The US should stay out of Venezuela

Wednesday 30 January 2019, by BURTENSHAW Ronan, LONG Guillaume (Date first published: 29 January 2019).

Trump's attempts to stoke regime change in Venezuela risk plunging the country into civil war. We should staunchly oppose US intervention.

On January 23 the long-running political crisis in Venezuela took on a new character when Juan Guaidó, who had recently been installed as president of the country's opposition-led National Assembly, declared himself interim president of Venezuela, in an attempt to oust the incumbent, Nicolás Maduro.

On Twitter, Donald Trump announced that his administration would officially recognize Guaidó as Venezuela's president, and was soon followed by Canada. In recent days the leading states of the European Union released a common statement announcing that they too would recognize Guaidó if elections were not declared within eight days.

Guaidó's move has been broadly condemned by the international left as an attempted coup, with members of parliament from the Labour left condemning the move as an attempt at "regime change" in a letter to the Guardian. This, however, has done little to impede the move against Maduro's government by the West, with the latest escalation of sanctions resulting in the Bank of England refusing to allow the withdrawal of $1.2 billion worth of gold the Bolivarian Republic had stored in its vaults.

Amid these developments, Ronan Burtenshaw, editor of Tribune,sat downwith Guillaume Long, former foreign minister and United Nations representative of Ecuador, to discuss the broader context of Venezuela's crisis, the Western response, the changing tides in Latin America, and whether the mediation proposed by the governments of Mexico and Uruguay stands a chance of succeeding.

RB: What is your reaction to what has happened in Venezuela in recent days?

GL: What we've been seeing is a speeding up of history, of a situation that has been developing for some time in Venezuela. There is a significant economic, social, political, and institutional crisis. A number of the country's institutions are in conflict, and in fact do not recognize each other's legitimacy. The executive branch does not recognize the legislative branch, and vice versa. This has been developing since the parliamentary elections in 2015, becoming steadily more polarized and radicalized in the process.
It reached a high point in recent days with Juan Guaidó of the legislative branch declaring himself interim president. So, we now have a situation whereby there is a president with control over most of the country's institutions, Nicolás Maduro, and a rival, self-proclaimed president, Guaidó, who has the backing of a number of international actors and important sectors of civil society.

This extreme polarization that we're seeing in Venezuela is the product of a society that is deeply divided, with substantial parts of the population backing either side. This is particularly important to understand in the West, where the media has given the impression of an overwhelming consensus

against Maduro in Venezuelan society. If we don't understand that both sides have support, significant and costly mistakes will be made.

It is clear that there is now a sizable anti-Maduro camp in Venezuela, which is no longer limited to the country's elite. Whereas for many years, particularly during Chávez's presidency, the opposition was drawn almost entirely from the elites or the upper middle class, its base has now spread to more popular sectors of society. Similarly, there is a strong Chavistacamp, which in some cases is very loyal to Maduro, and in others is more critical of Maduro, but is still hostile to Guaidó and more generally to the Venezuelan opposition.

In the last elections, which have been hotly contested, a part of this base may not have voted, but this does not mean they have joined an anti-Maduro bloc. I think we should be careful not to systematically equate the high abstentionism of the last election with anti-Chavismo. Many Venezuelans are undoubtedly frustrated with the last few years of deepening crisis and with the Maduro government, but this does not necessarily mean they are prepared to support the opposition.

RB: In the wake of Guaidó's announcement, the United States and Canada recognized his victory. The major European states have followed by saying they would recognize him if new elections were not called in eight days. How do you assess this response from the West?

GL: I think it is a serious mistake to further polarize the situation right now. To radicalize positions on either side of that political divide in Venezuela is to run the risk of increasing violence. There are already significant levels of political violence in the country — in 2017 a rogue pilot used a helicopter to attack the Supreme Court, last year there was a drone attack on a Maduro rally, security forces have cracked down on opposition demonstrations and killed people, there have been periodic outbreaks of guarimbas, theviolent roadblocks set up by certain sectors of the opposition, and we have the deaths of the last few days. This situation could fast descend into civil conflict or even civil war if tensions are further exacerbated.
In fact, in recent days former Spanish president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who has been involved in the negotiations between the two sides in recent years, warned of the possibility of a "civil conflict with dramatic consequences." He spoke about the two blocs, and two categories of people — Chavistas and opposition — who were committed to their perspectives.

Amidst all this, the armed forces have remained loyal to Maduro. There have been some defections, but they have been marginal. By and large, the military remains on the side of Maduro's government. So for the West to call for a coup or for an insurrection, which is sometimes what the rhetoric sounds like, is dangerous. At the moment they are encouraging regime change through non-pacted means. The message is that some force will be needed and justified to remove the government. If this happens, you're going to get Chavistas responding forcefully in return. This lays the foundations of a civil conflict or civil war.

RB: Clearly, there have been significant changes in Latin American politics in recent years, with power flowing away from the string of left-wing governments elected since the turn of the century and towards an increasingly hardline right-wing movement. The most dramatic recent example of this was the election last year of right-wing demagogue Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil. What do you believe is the regional context of the latest Venezuelan crisis?

GL: It is important to remember that Chávez was an uncomfortable character for the Latin American right-wing and regional elites from the beginning. The coup against his government in 2002 wasn't

supported just by the United States and [then–Prime Minister José María] Aznar's Spain, it also had the endorsement of a number of regional powers, most notably in Colombia. This was because of his radical agenda, not just for Venezuela but for the continent, which questioned the historic role of regional elites and called for redistribution of wealth and power.
During the period known in the West as the Pink Tide, a number of left-wing regional governments were elected which were more sympathetic or, at least, less hostile to Venezuela. However, since the rise of the Right in recent years, we have seen Venezuela placed at the center of the left-right divide in the continent. It has impacted the debate in every single Latin American country.

During the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico, every day there were stories about how he was going to turn the country into Venezuela. In the Brazilian election too, the debate over Venezuela played a major role. All of politics in Latin America, both within states and between states, has been contaminated by the Venezuelan crisis, which means its resolution is not only about Venezuela — it's also about the region and its capacity to process crises in the twentieth century.

Crucial players in all of this are the Lima Group of key regional right-wing governments, which was convened in 2017 to respond to the Venezuelan crisis. They have been pushing an extremely hawkish line: non-recognition of legitimacy of Maduro, non-engagement with his camp, recognition of Guaidó, etc.

As for the European Union, and its constituent powers, it is showing signs of adopting the Trump and Lima Group line. I think it is important that the European Union does not follow this path. Initially, they seemed to show restraint, but recent statements about recognizing Guaidó subject to elections within eight days fall in line with this hawkish approach.

Unfortunately, underlying all of this is a return to a kind of Cold War politics in Latin America. Bolsonaro has been the best example of this, saying he would not permit "communism" on the continent and vowing to rout out "the reds." He said this with reference not only to the Workers' Party (PT) and other left-wing parties in his own country, but also to left-wing governments like Venezuela and Cuba. This dynamic has been deepened by the United States' intervention under Donald Trump and John Bolton, who have recently reintroduced figures like Elliott Abrams, one of the most notorious figures of the 1980s Contra dirty wars in Latin America, to the region's politics.

I think Europe should be adopting a more nuanced approach which would allow it to play a more productive role in Venezuela, and indeed in Latin America, including even mediation some time down the road.

RB: There is, of course, another regional context to all of this, and that is the offer by the governments of Mexico and Uruguay to play a mediating role in Venezuela and restart the talks which broke down around last year's elections. What do you think is the viability of that proposal?

GL: We were just saying how Venezuela is divided between these two camps, but the world is also divided in many respects. Clearly in Latin America the right-wing camp is ascendant. But even then the Lima Group did not manage to pass its motion in the Organisation of American States (OAS) meeting, which sought formal recognition of Guaidó's presidency. There weren't enough votes for it even with the regional shift. Then you've got the geopolitical realities too, with Russia and China backing the Maduro government even if the West is backing Guaidó.
When are negotiations important? Exactly when you have these impasses, with a degree of balance of power which offers no way forward. The two sides are too entrenched in their positions, neither appear for the time being to be powerful enough to triumph over the other. These are the moments

when you need negotiations.

In that context, the proposal by the Mexican and Uruguayan governments is welcome. Uruguay has not been pro-Maduro, it has been very critical in recent years. Mexico is a much more recent government. But, even though AMLO put an end to Mexico's membership in the Lima Group and has refrained from attacking the Venezuelan government, he did not attend Maduro's inauguration, nor did he send senior representatives. I think these two states are well-placed to mediate in the crisis.

There has been a long history of negotiations between the Venezuelan government and the opposition. Their failure to produce a settlement has been used by those who are pushing for escalation of tensions. But in fact, the negotiations have done some good, preventing further violence at key junctures. That in itself is an achievement. The first of these was the UNASUR (Union of South American Nations) mediation, which was headed by Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil in 2014–15.

Then the second was the so-called "former presidents" initiative. This included the former president of Spain, Zapatero; the former president of Panama, Martín Torrijos; the former president of the Dominican Republic, Leonel Fernández; and then later on the former president of Colombia, Ernesto Samper, who was secretary general of UNASUR [Union of South American Nations] at the time. For a while, both sides were sitting at the same table. Some of the immediate issues were resolved, even if the more long-term issues clearly weren't.

The last round of talks that took place centered on last year's election and involved former Spanish president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. I was not part of the talks, so I can only go by what Zapatero said. His statement made clear that there was an agreement, until the last day, for a process of what he called "normalized operation and development of democratic politics." But the opposition then pulled out of this deal, a move which he criticized. This is an argument used now by the Maduro government, but which is totally absent from the narrative in the Western media.

So we have some evidence that dialogue can work. There has also been a big development in these terms in recent months. The Venezuelan opposition has been deeply divided ever since Chávez came to power and has never really found a figurehead. There have been key leaders, including Henrique Capriles, Leopoldo López, and others, but the opposition has largely been divided.

This seems to have changed, with very broad support for the Juan Guaidó position across the opposition. Whether that is because of him personally, or because of the mandate of the National Assembly, or the international factors that have arisen, is difficult to know. But now, for the first time, the Venezuelan opposition is showing signs that it may be able to be in a position to negotiate together. That is a positive development from the perspective of negotiations. In the past, large sections of the opposition denounced the talks as partial or insufficient. Now, they would find that more difficult.

RB: If negotiations aren't forthcoming, what is the most likely outcome?

GL: It is hard to see how the Guaidó camp can succeed on its own, without the military and with society deeply divided. Even with the support of the Western powers. The escalation of sanctions is going to make the situation increasingly untenable. Economic sanctions always hurt the poorest in society and have been a substantial contributor to Venezuela's economic crisis. They will also, in all likelihood, prevent the Maduro government from engineering the kinds of change that would increase its support base to pre-2015 levels.
The encouragement, particularly by the Trump administration, of further escalation in Venezuela is therefore extremely dangerous. It underestimates the resilience of the Chavista camp and rests on

the idea of overwhelming popular support for the opposition. If Reagan-style policies from the 1980s are what the United States has in store for Venezuela, then it is very bad news for Venezuela and for Latin America as a whole.

Venezuela's crisis has already produced a huge migratory crisis — and further escalation into violence would make this much worse. We have seen in Syria, Iraq, and Libya some of the potential outcomes in this regard. I don't think even the continent's right-wing governments have the stomach for that. This realization may eventually lead a growing number of Latin American states, including members of the Lima Group, to understand that the Venezuelan crisis should be resolved at the negotiating table.

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