



OP-ED

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Power and Paranoia in Caracas

On April 30, leaders of the Venezuelan opposition, among them National Assembly Chair and self-proclaimed interim President Juan Guaidó, gathered before dawn on a three-lane highway in Caracas to proclaim the start of “Operation Freedom,” an uprising to liberate Venezuela. Liberation, however, proved fleeting. A smattering of supposedly mutinous secret policemen had gathered for the uprising, yet within two hours of its proclamation, they had piled into their vehicles and sped off. As one opposition member present at the time later recalled, “It was over before it began.”

Operation Freedom was only the latest in a string of efforts, headed by Guaidó and abetted by the United States and various Latin American governments, to unseat Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, whom they decry as a dictator driving his country back to the economic Stone Age. But the failure of the April revolt has prompted supporters of both Maduro and Guaidó to do some soul-searching. The opposition and its advocates in Washington no longer expect that Maduro will be easily pushed from power. Brazil and Colombia no longer believe that a quick government turnover in Venezuela will halt the flow of migrants across their borders. And the Venezuelan government’s conviction that partisans of Chavismo – the mass movement created by Maduro’s predecessor

Hugo Chávez – would unite around Maduro is bruised, at the very least.

“A moderate position is now a rational one,” a former senior Chavista official told me. Twice in May, Norwegian diplomats invited high-level delegations from both sides to Oslo for discreet talks, which at present remain on hold. Invested foreign powers have dialed back their hostile rhetoric and begun to explore the possibility of a détente between Venezuela’s government and its opposition. In May and June, respectively, top U.S. and Colombian diplomats flew to Russia to discuss Venezuela with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Canada has courted Cuba in search of a peaceful settlement to the dispute. The EU-backed International Contact Group, which supports mediation, has sought to recruit Latin American states and China to its cause.

But even as foreign powers reach fitfully for a deal, powerful pro-Maduro and pro-Guaidó constituencies remain convinced that their cause will triumph in the end. One parliamentarian, an opposition moderate, told me that a common refrain on both sides is, “Why should we negotiate if we can still force them down onto their knees?” Pro-government and pro-opposition leaders absolutely mistrust one another’s motives and still believe that a total victory is possible even if it is not right around the corner. The case for a negotiated solution grows stronger by the day, but until the country’s political elites can overcome their fear of one another and resist the pressure from their most polarized constituents, such a solution will remain out of reach, and Venezuela will sink further into crisis.

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An Elusive Compromise

The Venezuelan government and opposition are deadlocked. The former is unable to shrug off U.S. sanctions and a regional diplomatic boycott, while the latter is chafing at its failure to win support from the military and disgruntled state officials. The country's economy, which contracted 50 percent from 2013 to 2018, could lose up to another third of its value this year. Cash, food, and medicine shortages have been compounded by power cuts and fuel rationing. In the sweltering northwestern oil state of Zulia, restricted to a few hours of electricity a day, markets stink of rotten meat and cars can wait six days in line for gas. In the southern states of Bolívar and Amazonas, gold has replaced Venezuela's worthless currency as the preferred medium of exchange. Four million Venezuelans have already fled the country.

Polls suggest that most Venezuelans are open to compromise. According to the respected pollster Datanálisis, more than 50 percent of the population supports a political agreement between the government and the opposition. Such pragmatism is evident even among supporters of Maduro. Although Chavistas have always rejected Guaidó's contention that Maduro's 2018 reelection was rigged, they disagree among themselves about how intransigent they should be in rebutting the opposition's demands. Across Chavismo's branches and capillaries in central and state government, the military, community councils, and the intelligentsia, a growing number of loyalists have begun to recognize that the government must make some basic concessions – early and presidential elections, institutional reform, and a dose of power sharing – in order to stave off collective disaster. “We as a government cannot accept this level of asphyxiation,” one former vice president told me.

Maduro, having survived this year's onslaught of diplomatic, economic, and political pressure, should in principle be in a position to hammer out a satisfactory peace deal. Already he has allowed international humanitarian aid into the country, reopened Venezuela's borders

with Colombia and Brazil, and invited UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet for a visit. For his next step, he could attempt to strike a bargain with the opposition and the United States. He could, for instance, agree to hold a fresh, internationally monitored presidential election next year on the conditions that he remain in office until then (the opposition has demanded he exit immediately), that his movement's political and economic dogmas be inscribed into a reformed constitution, and that he and his colleagues are assured immunity from future prosecution.

But although such an agreement is possible in principle, in practice it is unlikely to come to pass in the short term. The April revolt should have convinced Venezuela's leadership of the virtues of pragmatism. Instead, it has done the opposite, increasing Maduro's paranoia and strengthening the hand of hard-liners within his regime. Much of the background to the uprising remains a mystery, yet government and opposition agree on one telling detail. Stalwarts of the regime – including the long-standing head of the armed forces, Vladimir Padrino López, and the ultraloyalist Supreme Court Chief Justice Maikel Moreno – had signed up to a U.S.-blessed plot to overthrow Maduro and replace him with a transitional civil-military government, or junta. In the government's version, the conspiracy was no more than a ploy designed to smoke out potential rebels. For the opposition, as well as various well-informed analysts, it was a genuine effort to unseat the president, establish a modicum of stability, and lift U.S. sanctions. Since the revolt, Padrino López has proclaimed his continued loyalty to Chavismo, but his public remarks have been cryptic and vaguely menacing toward his own government. At a military ceremony in May, he said, “All of us have to hold on tight, until the storm passes and at last we can see the faces of those of us who remain.”

While the April revolt reportedly shook Maduro's faith in figures such as Padrino López, it extended the influence of the government's most notorious hard-liner, Diosdado Cabello,

head of the National Constituent Assembly and a former military officer with enormous sway within the armed forces. Cabello offered Maduro unswerving support during the uprising and soon after reinstalled his ally Gustavo González López as head of the National Intelligence Service (SEBIN), the country's secret police. Close to 20 opposition deputies have since been imprisoned or forced into exile by black-shirted SEBIN agents, reinforcing the belief, among the government's opponents, that Venezuela is becoming a police state. In the febrile political climate of Caracas, meanwhile, political insiders point to the dwindling trust among the most powerful figures in the country. One former senior Chavista told me that his advice to Maduro is simple: "Either you negotiate [with the opposition], or you yourself are negotiated."

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

The weakness in Maduro's ranks helps to explain the government's reluctance, in the Oslo talks, to offer the opposition anything resembling a gesture of goodwill, such as a mass release of political prisoners (30 were freed in the run-up to Bachelet's visit, but over 700 remain in jail) or an end to judicial persecution of the opposition. Whereas most Venezuelans and many Chavistas are ready to support talks, Maduro seems to fear offering concessions that could incur the displeasure of his hard-line allies, on whom his power increasingly depends.

As Maduro's position has hardened, so, too, has Guaidó's. Operation Freedom was the act of an opposition convinced that Maduro was about to be toppled. Even after the operation's failure, that conviction has been hard to shake. To complicate matters for Guaidó, the uprising has elevated the more radical members of the opposition, among them Leopoldo López, the charismatic leader of Guaidó's party. After five years in captivity, López was liberated by

mutinous secret policemen on the morning of the uprising and has since taken refuge in the Spanish embassy. Although his return to public view was short-lived, López has repeatedly insisted in media interviews that the government's days are numbered and that the military and the public will unite to free Venezuela. López has even entertained the possibility of foreign military intervention. When asked about it in an interview, he said, "We cannot discount any means of struggle."

The main effect of radicals such as López has been to raise expectations and limit the opposition's room for maneuver. Pragmatic opposition figures admit to spending their working lives in fear of drawing the ire of their colleagues and especially of radicals on social media, where uncompromising members of the Venezuelan diaspora often seek to hold the opposition's feet to the fire. Leaders who attempt to take a moderate stance run the risk of being publicly lynched by those who insist that Chavismo is an evil that must be extirpated. Such views, expressed daily and reinforced by senior U.S. officials such as National Security Adviser John Bolton, have served to buttress Chavista fears that any attempt to negotiate with the opposition would be suicidal.

Thus the tragedy of Venezuela today: economic misery and political crisis are persuading foreign powers and the Venezuelan public that a negotiated settlement is the only way forward, but the leaders of the government and opposition are in thrall to their most hard-line supporters, who not only fear and loathe one another but believe, against all evidence, that victory is not far off. International pressure from allies on both sides will play a role in getting them to the negotiating table. But until the bases of both political movements – and the silent majority of Venezuelans – can alter their leaders' calculus, the country risks more of the same: protracted gridlock, civil strife, and the suffering of ordinary people.