

Crisis and Critique: Venezuela, a Paradox of Stability?

Ociel Lopez looks back at 2019 and the radically reversed fortunes of Juan Guaido and Nicolas Maduro.

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For Venezuelans, the start of 2019 was perhaps the tensest moment in the past seventeen years. Unlike the [political violence](#) of 2017 and the [electoral abstention](#) drama of 2018, we faced a real scenario of foreign military [intervention](#) in Venezuela. And for the first time, Washington's long repeated threats to use military force, like in Iraq, Libya, Panama, etc., appeared credible.

As the year wore on, the errors and miscalculations implicit in the US strategy became increasingly evident. A “parallel government” headed by **Juan Guaido** was created, but it had minimal capacity to shape events inside the country, let alone actually govern. Guaido's only power base was in the international [corporate media](#), yet he needed military backing. And so arrived [April 30](#).

That day, there was a mobilization by mutinous soldiers, who despite being very few in number had strong international media backing which fueled the impression that Maduro might fall. The contingent, led by Guaido, took over an overpass across from the La Carlota airbase in east Caracas and called on the military to rise up against Maduro. A few hours later, the weakness of the movement became patently obvious and US **National Security Advisor John Bolton** revealed that top military and civilian officials allegedly implicated in the putsch had “turned off their phones.”

Following this failure to flip the Venezuelan military, which once again demonstrated its loyalty to the government, Washington doubled down on [sanctions](#), especially in all areas related to the oil trade.

During the first six months of the year, there was no way to describe Venezuela beyond the vocabulary of calamity.

The second semester was something else entirely.

Hitting rock bottom?

The tension hanging over Venezuela fanned out across the [continent](#). In Puerto Rico, Panama, Haiti, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, and Colombia, popular upheavals rattled one government after another, which are now fighting for their political survival.

While Latin America boils over, Venezuela has returned to calm. Despite the severe economic crisis that has lasted at least six years and the collapse of basic public services,

political strife has waned. Opposition supporters did not return to the streets en masse and the political [instability](#) was displaced to the opposition's own camp.

At the close of 2019, Guaido's leadership does not inspire unanimity. He has suffered several scandals, including the alleged [embezzlement](#) of aid funds by his handpicked envoys, his ties to paramilitary drug trafficking outfit [Los Rastrojos](#), and most recently an illicit [lobbying scheme](#) involving deputies from his own National Assembly, among them members of his political party. The governments most radically opposed to Venezuela like Chile and Colombia have had to tend to their domestic matters. The activation of the Inter-American Reciprocal Action Treaty ([TIAR](#)) has not advanced in the direction of a direct military intervention, and in the US and international media, Venezuela's "humanitarian crisis" has been moved to the backburner. It would seem that Venezuela is no longer at the center of the international agenda as it was at the start of 2019.

And, beyond all that, the Venezuelan economy is beginning to stabilize.

Economic stability?

Unlike various other countries in the region, Venezuela's economy appears to be stabilizing for several reasons. First, the migratory wave has had the salutary side-effect of flooding the country with remittances that reach millions of families, even the poorest. There are even many cases in which financial support from abroad has changed the socioeconomic status of many families amid the severe crisis.

There have also been several [contradictory] economic measures taken by Maduro, such as the derogation of the Illicit Exchange Law, the de facto elimination of price controls, and allowing the free circulation of [dollars](#). All this has opened up new economic scenarios going into 2020, including the end of shortages of essential goods – the bane of the 2012-2016 period –, the creation of new business opportunities, as well as the repatriation of some capitals, however marginal, which are stimulating some commercial activity in a terribly impoverished economy.

At the end of November, Reuters revealed that [oil production](#) in Venezuela had increased 20 percent relative to the month before, which could indicate a definitive reversal of the free fall experienced during the first half of the year. This news raises positive expectations for 2020 with the possibility of increasing Venezuelan crude exports in the coming year.

Indeed, according to Venezuelan economist Francisco Rodriguez, Venezuela's economy could even [grow](#) by 4 percent in 2020.

It might be concluded that if Maduro did not fall due to the grave economic crisis during 2019, it's less likely that he will be ousted now, at least on this account. We will have to wait to see if Trump, in the course of his reelection campaign, opts to impose harsher measures on Venezuela that damage the economy even more severely .

But for now, and while Trump appears to rule out military intervention in Venezuela, all eyes turn to the Venezuelan opposition. Will they manage to consummate their coup by themselves?

Venezuela's opposition post-2019: A definitive fracture?

Regardless of whether Guaido can secure [reelection](#) as president of the National Assembly (AN) in 2020, the opposition does not have a credible strategy for ousting Maduro. And this impotence fuels an internal debate that not only divides the opposition publicly but also demobilizes its supporters. The opposition, as it stands now, appears politically bankrupt given the massive expectations it created in 2019 and the utter failure that ensued.

Today's opposition is divided between those holding out for a US invasion and those who favor a [political solution](#). The bulk of the first group is based in the United States, while the majority of the second is still in Venezuela. This rift will likely continue to widen in 2020 when elections are slated for the National Assembly, the only branch of government the opposition currently controls. Of the four large opposition parties that control the AN, Democratic Action (AD) and A New Era (UNT) have their leadership in Venezuela and, as such, abstention would mean surrendering their seats. For the radical sectors, especially those based in the US and Colombia, their power base is mainly the international corporate media, and they will not accept an electoral solution. Therefore, 2020 could be the year of definitive fracture within the opposition. Popular Will (VP) and First Justice (PJ) still don't know how to tell their supporters to vote in the elections without having fulfilled their oft-repeated "end of the usurpation" promise, because the alternative is to lose the National Assembly.

And the opposition defeat is not limited to the political and military arenas. The mounting list of corruption scandals and political debacles runs in parallel to the popular uprising shaking the neighboring right-wing governments allied with the Venezuelan opposition. That is, the opposition is being routed on several fronts.

If the opposition began 2019 with extremely high expectations around which it united and rallied its supporters, it ends the year severely divided, atomized, and demobilized. The careful public relations campaign that went into promoting Guaido was powerless to stop the political novice from squandering his political capital without achieving any notable gains.

Maduro, on the other hand, has experienced a similar process but in reverse.

Maduro, survivor of 2019

At the start of the year, Maduro had the profile of a weak president on the verge of being overthrown at any moment. The opposition flooded the streets in January. Over fifty countries refused to recognize Maduro and backed Guaido following his self-proclamation. Washington practically put a price on Maduro's head, with Florida Republican Senator Marco Rubio threatening to sodomize and murder him like NATO-backed rebels did to Libya's Muamar Gaddafi.

Venezuela's future appeared to be one of bloody conflict if not outright dismemberment by Colombia, Brazil, and Guyana.

Chile's Sebastian Piñera and Colombia's Ivan Duque gathered alongside Guaido in Cucuta on [February 23](#) in what was hailed as the final thrust to oust Maduro by forcing so-called "humanitarian aid" across the Venezuelan border. By December, neither of these right-wing presidents attend meetings of the Lima Group, preferring to focus their energy on putting down the mass anti-neoliberal revolts occurring within their borders.

At the end of 2019, Venezuela looks much more stable than its right-wing neighbors, who just months ago were fixated on regime change in lieu of their domestic problems.

The Venezuelan government is no longer on the defensive, moving to take the political initiative by calling 2020 legislative [elections](#) in a bid to seize the opposition's last political bastion. These elections could be held as early as the start of the year. The armed forces remain firmly behind Maduro, who has succeeded in opening up avenues for [negotiation](#) with minority opposition factions, with whom the ruling party can work during a new legislative period.

Politics is a clash of opposing forces and, as Venezuela demonstrates, the balance can shift radically in the course of a year.

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