

Why Won't US Media Tell the Truth About What's Happening in Venezuela?

A Washington-sponsored opposition bent on regime change threatens a fragile democracy.

By [Justin Podur](#)

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Earlier this month, Donald Trump stood before the U.N. and called for the restoration of “[political freedoms](#)” to a South American nation in the throes of an economic crisis. The country in question was Venezuela, but he could have just as easily been describing Argentina, whose right-wing government imprisoned indigenous politician Milagro Sala, has run inflation into the double digits and is in the process of re-imposing the sort of austerity policies that triggered a popular revolt and debt default in 2001.

The description also fits Brazil, where President Michel Temer has been caught on tape discussing bribes, his former cabinet member's apartment recently [raided](#) to the tune of 51 million *reais* (\$16 million). Temer, who assumed office only after leading the impeachment of his predecessor, Dilma Rousseff, has also run an aggressive program of austerity, dissolving the programs that lifted tens of millions of Brazilians out of poverty and into the middle class.

In both countries, right-wing forces have taken power and undermined fragile democratic norms with the objective of reversing the modest redistribution of wealth achieved under left-wing administrations over the past 15 years. Backed by a United States government with a long history of subverting leftist movements in the region, and a mainstream media that's all too eager to carry its water, the right is now attempting the same feat in Venezuela.

How the opposition fights a popular government

Unlike Brazil and Argentina, Venezuela has been victimized by a number of factors outside of its control, but especially a precipitous drop in the price of oil, the country's main source of revenue.

The oil price drop of 2015 was a global phenomenon. Since the formation of OPEC in the 1970s, the Saudi Kingdom has been able to use its immense reserves to undermine other oil-producing countries' attempts to maintain a high and stable price for petroleum. Even if all these nations were to ally, the Saudi Kingdom can turn the tap up or down and change the entire global economy to benefit its own geopolitical agenda and that of its U.S. patron. It did so in the late 1970s to offset lowered production in Iran after the 1979 revolution. And it did so again in 2015, partly in response to the success of the Iran-U.S. nuclear deal. It's not a perfect mechanism; the price drop hurt the Saudi economy before prices slowly climbed anew. But the most severe effects were felt by the United States' designated

enemies: Russia, Iran and Venezuela.

Since 1999, the Venezuelan government has experimented with a process of social and economic reform using constitutional and electoral means. The president who initiated the experiment, Hugo Chavez, called it the “Bolivarian Revolution,” but for the most part it is now simply called *Chavismo*.

Chavez held power from 1999 until his death in 2013, interrupted by a three-day coup in 2002. During his presidency, the country saw a referendum on a constitutional assembly, the election of that assembly, a referendum to ratify the new constitution, a new election under that constitution, an attempt to use a provision in the constitution to recall Chavez, and two additional presidential elections, all of which were won by Chavez's government. To say that Chavismo's popularity and that of Chavez himself has been tested at the polls is an understatement.

While Chavez was alive, no politician could rival him for the presidency. This was true despite the 24-hour demonization of him in the country's private media and the systematically negative coverage of his government across Western news outlets. As often occurs whenever a country runs afoul of the U.S., Chavez was presented as a dictator, despite his numerous electoral victories. So popular was he that when opposition leaders seized power for 72 hours in 2002, one of their first orders of business was to shut down the government's TV channel. As the 2003 documentary, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, reveals, the coup was ultimately defeated when officials managed to get back onto the airwaves.

Phases of economic warfare

When coup and media campaigns failed to upend the government or silence its mouthpiece, the opposition resorted to economic warfare. This war has had several phases: a national strike in 2002-2003 brought Venezuela's state-run oil company, PDVSA, to a halt, denying the government its main source of revenue. But despite their personal suffering, the company's lower-ranking officials remained loyal to Chavez (as did many of the middle ranks), stepping up to replace the striking managers and engineers in order to get the oil flowing again.

A more recent phase around 2014 saw smugglers take huge quantities of subsidized fuel, food and staples across the border to Colombia to sell or simply dump, denying poor Venezuelans essential goods as a means of exerting pressure on the federal government. The Maduro administration has been able to mitigate some of these losses by carefully controlling the distribution of subsidized staples.

Ultimately, the greatest source of Venezuela's economic woes has been its own currency, the bolívar. Global markets can wreak havoc on governments by making runs on their currency, and Venezuela has attempted to immunize itself against this by imposing a fixed exchange rate. Any fixed exchange rate invites a black market, but the fixed rate in Venezuela is so far off the black market rate that anyone who obtains U.S. dollars stands to profit handsomely. Dollars can only legally be obtained through the sale of oil, so the black marketeers' gains are the government's losses.

Two decades of relentless criticism from the right has created an unforgiving environment for mistakes. And mistakes have been made. Over the long term, the Venezuelan revolution has not been able to surmount the country's dependency on the extractive industry generally or petroleum specifically, which had always been one of its goals. Nor has it been able to dislodge entrenched bureaucracies or elite corruption, persistent problems that would be faced by any progressive government or movement. More recently, sensible economic proposals like those of UNASUR have been ignored, or even dismissed as capitulations to neoliberalism, when they likely would have strengthened the Chavista project. Without real changes to its economic policy, Venezuela will continue to lurch from

one crisis to another.

The opposition's politics of rejection and the threat of U.S. military intervention

If the opposition has succeeded in sabotaging the economy over the past couple of years, it has also benefited from Chavez's death. The Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) may have lost the presidential election to Chavez's successor, Nicolas Maduro, but it captured the National Assembly.

No sooner did MUD assume its new seat of power than it immediately declared it would not work with Maduro. Rather than help solve the country's economic crisis, it has celebrated it, hoping it will finally topple the governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Its aims are entirely negative: MUD has no positive economic or political program of which to speak. It wants only regime change, if necessary through another military coup or a U.S. intervention, which some officials have openly pined for.

If the opposition does ultimately capture the presidency, the best-case scenario is that Venezuela adopts the ruinous austerity policies of Macri's Argentina or Temer's Brazil. The worst-case scenario could look something like the U.S.-led occupation of Haiti, with the country's oil industry turned over to the multinationals, like Iraq's was more than a decade ago.

How the opposition might rule is a matter of less speculation. During its three-day coup in 2002, it annulled the constitution and immediately began persecuting Chavistas. Older Venezuelans remember the years before 1999, when austerity policies were enforced with torture, disappearances and even massacres like the Caracazo of 1989.

Violent threats have always been leveled against Chavismo, mainly through paramilitary incursions from Colombia. From April through July, the Venezuelan opposition was engaged in a small-scale urban insurgency against the government. Abby Martin's July program on TeleSUR, "Empire Files," offers a flavor of [what this looks like](#): the assassination of Chavistas, the intimidation of Chavista voters and the destruction of government buildings and warehouses (including those for subsidized food).

The insurgency put the government in an impossible position: If it represses these protests, it risks providing a pretext for a U.S. intervention or another coup. If it does not, a relatively small and unpopular opposition could impose minority rule. Meanwhile, the opposition adds fuel to the flames by refusing the government's attempts at dialogue (which the Pope has offered to mediate).

The Venezuelan government recently tried to bring its opponents back into the fold by calling for a new constitutional assembly, whose members were elected in July 2017 and which is currently in session. Its reward? Another boycott, and the rejection of all constitutional changes the elected assembly makes as illegitimate.

The coup playbook

These methods—foreign incursions, sabotage and violent demonstrations, combined with a refusal to negotiate—were part of the Haitian opposition's playbook in the years preceding the 2004 overthrow of Haiti's elected government. Despite the mass anti-war protests of that period, the Haitian coup was met with surprisingly little international resistance, which helps explain why Venezuela finds itself in such a precarious position. What in the early aughts looked like the birth of a new Latin American sovereignty has been rolled back: coups have overthrown governments in Honduras (2009), Paraguay (2012) and arguably Brazil (2016).

As the U.S. steps up its regime change efforts in Caracas, many leftists in progressive and social media have expressed confusion or equivocation. Their difficulty in distinguishing between an embattled social democracy and a violent, right-wing rejectionist opposition is a testament to the weakness of anti-imperialism in Western politics at the moment. Progressives should have no such difficulty. Chavismo is an incomplete, flawed, ongoing democratic experiment. The alternatives on display are clear: terror, occupation and austerity.

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