

LE MONDE *diplomatique*

> **march 2019**

OPPOSITION HAS NO PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

Venezuela's missing future

Juan Guaidó has assumed the presidency of Venezuela even though Nicolás Maduro hasn't relinquished the office; but in spite of foreign backing, the opposition is deeply divided.

BY JULIA BUXTON



For sale: bag made of bolivar bills on the border with Colombia, whose currency has locally displaced that of Venezuela

Luis Robayo · AFP · Getty

THE Venezuelan opposition, paralysed by personal grudges and strategic divisions, seems to have unified, which is remarkable. The perception that President Nicolás Maduro's re-election in May 2018 lacked legitimacy has led to attempts at inter-opposition solidarity. The opposition-dominated congress regards Maduro as having 'usurped' power, and in these circumstances the 1999 Bolivarian constitution requires the president of the National Assembly to take over control of the government.

Juan Guaidó of the Voluntad Popular (Popular Will or VP) party announced on 23 January that he was assuming the interim presidency and said he would make it his mission to establish a transition government, which would organise a new presidential election within 12 months. He was soon recognised as the official head of state by around 50 countries, including the US, Brazil, Ecuador and most countries in western Europe. There are critics, though, including Noam Chomsky, who have called this move 'a coup' (1). There is also a serious problem with US sanctions against Venezuela, which have become harsher since 2017, and have been described by former UN special rapporteur Alfred de Zayas as 'crimes against humanity' (2) because they are worsening already very difficult economic and social conditions (3).

US military intervention?

There were hopes in the Guaidó camp that US pressure would bring a quick regime change, but these soon ended. Venezuela's armed forces continue to recognise Maduro. Russia and China also support him, though China has begun talks with the opposition on Venezuela's nearly \$75bn of outstanding debt (4). Calls from Mexico and Uruguay for a negotiated solution to the political impasse have also slowed Guaidó's momentum, but with US encouragement he has deflected them, and instead is calling for still harsher US sanctions; he has not ruled out a US military intervention, and President Donald Trump likes to suggest he is ready to oblige.

The opposition has formed an internal alliance of circumstance, but there is still the crucial question of what kind of country it plans to build. This has no clear answer as yet, for the good reason that Maduro's opponents remain deeply divided. Their fragile unity, hastily created over recent months, will become harder to maintain when the serious problems of power distribution, institutional appointments and policy direction have to be dealt with.

Opinion polls showed growing numbers of 'ni ni', those neither for Maduro nor for the opposition

The opposition has three main strands. The first, the radical fringe, is linked to Guaidó's VP party (founded by Leopoldo López, who is currently under house arrest for incitement to violence and conspiracy during riots in 2014) (5), and also to Vente Venezuela and Alianza Bravo Pueblo, long-term opponents of Hugo Chávez, and their leaders, María Corina Machado and Antonio Ledezma. The key figures in this strand come from this group of people, which actively blurs its ideological beliefs and behaves like a clique.

Although VP has only a small presence in the National Assembly (14 out of 167 seats), it seems to be leading the action. As the most extreme wing of the opposition, and the closest to the US, it is least open to compromise; it also has the smallest social base. If Guaidó were to attempt reconciliation with Venezuela's still sizeable Chavista constituency, he would risk resistance from VP activists whose anger has long been stoked by their party.

This radical fringe has always regarded participation in elections as legitimising authoritarianism and undermining Venezuelan democracy. It is connected to a diaspora in the US, where it has privileged access to the most conservative sectors of the political system, especially to the US Republican senator for Florida, Marco Rubio. With the support of well-established thinktanks (Council of the Americas, Carnegie Foundation) and the financial backing of the US Agency for International Development (USAid) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), it has filled the media with attacks on those who advocate election participation, calls for military intervention plans for political transition.

Capitalising on the widespread antipathy of many Venezuelan voters to centralised political parties, the radical fringe focuses on loose popular networks (*redes populares*), social media and mobilising hardline students (more determined than numerous). But it is held back by the elitism that characterises its members; they have privileged backgrounds, a US education and fair skin, which set them apart from the mass of the Venezuelan people who used to support Hugo Chávez. Their efforts to unseat Venezuelan presidents — including an attempted coup against Chávez in 2002 — look like the desperate efforts of a wealthy minority seeking to impose its will. Their closeness to the US neocons makes them appear detached from the Venezuelan people, and even the national interest, contrasting with Chávez's success in the re-distribution of wealth and reduction of inequalities across race, class and gender.



Unelected: Juan Guaidó, who has declared himself leader of Venezuela, in fighting form in Caracas in February

Carlos Becerra · Bloomberg · Getty

Centrist opposition

The two other strands of the opposition movement have been more willing to engage with electoral processes and more amenable to dialogue and reconciliation. Their influence within the opposition coalitions since Chávez was first elected in 1998 has varied according to the strength of the radicals. Whenever they scored electoral successes, as during the 2008 state governor elections and 2010 legislative election, the centrists have been in the ascendant. Setbacks such as the defeat of Henrique Capriles, of the Primero Justicia (Justice First or PJ) party, by Maduro in the 2013 presidential election strengthened the radicals who advocate boycotting elections and returning to street protests.

The centrist position is loosely associated with Venezuela's largest opposition parties — PJ (with 27 of the opposition's 109 National Assembly seats) and Acción Democrática (Democratic Action or AD, with 25 seats) — and some key figures have gone back and forth between them. PJ grew out of civil society campaigns for political reform in the pre-Chávez era in the early 1990s, and was registered as a political party in 2000. Meanwhile, AD is Venezuela's most important historical party. Between Venezuela's return to democracy in 1958 and the Bolivarian revolution in 1999, it shared power with the Christian-Democrat Partido Socialcristiano (Social Christian Party or COPEI).

The tribal nature of the opposition remains a major obstacle to a peaceful solution to the crisis

PJ leader Henrique Capriles is credited with leading the opposition away from the election boycotts that helped Chávez gain power in national, state-level and municipal elections between 2000 and 2006. Capriles pragmatically steered the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Round Table or MUD) opposition coalition, launched in January 2010, toward a more progressive policy platform. Under his leadership, the MUD continued to advocate Venezuela's economic 'reactivation', democratic 'reconstruction' and social 'recomposition', but it also acknowledged the need to appeal to Chávez's popular support base and retain some of his social initiatives.

The 2010 legislative elections strengthened the centrist position, uniting the MUD behind Capriles's candidacy in the 2012 presidential contest against Chávez. Capriles proposed a centre-left, business-friendly but socially conscious economic model, which preserved a distance from the radical wing's demands to strip back a bloated state; to privatise, including the oil sector; and to return to a market economy. Where the radicals obsessed over criminal proceedings against government officials,

Capriles stressed reconciliation and national unity.

'The excitement of a soap opera'

Chávez beat Capriles by 11% in 2012. His death in 2013 led to a fresh election in which Capriles lost to Maduro by just 1.49%, but this succession of failures strengthened the position of the radicals, and Capriles was now overshadowed by VP founder Leopoldo López. *Foreign Policy* magazine said the rift between the two was 'reported on with the excitement of a soap opera in Venezuelan media' (6).

López had joined PJ soon after completing his education in the US, but left the party in 2007 because of internal disputes. A 2011 US State Department cable described him as a 'divisive figure ... arrogant, vindictive, and power-hungry' but with 'enduring popularity, charisma and talent as an organiser' (7).

López then joined Un Nuevo Tiempo, another AD splinter party formed in 1999, which focused mainly on encouraging the disruptive student mobilisations of the late 2000s. He formed Voluntad Popular in 2009. Disbarred from public office after allegations of corruption, he became the most feared challenger to the Chavistas and was lionised by the most radical fringe of the opposition. This earned him harassment by the government and a prison term. Capriles looked like a poor second best to López, but they soon found common ground again, and merged strategies to combine insurrection

with electoral participation. In the 2015 congressional contest, the MUD won 65.27% of the vote and a majority of seats.

The coalition had a plan for power — but none for government. Apart from overthrowing Maduro within six months, their stated aims were only the release of ‘political prisoners’, especially López, and the suspension of some of the most popular of Chávez’s social programmes. This agenda did not address the priorities and concerns of the average Venezuelan living with worsening economic chaos, shortages and insecurity. And throughout this period, opinion polls showed growing numbers of ‘*ni ni*’, those neither for the Maduro government nor for the opposition; in 2017 half the population were *ni ni*.

Elections to secure change

The MUD imploded in 2017. Maduro had just convened the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) with the purpose of bypassing the National Assembly, dominated by the opposition; he contested the National Assembly’s legitimacy because there were suspicions that three members for the state of Amazonas had bought votes. The NCA was not recognised by the US or the OAS (Organisation of American States). The situation seemed to favour the radical fringe, which had actively cultivated external support, but five governors elected on the MUD ticket finally took their oath of office before the NCA. This laid bare the divisions within the opposition all over again.

The ranks of those who regarded elections as a means of political change were strengthened by Chavistas — some of whom had been ministers under Chávez — and by socialist activists frustrated by government corruption, authoritarianism and economic chaos. In the May 2018 presidential election, they supported the anti-Chavista Progressive Advance (AP) party's candidate Henri Falcón. Falcón's advocacy of reconciliation was strongly criticised even from within the opposition: María Corina Machado condemned it as 'repulsive and outrageous' (8). Maduro triumphed with 68% of the vote, although the turnout was only 46%. This new setback for the moderates thrilled the radicals, especially Juan Guaidó.

But Guaidó's authority over the opposition is fragile. A few days before the speech in which Guaidó declared himself president, Capriles had criticised attempts by members of the opposition to force their way into the NCA; he believed these politicians were ready to see Venezuelans become 'cannon fodder' (9). And after a show of unity immediately following Guaidó's announcement, criticism intensified again, because the initial goal — to overthrow Maduro quickly — had not been achieved. On 15 February the *Wall Street Journal* observed that, although VP and its US allies were certain 'President Nicolás Maduro's regime would crumble quickly after Washington threw its support behind a plan designed to sap his military support and spur his exit, [it] hasn't happened that way' (10).

The opposition's failure to agree a strategy for taking power has overshadowed its principal weakness: an inability to draw up a coherent political programme that will convince a majority of Venezuelans. While Maduro is still able to count on the support of a section of the electorate, the

tribal nature of the opposition remains a major obstacle to a peaceful solution to the current crisis.

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Original text in English

- (1) ‘Open letter by over 70 scholars and experts condemns US-backed coup attempt in Venezuela [<https://www.opendemocracy.net/democraciaabierta/noam-chomsky/open-letter-by-over-70-scholars-and-experts-condemns-us-backed-coup-a>]’, 28 January 2019.
- (2) Michael Selby-Green, ‘Venezuela crisis: Former UN rapporteur says US sanctions are killing citizens [<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/venezuela-us-sanctions-united-nations-oil-pdvsa-a8748201.html>]’, *Independent*, London, 26 January 2019.
- (3) See Renaud Lambert, ‘Venezuela’s economic volcano erupts’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, December 2016.
- (4) Kejal Vyas, ‘China talks with Venezuela opposition to protect investments [<https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-holds-talks-with-venezuelan-opposition-on-debt-oil-projects-11549993261>]’, *Wall Street Journal*, New York, 12 February 2019.
- (5) See Alexander Main, ‘The Venezuelan “Spring” that wasn’t’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, April 2014.
- (6) Roberto Lovato, ‘The making of Leopoldo López [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/27/the-making-of-leopoldo-lopez-democratic-venezuela-opposition/>]’, *Foreign Policy*, Washington DC, 27 July 2015.
- (7) Ibid.

- (8) Orlando Avendaño, ‘[Machado sobre candidatura de Henri Falcón en presidenciales de Maduro: “Es repulsiva e indignante”](https://es.panampost.com/orlando-avendano/2018/03/05/machado-henri-falcon-repulsiva-e-indignante/)’ [<https://es.panampost.com/orlando-avendano/2018/03/05/machado-henri-falcon-repulsiva-e-indignante/>], *PanAm Post*, 5 March 2018, es.panampost.com/.
- (9) ‘[¿Quién es el enemigo de la Asamblea Nacional?](http://henriquecapriles.com/quien-es-el-enemigo-de-la-asamblea-nacional/)’ [<http://henriquecapriles.com/quien-es-el-enemigo-de-la-asamblea-nacional/>], 13 January 2019, henriquecapriles.com/.
- (10) David Luhnaw and Juan Forero, ‘[Venezuela’s Maduro shows no sign of leaving. Now what?](https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuelas-maduro-shows-no-sign-of-leaving-now-what-11550097501)’ [<https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuelas-maduro-shows-no-sign-of-leaving-now-what-11550097501>], *Wall Street Journal*, 13 February 2019.

TRANSLATIONS >>

[FRANÇAIS Où va l'opposition à Nicolás Maduro ? \(fr\)](#)

[ESPAÑOL ¿Hacia dónde va la oposición en Venezuela? \(es\)](#)

[DEUTSCH Was will die Opposition in Venezuela? \(de\)](#)