

Venezuela: Maduro Constantly Rearms His Enemies

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The political crisis that has been shaking Venezuela for months is at the heart of a war of information and propaganda, which is even inviting itself, albeit for other purposes, into the French political debate. Beyond binary discourses, we wanted to take the risk of complexity with Fabrice Andreani, doctoral student in Lyon-II University, who is working on the Bolivarian revolution. [CQFD]

CQFD: In January 2016, in CQFD, you analysed with Marc Saint-Upéry the crises of post-Chávez Venezuela. How have things evolved?

Fabrice Andreani: The victory of the anti-Chavist opposition coalition Table of Democratic Unity (MUD) in the December 2015 legislative elections meant the loss by the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and its allies of 2 million votes, mainly because of the abstention in the barrios, the popular neighbourhoods, demobilized since the death of Chávez in 2013. This was against a background of shortages of regulated or subsidized goods and recourse to the black market, with astronomic rates of inflation. But also brutalization and an unprecedented extension of state violence. After declining between 1999 and 2008, it began with judicial, police and militia harassment of PSUV dissidents (trade unionists, peasants, indigenous people), before spreading to the students and the parliamentarians of the MUD who were demanding the departure of Maduro between February and May 2014. It took on a much more lethal character in 2015, through a campaign, as illusory as it was spectacular, against ordinary popular kinds of illegal activities — especially small- and medium-scale smuggling -- resulting in thousands of evictions from public housing and dozens of summary executions.

I was in Venezuela in the spring of 2016 when people started talking about a humanitarian crisis. Apart from local fruit and vegetables and bread here and there, the purchase of any basic product — flour, oil, milk, margarine, soap, nappies, sanitary pads, paracetamol, condoms — implied waiting in endless queues or paying a high price to the local trader. Emigration spread to all social classes.

Riots and looting, which had almost disappeared under Chávez, became commonplace, as well as the lynching of thieves, real or targeted as such. All of this in a context where the rate of homicide is fifty times higher than in Europe and 95 per cent of crimes and misdemeanours are unresolved.

Meanwhile, the MUD was deprived of a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, which augured for a quasi-cohabitation. The Supreme Court of Justice, whose mandate was renewed before the

legal date by the outgoing PSUV majority, effectively invalidated the election of indigenous deputies on suspicions of fraud (so far unproven), then annulled all the laws that had been adopted, including entry into the country of humanitarian aid, denounced as an “imperialist Trojan horse”... Maduro then took on emergency powers and declared a state of economic emergency. On the one hand, he set up a network of committees of PSUV militants who directly sell the food sent by the army. On the other hand, he launched the Orinoco Mining Arc, whereby 12 per cent of the country’s territory is to be exploited via opencast mining, in order to extract minerals (gold, silver, diamond, bauxite, coltan, cobalt...), by a military enterprise linked to the entourage of Maduro and by Chinese, Russian and North American multinationals — in defiance of the vital rights of indigenous peoples.

Following these various irregularities, the MUD launched a procedure to revoke Maduro by referendum — also demanded by many Chavists. But the National Electoral Council (CNE) changed the rules several times along the way. Finally it cancelled it in extremis, after having suspended the regional elections, but also the trade union elections, where the PSUV no longer controls the two major industries, oil and steel. So by autumn 2016, the demonstrations called by the MUD and the student organizations coexisted intermittently with popular protests. So that between two steps of salsa and jokes about his “diet” on TV, Maduro was forced to cut short at the last minute disastrous inaugurations of infrastructures in barrios -- which was followed by arrests and convictions. Since the end of March, when the Supreme Court decided to take the place of Parliament and Luisa Ortega, the Attorney General -- a Chavist -- denounced a break in the constitutional order, the streets have not been empty. Especially since on May 1st, after some thirty deaths, hundreds of arrests and a series of penalties of ineligibility against MUD parliamentarians, Maduro pulled out of his hat the idea of an all-powerful Constituent Assembly. Unlike Chávez in 1999, he refused to submit to a referendum on the system of election, which was tailor-made for the PSUV [1]. The opposition boycotted the election of this Constituent Assembly which took place in August under conditions that were more than dubious.

The dissenting prosecutor Luisa Ortega has since fled the country, denouncing the corruption of Maduro and others. What political forces does the government actually have at its disposal? Is there any opposition other than the liberal right?

The first victory of the Constituent Assembly was to dismiss the “traitor” Luisa Ortega, who had been at the head of her ministry since 2007. Too well known to be found at home with a bullet in her head, she was given a warning by the abduction of her daughter and granddaughter in February when she was in Brazil. In dissenting, she is well placed to know what risks she runs if there is no movement on the side of the PSUV: at best, she will finish in a minor position on the left flank of the MUD; at worst, she will rot in a military prison alongside people whom she did not much care about in previous years [2]. Or else she can take flight, at the risk of being forced, due to insufficient protection, to give names to the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), present in many countries of South America, in exchange for political asylum.

However, she explained that she could not demand that the protestors respect the law in the face of a government proclaiming “Whoever is not with us is a terrorist” (as Maduro put it), and while exactions have become the norm [3]. Before embarking with her files in a “go-fast” (a flight) to Colombia and then Brazil, along with her husband and colleagues who were equally threatened, Ortega said that of the more than a hundred violent deaths since April, about 25 per cent were due to the police and the army, and 40 per cent to pro-government paramilitaries. To this must be added the more confused causes of the deaths of rioters and onlookers, as well as the assassination of Chavist militants and representatives, as well as police and military personnel [4].

Today, “Madurism” is fundamentally based on the politico-military chieftainships of public administrations and enterprises, and on networks of currency, contraband and drug trafficking. To

this must be added the support of a clientele of 10 to 15 per cent of the electorate, of which a minority deals the crumbs (from the oil rent) to the rest, provided that they stay in line. The monocolour Constituent Assembly probably mobilized not more than half of the 8 million voters announced — against a backdrop of widespread blackmail in relation to public employment and food aid.

In the face of Ortega's "betrayal" and the hundreds of cases of military insubordination, part of the PSUV and its allies doubtless hoped for a signal from the higher ranks of the army, and vice versa. But notwithstanding the dissent of three PSUV deputies, the appeal to rebellion of a helicopter pilot over Caracas in July, or the civilian-military attack on a barracks in the popular town of Valencia in August 2007, the status quo prevailed. Whether it is the Platform in Defence of the Constitution, launched in mid-2016 by ex-ministers, intellectuals and high-ranking officials, or Marea Socialista (see the platform published on July 29th, 2017) a dissident political grouping of the PSUV, no anti-Madurist Chavist group can claim to have a significant popular base. The Socialism and Freedom Party, autonomous from the PSUV since 2008 and anchored in the trade-union movement, created along with Marea Socialista and collectives of barrios a Platform of the People in Struggle and Critical Chavism. But it still has to fight against the widespread idea on the left that occupying the street is playing the game of the right. On this point the anarchists close to the monthly *El Libertario* are in agreement.

Roughly speaking, the MUD opposition coalition gravitates to the centre-right — its parties range from the far left post-Maoists to the liberal-conservative right, through various forms of social democracy. But these labels generally remain in the background during mobilizations that bring together up to a few hundred thousand people. And it can be over a million, in a country of 31 million inhabitants, when students, private sector employees, health workers and teachers are involved. As is the case with any state or "body of armed men" (as Engels put it), who trick and mistreat in a "socialist" Newspeak, the "anti-communist" — and here, anti-Cuban -- discourse is certainly present in the street, in particular among the students. But this is more in the name of a primordial political liberalism than an economic ultraliberalism that has never really caught on in this oil country [5].

There is also racism -- based more on class than on race — in the wealthy fringes of the MUD, but it is too minor to explain alone the weak mobilization of the anti-Madurist Chavist base. In reality, the culture of street protest, still strong in the barrios, is contained in it by the "social informants" of the PSUV and the paramilitaries. On the other hand, this same culture is totally foreign to the middle-class youth who supported the revolution. In short, behind the comfortable criticism of the leading contingents in the demonstrations, described as violent and right-wing — while being eminently plural — the fear of repression remains a great factor of deterrence.

Some observers argue that the situation, comparable to that in Chile in 1973, results from an "imperialist economic war". What do you think?

The April 2002 coup, followed by the oil and commercial lock-out the following winter, both backed by the private media and the United States, but defeated by a massive popular and military counter-offensive, forms the original matrix of the Chilean analogy. Chávez wanted to stop the rampant privatization of the PDVSA oil company and launch an agrarian reform. The managers of PDVSA and the big bosses then bet, mistakenly, on his fall. Hence the decision to reinstate exchange controls to prevent capital flight. But this, together with the complicity of the Chavist high officials, generated a hyper-profitable business, through the falsification of imports and the resale on the black market of petrodollars assigned by the state to pay for them. For the greater benefit of the bosses tied up with to the government, especially those in charge of public enterprises and subcontractors. The private sector, forced to be more scrupulous under the threat of nationalization, got into this business later

on. Of the trifle of one trillion petrodollars accumulated over the period 2003-2013, nearly a quarter evaporated, even before it was counted by the state, and another quarter was lost in the operations of an allocation of foreign exchange to importers who speculate, in various ways, with the foreign exchange earned.

Besides, while the oil sector and nationalized enterprises (steel, cement, electricity, etc.) were slowing down -- because of lack of maintenance, corruption scandals and repeated strikes -- the rentier euphoria was such that the state has continued to get into debt to finance a number of major projects: from TeleSur satellites to the hundreds of thousands of homes provided in the last campaign of Chávez (2012), and a number of infrastructures that have never been created (metro and train lines, bridges, etc.).

The PDVSA even incurred debts in kind China -- something which was only viable if the price of oil remained high. Unfortunately, crude oil prices collapsed in 2014, making the gap between the official and unofficial exchange rates of the dollar literally explode -- a gap that already provided profit margins of at least 100 per cent to "agents of economic war".

Although the fall in crude oil prices is partly a result of the growth of shale oil production in the United States, it is not the result of any concerted plan... No more than is the flight of capital, the shortages and the hyper-inflation, not to mention the disappearance of millions of 100-bolivar bills - worth almost nothing and used to make fake dollars (using "cleaned" paper).

As the Marxist economist Manuel Sutherland, who was sacked last year by the Bolivarian University, clearly explains, the Bolivarian Revolution succeeded in making currency trading "the most profitable business in the history of capitalism", and all the rest flows from that. It is a curious war, he adds, where Maduro and his consorts are constantly rearming their enemies whom they have denounced for so many years. The fact is that they prefer to pay, cash down, an "odious" debt, including to Wall Street, rather than restructure it - probably less through divergences with the IMF than to avoid any audit that would reveal the identity of the operators of this veritable robbery of the century.

However, it would have been enough to save less than a tenth of the loot stashed away since 2003 to pay for more than three years of imports at the staggering levels of 2012. Moreover, the fact that small Madurist groups advocate an agrarian neo-Stakhanovism in isolated communes has very little influence over the activity of the rest of the population, 90 per cent urban, half of them self-employed in the informal market sector.

Trump recently spoke of "a possible military option if necessary". Is it credible?

Neither the State Department nor the Pentagon nor the CIA take seriously any statement from Trump on international issues. All the regional leaders, allied or not, condemned these remarks. As did the White House National Security Advisor, and then the Vice-President. What is worrying, especially in Bogotá and Brasilia, is the possibility of a civil war, with a population exodus even more spectacular than the current one. A scenario all the more sombre in that it would correspond to a form of "Lebanonization" (as in Lebanon, with confrontations based on regions) of the conflict, which would be more multi-gang than binary. The extreme right-wing (narco-) paramilitaries demobilized in Colombia and present in the Andes, as well as the pseudo-left guerrillas of Llanos (South), would have as much chance of joining with representatives of the MUD as with the PSUV, for pragmatic commercial reasons.

This interview was first published on the CQFD site, and subsequently on the site A l'encontre.

Note by A l'encontre

According to the AFP of September 16th, 2017: "Under the auspices of the Dominican government and the United Nations, the government and the opposition agreed on Thursday in Santo Domingo to the creation of a group of friendly countries to lead future negotiations. They will meet again on September 27th. The Venezuelan opposition added to these talks the respect of certain conditions, among which were an "electoral calendar" including the presidential election at the end of 2018, the release of 590 "political prisoners", the "respect" of the Parliament whose powers were confiscated by the Constituent Assembly and the lifting of sanctions that prevent some oppositionists from standing in elections."

Moreover, to give the appearance of independence against the dollar, Maduro asserted, two days ago, that sales of oil would be denominated in Chinese renminbi; which is, in fact, a demand of Beijing.

According to the AFP of September 14th, 2017: "Confronted with an unprecedented food and economic crisis, Venezuela seems determined to remedy its shortages. The government, led by President Maduro, announced on Wednesday that a new urban agriculture plan will be put in place by October 4th. This includes the "rabbit plan" whose aim is to develop the breeding of the rodent and encourage the inhabitants to eat it." There is a cultural problem because we were taught that rabbits were cute animals, Agriculture Minister Freddy Bernal said on a television show this week. "A rabbit is not a pet. It is two and a half kilograms of high-protein, cholesterol-free meat."

P.S.

* http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/ecriture/?exec=articles&id_article=5193

Footnotes

[1] In this system, rural communes of 10,000 inhabitants have the same weight as cities with 800,000 inhabitants, with a corporate provision that excludes more than 5 million citizens.

[2] Such as General Baduel, who supported Chávez against the putsch in 2002, but opposed the "socialist" reform of the 2007 Constitution, passed through decree-laws. Or the conservative Leopoldo Lopez, who was sentenced to 13 years in prison, considered as being "responsible" for the forty deaths that occurred during the 2014 movement.

[3] From the tear-gas, flash-balls and lead shot fired at point-blank range by the gendarmes, to the bullets fired by the paramilitaries on motorcycles by their side, through military trials, mutilation of detainees and the hunt for young men in buildings adjoining the barricades.

[4] Including a few cases, highlighted and instrumentalized by the regime, of Chavists who were lynched or burnt alive -- against a background of settling of accounts and/or incitement by plainclothes police.

[5] The anti-IMF riots of the Caracazo in 1989 are the typical example. The memory of the thousands of deaths from repression served as a banner for Chávez to take centre stage during his failed putsch in 1992.