Making Sense of Opposition in Venezuela: From the MUD to “La Salida” and Back

By Barry Cannon October 12, 2016

Since the election of President Nicolás Maduro, by a wafer-thin margin in elections last April 15th, Venezuela has experienced one of the most serious outbreaks of opposition-led violence and instability in recent years.1 This led to the deaths of over 40 people, from government, opposition and non-aligned sectors, the arrest of prominent right-wing opposition leader, Leopoldo López, who led the push for the ousting of Maduro – termed “La Salida” (meaning both ‘Exit’ and ‘Solution') - and the charging of another prominent leader María Corina Machado, among others. More recent reports suggest that as a result of this and other government actions against such opposition activity, the United States is moving closer to imposing sanctions on the Caribbean oil producing nation.

Such events are reminiscent of previous high profile attempts to dislodge the late President Hugo Chávez from power, such as a coup in April, 2002, a debilitating oil strike in late 2002/early 2003, a recall referendum against Chávez’s mandate in 2004 and an electoral boycott in 2005. Yet it obscures the fact that the opposition had been pursuing a highly successful period of constitutionalism, whereby, since 2006 it concentrated on a process of “partidization” through the MUD (Mesa de Unidad Democrática/ Democratic Unity Coalition). This involved a return of the predominance of politics and political parties, a privileging of electoralism and a unification of policy platforms and electoral strategies. This strategy was extraordinarily successful for the opposition as the near-win in April would suggest. What can explain this variance in predominance of constitutional and extra-institutionalist strategies by the Venezuelan opposition?

This article, based on a longer article of mine published in the Winter edition of *Latin American Politics and Society*2 suggests these seemingly conflicting strategies should be considered together, with one responding to the other depending on their outcomes. In this manner, I argue, we can come to a fuller, more comprehensive vision of the Venezuelan opposition, than news reports and most academic study has provided to date.

Opposition Characteristics: Institutional and non-Institutional Actors

In terms of characterising the Venezuelan opposition it can be argued that it is both parliamentary and non-parliamentary, with a varying emphasis on each of these parts over time. Reviewing some of the main literature on the opposition to date (Corrales and Penfold ,2007, Domínguez, 2011, and García-Guadilla, 2005) we could go beyond political parties to include all those actors who have an interest in removing the current government from power in order to (re)establish liberal democracy and a free market socio-economic system. Hence this could include not only opposition political parties, but also opposition social groups and movements and, indeed, foreign powers.

On this basis, the opposition could be seen as having a hard-core of about three million supporters, mostly in the middle and upper class groups. This was the approximate number which voted in the opposition presidential primaries in February 2012, electing Henrique Capriles of the First Justice party as presidential candidate for the MUD. We could also include different social sectors including more “modern” or “globalized” business groups, interested in developing closer links to global – mostly OECD - business groups; old guard trade unions grouped into the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV in Spanish); opposition-linked civil society groups, dominated by middle and upper social strata; the higher echelons of the Catholic Church; some of the more recalcitrant members of the military and most of the private media. We can also include the United States of America, which consistently provides financial, strategic and moral support to a wide variety of these opposition groups (Pearson 2011; Robertson 2012; Weisbrot 2013).

Different parts of this wider coalition have had the upper hand at different times, but both have always remained active. Hence, in the first half of the Chávez period (1999-2006) non-parliamentary elements dominated, with business groups, trade unions, the media and parts of the military all playing a leading role, and with the political parties in the back seat. Nevertheless, political parties still contested elections, except for the elections boycott of the 2005 National Assembly elections. After those disastrous elections, with abstention widely seen as an error as they gave the chavistas a huge majority in the National Assembly, the parties began to take the lead, placing increased emphasis on an electoral strategy.

Despite this renewed electoral policy, non-parliamentary elements still have a powerful voice in policy formation and popular mobilization. Furthermore, large student mobilisations continued with frequency with sometimes violent outcomes, in support of opposition television channels and “free speech” and, more recently, as noted, aimed at the removal of the current Maduro-led government (Buxton, 2014). Hence the relationship between

institutionalised, party based actors and civil society actors is dialectical rather than discreet, with both having important parts to play in achieving the ultimate objective of removing the government.

Nevertheless, there are groups who have benefited from the existing system, who are mistrustful of the opposition and/or are interested in ensuring that the existing institutionality is respected. Within this group we can identify “ambivalent” voters, the so-called ni-ni’s in that they are neither with the government nor the opposition (Corrales and Penfold 2007); logically, we could also include some government supporters, necessary to gain an overall electoral majority; some of the business elites with closer ties to the government (the so-called boliburguesía because they owe their fortunes to the current regime); the bulk of the military, one of the major lynchpins of the Bolivarian regime (Corrales and Penfold 2007); and crucially other Latin American governments, particularly those grouped in Mercosur, and especially Brazil, as the major power within that grouping and in the South American region. Gaining power then involves catering to these two main groupings, with discourse and strategies reflecting the tensions between the two.

Change and Continuities in Opposition Discourse

As noted above, opposition objectives generally speaking remain the (re)installation of a liberal democratic regime with a market based economy. Yet evidence gleaned from close reading of opposition policy documentation (MUD 2008 and 2012) and interviews with key figures in opposition parties or opposition-linked organisations suggests that these are nuanced at a number of levels, reflecting the competing demands of both these groups.3

In reviewing opposition documents policy reflects three major preferences at the political, economic and social levels. Politically the opposition seeks a privileging of the institutional, including political parties, over the participatory elements emphasised by the current government. In terms of the economy, the emphasis is on private sector activity over the public, closing down state activity in almost all sectors in which it has been developed under the PSUV (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela) government. And in terms of social provision there is an emphasis on poverty reduction, but again with ample scope for private sector involvement and an emphasis on employment in the private economy, in order to ensure a minimal role for the state.

Nevertheless, this overall characterization needs to be qualified by two further observations. There is evidence to suggest some elements of continuity with the present policy configuration. For example, the maintenance of the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution, a commitment to keep the state oil company PDVSA in public hands, and the continuance of some of the more notable social Missions set up by the current government, such as the health based *Into the Neighbourhood Missions*(Misiones Barrio Adentro). However, in the last two cases specifically, on closer reading of policy papers these institutions may be transformed beyond recognition from their present incarnations, and with policies of decentralization, “depoliticization” and downsizing of the public sector. Such policy intentions may mean loss of gains for those who have until now been supported by them, either through

benefits or jobs or both.

There are three notable characteristics in these policy positions. First, they seemingly conform to a Post-Washington Consensus style policy formulation, with a “pro-poor” social emphasis within a free market system. Second, leaders interviewed from the differing ideological factions in the MUD coalition (centre-left, centre-right and right), all characterized these policies as pragmatic and non-ideological. Additionally, policy documents point to attempts to “depoliticize” large swathes of the state apparatus, which may mean purges of PSUV personnel, and educational policies seeking to naturalise such ideological tenets. Third, policy differences on key aspects were noted between these different ideological currents, especially on the key point of privatisations of state-owned utilities, with some in favour of total privatisation of electricity, gas and indeed the all-important state oil company PDVSA and others more cautious. Hence there are currents more in favour of old-style “shock therapy” type neoliberal restructuring. This points to a dialectic between “moderate” and “radical” strategies in opposition action and policy discourse, which seeks to satisfy both hard-core opposition and agnostic non-opposition supporters, and in which the recent “Salida” campaign of López and Machado must be placed.

Constitutional and Extra-Constitutional Tactics in Opposition Strategies

The need to maintain current support while attracting support from outside core supporters can perhaps help explain changes in strategic tactics also. With regard to opposition supporters, previous insurrectionary strategies had failed to achieve their principal objective - the removal of Chávez from power. First, the 2002 coup prompted serious evaluations of such tactics, with some opposition actors rejecting the abolition of institutional structures by the brief de facto government of business leader Pedro Carmona Estanga (Poleo 2002). Second, each government win seemed to lead to policy radicalization on its part, making the situation more difficult for the opposition and its supporters (Corrales and Penfold 2007). Third, radical strategies had a counterproductive effect on Venezuelan society in general (Cannon, 2009: 81) and on the opposition’s main constituency in particular (García-Guadilla 2005). Finally, the intense mobilization needed for such strategies must have taken their toll in terms of energy and commitment for those who participated, reducing motivation. Hence, such strategies were causing a crisis on the opposition support base by both failing in its main objective of removing Chávez as well as trying the patience of its own supporters, not to mention the wider Venezuelan populace. The cost of these extra-parliamentary and sometimes illegal strategies to opposition core groups may have prompted a re-orientation in political strategy towards more constitutional tactics.

Chosen tactics may also be impacted by the need to attract outside support from groups (and states) which do not support or are wary of the opposition. In opinion polls a large majority of Venezuelans repeatedly express their adherence to democratic values (See for example Batista Pereira, Seligson and Zechmeister 2013). This would suggest a low tolerance level amongst a majority of Venezuelans – including government supporters and the so-called ni-ni’s - for extra-constitutional power strategies. Furthermore, the increasing moves in the South American region to greater union, especially

with the foundation and consolidation of UNASUR (*Unión de Naciones Suramericanas*), has meant less tolerance for extra-constitutional strategies to power and US interference in the region’s internal affairs. This would suggest that the Venezuelan opposition must also take their closest neighbour’s opinions into account when designing its power strategies. And the overall emphasis on constitutional paths to power may help assuage doubts of leading powers in the more immediate region, most notably those grouped into Mercosur, and particularly Brazil.

Nevertheless, thirteen years since Chávez first came to power, and even since his death, the opposition has failed to win national political power through the electoral route. Additionally many of the more radical sectors are firmly convinced that under the existing Bolivarian institutional configuration such an opposition win is unlikely due to government dominance of the state apparatus. Moreover there is a sense of urgency due to fears that permanent damage will be done to the country’s economy putting it beyond “repair”. This reading of events could possibly explain the salience given by sectors of the opposition to extra-constitutional strategies from 2013/14 (Arria 2013; Venezuela Soberana 2013; Brown 2013), especially as these have received the firm backing of the United States, including the threat of sanctions, and the international media (Buxton 2014). Hence, such changes may be best seen not as dichotomic, discrete or linear strategic directions, but rather as parts of a wide repertoire, different parts of which may be activated according to changing circumstances.

Conclusion: A Comprehensive Approach to the Venezuelan Opposition

This reading of the Venezuelan case highlights two main points with regard to opposition characterization, discourse and strategies respectively. First, it emphasizes the need for a wider definition of opposition which goes beyond political parties to include a wide variety of different types of social organizations (Brack and Weinblum 2011). The roles and salience of the distinct actors may change over time, but their relevance still needs to be recognized and evaluated to gain a more comprehensive picture of opposition(s) in their fullest sense. Second, the Venezuelan case shows that discourse and strategy can go beyond the parliamentary to include all manner of extra-parliamentary acts and these need to be analyzed together as part of one overall strategy. Again, emphasis within discourse and on different types of strategic components may change along with circumstances, but all such actions and strategies need to be kept in mind as opposition activity is assessed.

Venezuela then presents a vivid challenge to more orthodox, institutionalised interpretations of opposition politics which has resonance beyond the country’s borders, particularly, but not only, in Latin America. Protests in recent years in Argentina against President Cristina Fernandéz and in Brazil in 2013 against the Workers’ Party government led by Dilma Rousseff, both underline the centrality of non-institutionalised processes in oppositional politics. Casting further afield, extra-institutional and extra-constitutional strategies were crucial in the 2014 removal of a sitting, elected president in Ukraine. All of these examples point to the need for a more comprehensive and flexible approach to the study of opposition, as used in this article, which considers both institutional and non-institutional actors

and strategies, privileging neither, within one overall theoretical framework.

Notes:

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2 This article is based on “As Clear as MUD: Characteristics, Objectives, and Strategies of Opposition in Bolivarian Venezuela,” by Barry Cannon, published in L*atin American Politics and Society*, vol. 56, number 4, Winter 2014, pps. 44-70. Copyright ©2014 University of Miami.

3 Interviews were with Roberto Abdul, Director of Súmate; Julio Borges, First Justice Party; Ismael García, PODEMOS Party; Rocío Guijarro, CEDICE; María Corina Machado, an independent member of the National Assembly. All interviews were carried out in Caracas, Venezuela by the author, assisted by Ybiskay González Torres, PhD candidate, University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia during February, 2012.

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