

The Role of the International Community in Venezuela

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October 20, 2016: Another Crisis

The future of Venezuela remains uncertain again after the National Electoral Council (CNE) suspended a recall referendum attempting to remove President Nicolas Maduro from power¹. The opposition was scheduled to complete the second step of the process and collect signatures from 20 percent of the electorate (around four million signatures) October 26 - 28. The opposition saw the suspension as another abuse of power by the Maduro administration, causing a national uproar, again.

The situation in Venezuela is extremely time sensitive. The opposition only started out with nine months to complete the lengthy three step process, but suspending the referendum made it near impossible to remove Maduro from power before January 10, 2017. If President Maduro is withdrawn from the power after January 10 (which marks the fourth year of Maduro's term), the current vice president will finish Maduro's current term through 2019. Even if Maduro is removed from power next year, Maduro and the party are likely to maintain the same level of control at today.

Simultaneously, human rights violations in Venezuela continue to get worse, there have not been any significant changes to improve the ongoing economic crisis, and the government continues to abuse political powers and violate core democratic practices and values. The Human Rights Watch released an 85-page report that looks at just a few of the current problems including shortages of food, lack of basic health care, and a climate of intimidation². To make matters more complicated, the government has completely denied the humanitarian crisis. This humanitarian crisis alone should be enough reason for the international community to intervene.

The opposition and the government sat down with the Vatican and other third party mediators on October 30 to discuss how to move forward with the recall referendum and economic crisis. Maduro released five political prisoners as a "sign of good will," while the opposition canceled a mass protest³. The parties are expected to reconvene on November 11, and the opposition has demanded the government to take action by then, or they will reconsider mobilization. Following the first meeting, Maduro proceeded to announce that "neither through elections nor bullets" would the opposition take over Miraflores, raising concerns of how the government will move forward⁴. This situation could escalate quickly and requires urgent attention to restore order and democracy, ensure that the crisis is controlled to prevent the region from destabilizing, and to develop new strategies to address this crisis.

The Role of the United States

The U.S. has an active, but limited role in the latest crisis. The U.S. has distanced themselves from any actions that could be seen as interventionist after a long and tense history with Venezuela. While a senior U.S. diplomat Ambassador Shannon participated in the negotiations with the Vatican, Ambassador Shannon reiterated that the U.S. will only support the negotiations, no matter the outcome⁵.

International Organizations: The Alternative Solution

While the international community is hopeful these conversations go well, if the parties do not reach an agreement, the situation could become violent quickly and destabilize the region. This raises the question, is there an alternative solution if the conversations fail?

Venezuela is a member of various international organizations including, perhaps most importantly in this scenario, the Organization of the American States (OAS). The OAS, made up of 35 nations in the Americas, has in place mechanisms to protect and defend democracy, human rights, economic development, and democratic institutions/ elections through the Inter-American Democratic Charter⁶. Under Title IV, the Secretary-General has the power to request the permanent council to step in and “undertake a collective assessment of the situation and to take such decisions as it deems appropriate” when there is an “unconstitutional alteration of the constitutional regime that seriously impairs the democratic order in a member state.” The council has the power to suspend the state from the OAS while “the Organization will maintain diplomatic initiatives to restore democracy in that state.”

The OAS has attempted to step in before, including in June 2016 when an emergency session was held for four hours and the member states left without a consensus on how to move forward. The Venezuelan opposition and the Chilean Senate have also suggested that the OAS should step in. Yet, the OAS has not taken any actions in the past months.

Even if the OAS does call a special session, there is still a divide between member states, making it difficult to reach agreements. Venezuela has a significant amount of power over many Latin American countries as 18 out of 35 members of the OAS are also members of PetroCaribe⁷. PetroCaribe, founded by Venezuela, allows 17 countries to purchase oil using preferential agreements. Between 2005-2015, on average, PetroCaribe supplied 32 percent of oil demand to their members⁸. Between 2011-2013, the preferential agreements resulted in an average 2.3 billion USD loss in income for Venezuela per year⁹. However, Venezuela has continued to uphold its agreement despite plunging oil prices and national loss, giving Venezuela control over countries who rely on their oil supply. Additionally, some countries, including Bolivia, have remained loyal to Maduro and the Chavista mentality. Despite these political reasons, the fact remains that Venezuela is in trouble.

The mission of the OAS demands that the charter states take a step back and uphold their commitment to defend democracy. These nations should also consider the long-term economic and social implications the crisis could have throughout Latin America if the crisis is ignored. The international community and the OAS have the power to ensure that human rights are not being violated and that democratic governments in the region are being held responsible through multilateral conversations and sanctions. This crisis goes beyond political corruption. The international community should uphold democratic principles and protect Venezuelans who are victims of these human rights violations.

Moving Forward: Two More Years?

At this time, even if the CNE reverses the decision and re-activates the recall referendum today, there are not enough days left to complete the entire process before January 10, 2017. While reversing the decision may re-establish order and democracy in Venezuela, a recall referendum that uses the current

timeline will prevent a recall election and Maduro's socialist administration will remain in power until 2019.

If President Maduro pushes to stay in power for two more years or the two parties do not come up with an immediate plan to improve Venezuela's social and economic crisis, it is almost inevitable that Venezuela will collapse in the next two years given the current crisis is not being addressed. A collapse would be catastrophic not only for Maduro, his administration, and the people of Venezuela, but the entire international community. Countries in the region could have to deal with mass numbers of displaced people and emigration if the situation gets out of control. Additionally, since so many countries are dependent on Venezuela's oil, a sudden collapse of power could create uncertainty about the future of Venezuela and access to oil, which could directly impact national economies around the region. It is crucial that Maduro agrees to significant changes before immediately and finds solutions to the current crisis to avoid a national and regional collapse.

- **Last Chance: President Maduro Should Initiate a Recall Referendum Immediately**

If Maduro does not want a national revolution or foreign intervention and is truly putting the Venezuelan people first, he should initiate an immediate recall referendum monitored by the OAS to ensure the legitimacy of the re-election. If the people of Venezuela support this regime, as Maduro adamantly claims, a recall referendum will only legitimize and strengthen the government to move forward with the administration's social and economic policies. If, however, the people chose a different path, there is an opportunity for a peaceful change in government, both for President Maduro and for the people of Venezuela.

- **An Alternative Option: The OAS**

If President Maduro does not independently take actions to change his social and economic policies or hold a recall referendum immediately, the international community and OAS have an obligation to step in to protect democracy and the citizens of Venezuela. If the majority of countries in the Americas join forces and collaborate, they have an enormous amount of power to control the situation to avoid chaos, improve democratic infrastructure, and address the human rights crisis. If the government does not allow a recall referendum to move forward, the only option the government leaves the opposition is to pursue violence or undemocratic actions. If the OAS and international community step in before this occurs, they have the power to pressure President Maduro to address the current human rights and democratic violation in Venezuela. Countries in Latin America should work collectively to avoid singling out a single country and to push the government to take immediate action.

Venezuela cannot afford two more years of the current policies in place. As a developed society, we have set up mechanisms to guarantee that people across the world are guaranteed human rights. When these human rights are violated and are left unaddressed for years under the same administration, the international community should step in during crises to pressure and support the national government to develop long-term solutions and restore democracy. It is time for President Maduro and the international community to take action and protect the people of Venezuela.

References and Footnotes

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- ³ Crooks, N. (2016, November 1). Venezuela Opposition Says 5 'Political Prisoners' Released. Retrieved from www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-11-01/venezuela-opposition-says-5-political-prisoners-released
- ⁴ *Maduro: Ni con Votos ni con Balas la Oposición Volverá a Miraflores* [Television broadcast]. (2016, November 4). In *Tele SUR*. Caracas, Venezuela. Retrieved from www.videos.telesurtv.net/video/610038/maduro-ni-con-votos-ni-con-balas-la-oposicion-volvera-a-miraflores
- ⁵ U.S. Department of State. (2016, November 04). Briefing on Venezuela. Retrieved from www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2016/264112.htm
- ⁶ OAS. (2001, September 11). Inter-American Democratic Charter. Retrieved from www.oas.org/charter/docs/resolution1_en_p4.htm
- ⁷ The 17 countries who are members of both the OAS and the PetroCaribe are: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, San Cristobal and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Lucia, Suriname, and Venezuela.
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- ⁹ The Economist. (2014, October 04). Single point of failure. Retrieved from www.economist.com/news/americas/21621845-venezuelas-financing-programme-leaves-many-caribbean-countries-vulnerable-single-point