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Obama continues Bush's policies in Venezuela

The US should respect Venezuela's sovereignty and support forces committed to its stability

April 8, 2014 5:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro [appealed](#) for peace in a New York Times op-ed last week, taking aim at sweeping misinformation about the unrest plaguing his country. He lamented the narrative that presents the two-months of unrest as widespread student-led protests with broad support. Although the U.S. media portray the protests as the spontaneous outgrowth of student demonstrations in February, right-wing opposition leaders Leopoldo López and [Maria Corina Machado](#) launched La Salida (the Exit) campaign — aimed at removing Maduro from office — in January. Machado announced her intent to oust Maduro by “[[creating](#)] [chaos in the streets.](#)”

Many of the Venezuelan protagonists behind the unrest were active in the failed U.S.-backed coup that briefly ousted Hugo Chávez in 2002. López is a Harvard-educated oligarch whose anti-government efforts have been [frequently mentioned in U.S. diplomatic cables](#), including one released in 2009 by WikiLeaks, which acknowledges that López is a “[problem](#)” who has divided the opposition and is widely mistrusted. Machado signed the [Carmona decree](#), which dissolved the Supreme Court, the National Assembly and other democratic institutions during the 2002 coup. They have worked since then to sabotage the government and replace it with one whose policies align with the interests of the upper class.

Anti-government protests turned violent on Feb. 12, shortly after they started. At least 36 people have died, and many others have been wounded. In February the hard-line opposition declined Maduro's invitation to a peace summit, meant to resolve the political crisis through dialogue, even as powerful opposition business

leaders took part. Some observers suggest that opposition leaders are destabilizing the country because they cannot constitutionally oust Maduro, who still enjoys significant popular support, for another two years. On March 27, [Maduro agreed to resolve](#) the political impasse with the Venezuelan opposition and proposed Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin as mediator. The Catholic Church wields significant influence in Venezuela, and [the opposition previously asked](#) the Vatican to intervene.

Maduro claims that Washington fomented [the recent unrest and is engaging in economic sabotage](#). On March 9, [Vice President Joe Biden](#) accused Maduro of “concocting totally false and outlandish conspiracy theories about the United States.” But those who deride Maduro’s accusations fail to consider their historical and geopolitical context. Maduro’s detractors [ignore evidence of U.S. efforts to delegitimize](#) his democratically elected government and Chávez’s. In fact, the U.S. is more involved in supporting the political turmoil than is generally known.

History of meddling

Recent revelations about Washington’s efforts to [subvert the Cuban government](#) by creating a Twitter-like social media network in Cuba underscore the persistence and contemporary nature of U.S. efforts to destabilize independent, left-leaning governments in the hemisphere.

[U.S. intervention in the region](#) has deep historical roots. After decades of overt and tacit support to undermine popularly elected leftist governments in Latin America, many hoped that Barack Obama’s election would usher in a new era of multilateral cooperation in the hemisphere. But Washington’s continued hostility toward Venezuela’s government evinces scant difference between Obama’s policies and those of his predecessor.

George W. Bush was the [most unpopular U.S. president](#) among Latin Americans, who viewed his economic policies as perpetuating pervasive social inequality in their countries and disapproved of his invasion of Iraq. Obama got a warm

reception in the hope that he would respect their sovereignty and support popular democracies. But this enthusiasm was quickly dampened by his handling of number of policy issues — his administration’s inability to pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill, Washington’s increased militarization of the war on drugs and continued isolation of Cuba. The region’s governments have also bristled at perceived U.S. hypocrisy in the selective condemnation of human rights abuses in some countries while glossing over those committed by allies such as Colombia, Mexico and Honduras.

The Obama administration has maintained the U.S. practice of funneling money to opposition forces under the guise of ‘democracy promotion.’

The Obama administration [continues to isolate itself from the region](#) as it reacts to the Venezuelan violence. Despite evidence that the [opposition in Venezuela is responsible for many of the deaths and other violence](#) plaguing the country, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has blamed the government for the escalating turmoil. On March 13, Kerry told a congressional committee that Maduro’s government is engaging in a “[terror campaign](#)” and that the U.S. is prepared to impose [sanctions if necessary](#).

In an open letter to Kerry last month, [46 academics and Venezuela experts](#) noted that Washington is signaling the opposition to continue causing mayhem. For those familiar with the diplomatic vernacular, statements from the State Department [send a clear message](#): The U.S. supports regime change in Venezuela. Washington has undermined Maduro’s legitimacy from the start. Although his election was free and fair, the U.S. isolated itself by quickly casting doubt on his victory. Washington even declined to send a high-level representative to [his inauguration](#), which was attended by dignitaries from [47 countries](#).

Kerry confirmed the United States’ continued characterization of Latin America as its “backyard” in comments at the House Foreign Affairs Committee last year. Kerry’s paternalistic remarks elicited collective indignation in the region, forcing

him to backpedal. In November, Kerry [renounced the Monroe Doctrine](#) — which formed the historical basis of U.S. engagement in the region. The policy, announced by President James Monroe to Congress in 1823, insisted that the Americas would be free from European colonial powers and that the U.S. would protect the hemisphere, militarily if necessary, as a separate geopolitical sphere. Kerry declared the hegemonic policy antiquated and pledged to cooperate with regional governments on shared interests and values as equal partners.

But Washington's conception of [shared values is narrowly defined](#). The U.S. predicates democracy on a neoliberal free-market paradigm that opens the doors for transnational capital and serves U.S. geopolitical and economic objectives. But many Latin American countries premise democratic values on free and fair electoral victory, self-determination, popular participation and assuaging the misery caused by pervasive social and economic inequality.

The Chávez doctrine

Venezuela has been at the forefront of efforts to thwart U.S. hegemony in the region. Chávez helped challenge the influence of the Organization of American States (OAS) through the creation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). Established in 2011 to counter U.S. efforts to manipulate the OAS in order to legitimize a post-coup government in Honduras, which lasted from June 2009 to January 2010, CELAC excludes the U.S. and Canada from its membership. Oil-rich Venezuela provides aid to many countries in the hemisphere, helping reduce their economic dependence on United States.

Meanwhile, conservative pundits in the U.S. continue to advocate for the overthrow of the Venezuelan government. Even before La Salida started, [Harold Trinkunas](#), a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, authored a memo titled [Venezuela breaks down in violence](#). He discussed a “[hypothetical coup](#)” against Maduro, suggesting that conditions were ripe for violence and unrest in Venezuela. He further argued that the U.S. should support the opposition, even if it means Maduro's ouster, and should encourage other countries to join in these efforts.

The Obama administration [has maintained the U.S. practice](#) of funneling money to opposition forces under the guise of “democracy promotion.” This year, the [foreign operations budget](#) includes at least \$5 million for similar initiatives. The U.S. has spent [\\$90 million](#) on democracy programs through organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute and Freedom House.

U.S. support for forces intent on destabilizing the Venezuelan government undermines a prompt and peaceful resolution to the crisis. Instead of demonstrating a new respect for sovereignty and democracy in Venezuela and other nations whose governments’ ideologies differ from ours, Obama has opted for the same old unilateralist policies.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.