

Mar 20 2014

Venezuela: The Failure of the Fifth Republic

LSE IDEAS

[Professor Maxwell A. Cameron](#), Director of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions, University of British Columbia.



The **turmoil** that has rocked Venezuela since early February has resulted in almost 30 deaths, hundreds of injuries, and 1,500 detentions (see [timeline here](#)). Although such protests were never likely to threaten the survival of the regime, their intensity, breadth, and duration have exposed the deep **cleavages and polarization** in Venezuelan society. The intent of many of the protesters is clear: to bring down a government elected less than a year ago.

After 15 years in power, why is the Venezuelan political regime still vulnerable to anti-system opposition? One might ask, to steal a line from Mario Vargas Llosa, *'en que momento se jodió?'* most from the beginning, I would say. What we are witnessing in Venezuela today is a crisis brought about by the failure

of *chavismo* to adhere to principles of its own 'Bolivarian' constitution—indeed, principles inherent in any constitution.

Neither ex-President Hugo Chávez (1998-2013), nor incumbent President Nicolás Maduro, ever fully appreciated the critical role of opposition in constitutional and democratic regimes: to offer a viable electoral alternative to the existing government and to question the actions of government officials, criticise them when appropriate, and thereby ensure that those in power are accountable between elections. The opposition has never truly united around a consensus on whether to play by the constitutional rules of the game. Neither side recognises the legitimacy of the other.

For over a decade, there has been a negative dialectic between the government and the opposition: Chávez minimised the role of the opposition in the constituent assembly that wrote the 1999 Constitution (surely a mistake); the opposition tried to topple Chávez in a botched coup attempt (huge mistake); Chávez hardened his regime, cracking down on critical media and reinforcing popular organisations; a chastened opposition organised a petition to recall Chávez by referendum (a good move, albeit unsuccessful); Chávez fought and prevailed using every trick in the book; a demoralised opposition [boycotted the 2005 legislative election](#) and then was trounced in presidential elections the next year (score two for Chávez); Chávez radicalised his revolution; the opposition unified and organised its best effort to challenge Chávez at the polls in 2012, followed by an even stronger result against Maduro in 2013.

This brings us to the present, where the dismal pattern has continued: Maduro should have read his [narrow victory](#) as a sign that he needs to reach out to the opposition, but (perhaps more worried about sustaining the internal cohesion of his coalition) he instead confronted and attacked the opposition (mistake); a fraction of the latter threw its support behind student protests of February 2014, using [#LaSalida](#) to give them a stronger anti-regime flavour (mistake). The protests have [not spread](#) much beyond Venezuela's middle and upper middle-classes, but they have spread across the country and have lasted for over a month.

All this illustrates that the Bolivarian constitution, although not merely printed matter, has not been fully institutionalised. The government and opposition in Venezuela cannot rise above their differences and recognise each other as citizens. Maduro calls his opponents 'fascists'; the opposition calls the government a 'dictatorship'. This can be fatal for democracy. As Guillermo O'Donnell put it, democracy depends on an 'institutionalised wager': I may believe you are wrong, but I must respect your right to vote and be elected (2010: 26). We have the same rights of citizenship. These rights are not negotiable. They are inalienable and imprescriptible, and they are backed up by an organisational guarantee: the rule of law under the separation of powers. This is why constitutions matter. They are the constitutive rules of democratic politics and provide the generative grammar that enables democracy to flourish ([Cameron 2013](#)).

How should we characterise the Venezuelan political system? Specifically, is Venezuela democratic or authoritarian? The answer is that it is both; it is a hybrid regime. There non-fraudulent elections; but elections are a means to a set of ends or 'goods'—and they alone do not make a regime democratic. The ends (or 'goods') are: (1) the possibility of alternation in power; and (2) the guarantee that a government will govern democratically and that the opposition will accept the results, because it has a legitimate voice and stake in the system. Elections must be free and fair to ensure that they produce these democratic goods, which means that further conditions must be present: access to alternative sources of information, the right to

assembly, association and protections for fundamental rights and freedoms. The Venezuelan government has grossly violated these conditions.

Venezuela's democracy is thus defective; it is plebiscitary and delegative. But is it authoritarian? Classifying a regime as authoritarian requires more than highlighting defects in its democratic features—it requires evidence of authoritarianism. The idea of competitive authoritarianism, although useful, needs further specification to avoid creating confusion over where to draw the line between democracy and authoritarian rule.

The voluminous literature on authoritarian rule reveals a common thread. In authoritarian regimes, a coalition of non-elected officials rules by coercion. Such governments cannot be removed by means of elections. They may be military and/or civilian; they may have technocratic and corporatist elements. Before labelling Venezuela as authoritarian, we would need to see such a coalition come into sharper relief. Perhaps it is there in waiting. We see armed [colectivos](#), the regime's Rottweilers; we see a politicised military throughout the bureaucracy; we see a Boli-bourgeoisie that does not want to lose its privileges. Could these elements come together to prevent alternation in power? Possibly, but it has not to date. What is clear is that these groups are not interested in allowing the opposition to play its critical role.

In short, the Venezuelan political system today has both democratic and authoritarian features that are at odds with each other. This should guide our thinking about how to avoid deepening the conflict. Venezuela urgently needs dialogue between the government and the opposition. We know from the transitology literature that hard-liners in the regime and radicals in the opposition often reinforce each other, and that successful transitions involve coalitions between soft-liners and moderates (Przeworski 1992). Building such a coalition demands great leadership skills on both sides—but it *is* possible. It is the challenge faced by current generation of leaders in Venezuela, and the international community can help.

The situation in Venezuela calls for the flexible and proactive diplomacy. In the absence of effective action by the [OAS](#), the Union of South American Nations ([UNASUR](#)) has offered to convene a much needed dialogue. To be meaningful, any dialogue will have to include human rights, freedom of the press, rights of the opposition, restoration of the constitutional separation of powers, citizen security and the rule of law. As [Jennifer McCoy](#) notes, it will have to create space for moderates, build confidence, and restore communication between government and opposition.

The lesson this crisis offers the rest of the world is the importance of opposition in a democracy: 'In democracies the opposition is an organ of popular sovereignty just as vital as the government. To suppress the opposition is to suppress the sovereignty of the people' (Guglielmo Ferrero cited in Sartori 1987: 32).

References

Cameron, Maxwell A. 2013. *Strong Constitutions: Social-Cognitive Origins of the Separation of Powers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

O'Donnell, Guillermo. 2010. *Democracy, Agency, and the State: Theory with Comparative Intent*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Przeworski, Adam. 1992. "The Games of Transition." In *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, Ed. Scott Mainwaring, et al. Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, pp. 105-152.

Sartori, Giovanni. 1987. *The Theory of Democracy Revisited: Part I*. Clatham: Clatham House Publishers.

This entry was posted in [Latin America](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).