the Chávez years Venezuela served as a reference point for people's capacity for struggle and also as an example of leadership. This position has been lost. Keep in mind that political efforts to achieve unity in the struggle for the liberation of the continent didn't progress and that the processes of change



remain limited to the national sphere. So, a defeat or victory in any particular country won't suffice to alter the balance of power definitively. Look at Brazil: after the departure of Dilma Rousseff, people began to fight, and now the liberals are on the defensive, while during the administrations of the Workers Party (PT) liberals were allowed to progress, though Lula and Dilma followed all the dictates of transnational capital.

## How do the interests of the European Union, Russia and China influence Venezuela's political and economic landscape?

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** I think the EU remains an accomplice of the US and, in the case of Spain, is fuelling the coup situation. A country like Spain, which has been a victim of terrorism, is incapable of criticising the terrorism of the Venezuelan opposition—which sets fire to people, attacks military installations and shoots its own people to present them as victims—and hasn't responded appropriately.

**Karina Arévalo:** Besides those actors who opposed the revolution, the alliances reinforced by *Comandante* Chávez were also noteworthy, as they provided a counterweight to the indiscriminate actions of the imperialists. The support of Russia and China has undoubtedly been decisive at times of heightened conflict. As troops from the Southern Command mobilised, both countries on several occasions threw their support behind the constitutional government of President Nicolás Maduro, thus neutralising the threats at moments of high tension.

**Edgardo Lander:** From a geopolitical perspective and from a Venezuelan viewpoint, it's clear that imperialism today is not just represented by the United States. While American power is still politically and militarily the mainstay of imperialism, in economic terms some of the most heinous cases of pillaging going on today or being planned in Venezuela and other Latin American countries are fuelled by capital and transnational corporations with headquarters in China, Russia or Europe.

**Raúl Zibechi:** Players on the national stage have always sought the support of global or international powers. The Creoles were supported by England and France. Now the liberals are supported by China, Russia and Iran, while the displaced middle-class gets support from the United States and to a lesser extent the European Union, because that continent has lost its strategic scope. As we're experiencing systemic chaos on a global scale, and we're in the midst of a hegemonic shift

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**Raúl Zibechi**

towards Asia and China to the detriment of the United States, in the long term those relying on the new powers stand to gain, though in the short term things are much more complex. There's no linearity.

We have to realise that China's role in Latin America is and will be increasingly strong. We saw it in Argentina: Macri had to renew and even deepen the alliance with China, because

that's where the soybeans go and the Chinese are the ones who can afford to invest. What I mean is that the China option is not ideological, but purely one of convenience and necessity.

On the other hand, China is not a better alternative to American capitalism. Soy and mining, that is the commodities model, are the tip of the iceberg in the emergence of China as a global power. On this point I want to emphasise two things. One, that for the popular sectors it's better to have a multipolar world because there are various masters battling each other, which provides us an opening to resist and fight better. Two, that neither Russia nor China are

alternatives to capitalism, but another kind of capitalism no less oppressive than America's. It's one thing to rely on China and Russia to disengage from the Yankee multinationals and quite another to confuse Vladimir Putin with Lenin, as some progressive intellectuals seem to do.



### [3] The balance of the Bolivarian process: achievements, weaknesses and errors

#### What are the main strengths of the Bolivarian process?

**Edgardo Lander:** The main strength of the Bolivarian Revolution has been the extraordinary ability that Chávez had to pull Venezuela's popular sectors out of a state of lethargy, deep despair, disconnectedness and complete distrust of institutions that had anything to do with politics, and provide a sense of direction, belonging and self-esteem by means of extraordinarily broad-based processes of grassroots organisation. These processes were promoted by the state, but they were also products of a more general change in the political climate of the country. There was a major transformation of the popular political culture. During his early years in office, Chávez promoted a process of collective experimentation that was very rich in terms of issues like access to water, health, education and urban land, which were revitalised by popular self-management and created a sense of identity and belonging at the level of grassroots communities. It was a kind of very powerful 'shock therapy', which was deepened by the experience of resistance to the right-wing offensive in the early years, during the corporate oil stoppage and lockout that brought the country to a halt for two months. We have to remember that it was thanks to mobilisation and popular resistance that the subversive processes were defeated.

Subsequently, there were changes and some setbacks. The government adopted a more top-down nature and failed to respond to the growing contradictions between the demand for autonomy and more spontaneous, horizontal self-government—on the one hand—and the hierarchical view of state and societal control—on the other hand—. These setbacks limited the capacity for experimentation and weakened the processes of transformation of the political culture.

**Reinaldo Iturriza:** Granting dignity to the Venezuelan people. The recovery of confidence in themselves, confidence in their capacity for change. Pulling millions of people out of material and spiritual poverty. Removing the majority of Venezuelan people from a state of invisibility. Those are its greatest strengths.

**Isabel Rauber:** A definite strength was Chávez's boldness in taking charge, bearing the burden of the country, without having a very clear idea where he was headed at first. He did know that he wanted to implant social justice and restore people's dignity, that he didn't want a dogmatic 20th-century-style form of socialism and that he couldn't achieve this with capitalism. Thus he began to outline the notion of Socialism of the 21st Century, rooted in the democratic participation of the people, and from there it clearly evolved to stress the central importance of local communities as the builders of history, who develop themselves from the grassroots.

*Of central importance is that the power is not built by a party, or by the military, or by intellectuals, but by the people themselves in all their diversity. Therein, I think, is another fundamental element: the communes.*

**Isabel Rauber**

Of central importance is that the power is not built by a party, or by the military, or by intellectuals, but by the people themselves in all their diversity. Therein, I think, is another fundamental element: the communes. A commune is built not by ethereal or theoretical individuals; they cannot be

reduced to an abstract working class but include labourers and farmers, indigenous peoples, the urban poor. Communes catch on faster in rural areas because for isolated villages, in inhospitable places, the importance of joining forces and working together is better understood. The first communes had a clear impetus from Chávez, and their development, driven locally by people power, was impressive. The individuals themselves considered it important to govern themselves, to break with rent-seeking culture, with relying on the government to solve all their problems, to seek solutions and alternatives on their own. These are unquestionable achievements that will demonstrate the relevance of Chávez's commitment to the communal state.

Power from below is rootal power, which comes from the roots, from the heart of the problem and is acted on by the individuals who deal with that specific problem. It isn't necessarily outside the institutional framework and may well be within it. Chávez, who promoted the communes, was in turn the head of government and used the tools of the state to promote the development of power from below.

**Atilio Boron:** The strengths of the Bolivarian Revolution are many. We may highlight the recovery of oil for the Venezuelan people; having put an end to the illiteracy that still plagues most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean; having 'citizen-ised' millions of people living in numberless shacks on nameless streets who lacked identity papers; having provided health care to the entire population; having created numerous free and open universities for the poor; having regained the national pride that had been crushed for decades by the dominant oligarchy who disdained their own country as they cultivated a fascination for all things American; having promoted the organisation of the communes and the political organisation and education of the Venezuelan people; having driven the integration of Latin America and put struggle against imperialism on the people's agenda; having created institutions such as Unasur, CELAC, Petrocaribe, Telesur, ALBA, Banco del Sur (sabotaged by the hesitant progressive governments of the region). Having declared that socialism was the only way out of the civilising crisis that affects all humankind and spread these ideals throughout the hemisphere. Having expressed solidarity with social struggles around the world, staked everything on peace in Colombia and provided subsidised oil to countries that needed it but couldn't get it. And lastly, having had the courage to stand up to imperialism and say, *Enough!* and pull our people out of the lethargy within which they had lingered for decades, maybe centuries.

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** Its strengths lay, on the one hand, in a substantial redistribution of income, and even though the structures of the Venezuelan capitalist system did not change, great strides were made in literacy and minimum standards of welfare as the rights of ordinary Venezuelans. Given the total absence of rights to health, education, housing, Chávez made access to those essentials into a right and that, again, is what also explains Maduro's staying power at a time of serious trouble, with the collapse of oil prices and US imperialist pressure. I think it also forged of a Latin American identity by means of Telesur and Unasur. In those years it was quite likely that many people in Latin America knew the name of the presidents of other countries, when previously they hadn't a clue. Lately, I think, such relevant knowledge is weaker. It was essential for a Brazilian to know the names of the presidents of Ecuador, Bolivia, and vice versa, for a Bolivian to know the name of the president of Ecuador. This regional awareness is essential in a country that is threatened by US imperial domination.

**Marco Teruggi:** Its greatest strength has been the participatory process, the central role of the masses, which was coordinated around a transition to socialism with a



government that created both the conditions for it to happen and the obstacles to it. This democratic and organisational prominence, with its contradictions and limits, gave millions of people both a sense of place and history. So you can understand how it's possible that, after more than three years of an economy plagued by violence and a political leadership that has for the most part distanced itself from the popular climate and language, nearly 25 percent of society still identify themselves as Chavista activists, willing to defend the process and resist whatever needs to be resisted.

*The greatest achievement of the Bolivarian process is that it imagined itself taking a different course than what was dictated by the logic of capitalist domination.*  
**Santiago Arconada**

Within this mass experience, theory and practice come together most richly in the communes. There are now more than 1,700 in the country, with varying levels of political and economic development, which make up a network of experiences in territorial government—or attempts at it—in both rural and urban areas. This assemblage has always had friction with an institutionalism that strongly resists it and sometimes gives in, but which was designed, within the revolutionary process, as the way to set up new institutions, the foundations of the communal state.

**Raúl Zibechi:** Its main achievement is the new attitude of the popular sectors, who have much more confidence in themselves and have gained dignity and self-respect, and occupy spaces without an inferiority complex. This attitude is one of the causes of the categorical rejection by the right and the middle classes, who feel displaced precisely because of the material and symbolic place now occupied by the underdog.

**Claudia Korol:** The greatest strength of the Bolivarian process in Venezuela is that it embodies the idea of a plebeian revolution, which has displayed a bold, rebellious leadership that is maintained through dialogue with the poor.

**Miguel Mazzeo:** The Bolivarian process can be regarded as an innovative experience of continuous democratic reform and consistent leaps in popular awareness, within the framework of an uninterrupted revolution aimed at workers' democracy and socialism. These reforms and leaps, the transitions of transition, are closely related to the political unity of the Chavista forces, committed to the construction of communal socialism and the development of forms of self-government, self-management, autonomy and people power. That is, a continuous constituent popular process based on the communes and the construction of alternative institutions. The chief strength and achievement of the process, as we see it, is that an important sector of the Chávez people has the capacity to develop a new institutional framework and take on the responsibilities that remain concentrated in the state. It is from this capacity that it derives its ideological, ethical and spiritual power.

Another strength, another milestone: leaders from grassroots organisations are usually better than those trained within the political system.

**Santiago Arconada:** The greatest achievement of the Bolivarian process is that it imagined itself taking a different course than what was dictated by the logic of capitalist domination. It was in this spirit that the the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela was drawn up, a document which distilled the constituent process of 1999, a time of national reorganisation. Its consolidation as the national constitution has been an arduous process. In the early years, Chávez's political adversaries opposed and abolished it in the coup of April 2002. It was reaffirmed in the implementation of its provisions, since the holding of the recall referendum of 2004 could mean nothing else, in which President Chávez got the go-ahead and

the constitution was strengthened. When at the beginning of 2007, at the height of his popularity, Chávez proposed a constitutional reform to the people of Venezuela, he had his only electoral defeat: the referendum through which he consulted the people over the proposed reform was lost. Flawed as it is in many ways, as for example in its reference to indigenous peoples whose lands and habitat continue to be undefined and their legality unrecognised, the Bolivarian constitution remains the collective horizon, the most significant collective programme in the history of our republic. It is the legal and political domain recognised by the entire population, and alteration of it would pose a serious threat to peace.

**Edgardo Lander:** On another level, with regard to the living conditions of the population, there have been substantial advances from the complete reorientation of public spending and the designation of oil revenues for the so-called social debt, in response to the population's need for food, health, access to education and other

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**Edgardo Lander**

basic goods and services. There were some enormously important changes, which were not always reflected by the statistics, and which led the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) to highlight Venezuela, along with Uruguay, as one of the least inequitable countries on the continent in terms of income distribution. There was a drastic reduction in poverty and a substantial increase in the quantity and quality of food for the majority, with a marked

reduction in infant mortality and other social advances. The *misiones* [missions, a series of ambitious social programmes launched by Hugo Chávez], *Barrio Adentro* and several others, met the demands of various sectors of the population and improved levels of social welfare across the board. Of course all of this was made possible by the high value of oil in the global market.

In the international arena, particularly in Latin America, the role of Venezuela was also extremely important. Venezuela became one of the main reference points for political and social progress worldwide. Venezuela lent significant support to social movements across the continent, culminating in the defeat of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The Constitution of Venezuela also became an essential tool for the design of constitutional processes in Bolivia and Ecuador. At the institutional level, Venezuela played a very important role by creating Unasur, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and Petrocaribe, by supplying oil to Central American and Caribbean nations as a form of international solidarity unlike the traditional strictly business relationship. Specifically, very important strides were made and there was also an effort to go further, to directly confront the unipolar world and the US tendency to treat Latin America as its backyard. Efforts were made to construct a multidimensional global model and there were direct confrontations over the flights of US aircraft over Venezuelan territory and the Palestinian cause.

**Santiago Arconada:** One of the highlights of the three Chávez administrations—1999–2000, 2000–2006 and 2006–2012—with regard to challenging imperialist domination, had to do with the construction of a multipolar world. Before Chávez, for Venezuelans, there was the OAS and the United Nations, and that was it. Total US hegemony. After Chávez there was CELAC, an explicit recognition that we could think of ourselves as a continent without the participation of anyone that had come here just to exploit us, to invade us, to rob us blind.

The fact that the balance of power has now shifted to the inside of CELAC doesn't invalidate the enormous significance of the constitution. USA: keep out. Canada: you can't come in either. Those who think of us as a commodity, as a resource, as

raw material, may not enter. That was an important step towards multipolarity in the world. For those of us who thought of the OAS as the US Ministry of Colonies, with its headquarters in Washington to make it quite clear who was in charge, the significant circumstantial 'victories' so dear to the so-called progressives meant we never had to change our minds.

**Zuleima Vergel:** The Bolivarian Revolution had countless achievements. The reorientation of our republican framework based on the constitutional process, with everyone involved in the discussion, and the adoption of a constitution in which sovereignty was declared as an inalienable right of the people, an essential fact that shook the foundations of the representative democracies that had done so much harm to our nations. The notion that direct democracy must be constructed, and that it is by definition central and participatory, is one of the revolution's greatest contributions. Plus the recognition of economic, social and political rights, the right to build a new social state, and the right of people to participate in the defence of their country by joining the popular militia, are all unquestionable steps forward in the consolidation of this process.

In social terms, the Venezuela of poverty and exclusion was replaced by a nation of 2,000,000 university students, free of illiteracy, with an 80-percent reduction in poverty and malnutrition, with the addition of millions to the formal economy, with the development of missions that fundamentally recognise new rights—for example the rights of housewives to be remunerated—among many other advances. These are all unquestionable achievements that changed the lives of millions of people.

**Nildo Ouriques:** The fundamental force has been the presence and leadership of President Chávez, even though the bankers remained strong during his time in government.

**Karina Arévalo:** One of its greatest strengths is the establishment of grassroots organising as a citizen's right and the incorporation of these organised people into the structure of public power. It includes the communal councils, communes, socially owned enterprises, cooperatives, workers' councils, the Bolivarian national militia; all forms of popular organisation established as rights in the various organic laws that determine them. These forms of popular organisation were built up as the revolutionary process deepened. This is the revolutionary praxis of *Comandante* Chávez's strategic vision. That profound Venezuela, invisible to the mainstream media, is certainly the cornerstone of the process, beyond the internal and external attacks we've faced. The resistance of these people cannot be comprehended without looking downward at the networks they've installed by means of these organisational methods, the neighbourhoods, the territory.

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The solidarity and communality of Latin American popular culture were converted into the structures of a new state that built roads, developed irrigation and production schemes, carried out vaccination campaigns, built schools, distributed food and staples and defended their territories. And most importantly, the communes make decisions, implement and exercise power in their territory. The people exercising power directly; undoubtedly, this has been the revolution's greatest achievement. The emergence of socialism as a fact, as a viable plan with specific methods that have a direct impact on the lives of millions, is a great contribution of the Bolivarian Revolution to humankind.

**Maristella Svampa:** Like few other processes, Chavismo, from the beginning, seemed to contain all the elements of classical populism: the constant oscillation between democratic opening and authoritative closure; the dichotomisation of the political space with surges of unexpected agitation, the state as an essential tool for social and economic redistribution, among others. This form of plebeian democracy might be compared with the Latin American populism of the 1940s and 1960s. As

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**Claudia Korol**

happened in Argentina under the first Peronista government (1946-1955), Chavismo enabled the entry of traditionally excluded social sectors, and via a tense and contradictory path achieved a real and effective process of empowerment of the masses. An early expression of this were the missions, aimed at the reduction of poverty, universal access to education (*Misión Robinson*), access to health care (*Misión Barrio Adentro*), a decrease in infant mortality rates, the construction of public housing and land distribution, among others.

However, one of the recurring risks of plebeian democracy has been the coordination of decisionist processes, in which leadership roles were taken by strong personalities. So, the growing political polarisation evolved toward plebiscitary and direct forms of democracy, and the consolidation of what has been called 'hyper-leadership', which stresses social bonding processes and gradually disables the popular stage.

**Claudia Korol:** A key achievement of the Bolivarian Revolution is the set of laws and behaviours that mainly benefit women, especially working women. The law that acknowledges women's rights to a life without violence, the organic law of the social process of labour, access to collective lands and other measures have enabled women to become key players in the revolution. This process has now been weakened, because division of labour by gender has not been culturally overcome, and in the context of the crisis, women's work proliferates as they still have to perform the care-giving tasks historically assigned to them. The weaknesses in the revolutionary process in other fundamental aspects of women's lives, such as sexual and reproductive rights, now become drawbacks to the revolution. As contraceptive are scarce, women, especially young women, are getting pregnant earlier and handling chores that return them to the domestic sphere. Again, anything that is not conducted in depth becomes a liability to the revolution itself.

## What have been the main weaknesses, limitations and errors of the Bolivarian process?

**Atilio Boron:** Weaknesses, contradictions? Many. Revolutions aren't carried out neatly and with the inexorable logic of trigonometric theorems. Revolution is like an immense cauldron in which historical processes are forged, with all their human limitations and social contradictions.

A basic weakness: the dependence on an exceptional character like *Comandante* Hugo Chávez, who despite his teaching, his great didactic ability, failed to complete the process of rural popular organisation in political, economic or social terms. His untimely death, cunningly conducted by the imperialists, left the process half done, worse still amid a highly unfavourable international climate.

To be sure there have been and there still remain other weaknesses: a state that is highly deficient in public administration; party officials who do not always live up to their enormous responsibilities; the aforementioned issue of corruption; too

much improvising in certain areas with the consequent loss of continuity in management; the decline—if not outright abandonment—of the cultural struggle following the death of Chávez, an absolutely irreplaceable figure; neglect of proper management of the problems and challenges of the media and, at times, a worrisome tendency to fall into the traps of the right and imperialism, with reckless responses to those provocations and the consequent weakening of the needed support from the other governments of the region.

**Marco Teruggi:** As far as limitations and weaknesses, there are several we could mention. One of them, in addition to the economic ones already mentioned, is the complexity of the political leadership in the process following Hugo Chávez's death. The civic-military architecture of the government needed leadership both to keep the doors open to popular participation and to work out a direction, a party—the United Socialist Party of Venezuela—and a heterogeneous movement, with differing views about how to build the new model of society. Reorienting without this unique leadership has been one of the main difficulties that arose under President Nicolás Maduro.

**Isabel Rauber:** Every revolutionary construction is fragile, as it entails a lengthy process. Because it is not something that can be resolved merely through the will of a group of individuals, but requires a link to the people in all their diversity, made up of individuals, and that's something no one can decree. It's one thing to choose which way to go, but it's the people who are going to have to make this complex transition. Taking charge of a state that has such important functions as the redistribution of wealth is essential in societies like ours, where large sections of the population are neglected, plundered and marginalised. The state here has the role of restoring or providing such basic rights as food, health, education and

housing. Taking over the oil wealth and distributing it in favour of the underprivileged is basic.

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But to take it a step further: to speak of a communal state poses a historical conflict between the constituted or instituted forms and the newly established power. That sets off conflicts in the territories, with the governments and even within the PSUV party cells. In the power struggle where power and public office are confused, contradictions arise that may not have been considered in previous

theoretical analysis. In theory it's all very nice, but when the commune claims governing powers for itself things stop being so nice because it means ceding power. And if you have power, are you going to give it up? Nowhere in historical experience do those in power give in meekly. That's not just something that happened in the Soviet Union, but comes up again in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and in the progressive processes of the Southern Cone.

The way to address this problem is popular control. If there are no social or popular elements in control, the entrenchment of certain sectors and personalities in state and government positions is almost impossible to avoid. And that entrenchment can be a boomerang against the process of radical change.

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** The weaknesses are related to the persistence of electoral logic. There seem to have been too many elections in Venezuela, because traditionally elections were always staged by the opposition as moments to buy votes, which obliged them to structure spending increases and encouraged a clientelistic mind-set rather than a genuine political consciousness. And that is the weak point that the opposition uses in moments of weakness to get the popular sectors that for the first time have access to housing, education or health, but who forget about it



and vote for the right that will be the executioners of these basic rights. The logic of having to cash in affects all the current states, which function to the extent that they have a tax base. The tax base in Venezuela is linked to oil and minerals, which turns the Venezuelan economy into an extractive economy, which is highly subject to mono-exporting and the environmental problems of the extraction of minerals and oil itself. In a way it's also subject to the difficulties of establishing a productive network based on research, development and innovation, which enables the economy to diversify, and a society of middle-classes with a democratic conscience to be built.

**Miguel Mazzeo:** In general, the weaknesses of the process are the reflection of delays in the comprehensive transformation of the state, in the substitution of many of its top-down authorities (and functions) by self-regulated communal authorities. Related to this crucial aspect, we believe that the Bolivarian Revolution faces a phase lag between the transformations in social relations, identities and values of the subordinated and oppressed classes (the processes of cultural reaffirmation, rebellion and popular participation) and the structural changes in the state and the economy. The state as disseminator of capitalist social relations, the 'communophobic' state, remains stronger than the 'statophobic' commune. There are sectors within the Chavista bureaucracy who oppose these changes, who replicate hierarchical, top-down schemes and bank on technocratic trends. Unfortunately, their position tends to be strengthened in the face of aggression from the right and imperialism. Then the ruling classes and capital retain their important positions in the state and society (particularly in the economy). For example, the post-neoliberal extractivist state favoured the position of the bourgeoisie active in the commercial and importing sectors.

Let me make it clear that I'm not prioritising a exclusively state-centred interpretation of the Bolivarian Revolution, primarily because we believe that the most powerful and disruptive components dwell squarely within the non-state biases in 'popular civil society'. That's where you'll find the 'golden area' of Chavismo. I believe that's where its moments of truth reside, its critical moments, its most ambitious emancipatory horizons and its ethical and humanistic reserves. It is in these substrata that we find its engine of radicalisation and the trenches of resistance against the counterrevolution.

**Edgardo Lander:** Despite the rhetorical references regularly found in the discourse of Chavista leaders with regard to the possibility of transforming the production model, in all these years there has been no real progress in this field. That was, I think, the main weakness. It would never occur to me or to anyone in Venezuela to suggest shutting down the the oil wells for 24 hours and starting immediately to

live differently, but there's actually been an absolute necessity to begin the transition to an alternative production model, one that is newly created or one that might explore alternatives.

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There was an extraordinarily unique historical opportunity, given the combination of a leadership that could provide guidance to society and that had validation and support from most of the population, and abundant resources that could have been invested in other areas, starting with agriculture, without the need for shortages or collective suffering in economic terms. Food sovereignty is a concept embedded in the constitution of 1999, but there's been no progress in this field. On the contrary, today we see a greater dependence on oil.

We can also see how the concept of socialism has become a mere synonym for statism. There were many processes of nationalisation of companies in many different areas, but in most cases these same companies went on to function with marked inefficiency, drops in production, financial loss and corruption. In many cases, the nationalised companies have only survived on the basis of oil revenues provided by the state, which means that dependence on oil has increased with the need to ensure that the expropriated companies are financed. This has led in recent years to a spiral of increased spending and a rise in public-sector employment under conditions of growing inefficiency. Production levels at many nationalised companies fell significantly in the shift from private to public hands.

**Claudio Katz:** Chávez achieved a major redistribution of income through unprecedented methods for popular politicisation, but subsequently failed to consolidate industry. He clashed with opposing capitalists and the internal *Boli-bourgeoisie* and didn't do away with the rentier culture that undermines all attempts to forge a productive economy. A hesitancy to break up the capitalist structure explains the adverse outcome. The current situation is made more difficult by reduced oil prices and the conservative obstruction to regional integration projects.

The government's missteps are borne out by the inoperative currency exchange, unacceptable external debt and skyrocketing prices and smuggling. But the current economic mess is being caused by the wealthy who manipulate currencies, trigger inflation, handle imported goods and engineer shortages of basic goods. The executive branch doesn't respond or does the wrong thing for many reasons: inefficiency, tolerance of corruption, protection of the *Boli-bourgeoisie*, collusion with millionaires disguised as Chavistas. So it doesn't cut support to private groups that get cheap dollars to import expensively. But the collapse of production and trade is a stratagem by the ruling class to overthrow Maduro.

**Nildo Ouriques:** The flight of capital is the Achilles heel of the Bolivarian process. In addition, the inability to overcome profiteering due to the ineffectiveness of the state and government to develop productive projects is truly shocking, because they've now been in government for many years. No one can say they haven't had the time! I also believe the government has to seriously tackle corruption, as it is offensive to the people to see how some people in government get rich when they turn 'Bolivarian', while millions of people do not even have enough to eat and must face permanent shortages of supplies.

**Raúl Zibechi:** The major weakness is that oil profiteering has deepened, which suggests the presence of a clientelistic political culture that remains dependent on the state or caudillos who handle those profits. The problem is that control of those profits is the key to the rise of the so-called *Boli-bourgeoisie*, which is why there's been no

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interest in leaving the model aside. The bottom line is these oil revenues have promoted a culture of shirking, to the extent that most of the nationalised companies produce much less than when they were privately owned. Here the mistakes of 20th-century socialism are being repeated without much discussion, because as has been shown, centralisation of the means of production in the hands of the state is historically and structurally faulty, and there's been no debate over that. From an ideological perspective, the rentier state is a major step backward from the Cuban revolution, for example. Socialism, for Marxists, is the fruit of collective and productive work, not of distribution, as has been assumed in Venezuela and other recent processes. And

this notion of collective work, *minga*, volunteer work, or whatever you call it, has been notably absent in the so-called 'revolutions' of the 21st century.

Lastly, the 'revolution' didn't even begin to touch the coercive apparatus of the state, so in a strict sense we can't even speak of the Venezuelan process as a revolution.

**Edgardo Lander:** In the popular political field there were also contradictions between the discourse and logic of grassroots organisation, popular mobilisation and participatory democracy, on the one hand, and top-down, statist logic on the other. The idea of participatory democracy was for many years the most important point of reference in the process of change that Venezuela tried to develop, but over the years the more top-down and statist positions ensured that most of the popular organisations would become dependent on vertical relations with the government for funding. Consequently, in times of state financial crisis, popular organisation got weaker.

This tension between aspiration for autonomy on the part of grassroots organisations and verticality was present from the very start of the process. This contradiction is closely associated with the issue of rent-seeking, because to the extent that the Venezuelan government seemed to offer guarantees of sustained income over time, their popular-oriented policies essentially boiled down to a redistribution of oil revenues. Efforts made in actual production, wealth creation or other modes of production were quite limited as compared with redistributive dynamics. Also the possibilities for self-government, self-management, autonomy at the grassroots level, were limited by the fact that they didn't have the economic base to be sustainable over the long term.

**Zuleima Vergel:** Some 1.6 million homes have been built in four years, a record for any country in the world. However, the pace of construction has slowed, which is perceived by the population as a decreased response to their demands. This no doubt undermines the political foundations of a revolutionary process that is sustained by organised people. We should also recognise that certain abuses of

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assistentialism have accelerated in recent years, in violation of the basic premise of the process of organising to secure rights, replacing it with the logic of vote buying, much like the Fourth Republic. Such a detail won't escape the notice of a people as politicised and conscious as the Venezuelans.

On the other hand, the Venezuelan government, despite loyal and stoic resistance to multiple attacks, has lost the initiative and has failed to set the political tone for the country, and so has been besieged by an agenda imposed upon it by destabilising sectors from both the inside and outside. Also, reformist cadres within the revolutionary leadership, mainly middle managers, have delayed and even obstructed the development of truly popular organisational

methods. The power of people should undoubtedly be this revolution's greatest strength, and the enemy to be defeated is the Venezuelan oligarchy, imperialist interests and the reformist elements that have infiltrated the structures of the Venezuelan state.

**Karina Arévalo:** As in all emerging processes of social change throughout history, there are internal contradictions. The impossibility of fighting—'for now', as the *Comandante* used to say—against scourges like corruption and the inefficiency of the bourgeois state bureaucracy, has in short order undermined some of the achievements of our process. Outside enemies have taken advantage of these

errors to deplete the revolution's social base, waging economic warfare to paralyse certain state structures, certain processes that had been developed and now face obstacles, such as the re-launch of the national industry, one of the central points in the *Plan de la Patria* (Plan for the Homeland).

The emergence of a bureaucratic caste that has gotten rich off state-driven economic processes is one of the main contradictions of this process, and in a sense brings to mind the 'reform or revolution' debate that has been brewing for many years in socialist circles. However, we are certain that the revolution, in the sense of total transformation of everything that needs to be changed, is moving forward and will continue to move forward by organised people who are not willing to lose what they've built up in 18 years and won't stop dreaming of the horizons originally defined by the Chavista process. One example of this is a recent popular seizure of land that took place in the first half of 2017, despite violent attempts at destabilisation by the right during the hardest months of the struggle. *Campesinos* from different states have regained lands not only from the hands of the oligarchy, but against the pact it made with bureaucracy. They've even recovered territory owned by land-owning financiers and right-wing armed mercenaries. This is the clearest proof of people's resistance here and it shows we will not rest until Chávez's dream has materialised.

**Reinaldo Iturriza:** The main weakness is the influence of reactionary forces, which, whether through actions or neglect, contribute to making many people invisible once again. Neutralising those forces, in the midst of attacks and harassment by opponents to Chavismo, is our greatest challenge. We call it a two-tiered struggle.

**Claudia Korol:** One of the weaknesses we should mention is, paradoxically, the difficulty posed to Hugo Chávez's leadership in accommodating a political system that strengthened people power through the central role of the communes and the various attempts to create areas outside the state institutions plagued by bureaucracy, and in some cases corruption. This weakness is thus the steepest challenge to be addressed.

Also evident is the difficulty the government faces in overcoming the consequences of the depletion of the petro-rentier economy to create a productive, communal and socialist economy. We also observe the inability of the leadership to place limits on escalating prices, which vexes the people. Insufficient support for the policies of popular movements aimed at ensuring food sovereignty, and the heightening of extractivist policies in response to the currency crisis also deepen the malaise and don't address, even temporarily, the social equilibrium that might enable the revival of the revolutionary process. These factors diminish the power of the communes and the people, and bring back the dependence of the political process on transnational power to ultimately weaken the revolution and the power of the people once again. One of the main achievements of the Chavista economy, the relative redistribution of income, is being demolished by inflationary policies, shortages and a lack of industrial diversification.

**Maristella Svampa:** Chavista populism's most radical element was the central role of participatory democracy through the community councils. This became the paradigm par excellence of the political transformation, and simultaneously, the key to legitimacy. In 2009 Chávez announced his plans to further deepen the process, and a year later, in 2010, the Organic Law for People Power and the Law of Communes were passed with the intention of creating a communal state. So in the heat of the political and social processes, participatory democracy—understood at first as *democracia participativa y protagónica*, later as *poder popular* and

finally redefined as *poder comunal*—ran into different obstacles, as well as economic and political constraints. For example, the Law of Communal Councils was a turning point as, then complemented by the creation of a single party (the PSUV), it illustrated the Venezuelan government's turn towards a more traditional model of dominance based on the statist idea of 'Socialism for the 21st Century'.

Thus the trends toward scant economic diversification and heightened extractivism were renewed by new mega-projects and concessions to transnationals, whose predatory nature was demonstrated by the opening of almost 112,000 square kilometres (12 percent the country) to mega-mining exploitation, in the process creating the *Arco Minero del Orinoco*, a new national strategic development zone, for which the Maduro government signed alliances and agreements with various transnational corporations (Chinese and Russian, among others), whose content is unknown, since the state-of-economic-emergency decree gives contractors discretion and does not require approval by the National Assembly.

To speak of anti-imperialism in Venezuela is a bit difficult unless you're blindfolded. Let's note the recent case of Goldman Sachs, which just bought PDVSA bonds at a 69-percent discount.



## [4] Alternatives, scenarios and proposals for overcoming the current crisis

### What scenarios would be most likely to resolve this crisis?

**Edgardo Lander:** Within the current political climate it's very difficult to predict or anticipate what might happen in the medium to long term, because the short-term threats are so serious. There is a harsh confrontation between the government and the opposition, with increasing levels of violence. The opposition includes sectors of the extreme right that are pushing for extreme violence and argue that it is not enough to stop this government, that it is not enough to defeat Chavismo at the polls, and that what is needed is a defeat of historic proportions to teach their opponents a lesson and definitively wipe out the notion of change and transformation rooted in popular mobilisation. The violence that is driving

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sectors of the extreme right isn't just the unbridled violence of an aimless lunatic, but expresses an overriding political project, irrevocably adding fuel to the fire.

But the government, for its part, is also displaying a growing authoritarianism, and some are doing everything they can to maintain themselves in power by any means. And if some people lose their lives in the process, that's too bad, say some supposed defenders of the revolution. Some Latin American intellectuals have called for the government to exert more repression. There are senior members of government, both ministers and top military commanders, who are so caught up in large-scale corruption that they're unwilling to cede the extraordinary power they've built up, and they know that an outgoing government could mean jail time or trouble enjoying their wealth abroad. Things are different in the world today than they were in the past, when despots and crooks could take their loot and buy a mansion on the French Riviera to enjoy their golden years in exile. This explains the language and extremely hawkish positions of some members of the government.

**Ana Esther Ceceña:** Right now there are three possible scenarios. One is the overthrow of the government by force and installation of a loyal replacement, similar to the coup of 2002. Such an operation would be accompanied by high levels of violence and immediate widespread repression to hold on. This would call for outside intervention—not necessarily an invasion, though that method can't be ruled out—in which the interim government would assume the role of a puppet. Such a scenario could be the antecedent or the result of a long, explicit or covert civil war.

The second is the inducement of a civil war through increased pressure on the government in response to opposition attacks, which would result in an exhausting process in which the only winners would be those who immediately seize strategic wealth-producing points (oil fields, mineral deposits and so on). This would be the equivalent of creating a widespread, prolonged situation of warfare, as in Afghanistan or Syria, with similar consequences, involving not only an internal disaster but turning Venezuela into the military epicentre of the entire region, including the Panama Canal and the Amazon basin.

The third is a densification in the organisation and mobilisation of the people to defend their interests and achievements and ultimately defeat the opposition and keep the government running. It would require robust, mounting international support to keep it going, along with a radicalisation of the process. The more people organise, build on their achievements and raise their awareness of the challenges and risks of the historical moment they're living through, the better they'll be able to radicalise and democratise the process.

It doesn't seem possible to keep the heightening conflict from ushering in a wartime dynamic that would pave the way for a possible 21st-century-style third world war, which would lead to a realignment of power and possibly to development of a new hegemony, as well as the emergence of new aspects and territoriality of capitalist relations.

**Marco Teruggi:** There are several hypotheses. One is that the right will obtain one of the two supports it needs to upset the balance of forces: a sector of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces or a foreign intervention. Either of these two scenarios could result in a coup. Otherwise, a balance of power will be maintained that enables them to take the lead against Chavismo in the battle for perception, besiege and destroy cities, carry out selective assassinations and demonise the government globally, but this is unlikely to yield the expected results in terms of popular support. This notion of wanting to resolve matters by force but not having the coordination to bring it off would result in an increase in the methods and scale of violence, something that the right has worked toward on a communicational level through the legitimisation of its paramilitary structure. This would go along with a plan to form new political powers, a dual government and usher in a prolonged scenario. Another possibility is that elections will finally be held, and that the right will participate in the gubernatorial and then presidential polls. Right now that scenario does not seem the most likely one.

**Isabel Rauber:** In the worst case scenario civil war is at hand. It is heroic how people resist attacks, killings, the burning of schools, hospitals, transportation, headquarters and other crimes, yet haven't reacted with armed violence. And the Venezuelan people do have weapons, starting with the army itself. I don't think it's easy to keep your head in such circumstances, but they do. The Venezuelan people are teaching great lessons about how far they can take their historic patience.

**Miguel Mazzeo:** Worth bearing in mind is that the Bolivarian Revolution has been marked by attacks and harassment throughout its history. Peaceful scenarios are few and far between. The information we receive first hand usually paints a picture of foreign intervention (with local support), civil war and other such situations, all marked by an extreme degree of violent confrontation. These days negotiated solutions are hard to come by. And therein lies the difference to the supposedly progressive governments of the region. The right won elections or dismissed its predecessors by 'institutional' means and began to implement its neoliberal restructuring policies, but in no case would it be called a bourgeois reaction—if there do exist conditions for a bourgeois reaction in Venezuela or, if you prefer, a 'profoundly reactionary processing' of the crisis.

**Claudio Katz:** In the short term there are two political options at stake: the right demands early general elections and the government calls for a constituent assembly. The opposition is only willing to participate in elections that guarantees it the top spot.

Of the 19 elections held under Chavismo, Bolivarian candidates won 17 and immediately recognised the losses. The right, on the other hand, never accepted adverse outcomes. They always cried fraud or resorted to boycotts. When they triumphed in midterm elections they demanded the immediate fall of the government. In December 2015 they won a majority in the National Assembly and

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proclaimed the overthrow of Maduro. They subsequently tried to disqualify him several times, resorted to installing illegitimate congressmen and forging signatures for the recall.

Henrique Capriles, Julio Borges and Leopoldo López now promote sham elections amid economic warfare and street provocation. They back Colombia-type elections, where hundreds of popular militants are killed between votes.

They intend to go to the polls like in Honduras when the country was still reeling from the assassination of Berta

Cáceres. They promote voting of the sort that prevails in Mexico, amid the corpses of journalists, students and teachers. They demand that Maduro hold elections in a climate of civil war that no government would normally accept.

Venezuela is going through a situation much like what prevailed in Nicaragua in the twilight of the first Sandinistas. The military siege and shortages wore down an exhausted people, who voted for the right out of sheer exhaustion. Under such conditions the elections have a predetermined winner. True, Maduro cancelled the recall referendum, suspended regional elections and banned political opponents. These measures were part of a blind reaction to harassment. But the Chavista leader is confronted by the greater hypocrisy displayed by the defenders of today's elections.

It's enough to see how Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in Brazil was pulled off by a bunch of crooks, with the protection of judges and legislators who rig the system of indirect elections for president. It wouldn't occur to the OAS to intervene against such a gross violation of democratic principles. Nor did the establishment object to the electoral college that anointed Donald Trump after he received several million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton. It seems natural to them in Spain or England to have a monarchy in control while in Mexico every election turns out to be a whitewash. The sacrosanct democracy that the right demands to be respected in Venezuela is completely absent in all the capitalist countries.

**Karina Arévalo:** It's hard to make predictions under these circumstances. As the vortex that Venezuela and world politics have become in the past few decades has shown, when all hope seemed lost and the theories of the end of history were strongest, a people and a leader appeared and together they started a revolution that changed the history of this century.

Far from weakening, capitalism appears to be reinventing itself, unleashing demons that seemed buried, such as fascism, racism, political violence and media manipulation. It's become evident that as the richest of the rich dwindle down to a precious few, most of the world's population remains impoverished, so the cycle of capital seems to require ever more violent and atrocious actions to keep the world's peoples from rebelling.

The Bolivarian Revolution is clearly at a crossroads, but we trust the power of the people, the grassroots, the common people, who, regardless of the circumstances or new scenarios they confront, have learned that people with dignity will never bow to the bourgeoisie or reformist sectors.

**Javier Biardeau:** The numerous explosive ingredients in the Venezuelan panorama are altering the political scene, and I hope that as time goes by, we'll start to see things more clearly. It appears that, as nobody seems able to break the deadlock at this time, a negotiated political solution to the Venezuelan conflict is still far off and we're in for yet another stage of escalation in the conflict. We'll see to what extent the president's proposed constituent assembly succeeds in getting a massive turnout for elections in late July, and also if it manages to deter the expectations of the more violent members of the opposition—and the sectors who remain dubious about the presidential initiative—to break the current impasse.

**Atilio Boron:** The key to solving the crisis is the complete neutralisation of the violent sector of the opposition. If they are allowed to continue committing the atrocities and crimes of the last three months (fire-bombings of schools and hospitals, burning people alive, attacks on state agencies, total destruction of more than 100 public transport vehicles, looting of shops, shootings and assassinations of those who try to cross a barricade), the future looks bleak: a lawless civil war, with tens of thousands of deaths, a country finally destroyed and, most probably, a 'humanitarian intervention' by the Southern Command, which would serve as a convenient excuse for a US takeover of Venezuelan oil.

Therefore, it is imperative to restore law and order, and if the violent elements won't understand the call for sanity and a cessation of the bloody riots, the state, which holds the legitimate monopoly on the use of force, will have to remove them at any price. It is what is done in any other country in the world, and Venezuela should not be the exception. Otherwise there will be no solution to the crisis. Some demand, incredibly, that the state should remain defenceless and renounce its right to suppress the actions of these violent elements.

Now then: with that sector neutralised, the opposition's non-violent wing, now intimidated by terrorists, will be able to sit down and negotiate an institutional solution with the government. And then the government and opposition will have to make some trade-offs to restore order, because if the crisis continues we'll end up devouring each other.

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** It's complicated, because the Venezuelan right, highly encouraged by the United States, wants to construct a Libya-type scenario and instigate extreme events such as a helicopter firing at the Supreme Court. Such events would be designed to create a 'failed state' scenario so as to justify any sort of excess, which would in turn justify an intervention, or some kind of outrage encouraged by the United States.

Corruption also adds to the complicated scenario, to the extent that it spawns micro-powers within the power, and affects entrenched sectors in the state and the army, but also businesspeople who are corrupt and responsible for an economic structure where changing bolivars to dollars is big business.

In another context, Latin America could serve as a mediator, but what do we see? Brazil is crippled by corruption after the coup against Dilma Rousseff; Argentina is in the hands of a neoliberal with a fondness for coups past and present; Colombia must always play the US 'trump card'; Mexico is in terrible trouble and also subject to American tutelage. Therefore I do not see much of a solution coming out of Latin America itself.

The possibility for a solution that doesn't come out of a dialogue, an agreement between the parties, seems slim, because an institutional clash between the head of state and legislature won't go anywhere. I think it's the fault of the opposition, which disregarded the legitimacy of the Maduro government, but it's true that

we've known of these issues for quite some time and there's been an inability to find solutions to problems that have been on full view for at least five years.

**Raúl Zibechi:** I honestly see no short-term solution. I think the worst scenario would be a civil war, a Syria-like process, supported by the United States and Colombia on one side and Russia and Cuba on the other. It would be a disastrous scenario, not only for Venezuela but for all of South America, because the violence would inevitably spill over to other countries.

**Santiago Arconada:** As the first half of 2017 draws to a close, the confrontation between different political forces demands the most accurate description possible. On one side are the government of President Maduro and the PSUV leadership using the state apparatus to stage a constituent assembly that is not convened by the only actor constitutionally authorised to do so: the people of Venezuela. The worst

*Both strategies, that of the the government and PSUV and that of the opposition and MUD, display a profound contempt for the Constitution. The objective danger that this situation could flare up into a violent confrontation stems from the fact that there are sectors on both sides with a direct interest in waging a war.*

**Santiago Arconada**

blow against the Bolivarian Constitution that the Bolivarian people could ever imagine came from the ones who call themselves the Bolivarian government. If the only call, already processed by the National Electoral Council, is an appropriation of popular sovereignty, then the electoral basis is a sham of the rights guaranteed to the Venezuelan people in the constitution.

On the other hand, the political opposition, grouped together under the so-called Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), intends to continue its policy of marches, sit-ins and

protests indefinitely, with its fatal balance of dozens of deaths, in addition to the disaster inflicted on daily life and the economy, for the purpose of staging a general election not stipulated in the constitution. Both strategies, that of the the government and PSUV and that of the opposition and MUD, display a profound contempt for the institutional framework. The objective danger that this situation could flare up into a violent confrontation stems from the fact that there are sectors on both sides with a direct interest in waging a war.

In the government and in the PSUV there is a sector, not as large as it is powerful, that has to hide hundreds of billions of dollars stemming from public, notorious, ongoing embezzlement. Wars are ideal for hiding money and eventually making it grow. This sector can be recognised by its talk of war and how to prepare for it. Their language is a constant provocation; their pretext, the defence of the homeland. Within the opposition and the MUD there is a small but very powerful sector for whom the constitutional elections, overdue like those for governor, are of no use even if they win. That is the sector of capitalist domination who believe that the Venezuelan people need to be taught a lesson so it will be a long while before they start thinking of rebelling again. That is the sector of capitalist domination who deem it necessary to savage the ideals instilled in the people by Chávez the Liberator.

**Nildo Ouriques:** I don't think the government is capable of moving the country forward and overcoming the economic crisis. If there is no chance of overcoming the economic problems, then the ability to garner a social and electoral majority once again becomes highly unlikely.

The energy accumulated by the Bolivarian Revolution is incredible, because only that energy could explain the fact that there are still millions of people fighting against the right, even though they don't like the government at all. On the other hand, no one can stay in power through the support of the military alone, as the army, however patriotic it may be, invariably responds to the social majority or the existing hegemony. To achieve a legislative majority through the constituent

assembly would not solve the underlying problem. I don't see how the Venezuelan process could recover its original emancipatory perspective. There are no signs of such a trend.

## What specific proposals are being considered to overcome the current crisis from emancipatory perspectives?

**Edgardo Lander:** When there are sectors on both sides who actually believe that the only solution is to crush one another, the threat of war, the threat of further violence cannot be ignored. For that reason some of us Venezuelans, concerned about the country, are creating a movement that suggests another option, which is not a neutral position, but that is opposed to the extreme right on the one hand (which, I repeat, is not most of the population) and the violent policy of the government. The current government does not represent Chavismo in its entirety, nor does it represent the majority of citizens or the will of the Venezuelan people. There is a very large portion of society who want another option, based on the preservation, respect and recognition of the Constitution, which faces the threat of escalating violence. Today in Venezuela we need a game plan that we all recognise, and right now the only viable game plan is the constitution. Those of us who recognise ourselves in this space oppose the threat of external aggression disguised as supposedly humanitarian intervention and understand that

*El proyecto venezolano que debemos construir será necesariamente anticapitalista, pero si seguimos con el rumbo actual lo que va a ser la idea de que los conceptos de anticapitalismo, socialismo o izquierda están intrínsecamente ligados a la corrupción, la escasez, el autoritarismo y la represión.*

**Edgardo Lander**

defending sovereignty is a matter of having chances to process the country's problems internally—on the basis of constitutional rules.

But this space, which is growing, is not strong enough or doesn't have the capacity in the short term to present itself as a political alternative on the national level. It's been very tough to build such a space, but many of us who are committed to its construction believe this space is necessary to preserve the aspirations of the anti-capitalist left. The Venezuelan process that we must build is necessarily anti-

capitalist, but if we continue down the current road, what will remain is the idea that the concepts of anti-capitalism, socialism or leftism are intrinsically linked to corruption, scarcity, authoritarianism and repression.

**Miguel Mazzeo:** If the Bolivarian Revolution wants to uphold socialism as its ideal, there is no place for a reformist path in pursuit of social peace. The socialist perspective doesn't accept social collaboration; it implies deepening class struggle. Socialism isn't built through existing institutions but through the construction of an alternative institutionality.

Thus, overcoming the current crisis in an emancipatory sense is a matter of hastening the decline of the ruling class (rather than strengthening it) by an 'empowered' people with a popular government that retakes the political initiative, and an anomalous state willing to take on the economic and political functions that remain in the hands of the bourgeoisie and bureaucracy. Which is quite different from the centralisation of state power couched in pseudo-socialist rhetoric. The government is unlikely to be sustained through support of a bureaucracy. Clearly the call for the constituent assembly may be seen as a way to overcome the crisis in an emancipatory sense. It can be an impetus for moving the Bolivarian Revolution to higher ground.

We are confident that the plebeian Chavismo will continue to be cast as a revolutionary movement in its struggle against reaction, in its open confrontation



against the ruling classes and against the right. In the context of the conflict, such determination shows its true colours. The plebeian Chavismo will be tested by the counterrevolution on a stage of profound polarisation. We are confident that it will emerge politically strengthened, radicalised. We are confident that the defeat of the counterrevolution will activate new processes for subjectivity among the popular classes every step of the way. We are confident that the Chavista people and their grassroots organisations will find worthy allies in the government and armed forces. We are confident that the posthumously quoted slogan of Hugo Chávez—*Comuna o Nada* ('Commune or Nothing')—will become a reality.

**Javier Biardeau:** In the president's launch of the constituent process, when he spoke of the possibility of having an election by sectors, one of the major players involved in the constitutional proposal was the communal sector. The problem is that within the Venezuelan popular movement itself there are two attitudes toward the presidential call: on the one hand a feeling of uncertainty, because the method being used contrasts with the method used by Chávez, and secondly, there is another sector that will go to the constituent forum basically because they say it is a space for struggle, for growth, for marshalling forces, and that the battle needs to be waged there to get the message and game plan across from below and to the left within the assembly itself.

The basic issue is that the rules of the game and procedures have never been too clear. That is, both senior government officials and the PSUV had raised the need for candidates to the constituent assembly to be registered on the platform of the National Electoral Council, and there have been technical problems with this, as they haven't been able to process all the nominations. The fact is, even small left-leaning sectors linked to the communal struggle, sectors of the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV), REDES, Homeland for All (PPT), Voices, Gallones, smaller organisations such as the Revolutionary Workers' Party (PRT), among others, argue that nominations by sector and territory, which require signatures from 3 percent of the people registered to vote, wouldn't allow small groups unaligned with the PSUV to have very short-term nominations, as is being done at this time.

The situation here is all mixed up, highly complicated. From the outside there might be a much simpler interpretation of the Venezuelan situation, but what we have here is a process of power restructuring, a process of heated argument over whether or not to enable the course opened by the president of the republic with his call for the constituent assembly. All of this is clouding the waters for the popular movement, which has always stressed participatory democracy, people power, the issue of direct popular sovereignty and mechanisms for direct expression of popular sovereignty to advance their struggle.

**Isabel Rauber:** With all the flaws that might be pointed to, there is a popular revolutionary process under way. So from the people's perspective, specific proposals for development are complex, because you can talk about dialogue, but it's hard to have much of a dialogue amid this confrontation. It is causing a breakdown in the legality of institutions, and the quest to overthrow Maduro is an attempt to shut down the revolution. I have no other diagnosis, because you can't have a dialogue when one of the parties doesn't want one.

The call for the constituent assembly, however, is all about people's participation in decision-making. You can not decide for others: any attempt to define the people's way of life must entail the participation of the people themselves. Nobody liberates anyone else, because liberation is a process of volition and conscience that moves the organisation to act, that defines mutually agreed-on ideals and says, Let's go there. You can not decree liberation, you can not decree

the revolution. I see no possibility for a solution, either for Venezuela or any process on the continent or in the world, without conscious subjects taking a central role. Will Venezuela achieve this? I don't know. It's complicated, because a segment of the opposition says it won't participate, and the key is to ensure such participation. The participation of the people is the key: the form it takes is always different. We'll do it and we'll do it from the bottom, from the territories where people live, and from there to the world.

**Santiago Arconada:** At the Civic Platform in Defence of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, we believe that the Constitution is best defended by putting it into practice or at least trying to put it into practice. Therefore, invoking Articles 5, 70 and 71, we're going to ask the CNE for the official form to collect the preferences of 10 percent of registered voters, in order to set, by means of signatures, a referendum on whether or not we want a national constituent assembly that they intend to keep from us. That would be the most robust reweaving of the country's institutional fabric. The Venezuelan people reclaiming their right to be consulted.

Will we make it in time? That declaration of war, which a rigged, illicit constituent assembly implies, which most likely will be answered by massive voter abstention and high rates of invalid votes by those who, for whatever reason, do go to vote, and that, even after being clearly rejected by more than 80 percent of the population, seeks plenipotentiary authority to impose the first three already stated decrees: the dismissal of the Attorney General, Dr. Luisa Ortega Díaz, the dissolution of the National Assembly elected in December 2015, and the suspension of all elections, including the regional elections scheduled for 10 December this year: can it be stopped? And the chaos that non-constitutional elections by the MUD would invite, can that be stopped as well? Whether or not either strategy can be stopped is something they'll find us struggling to find out. All we know is that they won't keep us down. Neither one nor the other is going to keep us down.

We also reclaim the emancipatory perspective. Taking an emancipatory perspective implies the recognition of a domination from which we would be emancipating ourselves. The notion of domination is very complex in Venezuela. Domination is, among other things, in my opinion, the application of the logic of neoliberal extractivism that turns nature into a commodity. In Venezuela this logic is patent in President Nicolás Maduro's decree over the misnamed *Arco Minero del Orinoco* (Mining Arch of the Orinoco River Basin). Confronting domination and its logic means confronting Maduro's government.

**Zuleima Vergel:** Following the passing of *Comandante* Chávez a new cycle began, not only in Venezuela but throughout the world. The emancipatory process must be updated politically, socially and even discursively, to rebuild the majority that's been lost to media manipulation.

We believe that it's time to defend the victories and fight for what's missing in Venezuela. Revolution is a historical process and still under development. At the CRBZ we understand that the solution to this revolutionary crisis has to do with furthering participatory democracy, that is, expanding popular participation to solve the problems facing us, from food production to currency allocation. Furthering organisational processes such as communes and communal councils is fundamental.

As for the war in which we find ourselves, our movement has proposed the creation of the Hugo Chávez Defence Brigades, which enlist the citizenry to defend their territory, not only against the real threat of fascist violence, but also to

strengthen the civil-military unit, a cornerstone of the Revolution.

Our people are also aware of the urgent demand to end the economic war, as we've heard in debates in the territories, which means controlling the inflation that affects the daily lives of our citizens. It's no secret that this scourge results from a confluence of interests between the Venezuelan bourgeoisie and a corrupt sector of the state bureaucracy. The issuance of subsidised currency should be controlled, while the public should be provided tools to counter speculation in prices on basic necessities. In addition, urgent fiscal reform—raising taxes on those who have the most—and the renegotiation of the foreign debt are two examples of macroeconomic measures that could defuse the tension between government control and the unproductive, speculative Venezuelan bourgeoisie. The people should not have to continue to bear the burden of the economic crisis.

**Claudia Korol:** I'm not in a position to 'give advice' to those who have for many years now thrown themselves into the creation and defence of a popular revolution that dared to call itself socialist at a time when the global powers and sectors fleeing the left believed that the notion of revolution and socialist ideals had been shut down: the supposed 'end of utopias' and history.

I have nothing but respect and admiration for the Chavista people, who faced a coup in 2002, an oil stoppage in 2003, street unrest and all the destabilising, violent actions of a fascist, patriarchal, racist right, both domestic and

international, which has the support of the United States and right-wing groups across the continent.

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**Claudia Korol**

That's the reason I try to reflect and share thoughts with them, and also converse respectfully with those from the political left, academics, or from certain popular movements who believe the narrative being mercilessly fabricated by the Venezuelan and international mass media. Thinking critically becomes a complex endeavour in a world where the powers that be have chosen to respond harshly, waging murderous campaigns against the people, devastating territory and

committing crimes against popular leaders. However, it remains necessary and challenging to think critically and not fall into the trap of dogmatic fundamentalism.

**Claudio Katz:** Clearly the best chance for a transformative constituent assembly was missed some time ago. To call for one now is a purely defensive move and an attempt to lead through a troublesome period. Before the call for the constituent assembly, the government limited itself to purely bureaucratic confrontations between the power of the state and others. It backed the clash between the executive and the legislature or between the Supreme Court and the National Assembly. Now it's making a formal appeal to communal power and it remains to be seen whether that approach will lead to a true mobilisation.

Various leftist currents think that the current call could foster a dynamic of communes versus bureaucratic machinations. The constituent assembly could also help break the recent deadlock between rightist unrest and government mobilisation. If handled properly it could also break down the oppositional front, separating the discontents from the fascists.

But it is clear that without drastic measures on the economic and social levels, the constituent assembly will come up empty-handed. If it does not address the country's disastrous productivity through the nationalisation of the banks and the foreign trade deficit and the expropriation of saboteurs, popular support will not

be recovered. Palliative measures won't suffice to increase the participation of grassroots organisations in food distribution. There are radical measures that can not be postponed.

**Claudia Korol:** From my analytical perspective, the most concrete proposals relate to the recovery of popular power and its centrality in government policies. The opportunity presented by the constituent assembly cannot be underestimated. But in the process, continuity will only be ensured when all the functions currently performed by the bourgeois, patriarchal, colonial state are taken over by the people, by women, by historically excluded sectors. The necessary aspiration for any popular alternative is the gradual transition from the bourgeois state to the communal state, built up from the territories with different levels of community self-government, which can rethink and rebuild the economy, not according to transnational logic, but based on its own needs and possibilities. Communes that are coordinated as part of a strategic plan, not only in control of the economy and politics, but also defence. Strengthen Bolivarian militias along the same lines, creating them where they don't exist, train them politically, to exert real control over the territory, both against provocations by the fascist right and possible foreign invasion.

Overcoming the petro-rentier economy entails the construction of a socialist, feminist communal economy that handles the production and distribution of food, recovers the healing knowledge of women, adopts collective and community levels of industrialisation by setting up factories without bosses, nationalises the banks and companies that disrupt the economy, recognises the double and triple exploitation of women, seeks collective forms of socialisation for housework, and develops production processes to fend off economic warfare and interact with other peoples of the continent.

At the same time it is imperative to wage a more energetic battle on the cultural front, throughout society, in the media, at the national and international levels, and demonstrate the limits to the individualistic, consumerist, patriarchal, mercantile culture. To overcome the social fragmentation of poor people by instilling a sort of cultural solidarity that can overcome individualism and the creed of 'every man for himself'.

Today more than ever the unity of the revolutionary forces as the basis for the unity of the people is an ethical requirement, and so is solidarity between our peoples internationally. Both in Venezuela and throughout the Abya Yala, Rosa Luxemburg's slogan, 'Socialism or Barbarism', is clearer than ever. Creating socialism is a difficult, painful, complex adventure. But we can not give ground to the barbarity of fascist revanchism. The revolution is now.

**Reinaldo Iturriza:** Any specific proposal would involve strengthening opportunities for participation to encourage processes and experiences of popular self-government. More broadly, it's essential to resolve the dispute over the direction of the economy in favour of the more progressive, revolutionary and democratic lines of Chavismo. Naturally, the most violent Chávez opponents must be defeated and isolated. Overcoming this moment in history from an emancipatory perspective would entail incorporating most of the anti-chavistas not associated with the violence of the most reactionary members and supremacists. It's necessary to re-politicise the conflict, which has become progressively depoliticised, leading us toward the use of authoritarian measures. Avoiding the use of force, providing political, or even electoral, solutions, has always been the triumph of Chavism.

**Atilio Boron:** It's essential to the future of the Bolivarian Revolution to carefully separate the terrorist-seditious faction of the opposition from the majority that wants

change and that should be listened to. As far as possible, a compromise should be reached which, although it may not satisfy either party completely, would stabilise the situation and eradicate outbreaks of violence. Clearly, things may not go on as they did before, but the real balance of forces leaves no alternative.

The point is to hold on to the fundamentals of the revolution without compromising what constitutes its essence: popular sovereignty, people's welfare, national self-determination, a Latin American focus and anti-imperialism. Recent history has taught us that without a series of trade-offs there will be no normalisation possible in Venezuela. Perhaps the revolution will advance more

*Without a series of trade-offs there will be no normalisation possible in Venezuela. Perhaps the revolution will advance more slowly and take a longer course, but that doesn't mean losing sight of its emancipatory horizon.*

**Atilio Boron**

slowly and take a longer course, but that doesn't mean losing sight of its emancipatory horizon, which is what gave meaning to the work of Chávez.

Without this commitment the United States will return to the fray more vigorously and brazenly than at present, in which case there will indeed be no peaceful way out. The model would be a Libya-style 'regime change': destruction of the country, assassination of its leaders and looting of its oil

wealth. Therefore, avoid getting to that point of no return. And the first step towards this is to destroy the terrorist faction of the opposition, arrest their leaders and those who perform such atrocities and exert the full force of the law against them. You can even appeal to an international court to take action on the matter to dispel any suspicion of governmental bias. The government should sit down and talk with the opposition at once to reach an agreement on political governability and economic and social normalisation.

The pacification of the country will be an arduous, time-consuming task and will require great political skill, that combination of wisdom and boldness that is essential in such cases. But if such a compromise is not reached, the future of Venezuela will be chaos, and we may even face the dissolution of the nation.

**Juan Carlos Monedero:** I think we must turn to dialogue. A recurring element is that the Venezuelan opposition always has a fascist component, so when their interests can not be accommodated in the short term they always seek a violent way out, and that alienates a segment of their popular supporters. We're seeing things happening in Venezuela that would be unacceptable anywhere else. If opposition forces tried to take over a barracks or military areas in any other country, some

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**Raúl Zibechi**

would surely be killed and virtually all would end up in jail. I think Maduro's government is trying to avoid a response that may seem disproportionate and justify increased international pressure, ultimately to the benefit of the violent element.

I think the democrats of the world need to become better aware of the situation and demand greater respect for the law and the rule of law. Pablo Iglesias said the opposition is behaving as if it wants a coup, and should therefore not be tolerated, and I think the same thing would happen in England, France or Germany, and pressure would be put on

the opposition to stop such behaviour. And then you'd have to rely on mediators such as Pope Francis, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero or Martín Torrijos to reach a satisfactory conclusion. But to do that we must first put a stop to the violence by the opposition. And also keep in mind that the one behind this violence is the United States.

**Raúl Zibechi:** From a revolutionary perspective, the best or most desirable development

would be a dynamic uprising by the masses, as occurred in the Caracazo of 1989 or in opposition to the coup of 2002. I imagine—wish for—a process in which the popular sectors would create organs on their own initiative, not something rigged or dependent on the state like the current communes, which are not at all autonomous and serve as mere conveyer belts for the government.

It won't be at all easy to take this approach because those on the lower rungs are very tired, disappointed and confused. Tired of having to spend eight or ten hours a day queuing to get enough food for their family. It's a tremendous headache, an issue that intellectuals don't even mention, maybe because they don't know what it's like to have to stand in line to buy a kilo of flour. Also discouraging is the tremendous corruption throughout the whole society, the smuggling that's carried on by everyone from the military-police mafias to ordinary people to earn some income.

There's enormous confusion because there's no one left to believe. All this makes a popular outburst unlikely, appealing as it may be.

**Marco Teruggi:** The Chavista movement has several important duties. One is to hold elections for the constituent assembly on July 30—the right announced that it will try to keep it from happening—and have a high turnout. For this to happen, not only must the attacks—which will culminate in a final strike—be resisted, but also a participatory process should be initiated in the territories to hold debates, listen to criticism and create a space where the grassroots and leadership can meet on equal ground. That would help gauge the level of participation in the constituent elections, and initiate the process of rebuilding a political and electoral majority.

Another urgent need is to stabilise the economic situation. The relentless rise in prices, the increase in illegal dollars, the difficulty in obtaining pharmaceuticals and other commodities of daily life form a panorama that big business and the right created to depoliticise, and strangle, the Chavistas and to distance them from their leadership. Without concrete answers, it will be difficult to reverse the situation and rebuild a political-electoral majority. On that point, the policies of the leadership offer more questions than answers.

Nowadays, Venezuela is the testing site for one of humanity's most progressive models for societal transformation, with all its contradictions, as well as a laboratory for experimenting with new ways to develop right-wing coups. What's at stake is not just a national process but the future of Latin America as a whole.

## **How are the Latin American and global left debating the current situation in Venezuela, and what are the main issues of contention?**

**Edgardo Lander:** I'm concerned about the legacy of the Venezuelan process, because the idea of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution now being propagated nationally and internationally is very negative. I'm not just referring to the major international media such as *El País* in Spain, the *Miami Herald* or the conservative newspapers in Bogotá, but also to what many people are thinking in our own country today. It seems that any idea from the people is bound to be identified as inherently corrupt or inefficient. So I think the resolution of the crisis in Venezuela is vital not only for the future of the left in Venezuela, but also for the future of the left in Latin America and worldwide.

I believe that many involved in the debate over Venezuela which is now being processed by the Latin American and global left don't have enough information or



material to analyse, among other reasons because the authoritarianism of the Venezuelan government is a very recent dynamic. One could develop a historical analysis of the type of leadership employed by Chávez and his political impact, or the institutions that were created around his figure, or the reasons for the creation of a single party to govern, and if we choose these approaches we might find institutional components that contributed to reducing the levels of democracy and popular participation. But quite obviously, the drift towards authoritarianism which forms the basis of the current crisis in Venezuela is relatively recent. The Chavistas in government lost the parliamentary elections of 2015 and since then took steps to ensure they would stay in power regardless of the outcome of subsequent elections and what is stated in the Constitution. This has created new ground for political action, which, because it is recent, is still not sufficiently known or analysed outside of Venezuela, leading to well-intentioned but misguided interpretations of the current crisis.

I also believe that the Latin American and international left still harbour remnants of a viewpoint that is, unfortunately, too rooted in the Cold War. It's a black-and-white vision, obsessed with the distinction between imperialists and non-imperialists. That distinction remains important, but I think in the context of our time is not sufficient to understand the complexity of the contemporary world.

**Claudia Korol:** Militarism marches forward in a world where the United States has more than 1,000 military bases and stages interventions, invasions and joint exercises with the armed forces of our countries. A typical rationale that is resorted to is to 'save democracy' and 'protect human rights' in Venezuela, with OAS support or threat of intervention. Those from the ranks of the left who subscribe to this narrative, which evokes an image of a bourgeois, patriarchal, colonial liberal democracy serving the interests of the hegemonic power, are doing them a big favour.

One of the main lessons to be learned from the defeat of the Chilean revolution is the need for an organised people to defend the revolution, in other words radicalise it, so that the people and their movements are not left to the mercy of fascist violence. They can defend themselves and also disarm them. These days the crimes of Chavista militants could be added to the list, and it's surprising that those who claim to defend human rights won't censure those same individuals, instead endorsing the misinformation that presents them as victims of state repression.

**Miguel Mazzeo:** The reactionary wave rolling through the region and the world, with its unconventional varieties—'populists of the right', the 'alt-right' and the like—is an eloquent expression of the multidimensional crisis of capital. Popular movements are on the front lines of resistance and it is not unreasonable to imagine new cycles of popular activism that aim, probably, to exceed the coordinates of 'progressive' experiences.

*With its chiaroscuros, the Bolivarian Revolution continues to provide emancipatory directions for people around the world.*  
**Miguel Mazzeo**

With its chiaroscuros, the Bolivarian Revolution continues to provide emancipatory directions for people around the world. Picking up the trail to geopolitical reconfiguration on a regional scale blazed by Chavismo, a commitment to regional integration as a way to counteract the trends imposed by foreign capital and its local allies, restoring an international presence in Venezuela, can be crucial to people's movements throughout the world and in the region. This is another general condition that should not be overlooked when analysing the so-called Venezuelan crisis. The current situation suggests the importance and urgency of a debate that much of the popular militancy would

rather avoid as discomfiting or 'politically incorrect', while other less timid sectors, aware of reaching a decisive moment in the dispute over the meaning of 'democracy', have raised it more directly, without any theoretical and rhetorical beating around the bush: is it possible to think of a kind of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' of the 21st century?

To make things clear, we're thinking of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' more in terms of Karl Marx than Vladimir Lenin. More social than political. That is, the implementation of the most radical versions of democracy, revolutionary democracy in the style of the Paris Commune, Violence in the hands of the commune members and levelled against the ruling classes. Is there another way to overcome the crisis in line with the interests of the working class? The debate is on.

**Atilio Boron:** The importance of the survival of the Bolivarian Revolution is basic. Its fall would surely precipitate an end to the cycle that the right-wing publicists (now recruited from the progressive and leftist intelligentsia deeply confused by its inability to understand the phenomenon of imperialism and the radical underestimation of its importance) have been trumpeting for quite some time, fulfilling the role of prophets of imperialist restoration rather than analysts interested in understanding the contradictions of the whole revolutionary process and the exceptional importance of preventing Chavismo's collapse. If such a thing were to happen it would be a historic setback for the emancipatory cause of our peoples. Therefore, despite its flaws, its mistakes and blunders, we must keep the Bolivarian Revolution going against all odds, help it defeat its enemies who will surely be back to restore the imperialist order that existed in our America on the eve of the Cuban Revolution.

We should not silence our criticisms of the Bolivarian government and we should keep putting pressure on the leadership of the revolution to improve its performance, but let's always keep clearly in mind that what confronts the Bolivarian Revolution is an empire whose crimes are unparalleled in history, from

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dropping two atomic bombs on two defenceless cities of a country already defeated in the Second World War, Japan, to the atrocities that are still perpetrated daily, especially in the Middle East. The extreme, lethal violence that now wracks a score of the 335 Venezuelan municipalities is being coordinated by Washington. What we have may not be as good as we want; but we know that they—the empire—are incomparably worse. And there can be no doubt when taking sides. In my case, the Bolivarian Revolution or die! For Venezuela and all the good it's done for Latin America. It would have been good enough just to finish off the FTAA [Free Trade Area of the Americas, an initiative for trade liberalisation in the continent led by the United States between 1994 and 2005], but Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution did much more. In short, there have been and there are errors and problems and only a fool would deny them; but when all is said and done and the verdict of history is declared, the historical achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution are much greater and more significant than its mistakes.

**Reinaldo Iturriza:** The cruelty is clear. Cynicism is being taken as common sense and there's widespread despair over the possibility of revolutionary change in the world. The defeat of Venezuela would encourage not only the American empire but those who want to make their political and academic careers discussing the 'end of the cycle' and that sort of thing. There is a sort of political activist and

certain intellectuals who if they make the effort, will maybe, in say thirty years, get the true extent of the transformation that the Venezuelan people have led. Meanwhile, caught up in their treatises on extractivism and so on they understand little or nothing at all.

**Claudio Katz:** Now is the time for solidarity. As happened in Cuba during the special period, we must now shoulder the burden through difficult times. Not only does Venezuela stir intense debate, it has also brought about a significant regrouping of intellectuals from opposite sides of the table. That positioning has been more significant than the controversial details of their declarations. There's been a major split between camps. The first call, despite its social-democratic tone, was rightly challenged with emphatic responses from both leftist intellectuals and revolutionary nationalists. If that tangle is unravelled, Venezuela will have spawned a reencounter between critical thinking and the revolutionary tradition of Latin America.

**Maristella Svampa:** The end of the progressive cycle as a *lingua franca* confronts us with a stark reality: a lot of water has flowed under the bridge since that epochal change between 2000 and 2006, which raised so many political expectations about new progressive governments. In fact, rather than becoming a post-neoliberal and truly transformative left, progressive regimes evolved toward more traditional models of domination, populism and transformism included, in their different national variants.

*Within the left the outlook is worrying, as we have indeed failed to articulate the different emancipatory narratives in a common language. Moreover, Latin American progressives ended up opening deep wounds in this political and intellectual terrain that will be difficult to heal.*

**Maristella Svampa**

Within the left the outlook is worrying, as we have indeed failed to articulate the different emancipatory narratives in a common language. Moreover, Latin American progressives ended up opening deep wounds in this political and intellectual terrain that will be difficult to heal. Nor can I overemphasise the symbolic importance of Chavismo at the regional level. Support for Venezuela became a sort of blind

spot for certain lefts, which is closely linked to the political and symbolic place that Chavismo had in reviving an anti-imperialist discourse in Latin America during the progressive cycle. That anti-imperialism, reinforced by utopian and at times confusing socialist ideals, was largely nurtured by quotations and traditions, also out of Latin America, ranging from José Carlos Mariátegui to José Martí and Eduardo Galeano, always by way of the Venezuelan Simón Rodríguez, Simón Bolívar and Ezequiel Zamora. In short, Chávez reactivated the anti-imperialist tradition throughout the region and led the process of creating a 'challenging autonomous regionalism' (using Jaime Preciado Coronado's words), whose shining example was the counter-summit in Mar del Plata in 2005, when social movements and Latin American governments said *NO* to the FTA promoted by the US government under President George Bush.

Moreover, I can't overemphasise how important the Bolivarian process was in a country like Argentina for a certain sector of the autonomous left and the popular and democratic left, not linked to Kirchnerism. These leftist groups found in Chavismo an essential Latin Americanist and anti-imperialist foothold with which to define themselves; the means of escape from the identity politics dilemma to which they were subjected for more than a decade of the selective progressivism of Kirchnerism. Their unconditional support for Chavismo would then point the way to proceed in history; 'not to be left out', to 'keep on keeping on' at the regional level during the cycle of progressive change. Thus support for the Venezuelan process was associated with the construction of a particular political identity capable of lending coherence and stability to the positions of these organisations at the regional level, right through the hegemony of Kirchner. In

short, for a sector of the Latin American left Chavismo became a blind spot—even, in some cases, an umbrella for regional political identity. From this perspective, Chavismo is beyond discussion. On the contrary, as a matter of the symbolic place it holds in Latin American anti-imperialist ideals, the general crisis turns this identifying screw even further, which is evident in the harshly intolerant, damning responses of unconditional support for the Maduro regime.

**Javier Biardeau:** One has to pay close attention to what's happening in Venezuela on a daily basis, because the pace of events is very fast, and as an actor who is in a sense involved in what is happening inside the country as a key witness, as an analyst of the situation, one also has to get the view from outside. Those not living in the country can, in some cases, take a cooler-headed approach to try to get the whole picture of how the various forces relate to one another right now within Venezuela and upon Venezuela, and thus clarify how to proceed most effectively, more legitimately in popular terms, and gain strength from the popular movement. And above all, we must create as calm and relaxed an environment as possible for discussion of the Venezuelan situation, because the debate is getting quite rarefied within some sectors of the left, because of the very complexity of the whole set of factors and forces, and because of how the political leadership is behaving at this time. I welcome this initiative and hope that this exchange raises concern, interest and motivation to open more avenues for analysis of and involvement in the Venezuelan situation by the Latin American left.

**Maristella Svampa:** Beyond whatever interpretation and assessment we make of the government of Hugo Chávez, the process of political mutation that's transpired in recent years is a fact. We must recognise that Venezuela 2017 confronts us with an increasingly discredited authoritarian regime and a general crisis that cuts across social strata and affects the spectrum of political, social and economic life. Along these critical lines, Edgardo Lander made an appeal to self-convened sectors of Venezuela, including political leaders, academics, former Chávez ministers and former leaders of opposition sectors, human rights activists and community and union leaders. Following his cue, we made an appeal, with a group of intellectuals, to stop the escalating violence in Venezuela and to create an International Commission for Peace, which had a great impact at the regional and international levels.

*Debemos crear un ambiente de discusión lo más sereno y distendido posible sobre la situación venezolana, porque se está enrareciendo mucho el debate en el seno de algunos sectores de izquierda, precisamente por la complejidad del cuadro de factores y fuerzas y por el estilo que está asumiendo la dirección política en este momento.*

**Javier Biardeau**

This call, as is well known, also set off a wave of condemnation that I find truly unjustifiable, but which fully demonstrates the extent to which support for Venezuela has become a blind spot for certain sectors of the left.

From our perspective as Latin American and left intellectuals, we must take on a double challenge: respect for human rights on the one hand, and respect for the self-determination of the Venezuelan people on the other. We know that the ways out of such catastrophic deadlocks are always long and complex, and require more democracy, not less. But no one has the formula, much less in an increasingly violent panorama that appears to be setting the stage for civil war.

## Contributors

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