

Forgotten voices in Venezuela crisis

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Things are approaching a crisis point in the long battle of wills between Venezuela and the White House. Juan Guaidó, president of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, swore himself in as the country's "interim president" before a crowd of tens (by some accounts, hundreds) of thousands of supporters in Caracas on Jan. 23.

Perhaps in an abortive move to pre-empt this, the SEBIN political police detained him on his way to a rally three days earlier, but later released him without charge. At his auto-inauguration, he declared President Nicolás Maduro's re-election last May illegitimate, and himself the only legitimate executive authority in the country. Donald Trump immediately announced that he is recognizing Guaidó—quickly joined by Canada and several Latin American governments.

"In its role as the only legitimate branch of government duly elected by the Venezuelan people, the National Assembly invoked the country's constitution to declare Nicolas Maduro illegitimate, and the office of the presidency therefore vacant," Trump said in a statement. "The people of Venezuela have courageously spoken out against Maduro and his regime and demanded freedom and the rule of law."

Seeming to anticipate Guaidó's move, Vice President Mike Pence one day earlier condescendingly intoned, adding a phrase in stiff and poorly pronounced Spanish: "As the good people of Venezuela make your voices heard tomorrow, on behalf of the American people, we say: estamos con ustedes. We are with you. We stand with you, and we will stay with you until Democracy is restored and you reclaim your birthright of Libertad."

The Lima Group of regional governments seeking regime change in Venezuela mostly fell into line. In a statement, 11 of the 14 members called upon Guaidó to oversee a political transition "in order to hold new elections, in the shortest time."

Maduro responded by breaking ties with the US, and ordering its diplomatic staff to leave the country within 72 hours. Trump is ordering them to remain at their posts. (Global News, Reuters, InfoBae, Miami Herald, Miami Herald, NYT, The Hill, CNBC)

Guaidó's grab: a soft coup?

Guaidó is protege and heir apparent of veteran opposition leader Leopoldo López, who has been under house arrest and barred from political office since 2014. López gave the nod to Guaidó to lead his Popular Will (Voluntad Popular) party when its mandate began on Jan. 5—five days before Maduro was inaugurated for a second six-year term. Guaidó had just finished his first full term as a

legislative deputy, having been elected in 2015. His self-inauguration was symbolically timed for the anniversary of the 1958 uprising that ended Venezuela's military dictatorship. As his supporters have mobilized in their thousands, so have those of Maduro—sometimes wearing paramilitary uniforms. (The Guardian, NYT)

A few obvious points. It is hopefully superfluous to comment on the irony of Trump, the great enthusiast for dictators, suddenly developing a touching concern with democracy in Venezuela. And however dubious Maduro's re-election may have been, Guaidó's self-inauguration is also on thin constitutional grounds. The New York Times reported back on Sept. 8, citing Washington and Caracas officials, that the Trump administration had held secret meetings with rebellious Venezuelan military officers over the past year to discuss plans to oust Maduro—inevitably raising memories of the attempted coup against Hugo Chávez in April 2002.

All that said... the rush to call what is underway a "coup" is premature. One may be in the works, but the model is certainly not Chile 1973, nor Honduras 2009—nor even Venezuela 2002. Widespread (and not merely oligarchical) rage against Maduro is obvious, spurred by the country's ongoing and deepening food crisis, human rights crisis and general crisis of legitimacy. Maduro continues to have his support base but even this has been eroded by the ironic neoliberal turn of his government in response to the crisis (and in spite of the incessant populist and anti-imperialist phrases).

The dissident left: it exists

Predictably overlooked in the world media's Manichean view of the crisis are voices of Venezuela's dissident left that takes a neither/nor position opposed to both the regime and the right-wing leadership of the opposition.

On Jan. 17, six days ahead of Guaidó's attempted power-grab, the Citizen Platform in Defense of the Constitution (PCDC) held a press conference at the Central University of Venezuela campus, saying "No to the parallel state imposed by the United States, the European Union and the Lima Group," but also registering its rejection of the "sell-out [*entreguista*] and unconstitutional regime of Nicolás Maduro." The statement called for a popular referendum to "renovate all the public powers" in the country. The PCDC is made up of long-time social leaders of the left, including former cabinet ministers under Hugo Chávez and followers of the Socialist Tide (Marea Socialista) party. (Apporea)

Indigenous resistance to extractive agenda

Also unheard are voices of indigenous dissent and resistance. In an episode that received shamefully little coverage either in Spanish or English, December saw protests in the remote Orinoco Basin after a leader of the Pemón indigenous people was killed by elite Military Counterintelligence troops. Pemón leader Charlie Peñaloza Rivas was shot dead and two others wounded in the Dec. 8 confrontation at Campo Carrao, an outpost within Canaima National Park, in the Guayana region of Bolívar state. Amnesty International found that the troops opened fire "without any justification." Members of the Pemón Territorial Guard subsequently took five hostages at the outpost, including personnel of the state power company Corpoelec. The military operation was ostensibly aimed at clearing the region of illegal gold mining—while the Pemón themselves had been protesting the mining. (EcoPolítica Venezuela, Apporea, BellingCat, Caracas Chronicles, Publico, Efecto Cocuyo)

Indigenous and environmental leaders in the region issued a statement in the name of the Venezuelan Political Ecology Observatory after the confrontation. The statement blamed the violence in the region on the "extractive" agenda of the government's Orinoco Mineral Arcdevelopment plan, and treatment of the territory as *res nullius* to undermine indigenous rights. Citing the indigenous autonomy provisions in Venezuela's constitution, the statement asserted:

“Contrary to the position demonstrated by sectors of the government and its armed forces, the principal guardians of the national territory are the indigenous, and in the case of Guayana the Pemón people.” (EcoPoliticaVenezuela)

It is clear that the illegal mining in the Guayana is fast expanding, driven by the economic desperation in Venezuela. A study just released by the Amazonian Georeferenced Socio-Environmental Information Network (RAISG) has identified thousands of illegal mining sites across the Amazon and Orinoco basins—with the big majority in Venezuela. Of the 2,312 “extraction points” across six countries, 1,899 are in Venezuela. The runner up at 312 was Brazil—with a far greater territory. (SciDev.Net)

Whether or not the Maduro government is viewing the illegal mining as a kind of social safety valve, keeping a sector of the economically displaced isolated in the rainforest, or (more cynically) viewing the outlaw miners as the advance guard of the “official” extractive agenda for the region, one thing is clear: the illegal extractive activity provides a pretext for militarization that can ultimately be used to repress indigenous opposition to the coming exploitation under corporate auspices.

Inherent contradiction of *bolivarismo*

As with the constitutional autonomy provisions, the government has of course sought to build support among the indigenous—especially those in places less remote than the Orinoco. Amid this week’s political showdown, the government handed over more than a hundred collective property titles to indigenous peoples. The move was announced by the Indigenous Peoples Commission of the National Constituent Assembly, the body charged with rewriting the constitution—and accused of usurping the authority of the National Assembly. The Commission’s Clara Vidal said the move was part of the government’s “decolonization” policy, adding: “This implies reinforcing and bringing back indigenous peoples’ way of life through intercultural bilingual education, ancestral medicines and foods, among others.” (Prensa Latina)

But in a contradiction also seen in the hydrocarbon-rich Sierra de Perijá along the Colombian border, extractive agendas undermine the very indigenous support the government has sought to build. The government clearly has far less indigenous support in the remote Orinoco, where the autochthonous inhabitants see their rights less in terms of “land” than of *territory*. And the sacrifice of these territories is essentially mandated by the Bolivarian Revolution’s fundamental strategy of winning popular support through a clientelist distribution of the proceeds of resource extraction.

There is nothing to be gained by overlooking these contradictions in the name of anti-imperialism. On the other hand, the condition of Venezuela’s indigenous peoples, as well as workers and peasants, clearly stands to worsen (certainly not improve!) if an *openly* neoliberal reactionary regime were to take power.

Can progressives around the world possibly walk this line?

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