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The US should respect Venezuela's democracy

Simplistic end-of-Chavismo narrative callously dismisses Venezuela's progress

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by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

Venezuela is facing a protracted political crisis. Images depicting its streets tell the tale: Student unrest coalesced into massive demonstrations around the country, triggering a violent crackdown on opposition leaders and protesters. The ensuing violence and destructive confrontations over the last several weeks have left at least [13 people dead and scores wounded](#), with casualties on both sides. Tensions remain high.

Headlines in the United States broadcast unchallenged narratives of widespread discontent with mounting economic woes and denounce the ensuing repression by an unpopular and discredited administration barely clinging to power. But the reality in Venezuela is far more complicated and nuanced than what the media and the U.S. government spin suggests.

For instance, it is difficult to say who is responsible for provoking the conflict. Despite the uncertainty over who is inciting the violence, the [U.S. government and press largely condemn](#) President Nicolas Maduro's administration while framing the protests as popular revolution, in some cases tacitly or even overtly rooting for regime change.

America's unfettered leverage

The United States' disenchantment with Venezuelan politics in the last 15 years is no secret. The U.S. has a sordid history of exerting unfettered influence in Latin America. It has supported the ouster of democratically elected governments and backed strongmen whose policies advance U.S. economic and political interests, inflicting incalculable suffering on the most vulnerable citizens of those countries.

After being sworn into office in 1999, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who died in office last year, instituted policies that have been a thorn in the side of successive U.S. administrations and posed a lasting challenge to Washington's hegemony in the region. The U.S. has not taken kindly to that, providing funding for ["democracy promotion" initiatives](#) in the country through organizations that have historically destabilized left-leaning governments. The 2014 U.S. [foreign operations budget](#) includes at least \$5 million for supporting opposition activities in Venezuela. Despite their lofty labels, these projects did little to enhance the popular political participation of Venezuela's people. While the U.S. casts its condemnation of the government's response as unswerving support for principles of democracy and freedom, its position runs contrary to the democratically expressed will of the Venezuelan people.

Venezuela faces serious economic challenges, and people are understandably concerned about scarcity and financial instability. Outrage about rampant crime cuts across all sectors of the country, and there are no easy solutions for Maduro or an opposition-led government. But a narrow focus on high inflation, crime and shortages of food and consumer goods masks the country's unparalleled progress in poverty reduction.

Venezuela has [the lowest income inequality](#) in Latin America and the Caribbean. A [detailed analysis](#) by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) found that poverty in Venezuela dropped by almost 50 percent and extreme poverty declined by 70 percent since 2004. These gains reflect an increase in cash income only and do not include other benefits that measurably improve quality of life, including access to education and health care. Similar growth indicators from the [U.N.'s 2013 Human Development Report](#) and the [World Bank](#) suggest that the alarm over the imminent collapse of the Venezuelan economy is [unsupported by objective data](#).

Popular support

It is little wonder then that Venezuelans have consistently and decisively demonstrated support for the policies of Chavez and his successor. Maduro's

ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) won the last four presidential elections and has dominated parliamentary and municipal elections since 1998. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, whose Atlanta-based Carter Center monitors international elections, calls the Venezuelan electoral system “[the best in the world](#).” In contrast, the center characterizes the U.S. electoral system as “one of the worst election processes in the world (mostly) because of the excessive influx of money.”

After Chavez’s death, Maduro won a closely contested but clean election last April, muffling claims that Chavismo — Chavez’s left-wing anti-capitalist political ideology — would not outlive its charismatic and “autocratic” creator. In December the PSUV handily won municipal elections that the opposition cast as a referendum on the Bolivarian revolution — a reference to Chavez’s populist anti-U.S. policies. The victory effectively silenced a baseless post-election narrative of illegitimacy. The U.S. government was singularly intransigent in its refusal to acknowledge Maduro’s victory in the presidential election, even after a [detailed statistical analysis](#) by the CEPR found that fraud was all but impossible.

Successive Chavista victories left the opposition splintered, though the protests have engendered some unity. One faction, led by Henrique Capriles, who ran unsuccessfully against Maduro in April, initially seemed committed to contesting leadership through democratic processes by building broad-based support. He supported demonstrations but indicated a willingness to meet with Maduro to defuse the current tension. Another, more radical right-wing group, led by Leopoldo Lopez, a Harvard-educated technocrat who hails from the country’s aristocracy, opted instead to foment discord by taking the battle to the streets with the stated goal of Maduro’s “salida,” or exit from politics. Lopez’s failure to articulate an alternative political solution has led critics to accuse him of hijacking and using citizen concerns about inflation, crime and shortages of basic goods as a pretext for replacing the socialist government with one whose goals align with the interests of the elite. A penchant for destabilizing efforts is hardly surprising,

since Lopez played an active role in the 2002 coup that temporarily ousted Chavez.

Deliberate misinformation

Venezuelans are deeply divided over the motives and possible outcomes of the current violence. But as [David Smilde](#) of the nonprofit Washington Office on Latin America observes, it is counterproductive for a government that has consistently prevailed in elections to instigate violence that has an inevitably destabilizing effect and invites international opprobrium. On the contrary, even though some opposition figures have acknowledged that the protests are unlikely to generate much support beyond the middle and upper classes, the opposition has much to gain by inciting violence, which it hopes will mobilize the masses.

Several regional organizations offered support for the Maduro government. On Feb. 17 the regional trade group Mercosur — comprising Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela — issued a [statement](#) condemning the violence and efforts to unseat a democratically elected government. South America's regional bloc, [the Union of South American Nations](#), also backed the Maduro government, in [a statement](#) last week.

Maduro supporters claim that the local and international response to the conflict is muddied by a [deliberate disinformation campaign](#) that includes old photos and videos, some of which have gone viral. The misinformation parallels a similar campaign in 2002, when manipulated footage of Chavez supporters firing at protesters was used to legitimize the coup against Chavez, under the pretext that he ordered troops to kill demonstrators. In this case, much of the disinformation spread mostly via social media, although in some cases, Venezuelan and international media outlets aided in the dissemination. Maduro's temporary shutdown of the Colombian TV channel NTN24 and other broadcast restrictions have fueled charges of social media censorship and press manipulation from both sides. But claims that the government exerts near absolute control over the media are contested as well, at least prior to the unrest.

Reducing Venezuela to a failed socialist experiment run by a repressive autocrat who should be overthrown is a callous dismissal of its laudable progress.

Yet Barack Obama's administration has laid blame exclusively at the feet of the Maduro government. "We are particularly alarmed by reports that the Venezuelan government has arrested or detained scores of anti-government protesters," said Secretary of State John Kerry in a press statement on Feb. 15. Kerry's comments implicitly reject the possibility that some of the detentions could have been part of the effort to maintain peace and security. Moreover, as [Mark Weisbrot](#), a CEPR co-director points out, the statement's tone was a signal to the opposition that the U.S. supports regime change in Venezuela, however undemocratic, much as it did in the 2002 coup against Chavez.

Venezuela, to be sure, is not a utopia. Like many of its Latin American neighbors, including close allies of the U.S., it must confront crime, impunity and corruption. The country's economic troubles are causing real hardship and palpable anxiety, though they are inseparable from the global recession. Despite these challenges, Venezuela has registered tremendous gains in elevating millions of people out of grinding poverty and democratizing a postcolonial country — developments that predictably alienate the country's elites. However imperfect, reducing Venezuela to a failed socialist experiment run by a repressive autocrat who should be overthrown is a callous dismissal of its laudable progress.

If the Venezuelan people genuinely reject the Bolivarian revolution, they should engender peaceful transition through fair and free elections, independent of interference by external forces, including a U.S. government that is more concerned with promoting its own interests than the economic, political and social advancement of Venezuelans.

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