

Venezuela Beyond the Protests: The Revolution is Here to Stay



By EVA GOLINGER - POSTCARDS FROM THE REVOLUTION, February 21st 2014

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Investigative journalist Eva Golinger traces the roots of current opposition protests, and argues “the revolution that is here to stay is the Bolivarian Revolution, which began in 1998 when Hugo Chavez was first elected president”.

For those of you unfamiliar with Venezuelan issues, don't let the title of this article fool you. The revolution referred to is not what most media outlets are showing taking place today in Caracas, with protestors calling for the ouster of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. The revolution that is here to stay is the Bolivarian Revolution, which began in 1998 when Hugo Chavez was first elected president and has subsequently transformed the mega oil producing nation into a socially-focused, progressive country with a grassroots government. Demonstrations taking place over the past few days in Venezuela are attempts to undermine and destroy that transformation in order to return power to the hands of the elite who ruled the nation previously for over 40 years.

Those protesting do not represent Venezuela's vast working class majority that struggled to overcome the oppressive exclusion they were subjected to during administrations before Chavez. The youth taking to the streets today in Caracas and other cities throughout the country, hiding their faces behind masks and balaclavas, destroying public buildings, vehicles, burning garbage, violently blocking transit and throwing rocks and molotov cocktails at security forces are being driven by extremist right-wing interests from Venezuela's wealthiest sector. Led by hardline neoconservatives, Leopoldo Lopez, Henrique Capriles and Maria Corina Machado – who come from three of the wealthiest families in Venezuela, the 1% of the 1% - the protesters seek not to revindicate their basic fundamental rights, or gain access to free healthcare or education, all of which are guaranteed by the state, thanks to Chavez, but rather are attempting to spiral the country into a state of ungovernability that would justify an international intervention leading to regime change.

Before Chavez was elected in 1998, Venezuela was in a very dark, difficult period with a dangerously eroded democracy. During the early 1990s, poverty swelled at around 80%, the economy was in a sinkhole, the nation's vast middle class was disappearing with millions falling into economic despair, constitutional rights were suspended, a national curfew was imposed and corruption was rampant. Those who protested the actions of the government were brutally repressed and often killed. In fact, during the period of so-called “representative democracy” in Venezuela from 1958-1998, before the nation's transformation into a participatory democracy under Chavez, thousands of Venezuelans were disappeared, tortured, persecuted and assassinated by state security forces. None of their rights were guaranteed and no one, except the majority excluded poor, seemed to care. International Human Rights organizations showed little interest in Venezuela during that time, despite clear and systematic violations taking place against the people.

Those in power during that period, also referred to in Venezuela as the “Fourth Republic”, represented an elite minority – families that held the nation’s wealth and profited heavily from the lucrative oil reserves. Millions of dollars from oil profits belonging to the state (oil was nationalized in Venezuela in 1976) were embezzled out of the country into the bloated bank accounts of wealthy Venezuelans and corrupt public officials who had homes in Miami, New York and the Dominican Republic and lived the high life off the backs of an impoverished majority.

Hugo Chavez’s electoral victory in 1998 shattered the opulent banquet the Venezuelan elite had enjoyed for decades, while they ran the country into the ground. He was elected precisely to break the hold on power those groups had harnessed for so many years, and Chavez’s promise was revolution – complete transformation of the economic, social and political system in the country. His electoral victories were solid, year after year, each time rising in popularity as more and more Venezuelans became motivated to participate in their governance and the construction of a new, inclusive, nation with social justice as its banner.

Chavez’s election was a huge blow to Washington and the powerful interests in the United States that wanted control over Venezuela’s oil reserves – the largest on the planet. In April 2002, the Bush administration backed a coup d’etat to overthrow Chavez, led by the very same elite that had been in power before. The coup involved mass marches in the streets of Caracas, composed of the wealthy and middle classes, calling for Chavez’s ouster. Snipers were used to shoot on those in the marches, creating violence and chaos that was immediately blamed on Chavez. Television, radio and newspapers in Venezuela all joined in the coup efforts, manipulating images and distorting facts to justify Chavez’s overthrow. He became the villain, the evil dictator, the brutal murderer in the eyes of international media, though in reality those overthrowing him and their backers in Washington were responsible for the death and destruction caused. After Chavez was kidnapped on April 11, 2002 and set to be assassinated, the wealthy businessmen behind the coup took power and imposed a dictatorship. All democratic institutions were dissolved, including the legislature and the supreme court.

The majority who had voted for Chavez and had finally become protagonists in their own governance were determined to defend their democracy and took to the streets demanding return of their president. Forty-eight hours later, Chavez was rescued by millions of supporters and loyal armed forces. The coup was defeated and the revolution survived, but the threats continued.

A subsequent economic sabotage attempted to bring down the oil industry. 18,000 high level technical and managerial workers at the state-owned company, PDVSA, walked off the job, sabotaging equipment and causing nearly \$20 billion in damages to the Venezuelan economy. After 64 days of strikes, barren supermarket shelves due to intentional hoarding to create panic, and a brutal media war in which every private station broadcast opposition propaganda 24/7, Venezuelans were fed up with the opposition. Chavez’s popularity soared. A year and a half later, when the opposition tried to oust him through a recall referendum, he won a 60-40 landslide victory.

Leading efforts to overthrow Chavez were the very same three who today call for their supporters to take to the streets to force current President Nicolas Maduro from power. Leopoldo Lopez and Henrique Capriles were both mayors of two of Caracas’ wealthiest municipalities during the 2002 coup – Chacao and Baruta, while Maria Corina Machado was a close ally of Pedro Carmona, the wealthy businessman who proclaimed himself dictator during Chavez’s brief ouster. Lopez and Machado signed the infamous “Carmona Decree” dissolving Venezuela’s democratic institutions, trashing the constitution. Both Capriles and Lopez were also responsible for persecuting and violently detaining members of Chavez’s government during the coup, including allowing some of them to be publicly beaten, such as Ramon Rodriguez Chacin, former Minister of Interior in 2002.

All three have been major recipients of US funding and political support for their endeavors to overthrow Chavez, and now Maduro. The US National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its offshoots, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) provided start-up funds for Machado's NGO Sumate, and Capriles' and Lopez's right-wing party Primero Justicia. When Lopez split from Primero Justicia in 2010 to form his own party, Voluntad Popular, it was bankrolled by US dollars.

Over the ten year period, from 2000-2010, US agencies, including the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and its Office for Transition Initiatives (OTI), set up in Caracas in 2002, channeled more than \$100 million dollars to opposition groups in Venezuela. The overall objective was regime change.

When Chavez was reelected in 2006 with an even larger margin of victory, nearly 64% of the vote, the US shifted its support from the traditional opposition political parties and NGOs in order to create new ones with youthful, fresh faces. Over one third of US funding, nearly \$15 million annually by 2007, was directed towards youth and student groups, including training in the use of social networks to mobilize political activism. Student leaders were sent to the US for workshops and conferences on Internet activism and media networking. They were formed in tactics to promote regime change via street riots and strategic use of media to portray the government as repressive.

In 2007, these student groups, funded and trained by US agencies, took to the streets of Caracas to demand Chavez's ouster after the government chose not to renew the public concession of RCTV, a popular private television station known for its seedy soap operas. The protests were composed of mainly middle and upper class youth and opposition politicians, defending corporate media and a station also known for its direct involvement in the April 2002 coup. Though their protests failed to achieve their objective, the "students" had earned their credentials as a solid fixture in the opposition. Later that year, their organizing helped to narrowly defeat a constitutional reform package Chavez had proposed in a national referendum.

After President Chavez passed away in March 2013 following a brutal battle with cancer, the opposition saw an opportunity to snatch power back from his supporters. Elections were held on April 14, 2013 in an extremely tense and volatile environment. Nicolas Maduro, Chavez's chosen successor, ran against Henrique Capriles, who months earlier in October 2012 had lost the presidential election to Chavez by 11 points. This time, however, the results were much narrower with Maduro winning by a slim margin of just under 2 points. Capriles refused to accept the results and called his supporters to take to the streets in protest, to "get all their rage out". During the two days after the elections, 11 government supporters were killed by Capriles' followers. It was a bloodbath that received no attention in international media, the victims just weren't glamorous enough, and were on the wrong side.

As 2013 wore on, the economic crisis in the country intensified and the old strategy of hoarding products to provoke shortages and panic amongst the population was back again. Basic consumer products disappeared from the shelves – toilet paper, cooking oil, powdered milk, corn flour – staples needed for everyday life in Venezuela. Inflation began to rise and speculation, price hikes, were rampant. While some of this was related to government controls on foreign currency exchange to prevent capital flight, a lot had to do with sabotage. A full economic war was underway against Maduro's government.

Problems persisted throughout the year and discontent grew. But as the electoral period came around again in December, for mayors, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) had sweeping victories. 242 out of 317 mayoralties were won by the PSUV, showing a solid majority of the country still supported the government's party.

Maduro called opposition governors and newly-elected mayors to a meeting at the presidential palace in late December in an attempt to dialogue and create a space to work together to improve the situation in country. The meeting was generously received by a majority of Venezuelans. Nevertheless, extremists, such as Machado and Lopez, saw the meeting as a threat to their goal of ousting Maduro well before his term ended in 2019. Once again they began to call for street protests and other actions against his government.

In January 2014, as Venezuelans arrived back from their Christmas vacations, economic difficulties continued. Maduro began cracking down on businesses violating newly-enacted laws on price controls and speculation. Towards the end of January, new measures were announced regarding access to foreign exchange that many perceived as a devaluing of the national currency, the bolivar. Sentiment built amongst opposition groups rejecting the new measures and calls for Maduro's resignation increased. By February, small pockets of protests popped up around the country, mainly confined to middle and upper class neighborhoods.

During the celebration of National Youth Day on February 12, while thousands marched peacefully to commemorate the historic achievements of youth in the nation's independence, another group sought a different agenda. Opposition youth, "students", led an aggressive march calling for Maduro's resignation that ended in a violent confrontation with authorities after the protestors destroyed building façades, including the Attorney General's office, threw objects at police and national guard and used molotov cocktails to burn property and block transit. The clashes caused three deaths and multiple injuries.

The leader of the violent protest, Leopoldo Lopez, went into hiding following the confrontation and a warrant was issued for his arrest due to his role in the deadly events and his public calls to oust the president. Days later, after a lengthy show including videos from a "clandestine" location, Lopez convened another march and used the event to publicly turn himself over to authorities. He was taken into custody and held for questioning, all his rights guaranteed by the state.

Lopez became the rallying point for the violent protests, which have continued to date, causing several additional deaths, dozens of injuries and the destruction of public property. Relatively small, violent groups of protestors have blocked transit in wealthier zones of Caracas, causing traffic delays and terrorizing residents. Several deaths have resulted because protestors refused to let ambulances through to take patients to the emergency room.

Ironically, international media has been portraying these protestors as peaceful victims of state repression. Even celebrities, such as Cher and Paris Hilton have been drawn into a false hysteria, calling for freedom for Venezuelans from a "brutal dictatorship". The reality is quite different. While there is no doubt that a significant number of protestors in the larger marches that have taken place have demonstrated peacefully their legitimate concerns, the driving force behind those protests is a violent plan to overthrow a democratic government. Lopez, who has publicly stated his pride for his role in the April 2002 coup against Hugo Chavez, continues to call on his supporters to rally against the Venezuelan "dictatorship".

While dozens of governments and international organizations, including UNASUR and Mercosur have expressed their clear support and solidarity for the Venezuelan government and President Maduro, Washington was quick to back the opposition

protestors and demand the government release all those detained during the demonstrations. The Obama administration went so far as to threaten President Maduro with international consequences if Leopoldo Lopez were to be detained. In the aftermath of the first wave of violent protests, Maduro expelled three US diplomats from the US Embassy in Caracas, accusing them of conspiring to recruit students in Venezuela to engage in destabilization.

As the violence continues in some areas around the country, Maduro has made widespread calls for peace. A movement for peace was launched last week, led by artists, athletes and cultural figures, together with organized communities seeking to end not just the current chaotic situation, but also the high crime levels that have plagued the country over the past few years.

Most Venezuelans want peace in their country and a majority continue to support the current government. The opposition has failed to present an alternative platform or agenda beyond regime change, and their continued dependence on US funding and support – even this year Obama included \$5 million in the 2014 Foreign Operations Budget for opposition groups in Venezuela – is an ongoing sign of their weakness. As a State Department cable from the US Embassy in Caracas, published by Wikileaks, explained in March 2009, “Without our continued assistance, it is possible that the organizations we helped create...could be forced to close...Our funding will provide those organizations a much-needed lifeline”.

During the past decade in Venezuela, poverty has been reduced by over 50%, healthcare has become free and accessible to all, as has quality education from primary through graduate school. State subsidies provide affordable food and housing for those who need it, as well as job training programs and worker placement. Media outlets, especially community media, have expanded nationwide, giving more space for the expression of diverse voices. Internet access has increased significantly and the state also built hundreds of public infocenters with free computer and Internet access throughout the country. Students are given free laptops and tablets to use for their studies. The government has raised minimum wage by 10-20% each year leading Venezuela to have one of the highest minimum wages in Latin America. Pensions are guaranteed after only 25 years of work and those who work in the informal economy are still guaranteed a pension from the state.

While problems persist in the country, as they do every where, most Venezuelans are wary of giving up the immense social and political gains they have made in the past fourteen years. An opposition with nothing to offer except foreign intervention and uncertainty does not appeal to the majority. Unfortunately, media fail to see this reality, or chose not to portray it in order to advance a political agenda. In Venezuela, the revolution is here to stay and the interests of the 1% are not going to overcome those of the 99% already in power.