

How Should the Left Respond in Venezuela?

August 15, 2017



Following recent elections that were widely boycotted, a Constituent Assembly charged with rewriting the Venezuelan constitution met in early August. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro called for the Constituent Assembly in May, proposing it as a solution to the crisis that Venezuela has faced in recent years. The U.S., the right-wing opposition in Venezuela and the Washington's European and Latin American allies denounced the Constituent Assembly as an undemocratic power grab. When the "Constituent" convened, the Trump administration announced new sanctions against Venezuela.

While Trump and the U.S. have no business lecturing the Venezuelan government on democracy, the Constituent Assembly has also caused controversy in the Latin American and international left. This debate is only one part of a broader discussion about what attitude to take to the Maduro government in its confrontation with the right-wing opposition and its imperialist backers—see articles by Mike Gonzalez, author of *Hugo Chávez: Socialist for the 21st Century*, reprinted at SocialistWorker.org; and George Ciccarello-Maher, author of *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution*.

This interview with Carlos Carcione, a leading member of the socialist organization Marea Socialista, provides a perspective on events from the vantage point of the Venezuelan opposition to the left of the government. Originally published in June at Aporrea, the Venezuelan site for news and commentary from a left perspective, it provides some essential background for understanding the dynamics in Venezuela today. Carcione also addresses the debate in the international left about the nature and direction of the Maduro government.

Carcione refers to the government of "Maduro, Diosdado and Padrino"—that is, the government whose main leaders are a troika of President Nicolás Maduro; Diosdado Cabello, the first vice president of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and PSUV leader in the now-dissolved National Assembly; and Vladimir Padrino, the defense minister and chief of the armed forces.

Carcione criticizes government plans, announced in 2016, to encourage foreign investment for mining of diamonds and other minerals in Arco Minero in Orinoco, a large zone in the south-central part of the country. Environmentalists and Indigenous rights activists have protested this decision. He makes that case that the left must develop a project independent of both the government and the right-wing opposition. This interview was translated for *Socialist Worker* by Lance Selfa.

THE COMPLICATED and uncertain situation in Venezuela has opened up a debate in what

we might generically call the Latin American and international left. As the situation in the country has gotten more serious, it seems that that two more or less clearly articulated groups have arisen. One defends the government of Nicolás Maduro and the other questions it. How do you see this argument?

WHAT WE see in the press is, to me, a simplification that stems from a deeper argument. I want to make clear that our stance is from a position of being part of the Bolivarian process and not just against the Maduro government, a government that a dear friend, Santiago Arconada, correctly labeled as the government of Maduro, Diosdado, Padrino.

Because from my point of view, what's at stake in that debate is your stance on the policies of the government/PSUV: its orientation, what social sectors it expresses, what interests it represents, and what are the consequences of these for the country and the population. It's not only about the leading figures in the government or speeches or the demagogic appeals to the geopolitical conflict.

Speaking from what's generally called the "left," if we analyze those elements, noting what I said earlier and in light of the Maduro's proposed Constituent Assembly, we see that there are two broad sectors on the left in Venezuela today. One is on the side of the PSUV-government-Polo Patriótico, and the other is the ensemble of broad and varied platforms of social and political struggle—like the Citizens Platform in Defense of the Constitution, which fights against the Arco Minero in Orinoco; newly formed regroupments of the labor and social movements; of the Platform for a Public and Citizen Audit; Marea Socialista as a political organization; and Bolivarian political parties like Unidad Política Popular 89; as well as some well-known personalities.

The current of that left that I'm describing advances proposals that grapple with the collapse of Venezuela's oil-based rentier economy. If we understand this, if we understand what these differences are and that they are radical, we can understand the controversy more clearly. It shows more clearly where each side on the left stands.

This vantage point, from inside the Bolivarian process, has additional importance. Take, for example, Marea Socialista, which recently left the PSUV and since has said that its politics aren't represented either by the PSUV or the MUD. It is an opposition from the left to the Maduro government, and it should go without saying that we have nothing to do with the right-wing opposition or MUD.

Marea Socialista doesn't repudiate its membership in the Bolivarian process, unlike a group of ex-ministers in the Chávez government—such as Héctor Navarro, the ex-minister of Education and Electric Energy or Ana Elisa Osorio, the ex-minister of the Environment, among others—or the heterogeneous movement known in the media as "critical Chavismo."

On the contrary, the criticisms, warnings, proposals and policies that Marea and like-minded others take as their starting point the conscientious defense of the economic, social and political gains of the Bolivarian process, including the 1999 Constitution—gains that are under ferocious attack from this government.

As long as the pro-government left and those who support them internationally—with automatic and unconditional support for the president—don't look critically at government policies nor at the Constituent Assembly, they are either tacitly or explicitly expressing support for those policies.

COULD YOU clarify the differences between those two parts of the Venezuelan and international left that you've identified?

IN SCHEMATIC terms, those differences revolve around the brutal economic crash that we're living

through, the pronounced regression in the political system into an authoritarian model that they're trying to consolidate and deepen with the Constituent Assembly, and the tremendously regressive counter-reforms to the social policies. I will try to synthesize these briefly.

Regarding economic policy, we can see two distinct periods under the Maduro government. First, there is a period of gradual macroeconomic adjustment that failed spectacularly. We can specify the time between the February 2013 currency devaluation, a month before Chávez died, and the second half of 2014 when the government approved the first packet of Enabling Acts, as an attempt to cut spending and social investment in the social Missions, to reduce imports and to cut real wages through inflation. This policy has a clear regressive outcome, because the adjustment falls heavily on income and access to basic goods for working families and the poorest sectors. It fails.

And it fails because, among other reasons, not only does it not attack, but it actually deepens, the mafia-like pattern of rentier accumulation that is rooted in the illegal capital flight stemming from two fraudulent financial mechanisms: first, illegal diversions of petro dollars designated for imports to large construction projects or big contracts or international agreements; and secondly, illegal speculation with the sovereign national debt or the debt of the national oil company PDVSA, including domestic debt that has been shown to be outsourced.

These maneuvers have driven the nation's debt to somewhere around 80 percent of the GDP, according to a thorough study by Oly Millán Campos and Paulino Núñez, who work with me on the Platform for a Public and Citizens' Audit. These illicit maneuvers make this debt illegitimate and odious, as Paulino says every time he gets the chance.

Despite all the warnings about this, despite all of the documentation, despite all of demands we've made, the government punctually makes every payment on this debt, while reducing imports, precipitating the sharp crisis of shortages of food and medicine that is putting us on the verge of a humanitarian crisis. It is seriously compromising the nation's patrimony.

Instead of accepting the Public and Citizens' Audit proposals that he take the same attitude to the debt that [former President Rafael] Correa took to the Ecuadorian debt, Maduro has continued to pay while refusing any type of investigation or independent audit. [*Translator's note: In 2008, Ecuador defaulted on \$3.2 billion in foreign debt. At the time, Correa said the debt was "illegitimate" and called bondholders "real monsters."*]

As a result, Maduro has frittered away \$60 billion in three years. And we never tire of insisting that this debt is paid for with the Venezuelan people's hunger, literally, because complying with these debt obligations means eliminating essential imports.

The second period that we point to begins at the end of 2014 with the passage of a new Enabling Act that allows the government to rule by decree. These laws make possible the creation of Special Economic Zones where Venezuelan law doesn't apply. These take full force as the price of oil was falling. Above all, from the beginning of 2016 when the government presented the so-called "15 motors of the productive economy" as a plan to overcome dependence on oil, what is really happening is a colossal extension of extractive industry and making the country even more dependent on raw materials exports. From the "Mining Motor" with the Arco Minero mines in Orinoco, to the "Energy Motor" with the opening of offshore drilling, to the "Timber Motor" to the "Tourism Motor," they are saddling us with a ferocious opening to transnational capital.

The international left that supports Nicolás Maduro unconditionally says nothing about any of this. They don't explain why this plan would be necessary, nor if it's beneficial, nor have they heard or read any of the criticism of it, nor have they proposed alternatives. On these grounds they're silent, a

complicit silence.

It's as if all of this didn't happen, as if reality was frozen in the year 2012. All they talk about is economic blackmail, extortion and imperialism's economic way—none of which we deny—but these would have about one-tenth of the impact they do, if they weren't bolstered by these policies of selling out the country, and this mafia-like pattern of accumulation that, while existing long before, has been boosted exponentially by the Maduro government to today's levels of looting of the country.

As Oly Millán writes in his article "It's the Economy, Stupid," the Constituent Assembly has, among other goals, providing the legal framework to sustain this model.

WHAT ARE the counter-reforms to social policy that you mentioned?

IN THIS respect, the left that gives the government knee-jerk support continues to cite statistics from 2012-2013, the last full and complete figures the government published. Those statistics describe a country that doesn't exist anymore. Yet the left holds onto those numbers because, if they acknowledged today's reality, most of their argument in support of the government would collapse.

What in reality happened is this: Where there had been popular markets like Mercal or PDVDAL where a large part of the population could get good quality food at subsidized prices, today there exists, barely, a door-to-door system of state-run distribution, the Local Committees of Supply and Production [known by its initials in Spanish, CLAP], that still has only managed to reach a very small number of families, who can just access these boxes or bags every month and a half.

Where there was a national system of primary medical care, for everyone—the Barrio Adentro program—where people could receive treatment, basic and some more advanced medical tests, and free medicines if needed. Today there is a wasteland, where equipment doesn't work, medicine isn't available, the ability to perform basic medical tests is lacking, and neglected infrastructure is decaying. Staffing of medical professionals has declined dramatically.

There were communal kitchens [*casas de alimentación*] in the poorest areas, organized so that those who needed them received free meals, operated by volunteers and housewives in the neighborhoods. But after months, going into years, of shortages of cooking supplies, a phenomenon unknown in Bolivarian Venezuela began to take place: more and more people "dumpster-diving" to eat. This is just one of the long list of successful social policies that are today disappearing.

The same is happening with progressive legislation, like, for example, the Law of Labor Rights [*Ley Orgánica del Trabajo*]. These laws remain on paper, but that's about it, because they don't really apply. And let's not even talk about wages that are some of the first in Latin America that have fallen to the levels of those in Haiti. Meanwhile, big business—both domestic and foreign—receives outrageous handouts of all types.

In the face of all of this, the pro-government left doesn't want to look at reality, so it looks elsewhere and repeats outdated statistics, and talks about old social advances, that have long been refuted by Venezuelans' lost weight from what the people call "Maduro's diet."

Because of mistreatment, persecution of the most oppressed sectors and the criminal hiding of all official information, we don't even know what the real budget of the country is. It's been converted into a secret under lock-and-key.

WHAT DO you mean by the strong authoritarian tendency in the political system?

ABOUT TWO years ago, the government began developing, I would say, as a state policy, a process

of dismantling the rights and guarantees established in the Constitution of 1999. Suppression of political and social rights. Elimination of economic rights and sovereignty in much of the national territory. Suspension, obstruction and elimination of union and student elections, from autonomous institutions like universities and from political positions such as regional governors, elimination of the right to the recall.

As professor and activist Edgardo Lander points out in a recent interview, "I think that after the parliamentary elections of 2015 the government seems to assume that its continuity in power is not possible if it appeals to the popular vote or if it respects the Constitution."

Here I will not describe the growth, also exponential, of state police violence outside the protests, in relation to, for example, the "People's Liberation Operation" [*Operación de liberación del Pueblo*] policy of clean-up operations and extermination of what the press calls "common crimes" against all legal and human standards. [*Translator's note: The original interview describes this operation as a "police policy that consists of patrols in the poorest parts of major cities to arrest, raid, repress, and even use deadly force without any respect for constitutional rights or minimum standards of legality."*]

This trend started earlier. Its major milestone was the Supreme Court's failed Resolutions 155 and 156, abolishing the National Assembly, in late March 2017. These decisions amounted to a mini-coup, led Attorney General Luisa Ortega Díaz, to denounce them as "breaking the constitutional thread." They had to be "reviewed" and revoked because of the national and international outcry they provoked.

The trend has accelerated since the start of the protests in April 2017. There are two recent studies that correctly describe and assess the situation in which there have already been 60 killed in the course of demonstrations. [*Translator's note: Since this interview, the figure of those killed in demonstrations has increased to more than 100.*]

But perhaps the most striking symbol of the deepening of this tendency is the deployment, against all legal principle, of military tribunals for the summary trial of civilians, and the use of military facilities for the detention of civilians condemned by the military courts. The Constituent Assembly is designed, according to the objectives assigned to it by all the official spokespeople, to consolidate this authoritarian tendency.

We are going to insist on this point that it's clear that there are those on the side of MUD sectors that are taking advantage of the climate of protest to launch guerrilla attacks. No doubt, these groups are no doubt financed, and some of them are trained by the United States or by the Colombian right, followers of ex-President Álvaro Uribe and his paramilitary supporters, do not seek a democratic or electoral exit from the crisis but seek the liquidation of chavismo. But this, which we repudiate, can in no way justify the de facto elimination of the right to protest and other elementary human rights, let alone the disproportionate and indiscriminate state repression of the protests.

In this case, the same thing happens in the previous ones. The pro-government left automatically lines up the government of Maduro, exaggerating "terrorist" role of the guerrilla actions, and lets the state off the hook from its responsibility for how it is handling the protests and repression.

This brings us to the extreme case of [left intellectual] Atilio Boron who advises President Maduro in a recent article to crush some unidentified "terrorists." In the context of the article, the word "crush" can be read as "exterminate."

Therefore, that old left demands that we unconditionally close ranks with an alleged "revolutionary

leadership" in the face of imperialist threats. We demand the application of clear policies to break with the domination of finance capital, beginning with the suspension of payments of the debt. And we denounce all those policies that compound dependence on this system of capital, that ruin the environment, that eliminate national sovereignty, that dismantle the social, economic and political achievements of the Bolivarian process, that consolidate the government's capitulation to imperialism and that open the door to foreign interference or intervention.

Four years into this period, we can no longer speak of mistakes. On the contrary, for us the government of Maduro, Cabello, Padrino is following a planned policy, hoping to placate these concentrated sectors of big capital.

Similarly, because, unlike the confusion spread by sectors of the left who unconditionally support Maduro, or who timidly demand a partial and limited policy change, we do not trust the leadership of the PSUV/government. That is that we are engaged in the construction of a new alternative that is anti-capitalist, environmentalist, feminist, and that recovers the democratic, anti-imperialist and Bolivarian keys of the process, fighting to deepen them.

BUT WOULDN'T the Constituent Assembly be a way out of the crisis? Could it not stop the escalation of violence and open a dialogue to establish rules of the game that everyone accepts?

BEFORE ANSWERING your question it's necessary to establish a characterization of the current moment. And why, from my point of view, the resolution to the crisis can only be one that is favorable to the country and working people, with more democracy and not with more authoritarianism. And more democracy means at this moment, making the Constitution of 1999 work again.

Today we are moving between Maduro's fraudulent Constituent Assembly and the civil war/crushing [of the protests] that Borón proposes, knowing that these two options seek the establishment of an authoritarian system to consolidate the sellout of the country that I have been pointing out.

Or, on the other hand, we can reinvigorate the Constitution of 1999, hold regional and municipal elections and specify a clear timetable for the presidential election. This would include full guarantees of political participation for all expressions of national political thought, without exclusions or proscriptions.

I think it is also important to make another distinction. The characterization of the current confrontation between the two leading political forces (i.e. the government and the right-wing opposition), is-unlike the one in 2002-03, and against what the government's side spills rivers of ink maintaining and what pro-government intellectuals internationally argue-not a fight between the popular sectors against the oligarchs. On the contrary, it is a struggle to define which of these two leading groups guarantees itself, in the next period, control of the state so as to manage and distribute the oil wealth.

They are two sectors of the elite, both subordinated to the international financial capital, a traditional one and an emergent one. And neither sector is democratic. Both have made clear that they need a completely authoritarian political system to successfully implement the ongoing economic counterrevolution and the counter-reforms to the political and social achievements, which, with all their shortcomings, were gained in the best years of the Chávez period.

As comrade Oly Millán says in the article I quoted earlier: "But also, the history of the oil industry has another characteristic very *sui generis* and that is, in each process of oil boom, there is a

rearrangement of the groups in power, i.e., some fall by the wayside, while others are strengthened and emerge anew." Today, on the downside of the oil boom and at a time of collapse of the rentier model, there is a predatory war between these two sectors of the Elites.

In this context, another goal of the Constituent Assembly is this: The leadership that today has control of state power but is threatened with losing its privileges, as punishment for the anti-popular and anti-national policy that has been applied in the last four years, is trying to retain it by means of a Constituent Assembly. The calling of this assembly is spurious and its electoral underpinnings are, without a doubt, dishonest.

On this point, many left-wing militants and intellectuals, chavista or not, agree. On Aporrea.org you can read interviews with Héctor Navarro, Edgardo Lander or Gonzalo Gómez and read articles by Nicmer Evans, Jesús Puerta, Sergio Sánchez, Felipe Pachano Azuaje and Javier Biardeau, among many others, who make this point. The government is taking the route of the Constituent Assembly so that it doesn't have to renew its mandate in a universal election, in which, undoubtedly, according to all the polls, it would be defeated.

In these conditions, the Constituent Assembly is not a "weapon for peace," as the PSUV/government leadership says. On the contrary, it is the weapon with which it will try to construct an authoritarian regime. The regional elections promised for December or the plebiscite for the new Constitution that Maduro will call, are just the mask to dress up this process with a false "democratic" breadth, a ruse. And since it is not a weapon of peace, the enormous danger that it entails is that it ends up turning into an instrument which, in the current escalation of violence between the new elite that controls the state and the old elite that believes that it's time to regain that control has arrived, opens the door to a civil confrontation with unpredictable consequences.

However, the calling of the Constituent Assembly has opened another door, unexpected by the leadership of the PSUV, through which has begun to seep dissent from a significant part of chavismo. Militants, deputies and middle leaders of the party, current officials, former officials, intellectuals and academics, and according to many reports even a substantive part of the armed forces, strongly reject the antidemocratic maneuver.

With this sector we agree on an essential point: the only democratic road, which cannot be captured by either of the two elites that are instigating violence, is the struggle to renew the Constitution of 1999. We are part of that effort, while the old left, in its decline, with its allegiance to a government that has broken with the process that carried it here, continues to show the world its poverty.

First published at Aporrea.org. Translated into English by Lance Selfa.